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White Nose, (Post) Bawdy Bodies, and the Un/dancing Sexy Jewess

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Hannah Sarah Schwadron

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This dissertation is dedicated to the funny girls who make us laugh the most.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

White Nose, (Post) Bawdy Bodies and the Un/Dancing Sexy Jewess

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies,  
University of California, Riverside, June 2013  
Dr. Marta E. Savigliano, Chairperson

“White Nose, (Post) Bawdy Bodies and the Un/Dancing Sexy Jewess” looks at asks how and why the 19th century figure of the exotic Jewess reappears in progressive US pious and porn subcultures, recent cabaret and burlesque acts, mainstream dance films, and magazine spoofs of the sexier Israeli sabra to articulate an updated Jewish femininity through various techniques of parody. I argue that today’s Sexy Jewess embodies the most recent addition of a specifically American lineage of Jewish jokes predicated on an excessive and unattractive Jewish female body, and assess how the self-professed sexiness of contemporary Jewish female performers both challenges and reiterates long-standing cultural anxieties tied to race, gender, class, and sexuality. The phenomenon of the Sexy Jewess raises questions about the so-called ‘post-assimilatory’ and ‘post-feminist’ implications of Jewish female performance modalities that tweak and play with stereotypes even as they insist upon a double Jewish and gender difference. My

research: 1) introduces how performers complicate self-critical jokes of the inferior Jewish female body through both marking and modifying a Jewish otherness, 2) documents the techniques Jewish female performers employ to mimic and master 'sexiness' and, 3) theorizes how performances of Jewish female identity use the body to both participate in and parody 'appropriate' femininity toward distinct ends. In order to question the viability of sexy ruse as a critical means of performing Jewishness, I draw on and intervene in three interrelated fields: Jewish Studies, Gender and Feminist studies, and Dance and Performance studies.

In order to contextualize the Sexy Jewess construct and its relationships to spectacles of US Jewish femininity, I take a dance studies approach that combines methods of choreographic analysis, participant performance ethnography, and archival work on genealogies of Jewish female performers to theorize how the body renders meaning in historical and contemporary contexts. I use print and online reviews, and performance ephemera like program notes, posters, photographs, giveaways, blogs and even tweets to discuss the textual and visual material surrounding live and online Jewess performances. My project also makes use of personal interviews with performers, choreographer-directors, and audiences as well as focus groups among viewers with ranging familiarity with dance and Jewishness to better understand how Jewish female shtick operates from a diverse set of perspectives. To frame my research, I borrow from scholarship on Jewishness and humor, gender and feminist studies dance and performance studies to analyze sexiness and funniness in relation to femininity, race, and social mobility.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Moving Face (Issues) and Funny Girl Bodies

*My whole point of view was, “No matter what, you’re going to respect me and love me the way I am, and I’m not gonna change. I’m not gonna get a nose job. I’m not going to pretend I’m the girl next door...But I do live in the neighborhood, so you better get used to me.”* –Sandra Bernhard in conversation with Roseanne Barr, *Interview Magazine*, April 2012.<sup>1</sup>

In a conversation with Roseanne Barr printed in the April 2012 issue of *Interview Magazine*, Sandra Bernhard confessed with signature authority that the most important, overriding arc of her three-decade career has been a refusal to be self-deprecating. Introduced as the original queen of punk-rock performance-art musical comedy, Bernhard’s promise to herself was a clear break with the past. “I wanted to take it to a new place,” she said. “It was post-feminist. We’d gone through Roe v Wade. You know, I grew up, as you did, looking at that, and that was just part of our conversation as women. Like Ms. Magazine and Ms. Gloria Steinem. I was 12 years old.”<sup>2</sup> Even as a young woman, Bernhard recalls reflecting on the works of early comediennees. She lists Jewish greats Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Totie Fields who span a half century and who self-mocked with bawdy appeal. “It was like, ‘I’m fat! I’m ugly! My husband has to put a bag over my head when he comes to bed!’” It was then that Bernhard decided, “I’m never gonna do that,” to which Barr added in that she had always thought the very same thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Roseanne Barr, “Character Study: Sandra Bernhard” *Interview Magazine*, April 2012, 73.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

These two icons of my own growing up had plenty more to say about nonconformity as television women throughout the decade run of *Roseanne*.<sup>3</sup> My oddball (looking) role models rendered personages that felt entirely opposed to more normative hetero humor on *Three's Company* reruns and *Married with Children*, which had similar slot times and were more popular among my peers.<sup>4</sup> Queering the white, middle class family with a raunchy roughness of its protagonist women, Barr and Bernhard made fun of the appropriate, white woman by eschewing any controls of her image. With lines that cut into one another constantly, a bittersweet sense of sisterly dynamics allowed all in the family to grow up as they were. Bernhard's real life bisexuality was brought upfront and center in a TV role Barr comments she took from Bernhard's autobiographical stage show, creating the role to feature Bernhard just as she was. If Barr's weight matched her public crassness, Bernhard's 'inappropriate' facial features, as indicated above by the artist herself, seemed to speak for her equally deviant public sexuality. The bigness of Bernhard's Jewish nose has only been trumped by her overstated lips. While not necessarily a physical asset of the stereotypical Eastern European Jewish 'look', they certainly reference the excessive (loud) mouth that is. To be sure, this funny looking pair

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<sup>3</sup> The American sitcom, broadcast on ABC from Oct 18, 1988 to May 20, 1997, revolved around an Illinois working-class family, reached number one in the Nielson ratings, becoming the most watched TV show in the US from 1989-90, in the top four for six of its seasons, and the top twenty for eight seasons.

<sup>4</sup> *Three's Company* aired on ABC from Mar 15, 1977 to Sept 18, 1984. *Married with Children* aired on Fox from Apr 5, 1987 to June 9, 1997. For what it may be worth to the reader, I knew these shows were dangerously mainstream from my mother, who had no rules for me other than not to watch 'these stupid shows' and would regularly mute commercials with overt gender assignments and attending stereotypes and talk over them with criticism.

with even funnier comic timing looks even odder now than it even did then, as roles for middle class misfit women, Jewish or not, are obsolete for female leads.<sup>5</sup>

Reacting against the self-derogatory sensibilities of a (Jewish) female comic legacy before her, Bernhard extends a genealogy of multi-genre performers through a stated break with the past. But in embodying difference *differently*, Bernhard and a generation of female comics that follow her necessarily cite those comic personas of the past that even Bernhard admits were “great performers and were reflective of their time.” As Bernhard and Barr helped bring an early utopic post-feminism to the fore as the central marker of their own times, they likewise animated a reactionary move away from second wave feminists of the generation just years before them.<sup>6</sup> The bodily premise of Bernhard’s post-feminism is fairly specific, however, as it reconfigures the unsexier shtick of an assimilatory American century and its heteronormative roles for women. Outing her non-normative sexuality and her Jewishness as ‘excesses’ she willingly embodies, Bernhard’s post-feminism marks a self-positive paradigm for affirming various bodily expressions of otherness. With this shift into the more liberated ‘beyond’, Bernhard makes it possible not only to wear a post-feminist face, but a post-assimilatory face of the ethnic and sexual other and call it definitively, if differently sexy.

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<sup>5</sup> This televisional shift, reflective as it may be of the disappearance of the middle class in the US more generally, marks the conservative backlash on the utopic premise of the post-feminism Bernhard and Barr similarly imagined.

<sup>6</sup> For a laugh out loud account of Barr’s own bouts with endless second wave feminists and a slew of splinter group circles, read her memoir, *Roseannearchy: Dispatches from the Nut Farm* (New York: Gallery Books, 2011).

It is Bernhard's proclamation of a convicted post-feminist, post-assimilationist perspective and the parallel declaration of self, quoted above, that outs her no-nose job Jewishness. It likewise narrows in on the agential premise of ethnic and sexually marked spectacle femininity central to my dissertation focus. While not the (white, appropriately feminine) "girl next door", Bernhard is a neighbor nonetheless. As such, her funny face and its queer Jewish female potential align sexual and ethnic otherness as overlapping positions-in-excess to reclaim from/at the marginalized edges with righteous authority.<sup>7</sup> The sexy that Bernhard and Barr are still advocating as wild women in outlandish solo performance, and campaigns for president respectively, has pushed these women and others like them back to the fringes with public ratings even below the B list. In Bernhard's own guess at why, she explains, "The thing that I keep getting when I'm up for stuff is, 'She's too recognizable. She's too...something'. And I don't understand what that means. It's like, everybody is recognizable. Meryl Streep is recognizable. I mean, we're all recognizable. We're in the entertainment business. So what does that mean?" As the two go on to agree that guys who are likewise seen as "controversial" work "non-stop", they agree that even resigning to writing their own roles has become increasingly impossible in today's industry.

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<sup>7</sup> As fleshed out further in this dissertation, I posit a theory of queer Jewish femininity that is at once not reducible to notions of sexuality, nor the sexuality of the performers selected for analysis, but likewise cannot fully depart from these categories of concern either. The deliberate recuperation versus the strategic dismissal of Jewish female excesses (on and of the body) redefines the contours of the 'queer' and its 'potential' in the contexts of visible and/or material difference. And yet, the degree to which performers and performances affect, or perform, a kind of queer Jewish potentiality varies from context to context, in the name of more or less radical critique of heteropatriarchy, war, religious conservatism, and other undue expressions of power.

Bernhard's funny face that is too recognizable, "too...something" is the controversial Jewish face (or more specifically the nose, as I will outline here) and its indications of radical (post) feminism no longer welcome on camera as it once was. As most invested in the subject might well agree, recent decades of television have reserved Jewish female slots for materialistic personifications of the Jewish American Princess. Fran Drescher sustained the sole Jewish looking female role on screen as the featured nasal lead of the nineties as CBS's *The Nanny* (1993-99), until the seal was broken by the increasingly whitewashed, yet still nose-worthy Sarah Jessica Parker in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004).<sup>8</sup> Overlapping the run of both of these shows was the popular *Will and Grace* (1998-2006). While not featuring such stereotypically Jewish female noses, the show was discussed in *The Nation* as the most overly Jewish program since the quintessential midcentury sitcom, "The Goldbergs" (1949-1955).<sup>9</sup> Despite leading actress Debra Messing's unobtrusive nose in the role of Grace Adler, the other characters frequently make fun of Grace due to the smallness of her breasts. The displacement from funny nose to funny breasts offers an important twist to any theory of the Jewish female nose and its television spotlight. When viewed in relation to spectacle embodiment of gender and Jewishness, Messing's laughable chest resignifies the sexual inferiority

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<sup>8</sup> See Michele Byers and Rosalin Krieger, "From Ugly Duckling to Cool Fashion Icon: Sarah Jessica Parker's Blonde Ambitions," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Summer 2007): 43.

<sup>9</sup> Kera Bolonik, "Oy Gay," *The Nation*, 17 Nov, 2003.  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/oy-gay>

indexed by the more typical Jewish (male) nose<sup>10</sup>. This physical and conceptual displacement from nose to breasts to other bodily signifiers of defunct sexual prowess extends the notion of the funny Jewish body as always already a failed femme. Whether male or female, such failing femme-hood offers insight into the constructed realm of Jewish female sexuality and the corporeal dimensions of its gendered stereotypes.

Yet more recent personifications of the JAP in Fox's favorite *Glee* role, Rachel Berry (2009- present) and HBO's *Girls* (2012-present), written, directed by starring Jewish actor, Lena Dunham paint distinct new faces of princessy Jewish femininity. Character trajectories follow differently imagined dreams with similarly insatiable types. The latter is arguably more sexualized if also less appropriately 'pretty' than the prudish star-studded former (who frets over a nose job, sings Streisand's "Being Good Isn't Enough", but all is justified by how good of a dancer she is). But while analysis of these Jewish female characters/caricatures deserves critical attention in their own right, I begin with these television personages to highlight the public demands on the nose at center. The possibility of its displacement or other forms of resignification offer expressive material for discussions of Jewish spectacle femininity more broadly. It may be expressly the task of TV to favor the face more than any other part of the body. That said, this problem of the overly 'expressive' Jewish female face troubles the relationship between its intentional or agentive doings and its loaded looks. The degree to which the Jewish female face can or cannot disassociate the deliberate expression of the face from the

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this subject see Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Henry Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

phenotypic form of it thus creates a visual crisis mapped on the body. The nose's implications of other bodily excesses or sexually conceived ineptitudes contributes to dance studies research on Jewish female corporeality. As indicated by Bernhard's bisexuality/hyper-sexuality and Grace's funny/displaced femininity, spotlighted Jewish female corporeality bars access to (hetero)normative white womanhood.

In what follows, I introduce the conceptual and choreographic implications of the Jewish female face that is both "too...something" and not enough for sustained celebration in today's industry spotlight. I figure her instead as a frontierist femme of subcultural frontlines; a do-gooder of pornographic and pious circles with enough public face to re-envisage assimilatory American Jewry through distinct means (Chapter 1). I then face her personally in the performance dugouts of New York's holiday tourism in revivalist returns to a nostalgic burlesque and cabaret underground (Chapter 2). I fish her mermaid acts and raunchier routines out from an earlier era as the funny face response to first and second wave feminism, and whatever happened to Jewish female dancing shtick (Chapter 3). I factor her presence on today's silver screen even when parts are only picked for passing Jewish girls with whiter looks and less 'expressive' noses (Chapter 4). And finally, I make face an issue of growing anti-Zionist critique through sexy magazine spoofs of the Israeli female soldier. A one act play of binational Israeli-US allegiances and a bay area choreography collaboration face-off with that Sexy Sabra and the Jewish discourse on occupation through dancing debkah as political divestment (Chapter 5). Finally, I frame the dissertation conclusion as a refacing of themes raised through the chapters by introducing my own efforts to dance 'difference' differently and its points of

curiosity, confusion, and moments of fleeting un/resolve. The analysis thus envisions a spectrum of spectacle Jewish female faces and facings on a contemporary project of Jewish female self-definition, largely but not entirely based in the US. Largely but also not entirely, the renderings are of/by/about/'beyond' stereotypes of Ashkenazi women, or those Eastern European ethnic origins. Largely but not entirely too, the emphasis leans on the holes of bias between artistic intention and the something-else of critical review, as often results from intimate proximity to people and their politics selected for analysis. Drawing together multiple genres through overlapping theoretical and cultural concerns with particular interest to dance studies, the dissertation scope aims to account for a wide-reaching range of representational culture. Results of the research mean less to contain the contours of Jewish female corporeality than to expose its multiple means of 'moving face' as choreographic maneuvers toward and away from such confinements.

As subjective 'facings' on my subjects themselves, my introductions here address the representational task of writing women that rarely stay put. I have meant to deliberately unstick the authorial perspective from presumptions of fixed findings as one-sided bores akin to dance performances facing only front and center. Instead, I mean to choreograph an experience of the writing itself as a varied and changing encounter with range of included events, films, and fantasies. Pitching the project from shifting angles, I also invite the reader to consider a range of ways to see, feel, and conceive of the selected works through its writerly materiality. But to presume such fluid movements from

choreographic practice to its utility on the page risks diminishing the particular concerns of either craft, as well as their quite distinct means of production.<sup>11</sup>

Still, I have tried to engage a critical discussion of ‘facings’ as a choreographic concern. A strategy that comes up in the setting of a work when plotting out ways for the audience to engage the material in new ways, a concern with facings frequently allows audiences to view the same material again, differently. As an experiment in Jewish female face-work for the page, I consider the faces of the writing itself in ways that mark (my own) doubled Jewish female difference. I likewise source that performative face-work frame to take on the opportunity to write those differences, differently. Like the figures selected for analysis, the prose to follow tries out more and less ‘appropriate’ facings to account for the multiples faces of the critical dance studies research process. The integration of historical, theoretical, practice-based, (auto)ethnographic, live, and virtual lenses likewise unfix any single model of critical analysis, making demands on the researcher and reader alike. Displeasing disciplinary boundaries becomes part of the conversation on Jewish female corporeality more broadly. The naturalization or normalization of fixed parameters are precisely what my featured female leads rebel against with often intentionally funny authority. As the reader will note, the project reaches beyond the bounds of even dance talk to talk dance in the context of Jewishness, gender, whiteness and sexuality. The figures and faces selected for critical discussion

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<sup>11</sup> One difficulty of translating studio or stage tactics to the scenes of writing may be a result of the latter’s inevitable fixity in a discipline so deeply invested in the lack of fixity of the moving body and all it represents. Furthermore, the refusal of a dissertation to develop from one read to the next, as a performance or piece of choreography might, resists such dancery authority as it can only ‘show’ the same words, which necessarily date themselves with temporal distance and delay.

thus remake the body of Jewish female dance discourse through an emphasis on moving face (issues), fleshed out first in the expressive confessions of one funny face herself.

### **Expressive Confessions of a ‘Face Like That’**

I’m eight years old at drama camp and Kim Avis has strep throat. This is good news because she won’t be able to go to the movies with my big brother any more, which is too weird because she’s in third grade and he’s in the sixth. She’ll be too sick to get better and learn all her lines in time to play Sandy opposite my brother as Danny in our Children’s theater performance of *Grease*. We’re all on stage, lined up to audition one by one. I’m anxious, short and sweating. I can feel my neck swell up. I get to the front and open my mouth and the director starts to laugh. Uncontrollably. She can’t stop, and has to keep playing the lead in chords over and over, apologizing. The very prospect that I’d play the pretty blonde was entirely too funny to let me even try. I’d been practicing that thing for days, and even at 8, I already knew it was a stretch: “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee/Lousy with Virginity”. But it’s time now and she’s laughing so hard, she’s snorting. She’s snorting through the nose she always said used to look just like mine. I was the exact image of her life pre-nose job, and the comic relief of the show, she told me then and over the next several years at drama camp. And so I learned, queering all the parts like a good little Jewish girl should. The Pink Lady too into her Twinkies and dessert wine to be bothered with the Greaser Boys. The Yiddish-inflected nun who was always a klutz in only a majority-Jewish West LA revision of *The Sound of Music*. The *Damn Yankees* vamp who couldn’t dance without tripping over a mismanaged rose or failed

fling of the garter belt. By the time I was butching up an Italian inflection of my typical Jewish caricature ‘isms’ to play the caboose train in a staged version of *The Little Engine That Could*, penning a heart-wrapped M.O.M on my arm with an eye liner borrowed from a friend’s more effeminate caboodle, the sexual misfit failed femme was a practiced role in my repertoire and a public imperative of my funny face and the funnier ways it made me move.

Introducing the role of the excessive, or inappropriate face and the trouble of its contradictory (funny good and funny not so good) ‘expressions’ helps makes explicit the blurry boundaries of ‘Jewish looks’ and the deal with a body dancing ‘Jewishly’. My focus is on the entanglements of funniness and sexiness in spectacles of Jewish femininity across a range of dance parodies. Physical humor and sexy ruse in stand up, burlesque, Jewish culture magazines, spiritual communities, mainstream film and punk pornography emphasize the operative capacity of stereotypes. Appropriations and subversions of those stereotypes inter-face with dance styles deemed for more appropriate bodies, associated with more or less achievable standards of white femininity.

My own performance foibles act as personal evidence of a contradictory corporeal scheme for Jewish female performers with categorically Ashkenazi/Eastern European features. Our excessively ‘expressive’ faces—heralded as exceptionally good or bad as such—offset bodies deemed appropriate, normal, and white from the neck down. Extending dance and performance discourse on questions of ‘Jewish dance’ as it has continued to influence an assimilatory US century, my own theory-practice endeavors build upon longstanding representational ‘issues’ tied to race, class, and femininity. Such

issues extend especially from those that caused early modern dance choreographers, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman to celebrate a Jewish dancer's technical abilities and expressive emotional capacity but wonder 'what to do with a face like that'.<sup>12</sup>

Recollections of my own unmet childhood aspirations for 'serious' roles and a slew of similarly concluding scenes ever since bring to life the author-artist as a grown-up girl with a careerist funny face and its attending Jewish 'issues'. "Face Issues", as one colleague diagnosed them, offered a probing (nosy?) framework for thinking through familiar representations of Jewish women as overly emotional, insatiably wanting, and famously inappropriate.<sup>13</sup> I am especially interested here in an understanding of this

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Foulkes, "Angels 'Rewolt!': Jewish Women in Modern Dance in the 1930s," *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader*, ed. by Pamela S. Nadell (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 209. In a larger discussion of the praised "emotional intensity" of Jewish female dancers so well suited for "universal" themes of human experience that vied with stereotypes of Jewish miserliness, Foulkes focuses on a celebrated capacity for "expressivity" that partnered well with the content of early modern dance, if not always with its whiter face. Though Foulkes does not interrogate the racial imagination of early modern dance outright, her invocation of this anti-Semitic moment reveals the Jewish female body at the center of more critical crises of ethnic and gender identification and visibility. For other studies of Jewish women in early modern dance and a related genre of "expressive dancing", see Linda Tomko's *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). See also Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). Susan Manning's discussion of Helen Tamaris in *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Naomi Jackson, *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y* (Hanover, N.H, and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), and Hannah Kosstrin, "Honest Bodies: Jewishness, Radicalism, and Modernism in Anna Sokolow's Choreography from 1927-1961" (PhD Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> For this conceptualization, I especially thank Christine Leapman, a (Jewish) arts outreach supervisor, who half-jokingly referenced my "face issues" after sitting in on a dance class I was teaching. After a moment of offended pause I wondered whether to wear on my face, I understood the comment's aim to tease if also to critique a certain facial bigness or excess we both knew as particularly Jewish and female.

hysterical bodily condition/ing through questions of performer agency or lack thereof. In an instance during grad school, I was advised by one professor-mentor while dancing in a colleague's unfunny MFA concert to make sure that I face away from the audience as much as possible so as not to cause them to laugh at the wrong parts. At this advisory note, another of equal ilk added that I'd never be "just a modern dancer". In the context of overstated expressivity that could purportedly throw off audiences, I understood this modern dancer as a mythic white body. Free from the particular demands of an archetypal Jewish nose, she was a faraway face of perfection poised atop a body naturally sculpted beyond such exaggerated expressions of funniness. This modern dance body, that would likewise be much flatter-chested, if equally muscular, with a butt much less pronounced, would be able to affect movement unfiltered by ethnic interruptions. Collapsing the space between dancer and movement, she could become the dance itself. The mythic modern dancer would somehow more rightly peer out past the audience with a more neutral face whose concert-ready gaze could pierce all high downstage diagonals with no rhyme or reason whatsoever. Surely, I had understood that such idealist neutrality only barely veiled 'appropriate' concert dance standards already debunked by decades-long embrace of bodily, dancerly diversity on the high art stage. And still, the mark of excessive Jewish expressiveness lodged both on and of my body remains a stain, if by now one I source with dance doctoral interest.

If I have tried, perhaps in vain, to be 'just a modern dancer', freed from funny interference at various points in my performance life, such occurrences fuel the fire of my research on Jewish female funny girls. After one performance with improvisation-based

modern dance company Susan Rose and Dancers at LA's Anatomy Riot, an audience member found my "face-work" particularly riveting. She told me so in a facebook message that led to an acting gig. A showing of the same work earlier that week to dance colleagues at UC Riverside resulted in less flattering remarks. One observer noted that my face detracted from the ensemble feel of the piece, and wondered aloud whether or not that was an intentional effect. I add such comments to an archival funniness of a genealogy of Jewish performance women I write about here. Fusing auto/ethnographic experiences, I position myself within the reflective roles of those whose rightful place in comedy often looked wrongful when aesthetic standards meant work for white women. In pursuing face as a funny starting point for research on Jewish and female bodily excesses of all kinds, however, I do not mean to trivialize perceptions of race and gender as they operate on visual and material planes. On an airplane home from an academic dance conference where I both presented on the subject and was asked later in a contact improv workshop why I was making a funny face, my professor witness seated in the same row laughed with me kindly and said, "You'll always be performing on multiple registers that perhaps you won't even know." After confirming that she was talking about me, and not some general 'you', she added with a smile, "Your face is your self-reflexive capacity".

I thus introduce this curious conflation of 'face issues' that disappears the gap between more and less deliberate features of face-work, or nose-work more truly. Taking quite seriously this near-mystic self-reflexive capacity, I develop a theory of the expressive, excessive Jewish female face/nose and its funny dancing accompaniment. In doing so, I catalogue the particular character and caricature of a curious Jewish female

face-body in (often self-parodied) need of constant fixing. This emphasis on face is both figural and figurative. It means to doubly re-figure a discourse of Jewish ‘assimilatory anxieties’ of a familiar Jewish ‘in-between’ tied to race and gender through mismatched ‘expressions’ of various kinds. It thus extends Jewish feminist scholarship on the roles of women as scapegoats for shifting class concerns tied to whiteness. In doing so, it means to test such overarching theorizations of an ongoing and operative collective Jewish class and race ‘anxiety’ in gendered and embodied terms.

### **The Jewish Face of Post-Feminism and the Special Case of the “Sexy Jewess”**

This funny face, with too much expressive capacity to even contain itself, is the bodily mark that signifies a stereotypical Ashkenazi, or Eastern European originated, Jewish and female difference. Understood as an exterior materialization of an equally excessive interiority (see US stereotypes on the Jewish Mother and JAP), the ‘face like that’ that I also possess carries a performative power. It naturalizes the excesses of face (big nose, funny expressions) that presumes the pushy positions and impositions of an excessively demanding Jewish female personage. It is thus inseparable from the demands of the excessive body itself (to be funny or else, entirely undesirable). I highlight here the face and its expressive capacities, expectations, demands and ‘dancerly’ additions and interruptions to denaturalize this conflation of interior and exterior bodily excess. So as to expose the workings of stereotypes, I view them as questionably subversive strategies performers employ to move ‘beyond’ delimiting conditions of difference.

As a comic corporeal interruption of the unfunny feminine ideal (one which all somehow *should* possess) I address this Jewish female face and the nose in particular as entangled in discourses of bodily excess linked to ethnic otherness and sexual deviance. Breaking out of bodily sameness, or whiteness from the neck down, the funny face functions as bodily transgression in the Foucauldian sense of transgression as a defiance of a limit, and the embodiment of the limit itself.<sup>14</sup> This transgressive capacity of the face, however, does not imply an intentional politics necessarily. It is this possibility of agential recuperation of difference and its slippages in and out of the intentionally subversive that I mean to question in the scenes selected for analysis. Moreover, as becomes evident in the chapters to come, any ‘corporeal interruption’ of the face necessarily implicates the whole body and its strategies of bodily movement. My awkward isolation of the face from the rest of the female body introduces just as awkward a dissection of the Jewish female spectacle body into other bodily excesses like boobs, butts, legs, necks, and more as indicated by performers themselves in the following chapters. The reader may wonder about such conceptual dismembering of the body into its juiciest parts, rightly suspecting some of the most gruesome of writerly slasher authority (See Chapter 4 for more on body-splicing horror genre). But, in taking the body apart, I focus on its multiple valences of constructed social meaning and stereotypes at play. My aim is to reassemble the notion of the Jewish female dancing ‘whole’ itself as much more complex than any sum of its physical parts.

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed Donald F. Bouchard and trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 34.

It is the interfacing of the ethnic and sexual excess that I position at the crux of the dissertation through the rise of an image of Jewishness: the Sexy Jewess. I am prompted by recent print and online media that documents the rise of the ‘Sexy Jewess’ as hard and soft porn’s tongue-and-cheek fetish du jour. I ask how and why the 19th century figure of the hyper-sexualized Jewess reappears likewise in progressive religious discourse, revivalist burlesque, mainstream comedy and film, and Jewish and gentile culture magazines to articulate an updated US Jewish femininity through humor and gender radicalism. I argue that today’s Jewess embodies the most recent addition to a specifically American lineage of Jewish jokes predicated on an excessive and unattractive Jewish female face-body. Cases chosen for chapter analysis tracks how the self-professed sexiness of contemporary Jewish female performers both challenges and reiterates long-standing cultural anxieties tied to race, gender, class, and sexuality. Across multiple spectacle scenes, I track the development of funny and sexy as inseparable but changing ‘faces’ of Jewish female performance. A largely class-oriented discourse of Jews and whiteness provides insight into the historical and theoretical relationships between spectacle performance and social mobility.

The phenomenon of the Sexy Jewess raises questions about the so-called ‘post-assimilatory’ and ‘post-feminist’ implications of Jewish female performance modalities that tweak and play with stereotypes even as they insist upon a double Jewish and gender difference.<sup>15</sup> In the chapters that follow, I compare and contrast the ways these

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<sup>15</sup> For further reading on “post-feminism”, see Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005); Talia Modeleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age* (New York:

configurations of the ‘post’ overlap to varying extents. In some cases, select scenes share radical, or utopic concerns mapped out by Bernhard at the opening of this Introduction. In other cases, they depart from their earnest expressions of new empowerment through more unanswered techniques of irony and intentional ambiguity. As central premises of the dissertation’s theoretical framework however, I offer the following definitions as conceptual parameters that build a theory of the Sexy Jewess in relation to contemporary Jewish female cultural production. The post-feminist approaches to Jewish female spectacle I outline can be understood as those mechanisms of performance that afford chances to cite layered reference and resistance to (a majority Jewish) white second wave feminism. Moving beyond feminism and necessarily because of it for a slew of reasons, the mythic figure of the Sexy Jewess takes material form in each chapter differently, and for this reason, helps develop just as expansive a post-feminist theoretical frame. My rationale for articulating a shared, but multivalent post-assimilationist agenda follows similar logic. As a class and race-based concept tied to the Jewish female body and its vexed pleasures of coming-into-whiteness, post-assimilationist approaches to spectacle performance describe those that similarly return to categories they mean to move beyond.

What is particularly sexy about such spectacle shows is likewise just as vast a conceptual chasm if also a performance obsession that needs to be unpacked. The

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Routledge, 1991), Baumgardner, Jennifer and Amy Richards. *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000). “Post-assimilatory” claims in Jewish cultural studies are discussed by Jon Stratton in *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Daniel Itzkovitz in “They are all Jews” in *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, ed. Vincent Brook (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

articulation of both post-feminist and post-assimilationist principles in distinct contexts assesses how they co-construct a complex and commonplace joke-worthy kind of sexiness. While the Sexy Jewess surfaces in contemporary formats with growing appeal, however, the particular brand of sexiness it outlines reaches backward as much as forward. Moreover, the sexy in Sexy Jewess suggests a self-conscious set of both white and ethnic aspirations that oscillate between sameness and difference to a feminine either/or ideal. Spiraling between efforts to embody either the perfect White Pin Up or the yet more othered, Exotic Other, the Sexy Jewess likewise morphs between assimilationist/whitened Jewish femininity and its imagined implausibility. Those familiar with representations of Jewish femininity across an assimilatory American century will recognize this in-betweenness as the precise mark of American Jewishness. What I specify here is the work of the Jewish female body to both ‘do’ this and ‘undo’ this in the name of a layered parodic ‘post’ sensibility with wide-ranging ramifications.

Through these lenses, my research here: 1) introduces how female performers complicate self-critical jokes of the inferior Jewish body (always already male but womanly) through both marking and modifying a doubled Jewish and female otherness, 2) documents the techniques Jewish female performers employ to mimic and master ‘sexiness’ and, 3) theorizes how performances of Jewish female identity use the body to both participate in and parody ‘appropriate’ femininity. To frame my research, I borrow from theories of parody, conceptualizations of exoticism, feminist deployments in dance studies and studies of pornography, and critical race studies to analyze the brand of ‘girl power’ articulated in U.S. contemporary performances of the ‘Sexy Jewess’. Attending

analysis of a contrasting media obsession with the ‘Sexy Sabra’ image of Israeli women in live and virtual spaces extends discussion of the Jewish woman in popular discourse.

A hundred years past the wave of Vaudevillian folly that waged its war against the establishment,<sup>16</sup> the performers I describe gesture towards a more modern parody of the religious conservative, the politically uptight, and the sexually prude. As these urban American ‘Jewesses’ trade in religious ethics for sexy fun, a slew of seasoned performers trained in various techniques act as choreocomics, joking about the female figure as particularly and differently Jewish. Of particular interest to my doctoral project is how difference both strategizes and structures what’s suddenly deemed sexy for/by Jewish girls and their audiences. What techniques do Jewish female performers employ to play with Jewish otherness in ways that both mimic and master ‘sexiness’ toward different ends? What are the social and aesthetic terms of this auto-exotic doubling of Jewish and female difference? What are the layers of Jewish self-mockery that may mean to be post-feminist or otherwise subversive? In what ways do such performances enact representations of the Jewish female as ‘sexy’ object of desire as opposed to her as a ‘sexual’ desiring subject, and how does that ambivalence itself assist the articulation of an updated US Jewish femininity?

By asking such questions of sexy-ness and its Jewish instigations and provocations, I partner a desire to carve a space for sexy Jewish femininity with an

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<sup>16</sup> As Robert C. Allen writes, the “horrible prettiness” of working class burlesque offered a voluptuous physical and ideological challenge to sentimental ideas of feminine beauty for bourgeois male audiences, linked with the social “problem” of prostitution. Robert C Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1991), 138.

interrogation of sexiness itself as a contemporary race and gender concern.<sup>17</sup> My dissertation questions what constitutes the spectrum of ‘sexy’ fleshed out through selected performances. It asks how its Jewish embodiments reflect, refute or otherwise reroute the sexualization of consumer society. I define sexy shows as a category of sex-inflected live and cyber spaces where the potential of Jewish female sexuality lives at the real and conceptual center of embodied performance aesthetics and parodic reference. In viewing together such widely mapped maneuvers, I bring together disparate post-feminist ‘frontiers’ of a Jewish spiritual leader and a porn star (Chapter 1), a spectrum Jewish sexiness embodied in basement burlesque and cabaret acts (Chapter 2), bawdy bodily endeavors of a funnier Jewish female Golden Era (Chapter 3), ballet bad girls (Chapter 4), and mis/perceptions of the Sexy Sabra as Israeli Jewess stereotype vs efforts by US playwrights and choreographers to redefine the role of Jewish women in conflict and war (Chapter 5). This broad theoretical discussion of the Sexy Jewess examines her multisingifying profile as a social phantasm with real legs. As I assess *how* sexy and funny come together in US contemporary Jewish female performance, it becomes possible to personify sexy Jewess-ness as an ambiguous assimilatory impulse in an era when the majoritarian discourse on US Jews are already white. More particularly, I offer insight on ways of measuring the costs and benefits of Sexy Jewess performance conventions against their liberatory claims. A class-oriented discourse of Jews and whiteness in the US and its projections locally and globally thus meets scholarship on

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<sup>17</sup> I distinguish ‘sexy-ness’ here from ‘sexiness’ so as to highlight the strategic embodiment of the sexy, as opposed to the label that would or could result from objective or evaluative judgements from the outside.

gender and sexuality to seek the stakes of self-othering performances for a newly articulated Jewish sexiness.

To draw together the multiple sites of analysis under the banner of self-parody, however, risks undermining the cultural work done by the figures under review that does not necessarily, intentionally, or entirely tend toward the comic, or the funny. As theories of parody point out, the genre is not reducible to its various techniques, such as humor, irony, citation, and quotation. Rather, I rely on frameworks of the parodic that situate its psychosocial aspects as an expressive realm of what Linda Hutcheon calls “repetition with critical distance”.<sup>18</sup> More than just humorous techniques of ridicule, Hutcheon understands parody as a genre of self-reflexivity and inter-art discourse that defies singular definition. As a wide-ranging genre of social commentary, parody forces a reassessment of artistic processes that depart from aesthetic and social norms. Even as the tropes of the Jewish female performer tend to hark back to humor, Hutchen’s theory makes room to divorce parody from laughter. Such thinking invites discussion of what sexy-silly performers mimic in order to wage what Hutcheon describes as either “conservative” or “revolutionary” critique.<sup>19</sup> Viewed in this light, even the laughing act can be situated as part of not necessarily funny efforts that either sustain or subvert notions of nice Jewish girlhood gone variably good or bad.

By necessity the politics of the sexy Jewess parody shift per context, sometimes strategically and other times, in ways arguably out of her control. Whether through

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 75.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

techniques of imitation, satire, irony, pastiche, or quotation, Hutcheon reminds that the political thrust of parody will depend upon the intent of the artist and its reception. But both the terms of authorial intent and reception are difficult to measure however much they seem to speak directly to the performer-audience relationship. How to assess what lives at the crux of performance parodies across a spectrum of sexy spectacle? How to measure Sexy Jewess bodily doings as they morph from one performance circuit to another? How do factors like location (religious and geographic) or sequence (the order to a single performance bill) change the nature of what shtick sells where and for whom?<sup>20</sup> As is outlined in the five chapters to come as well as in the auto/ethnographic Conclusion, such parodic citations of the Jewish female fall privy to the traps of an ethnicized girl power. Even the most radical and reappropriative intentions are inevitably and immediately co-opted by their vulnerability to capital, consumption, and circulation beyond their means. They may even pit women against other women as they present male (and so-called 'post-fem' female) audiences with amusing varieties of femininities from which to choose.

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<sup>20</sup> Borrowing from Hutcheon's theory of parody, Marta E. Savigliano likewise argues that parody is not necessarily bound up with humor in "Irreverent Tangos: Dancing 'Love' and the Politics of Parody" (2009). Savigliano offers examples of tango parodies that "pit newness against tradition" and "ridicule resistances to transformation," but also pay homage to "what makes the parody possible", 261. In her analysis, such parodies stem from the heterosexual love encounter and its ambivalent slippages into sexual relations, 244. I borrow across quite distinct contexts this focus on the heterosexual love encounter that also lives at the (punning) heart of parodic Jewish sexiness. Savigliano's emphasis on taboo slippages to real sex through tango parody likewise help frame Jewish stage femininity as resistant and/or complacent with heterosexual renderings of the more appropriate Jewish woman's role.

## **Post-Assimilation Anxieties and Situating a Jewess Corporeality**

Such a focus on the gendered representation of bodies and Jewishness extends from what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called the “corporeal turn” in new Jewish Cultural Studies. The emergent discourse has provoked much anxiety for those still heavily invested in Jews as a disembodied ‘People of the Book’.<sup>21</sup> But “The book” creates an empty space that dismisses the body and bodily process as outlined in much of the scripture. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz explains this as part of a larger modern strategy that attempts to disembody Jews and Judaism, in hopes of spiritualizing them. As he explains, texts dealing with bodily emissions, circumcision, defecation, urination, sexual intercourse, and so forth evoked shame since the late 18th century when Jews joined European intellectual life. The endurance of bookish personifications in Jewish America today extends this assimilatory aspiration to whiteness through a transcendence of bodily associations linked with a self-conscious ‘enlightenment’ (whether religious or cultural). It simultaneously continues classification of the Jew in discourse as always already effeminately, if studiously male. The critique of the feminizing turn toward corporeality thus spirals uneasily around the effeminate image of the disembodied male. In this respect, I contribute to feminist Jewish scholarship that analyzes these configurations as they simultaneously negate ‘the feminine’ to erase the actual female, and in doing so, perpetuate a womanly threat wrapped up in whiteness.

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<sup>21</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Corporeal Turn,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (Summer 2005): 451. See also Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book” in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 17.

Some Jewish studies scholarship has criticized the ‘turn’ itself as a feminizing (read, worse than feminist) impulse that blindly follows the voguish doctrines of so-called postmodern thinking, reeking of a secular skepticism that opposes Zionism.<sup>22</sup> The threat of the (female) body lives at the core of its critique, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett seems to say, as Jewish scholarly attention has largely favored the mind in a mind/body split. Most daunting has been what is described as its post-disciplinary interests in corporeal and material practice that threaten to do away with Jewish textual study. But Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that this introduction of “New Jewish Cultural Studies” to readings of gender and sexuality has only worked to strengthen interest in textuality by including body as text.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, with the power to alter the disciplinary subject and ways of thinking about all that went before, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes a critical turn toward the study of actual Jews too long left out of Jewish Studies. My focus slides in and out of ‘actual Jews’ and the stereotypes they mock, modify and mobilize. That said, it is within this shift toward the corporeal—and the scandal that such an endeavor entails for studies of Jewishness and the body—that I attend to the re-feminization of a New Jew imaginary.

Distinct for the study of Jews and gender in the US has been the full discursive occupation with the womanly but male Jew, who stands in metonymically for the feminization of Judaism as a whole.<sup>24</sup> And yet, as the scholarship makes clear, readings

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<sup>22</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett cites especially the criticism of Hillel Halkin, “Feminizing Jewish Studies,” *Commentary* 105 (February 1998): 39–45. For an alternative perspective see Matti Bunzl, “Jews, Queers, and other Symptoms: Recent Work in Jewish Cultural Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6.2(2000):321-41.

<sup>23</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Corporeal Turn”, 449.

<sup>24</sup> This configuration is distinct from but in necessary dialog with the depiction of Israeli men as muscular Jews. A rich discussion of the militarization of the Israeli frontier during

of Jewish effeminacy have largely displaced the Jewish female herself. This is as if to suggest, as Ann Pellegrini so provocatively does, that all Jews are womanly, but no women are Jews.<sup>25</sup> Always already feminized, Pellegrini argues that the collapse of Jewish masculinity into abject femininity displaces women theoretically and actually.<sup>26</sup> When the Jewish woman has been addressed, it has most often been to situate her as the male opposite in ceaseless stereotypes of her excessive desires. Riv-Ellen Prell offers the most extensive reading of Jewish female stereotypes.<sup>27</sup> Prell argues that the vilification of Jewish female desire as overly demanding projects Jewish male status anxieties wrapped up in assimilatory fantasies.<sup>28</sup> While she does not discuss the corporeal in particular, Prell explores a century of literary and comic projections of the Jewish woman's "insatiable appetite" for food, fashion, acceptance, and loyalty. Incessant figures of the Ghetto Girl, The Wife, The Mother, and the JAP instruct that such personifications have served as justification for a yet incompleting American assimilation.

Prell argues that such scapegoating has worked to fictionalize the female as meter of middle class access so much for Jews and nonJews alike that by the 1980s, life in the middle class could be thought of as Jewish and female.<sup>29</sup> Karen Brodtkin defends that as postwar suburbanization made space for middle and upper class Jews. Stereotypes of the

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the period of state formation can be found in David Biale's "Zionism as an Erotic Revolution," in *Eros and the Jews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See Chapter 5 of this dissertation for discussion of the gendering of Israeli Jewish discourse.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Pellegrini. *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell. *Fighting to Become American: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 207.

Jewish female circulated through mother-bashing humor and by the 1970s, Jewish American Princess jokes.<sup>30</sup> As monstrous images of the Jewish female spread, Brodtkin recalls more personally that “We all struggled with what it meant to be mainstream, “normal” or white. Brodtkin reflects on what it meant to be a Jewish woman, and what being any kind of woman had to do with being a person at a time and place where, according to the media, a woman wasn’t a person.<sup>31</sup> It follows that the imagination of American success was predicated on the taming of the overly wanting Jewish female such that her figure had come to personify the middle class itself. Her actual body has sustained as a site under constant construction and reconstruction of normalness itself.

This theme has been taken up by Rebecca Rossen in her dissertation on the subject of Jewish choreographers of modern and postmodern concert dance in the US. In her provocative question, “Can dance act like plastic surgery?” Rossen wonders whether dance technique can transform bodies from marked to unmarked, ethnic to white. The question also attends to the shift from figuratively absent on the concert stage to visibly present as Jewish performers engaged Jewish choreographic content or meaning.<sup>32</sup> The metaphor likens dance to a quite Jewish preoccupation with nose jobs (and I’d add, though it is less discussed, breast reduction surgeries). Achievement of white standards of feminine beauty attempts to resolve a particular Jewish and Woman question when at the root of this rite is the malleability or ‘plastic’ position of Jewish women in assimilation.

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<sup>30</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race In America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 169.

<sup>31</sup> Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Rossen, “Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in Modern and Postmodern American Dance” (PhD Diss., Northwestern University, 2006), 30.

In this comparison of dance to aesthetic surgery, the need for dance and gender theories of Jews becoming white is driven home. As Jewish dancers became white folks through techniques of de-ethnicization, her rhetorical question seems to imply, they reveled in being seen for the first time, however plastically, as acceptable women. And yet, in the disconnect between face and the body I introduce here, an underlying principle has to do with the idea that the body can be trained but the face cannot. Competing cultural perceptions of concert dance and cosmetic alteration complicate the analogous relationship of the face-body and its potential of dance ‘surgery’.<sup>33</sup> Still, building upon Rossen’s question, I extend the suggestion of a dancing bodily alteration through overlapping technologies of impersonation. My objective is to theorize how various experiments in embodied Jewish and female excess attempt to resolve a crisis of identification for urban US Jewry by morphing deliberately across race and class lines.

I have outlined a rationale for understanding the projection of assimilatory status anxieties onto the Jewish female body that has characterized a gendered cultural imperative of sorts. The result is an appropriation of a new Jewish female sex appeal that stands in for a post-assimilatory era. Along with it, the familiar femme-hood of Jewish men also falls under question. Jewish studies scholar Daniel Boyarin recuperates the Jewish male femme as a conceptual space of future imagining. In his theorization, notions of religiosity and the new are not pitted against one another, but rather work

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<sup>33</sup> I thank Dr. Jeffrey Tobin for his guidance on this distinction, which he explained to me as the difference between cultural understandings of training (as puritan value) and cosmetic surgery (as puritan sin).

together to redefine the terms of Jewish becoming.<sup>34</sup> In a chapter on the intentionally misspelled “femminization” and “its discontents”, Boyarin answers Marjorie Garber’s challenge in *Vested Interests* to repoliticize the feminization of the Jewish man. Boyarin insists upon an anti-homophobic orthodoxy that at once regards Talmudic texts with scholarly devotion and repositions the ways in which tradition has been used to oppress women and delimit the roles of men.<sup>35</sup> Such feminist revision shapes the nature of this study to assess the potential for practices of liberatory reconstructions of gender and Jewishness that gesture toward and away from the governance of masculinist logics. In taking cues from my research subjects, I add here the possibility of blurring a post-feminist and post-assimilationist writerly stance in my focus on spectacle Jewish femininity. Just as the performers and performances I choose for analysis, my own critical lenses make multiple moves that stem from these Jewish feminist agendas.

If Jewish women have effectively become meter of the mainstream, the growing live and online revival of her jokish ‘exotic’ appeal in performance and in print seems all the more provocative. I argue that the rise of the Sexy Jewess construct indicates a mocking tenor meant as an apologetic cover up for the guilty pleasure of white entry. That is, what is funny about Jewish un/sexy displays relies on the duplicitous performance of heterosexual obsession, and of sexual boredom, failure, or other frustrations with invisibility. As performers site sexual immorality through the rhetoric of excessive sexiness, any parody of sexual-ness cannot be separated from this guilty

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-30.

<sup>35</sup> Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 151-186. See also Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

pleasure of whiteness. Such depictions thus spiral ambivalently between white and exotic imaginations of the feminine, such that a less-than-usual explication of Jewish guilt extends to the Jewish American female and her white status anxiety.

### **One Face, Two Face, Red Face, Blue Face<sup>36</sup>: The Changing Face of Jewface Drag**

‘Moving Face’ as an introductory lens accounts in part for a history of race and gender impersonations of/on/in the face of yet more othered ‘others’. Spectacles of Jewish femininity update legacies of blackface and yellowface performance circuits that arguably engendered Jews as white Americans at the turn of the twentieth-century. I mean to show how role-playing ‘Jewface’ performances entangle together race assumptions and aspirations in related dramas of distance and desire. In the scenes selected for analysis, an overarching logic of race built on a black-white binary returns to long held assimilatory notions of the Jewish “in-between”. The “not quite” white thus oscillates between simultaneous sameness and difference. The compounded notion of Jewface drag offers a layered interpretive lens for seeing and sensing the slipping on and off of race and gender identities through the plays of intersectional impersonation.

Understood as parodic citations of a familiar American Jewish racial liminality, such

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<sup>36</sup> As part of the research for this section of the Introduction, I created and performed a structured solo improvisation called “Blueface” for a group exhibition at the Torrence Art Museum that asked participating artists to consider the role of “theatrical dynamics” in their work. In it, I wore black-rimmed glasses with paper inserts that concealed the eyes but emphasized the face. The partial mask meant to play with face and its veiled expressive power at central focus in a slew of race and gender impersonations from soul singer to music video sex star to Yiddish comedian. The one public performance was on January 19, 2013 in Torrence, California and made me a number of new Facebook friends interested in funny face issues and what Blueface could mean in the context of impersonation, appropriation and race and gender drag.

performance paradigms construct and are constructed by a simultaneous if also uncertain move ‘beyond’ assimilation and feminism alike.

Notable studies on the tradition of Jewface performance focus on the use of codified make up techniques designed to accentuate stereotypical Jewish features. Highlighting around the eyes, and shadowing around the nose extended phenotypical markers of the Eastern European Semitic face, while also exposing the fiction of the very same appendages as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ attributes of a single Jewish archetype.<sup>37</sup> I extend here a discussion of Jewface beyond the use of makeup to address the codification of an aesthetic heavily rooted in the body itself. In doing so, I position a gestural vocabulary that in concert with prop, costume and humorous narrative devices, accounts for Jewface as a bodily, bawdy archive (inclusive, but not reducible to the expressivity of face). As I argue throughout the dissertation but particularly in Chapters 2 and 3, this bodily bawdiness harkens back to a ‘pre-feminist’ period of Jewish female comedy. The sexually frank, or ‘blue’ humor of solo performers tied topics directly to failed feminine bodies and their deviant or defiant ‘badness’.<sup>38</sup> The connection between badness and the

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<sup>37</sup> Rossen, “Dancing Jewish”, 211. See also Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 1-16.

<sup>38</sup> Giovanna P Del Negro discusses the “outrageously blue, sexually frank” comedy of Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, and Patsy Abbott in “The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy: Gender, Class, Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America” in *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America*, eds, Hasia R. Diner, Shira Kohn, and Rachel Kranson. (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 144-159. Known best for their “party records” of the late 1950s and early 1960s that furnished the living rooms of the growing Jewish middle-class, Del Negro points out that through such blue humor, these women touched a nerve with middle-class audiences who longed to escape the unquestioned blandness of white-collar existence and the climate of cultural conformity”, 155.

sexual body carries throughout the dissertation as central to US Jewish female spectacle and its post-feminist, post-assimilationist contemporary renditions. Today's Jewface mediation of historic minstrelsy and makeup recentralizes face and its bodily doings of Jew and Woman between spiraling positions of same and other, self and its gross exaggeration.

Moreover as a genre of female-as-femme impersonation, the genealogy of 'Jewface' performance parody foregrounds a spurious circuitous nature of gender performance as characteristic of Jewish female physical humor. Always already an effeminate conceptualization, the discourse of the Jew in America and especially its links to humor as a critical site of culture has largely focused on castrated male 'femmes'. To return the femme configuration to an analysis of funny female performers interrupts these historical and theoretical narratives in order to question the roles of women in spectacles of Jewish femininity. To mock and modify the female through sexy ruse intentionally overlaps an ongoing Jewish Question with a Woman one. The particular dynamics of Jewface femininity that I mean to address thus mean to intersect a race concern with the performance of gender and sexuality. In doing so through an analysis of sexy ruse, I overlay a discourse of Jewish humor through a focus on gender rebellion and its transgressions, appropriations and subversions, however imperfect. As Jewface performers mock the very sexy stereotypes they try on, they impersonate themselves through comic diatribes of difference as both Jew and woman. This conceptualization thus addresses performers have sold the 'Jewish woman' to gain access to mainstream

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markets. It likewise considers how these performers poke fun at stereotypes of Jewish women versus women more generally (whose exclusive ranks they may wish to join).

In order to theorize the historical and political potential of a ‘Jewface’ sexy femme impersonation, I draw from theories of literal and ‘metaphorical’ blackface. I focus on its debated sympathetic vs. exploitative functionalities specifically to present a Jewface masquerade equally as entangled in related dramas of distance and desire. In doing so, I contribute to a central debate within the scholarly discourse early blackface minstrelsy and the degree to which Jewish participation can be understood as sympathetic or exploitative. That is, intentionality. Jewish studies scholars like Irving Howe and Michael Alexander defend that Jewish blackface provided foundational avenues through which Jews Americanized in relation to blackness from the position of similar non-belonging.<sup>39</sup> Scholars such as Michael Rogin and Eric Lott align more closely with critical race and whiteness studies arguments that insist upon cultures of identification predicated on a structure of exploitation.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Irving Howe’s *World of Out Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) is one of the first studies to document the prevalence of Jewish minstrelsy. He argues that Jews asserted Jewishness, not whiteness. Michael Alexander’s *Jazz Age Jews* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) begins with a similar sympathetic assumption of Jewish blackface to discuss the popularity of black vernacular among Jews who continued to identify with marginalized Americans through an “exceptional Jewish liberalism”, 1. Alexander positions that such cultural forms were less about assimilation or the desire to acculturate, and more about marking oneself as different—by using a language familiar from centuries of being different—and imagining that you are a better American because of it.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 29. See also Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

While both theories may help explain what happened in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Harrison-Kahan makes an important contribution to the scholarship through her focus on gender specifically. She calls for more attention to the ways in which interracial female-female relationships shed new light on a discourse of progressive era Jewish-black relations. Arguing for more nuanced theorizations of cross-race performances, she notes that scholarship to date has largely focused on male subjects. Furthermore, Harrison-Kahan writes against a unidirectional sense of either Jewish alliance *with* or exploitation *of* African American subjects, spaces, vernaculars, cultural production. She insists that interracial relations among black and Jewish women particularly in the literary fiction of Zora Neal Hurston and Fanny Hurst account for two-way interactions at least, if still “uneven”.<sup>41</sup> Just as Harrison-Kahan adds to women to discourse on Jewish blackface that has largely focused on men, Joyce Antler’s understanding of Sophie Tucker’s blackface makes an important gendered distinction. Antler argues that Tucker’s use of blackface as male drag justified her large physique and not-a-pretty-girl shtick.<sup>42</sup> While Harrison-Kahan frames a discussion of white and black women relating to one another, Antler’s synthesis rationalizes racial impersonation as gender drag. Distinct as these paradigms are on the rationale and interpretation of Jewish female blackface performers, both make possible the critical addition of women to a history of Jewish blackface.

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<sup>41</sup> Lori Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black Jewish Imaginary* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Joyce Antler, ed. “Jewish Women in Popular Culture”, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century*. (New York: The Free Press, 1997). 136-175. See also Antler’s discussion of Tucker in “One Clove Away from A Pomander Ball: the Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, Volume 29 (2010): 129.

Foregrounding genders performance in the discussion of Jewish acculturation through fetishized black bodies and vernaculars, these two perspectives provide paradigms for re-thinking gender in a century long black-Jewish imaginary. I borrow especially from these frameworks to investigate the relationships between race, homosocial female desire, and male or masculinist impersonation present in today's parodic "Sexy Jewess".

Harrison-Kahan and David Gilotta have discussed the modern-day extension of blackface performance in the "Face Wars" episode of *The Sarah Silverman Program* on Comedy Central.<sup>43</sup> Made up in blackface expressly to look like notorious actress-rapper Queen Latifa, Silverman is stumped to find out "how cruel white people can be" when they express outrage at the sight of her. She enters a black church to be among "her own people", exaggerates a slowed, stunted run in place with arms swinging on exaggerated bilateral pendulums up to the pulpit ala the iconographic minstrel step and appears shocked to be forced out and pushed down the stairs by a crowd of angry people. "This is literally my darkest hour," Silverman says into the camera. The race/ist dummy parody continues through the episode, as Silverman, now arrested and speaking on her own behalf, addresses a cork-painted crowd of supporters as a self-identified "angry black-faced woman". Perhaps because of this conflation of white privilege and guilt, scholarship this instance of Silverman's blacking up revolves around whether it works to

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<sup>43</sup> "Face Wars," *The Sarah Silverman Program*, Comedy Central, Episode 203, posted Oct. 17, 2007. <http://www.comedycentral.com/video-clips/ojgria/the-sarah-silverman-program-blackface-rally>. See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a longer analysis of Sarah Silverman and the parallels she draws between Jews and Blacks in the context of gender and sexuality.

mark her more Jewish or more white.<sup>44</sup> But there is also a gender crisis Silverman underlines of Jewish women that both performs ‘woman’ as hyper naïve or well meaning white woman or the badass, sexually ambiguous Queen Latifa she dresses up to be. That such dual parts for the Jewish female are so legible to mainstream audiences reveals a racial imaginary still very centered on masculinist Jewish jokes. Such punchlines rely on (women to write and perform) aloof/female impersonations or continue to reify a racialized construction of Jewishness and a sexualized appropriation of blackness.

Susan Manning makes important contributions to the study of racial minstrelsy in her book, *Modern Dance Negro Dance*. Historicizing the mutually constitutive genres of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Modern dance and Negro dance, Manning outlines the potential of a “metaphorical minstrelsy” on the concert dance stages of the 1930s as “unseen asymmetries” of hierarchical racial politics. Jewish choreographers like Helen Tamaris appropriated black cultural vernaculars with universalist spiritual claims to which all could presumably relate. These choreographers came out of a Jewish socialist tradition of labor activism and organizing and interests in an American movement of modern dance heralded for its expressivity. Such endeavors of dancing spirituals fit well within the scope of a larger debate around Jewish ‘borrowings’ of blackness and the affects/effects of these appropriations. As is indicated in such metaphorical performance of otherness, the ambivalence surrounding Jewish in-betweenness pivots around questions of sympathetic identification on one hand (the discourse on early Jewish jazz, for instance)

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<sup>44</sup> See Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress*, 180-182; and David Gillota, “The New Jewish Blackface: African American Tropes in Contemporary Jewish Humor” in *Jews and Humor: Studies in Jewish Civilization*, ed Leonard J. Greenspoon vol. 22, Oct 2009: 226-229.

and a simultaneous racial privilege (and guilt) of inevitable exploitation in uneven exchange. In the performances chosen for analysis, more and less explicit oscillation between these race tensions means to blur the space in-between them as the site of investigation itself. But where contemporary Jewface performances extends out of this legacy of black appropriation through literal and metaphorical means, I mean also to suggest a distinct reworking of ‘Jewish’ and ‘Woman’ as doubled difference. In the Jewface I outline, a complex genre of Jewish female self-parody still invokes an assimilatory black-white race and gender logic in an arguably post-assimilatory period.

The grouping together of ‘Jewface’ performances takes off from these explicit and implicit means of self-identification through practices and personifications of otherness. In some cases, like Silverman’s “Face Wars”, the portrait of Jewishness still emerges through yet more othered others. In other cases, like those of porn star-director Joanna Angel’s “gangster white chick” interracial adult film (Chapter 1) and Natalie Portman’s *Saturday Night Live* sketch in a similar personage (Chapter 4), a more ‘metaphorical’ blackface highlights a post-assimilatory Jewish parody without any makeup whatsoever. In cases like the joke-work of Rabbi Brous (Chapter 1), and in other cases, the dread of post-assimilatory sameness itself becomes the central topic for torching critique. And in yet other cases like the neo-burlesque Jewish basements of NY holiday tourism (Chapter 2) pushed underground after the unfunny end of a Golden Era of Jewish female dancing feats (Chapter 3), a proximal distance from ‘Jewishness’ supplies more and more sufficient material for a parody of white womanhood and its guilty pleasures. Finally, the dissertation reconsiders Jewface as US-based spectacle

through its international ‘doings’ in the context of Diaspora thinking and the triangulation of US-Israel-Palestine (Chapter 5). Contemporary Jewface performance extends the ambivalent workings of blackface impersonations in updated American national and international contexts tied to racial and economic structures of patriarchal power. What follows tracks a contemporary cultural project of Jewish self-othering as it morphs in and out of deliberate, defensive or otherwise strategic meaning.

### **Methods, Materials, and the Spectrum of Sexy Spectacle**

Chapter 1, “Pious and Porn Spectacles: Frontier Choreographies of the US Jewess,” explores the pious and porn faces of this jokish Sexy Jewess to introduce the construction of today’s New Jew as a post-assimilatory, post-feminist subject in flux. It begins by juxtaposing leading Jewish women at IKAR, a Jewish spiritual community lead by Rabbi Sharon Brous, and Burning Angel, the punk-porn company of director, Joanna Angel. Through analysis of the overlapping marketing of cultural orgs as “Not Your Bubbe’s Synagogue” and “Not Your Daddy’s Porn,” I partner personifications of a sexier Jewish female figure as the newest business of Jewish identity politics. Of particular interest is how these seemingly opposed organizations - one religious and one ‘alt-porn’ - defend and mobilize a ‘frontier feminism’ at the (embattled) edges of progressive Jewish discourse. I borrow the Frontier Concept from Sander Gilman as a symbolic site of “culture-in-motion”. Contributing to his formation through the focus on Jewish female leaders, I offer a ‘choreographic’ analysis that recognizes the mobilization of bodies across live and virtual space and time. In doing so, I document a curious feminization of

that movement - the frontier's bodily personification - through reference to a hot new Jewishness that can replace its old unsexy stereotypes.

The argument extends from a conspicuous inversion of a century-long representational legacy of the socially castrated Jew as male schlemiel. In its place, I situate a current wave of Jewish progressivism that sources, services and sells a sexier self-feminization with growing live and online appeal in and out of Jewish circles. The chapter frames how US spectacles of Jewish femininity reveal a current representational politics of a generation described as the "unaffiliated" and "hardest to reach". It looks to distinct figurations of the Sexy Jewess that negotiate conflicting messages of a Jewish 'new', and temper that representational authority through jokes on her behalf. This New Jew as Jewess personifies not only the work of women at the forefront of Jewish reinvention, but the ways in which a Jewish female commoditization is regularly and unevenly appropriated through various means.

A 'choreographic' reading of this Sexy Jewess spectrum looks at the variable ways Jewish bodies are sexualized to both justify and reconcile this mobilization of 'unaffiliated' Jews through a sex appeal meant to be as edgy as it is funny. The examples of *Heeb Magazine's* 'Shtetl Bunny' and 'Gratuitous Jewess' columns introduce additional and less spectacular sites and sights of contemporary Jewish culture. They both construct worlds of re-appropriative female agency (as self-aware sexy subjects) through user-generated content characteristic of Web 2.0 technologies and police that empowered potential through those same channels. Competing 'textual' material of the visually curated images and the accompanying commentary reveal a complex site of user

interaction. Collapsing traditional spectatorship through partially unseen/anonymous audience make-up, this interactivity likewise questions a simple assumption of a hetero-masculinist gaze. And yet, as the most pointed comment-posts of calendar girls as more hags than hot Jewesses make plainly clear, it is Ariel Levy's post-feminist conceptualization of the 'chauvinist pig' –male and female- that would presume to laugh last.

Chapter 2, "Nice Girls Gone Blue: Burlesque Nostalgia of the Downwardly Mobile," positions my usher-ethnography of New York's Jewish female burlesque and cabaret scenes and their Hanukkah spoofs for a holiday in-crowd. It takes as its premise the particular renditions of the sexy Jewess as a nostalgic return to a time when Jews weren't white as humor and gender rebellion in contemporary contexts. Through close readings of stage performances and inclusion of remarks on the subject by performers in the field, I address the rhetoric of transgression itself. As part of a larger discourse surrounding progressive Jewish femininity, its relationship to autoexotic self-displays of funniness and sexiness connect to bodily ties to an incomplete and arguably incompletable whiteness. In order to test the resistive potential of self-parody, I borrow from Foucault's theorization of transgression aware of its own limits. I read Foucault's thesis against Teresa de Lauretis' notion of perversity as a reiteration of binary categories like butch/femme in order to pass through them. Returning to Hutcheon's theory of parody as a tool of critical distance through repetition, I draw connections between self-othering performance in light of Foucault's limit experience and de Lauretis' sociosexual masquerade.

Through the spatial and socioeconomic staircase of a 'downward mobility,' I situate a Jewish performance circuit that engages familiar assimilatory class concerns through their notable fall from fame. That is, performers I describe work for little or no pay in alternative spaces of an off-off Broadway. In narrative and literal distance from celebrity spotlight, the showcases I discuss parody dominant discourse both on whiteness and expectations of post-assimilationist Jewish affluence. A do-it-yourself aesthetics of a generation poorer than their parents both engages the sexy ruse of a post-feminist 'gone wild' sensibility and uses a nostalgic lower east side immigrant reference to justify it.

Expanding upon the frontierist feminization of today's New Jew outlined in Chapter 1, I situate here the makings of a queer Jewish dance 'underground' that pushes at similar post-feminist, post-assimilatory frontiers but from less public platforms. To analyze female spaces run for and by women, I define my use of queer as a methodological agenda for 'reading' such scenes. I turn towards 'queer' as a theoretical paradigm for testing the homosocial bounds of a jesting Jewish female sex appeal against the campy drag of a Jewface femme they both mock and modify. As a multivalent framework-in-progress, meanings of queer extend from several distinct and overlapping pursuits. It encapsulates the practice of rehistoricizing archival absences to praxes that decolonize discourse in pursuit of fragmented hunches, intuitive interpretations and in idealist cases, envision the utopic as a futurist imagination of radical change. Deployments of the term have commonly dislodged their definitions from the confinements of non-normative sexuality itself (and debatably aimed to de-sexualize subjects) so as to include more expansive notions of a political and social potentiality not

ted to individual identitarian politics. That said, I use queer here to centralize a female subject who ‘queers’ as political critique. In analysis of Jewish female sexy ruse that breaks with Jewish and white standards of femininity, I wonder how a queering of Jewishness and a Jew-facing of queer burlesque work in tandem as overlapping transgressions, perversions, and parodies. I contribute to scholarship on queer Jewish dance through visibilizing the homosociality of neo-burlesque and do-it-yourself comedy spaces.

Chapter 3, “The (Post) Bawdy Body and the End of a Golden Era” writes through a performative gesture that eulogizes the death of Jewish female comedy. It theorizes an end of an era where Jewish female physical humor functioned as a critical site of ideological and embodied resistance. Funny dancing by Bette Midler, Barbra Streisand, Gilda Radner, and Madeline Kahn during the late 1960s through 1980s offer rich examples of a Golden Era of humor and gender radicalism no longer viable in today’s mainstream markets. This chapter attends to how these ‘Golden Girls’ of Jewish female comedy (that references back to earlier Yiddish femme figuration I imagine through Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker and Betty Boop) humored a feminist critique of race, class and sexuality through various techniques of a legacy bawdy body. I ask how the regeneration of the Jewish woman shtick in today’s mainstream comedy contexts (Sarah Silverman’s *Jesus is Magic* as central example) no longer makes (or market) such a funny Jewish feminism.

As compared to the dancier comic scenes of the Golden Era I outline here, contemporary demands on the stand up female body, Jewish or not, arguably refocus

attention to her face-work, posture, carriage and gait in pedestrian ways. Today's more profitable limelight in stand up and sketch TV circles leaves a rich dancing legacy behind. Fully staged, costumed choreographies of the beloved greats of a Golden Era are left to live on only among the off-off gimmicks of the less glamorous modern girly show of the previous chapter. The shift reveals a more universal end of the song and dance act and its replacement by the proliferation of stand up clubs and sketch comedy TV since the early 80s. The turn I identify here thus follows general trends in national entertainment that render comic dance as social parody a thing of the past.

What the disappearing dance act may have to do with Jewishness and gender specifically is less than self-evident, however. By focusing on a post-assimilationist 'Jewish question' and post-feminist 'Woman question' as doubled trouble of a contemporary gendered and racialized threat, I offer frameworks for thinking about dance specifically as it is ditched in order to sustain Jewish female comic celebrity spotlight. To theorize this shift, I propose a Jewish post-assimilation and a parallel 'post' tension in scholarship on feminism to determine a cause of unfunny death for Jewish female dancing jokes. Against the backdrop of a nostalgic Jewish female underground discussed in chapter 2 and the Sexy Jewess/New Jew outlined in Chapter 1, I document and diagnose an uncertain contemporary afterlife for Jewish female bodies in mainstream comic formats.

Chapter 4, "*Black Swan*, White Nose: Jewish Ballet and a Dancing Bird By Any Other Name," compares Darren Aronofsky's Academy Award winning psychological thriller, *Black Swan* (2010), to Barbra Streisand's rendition of *Swan Lake* in *Funny Girl*

(1968). The richly opposed examples of Jewish dancing spectacle offer insight on variable investments in visual representations of Jewishness. I argue that both films reflect not only when the Jewish female body may be depicted as same (white) or other (Jewish), but reflect upon the cultural imagination of ballet as a white institutional milieu. As each ballet borrowing continues to circulate a mythos of exclusion for “funny girls” with big noses, I argue that a shared disfiguring of the Jewish female body desexualizes Jewishness in the service of white aspirations. In radically different ways that distinguish the two films in horror and humor categories, both contribute to theories of the Jewish-looking female body as excessively demanding, overly desiring, and - as conceived at the butt of even her own jokes - not so certainly sexy.

I read *Black Swan* as an ambiguously Jewish film with horror appeal. An alternative reading of the film’s performative (what it “does”) and thrilling (how it does it) uncertainties adds to Jewish visual and performance discourse. It also challenges the notion that stereotypically “Jewish” content defines the Jewish film. Moreover, even in *Black Swan*’s white and black world seemingly free of Jews, there is evidence of what cultural studies scholar Jon Stratton calls “Jewish moments.” My appeal in this chapter is to those viewers who may be swayed to read “Jewishly”. In a parallel move to domesticate the queer (and its subversive Jewish female potential outlined in the previous three chapters), *Black Swan* exploits the horror of repressed desire. I argue that the film domesticates the queer so as to recontain the ambiguously Jewish, ambiguously sexual female and restore status quo norms of white womanhood. I reengage Manning’s ‘metaphorical’ minstrelsy to question how the film blacks up the not-quite-white femme

fatale through the psychotic atavism of a more sexually adventurous swan. In doing so, *Black Swan* appropriates the creative and sexual potential of queer desire to ultimately reaffirm the social and psychological pathology of whiteness.

Passing into whiteness through ‘neutral’ noses, Jewish actresses in unJewish roles slide through the cracks of popular culture’s color lines today as they have through racial impersonations of various means for over a hundred years. I compare the constructed whiteness of Jewish performers in contemporary leading roles like *Black Swan*’s to the Jewishness as marked on the bodies of female comics like Streisand. What becomes evident is an important distinction between visual representations of Jewishness and the politics of its efforts at whiteness is mapped in bodily terms. The Jewishness of *Black Swan*’s characters, writers, and directors is regularly overlooked in the white/black world of ballet’s demands for perfection. In contrast, the deliberate duckishness of *Funny Girl*’s ‘perfect imperfections’ implicates an in/visibility that historicizes period-specific constructs of where and how Jewishness can be seen in relation to the female ballet body, and filmic depictions thereof.

Chapter 5 “Sexy *Sabras*, Guns and Calendar Girls: Defensive Desires of a Global Diaspora,” looks at the personification of this Sexy *Sabra* (stereotype of the Israeli born Jewish woman) as archetypal foil of the unsexy funny girl grown up in the US. Representations of women as sexual objects of a presumably hetero-masculinist global desire show how the militarization of her image in US magazines like *Heeb* and *Maxim* as both offensive subject and object in need of defense. This, I argue, blurs any easy understanding of her popular US allure. I position the appropriated *Sabra* sex pot as the

site of discursive desires ‘in defense’ of Israeli statehood. Its presumption of a center-Diaspora model contributes to scholarship that has focused on the “Eros” of Jewish statehood in a larger focus on the sexualization and vexed masculinization of Jewishness. Specifically, I mean to question where the heterosexualist stereotype of military girls and their calendar spreads reinforce and revisualize a discourse of the “muscular Jews” that David Biale explains has stood in for the Zionist nationalist project. Such a move returns to theories of the New Jew as Sexy Jewess (Chapter 1) and re-situates that theory in the context of US Israeli relations and the postzionist critique of undue imperial expressions of power.

To ground the sexy online gallery of *sabra* military-models in performance examples that both reiterate and reformulate her image, I offer a close reading of *New Eyes* (2010-current), a solo performance created and performed by Israeli-American actress, Yafit Josephson. The one-act drama, currently on tour across a number of US college campus after a 90-show run in Los Angeles and more in New York, provides insight into the modes of marketing and moralizing of a personal portrait of the IDF. Analysis of its funny and fun-loving female lead theorizes the sympathetic roles of a big Jewish nose and its ties to Israeli defense. I offer embodied ways of reading *New Eyes* as a right-wing portrayal of Jewish-Israeli identity and focus on the strategic ways it literally and figuratively invisibilizes a Palestinian experience. I compare the play’s pro-Israeli politics to the support for Palestine stressed in the film *Miral* (2010). In reading these two works together, I draw specific attention to the personifications of women as sympathetic figurations and fighting femmes of national identity. Finally, the chapter returns to the

politics of a more expressly diasporic Jewish representation with a reading of Bay Area-based choreographer, Nina Haft's evening-length *T:HERE*. Haft's work reflects her company's travels to a Palestine, which, Haft blogs, is carried "inside of us [all] in some way".

Through both the shared and shifting figurations of the Sexy Jewess as part jokish self-parody, part Semitic femme-fatale across contexts, I showcase the wide range of locations that differently house her image. Pairings of people and performances that might not otherwise partner with one another introduces a conceptual Jewish female figure as she both morphs and is made amorphous under masculinist demands of mainstream capital. I begin from the premise that her elusive or implausible identity as Sexy Jewess neo-stereotype is entangled in US cultural politics of race, gender and sexuality that render her status as ambivalently acceptable. I develop that theory in the context of national and international affairs not just for thinking on Jews and Jewishness. By the end of the dissertation, my self-questioning stance remains yet unreconciled, as the stakes of (my own) self-othering spectacle appear to overlook points of US race privilege in local and global contexts. At the crux of this concern lives a blurry boundary between outmoded doctrine of Jewish victimization and the very different issue of excess Jewish female visibility. Those edges are even more blurred by the deconstruction of deliberate embodiments of difference when those choices are seen as deliberate strategies of Jewish defense.

Still, staging femininity through sexiness, and sexiness most often through humor, the Sexy Jewess plays, preaches, posts and performs between race privilege and gendered

rebellion, between allegiances more and less deliberate/d. Moreover, parodies of excessive and sex-inflected Jewish femininity in an era of openly transgressive sex everywhere begs the question of what it is about Jewishness that may be so boundary crossing. What about the excessive expressivity of Jewish femininity helps realize today's resistive femininity through bodily means so humorously, or horribly as the case may be? The writing of this research thus aims to wonder with the reader what is finally so funny about funny girls in the context of dancing Jewishness, gender and sexuality. In asking how the recently revamped historical figure of the 'Sexy Jewess' engages in "post-feminist" politics in particular, my argument adds ethico-religious twists to gender and sexuality concerns. Across contexts with critical insight to studies of Jewish cultural depictions of the corporeal, I ask what is at stake as (Jewish) women perform (Jewish sex) as counter culture, when 'Jew' and 'Jewish' always already mean smart, funny, male and abashedly *unsexy*. How do these stagings (mis)represent Jewish female desire, and how does that change the analysis of a so-called rise in desire for the Jewish female? Where she has been 'sexy' has largely been for laughs, I will argue, framing the central questions of the dissertation: What constitutes the sexy, the Jewess, the joke, and what and who are at stake as those categories overlap?

## CHAPTER 1

### Pious and Porn Spectacles: Frontier Choreographies of the US Jewess

A rabbi and a porn star walk into a bar...and any number of punch lines that could come next might miss that the particular porn star I mean is an ex-orthodox Jewish “punk princess” and the nondenominational rabbi is a svelte brunette. A rush job on the joke might likewise miss that they’re both thirty something year old bosses of their own ‘best of’ business models with too much at stake for the same garish jokes.<sup>45</sup> Reset that near-mythical bar in one of the Korean Spas in mid-Wilshire, Los Angeles. Space it somewhere between Joanna Angel’s pornish “pink parties” in just as revamped a downtown district and Rabbi Brous’ converted JCC-gym on Olympic Blvd. Meeting in the middle of less-than-opposed worlds, these jokish renditions of a sacred-profane send-up might be better scripted by the savvy leading ladies themselves. Funny in their own right and known to be particularly just judges of respective domains, the two anti-

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<sup>45</sup> Such jokes regularly spoof on rabbi roles in combination with other religious or ethnic figures and most often return to the failures of a castrated penis in some inane critique of a general Jewish inferiority. To begin the joke here with a rabbi and a porn star would seem to assume the same in an explicit heterosexual encounter, but for the twist of their unsuspecting roles as women, their shared resistance of heteronormative religious or sexual dogma and their variable investments in Jewishness. For the reader’s pleasure, one of the old jokes with Jewishness and excessive sexuality at its core: Moishe travels from Bialystock to Warsaw and the first thing he does is go to a brothel and ask for Rachel. When she is finally free, he doesn’t say a word to her. He just shtu[s her and leaves a thousand rubels on the night stand. She says it’s too much but he just shrugs, “It’s ok”. The next day he returns to the same brothel and again he waits for Rachel, shtups her, without saying a word, and leaves a thousand rubels. The third day the same thing. It’s a lot of money so Rachel tries to find out something about her new best customer. She asks, “So where are you from?” “Bialystock,” he says. “Me, too,” says Rachel. “What a small world. Perhaps you know my uncle Izak Greenberg?” Moishe replies, “As a matter of fact I do. He gave me something to give to you.” “What?” Rachel asks. “Three thousand rubels.”

traditionalists certainly loom larger than their five-foot frames. Were the religious maven and porn directress ever to sit side by side in the spa comforts of an afternoon soak, I could imagine the two agreeing on at least a few things: Jewish apathy in America (white guilt) is dead and a revolution of the newly felt and the radically embodied should be tweeted, blogged, emailed, podcasted, sold as merch, made in LA, sent home to New York networks, and posted onto voter's favorite lists of a hot and hotter Jewish female force with too many facebook fans to ignore.

Let me be clear. Rabbi Sharon Brous of LA's Jewish spiritual community, IKAR, and director-model Joanna Angel of the adult film company Burning Angel may or may not know one another personally. Nor would they ever have time to meet for such a spin on the ritual *mikvah*, or female bath. Indeed, LA's social worlds of Jewish religiosity and the fetish subcultures of an alt-porn punk phenomenon are of admittedly different vicinities and scales, near as they are on a star map of Jewish sites. Close neighbors spatially if less conspicuously in relation to ideology, my performative fiction faces these afterhours accomplices together revamping old rabbi and porn star-director roles. Through the appropriations and subversions of today's Jewish woman in both roles, the pairing means to enact a partnering duet of a west coast (post)feminist network and its spectacular Jewish entrepreneurship. Under the spotlight of current top-five lists, both women preside over break-through businesses in distinct arenas as winner of Top Rabbi lists<sup>46</sup> and Best Port Site/Sex Scene respectively.<sup>47</sup> I argue for the utility of a hypothetical

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<sup>46</sup> Abigail Pogrebin, "America's Top 50 Rabbis for 2012," *The Daily Beast*, Apr 2, 2012. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/04/02/america-s-top-50-rabbis-for->

gesture that looks beyond critical differences in scale to pitch the physical and conceptual places of overlap in and of a New Jewish femininity with growing appeal.

What originally related these two institutions was the humor of matching company slogans. With respective mantras promising that one is “Not Your Bubbe’s Synagogue” and the other, “Not Your Daddy’s Porn,” I could not help but invite comparisons. At play in the semantic overlap of these sassy hooks is a particular rhetorical gesture that invites potential participants to wonder what *is* or *could be* if not in Bubbe’s or Daddy’s domain.<sup>48</sup> In the shared connotation of a “not your” sensibility, a tongue-in-cheek refusal of two American Jewish generations underlines an overlapping newness assigned to the featured female lead; her edginess, her boldness, her exceptional ideas. As both bylines highlight what they are *not* to invite collective imagining of a future-present tense, they similarly envision a next step for Jewish progressivism with a certain Jewish female ‘topness’ at the fore.

Moreover, as spectacular icons on the fringes of Jewish America, and gentile US more broadly, they offer their respective stances in positions of Jewish and female authority as funny, ‘sexy’ alternatives to mainstream representations of either category. While Angel invests in an explicit, bodily sexiness by trade, however, Rabbi Brous heads

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[2012.html](#). Voted fifth of the top rabbis of 2012, Brous’ organization IKAR has been described as the “gold standard for captivating young, unaffiliated American Jews.”

<sup>47</sup> “AVN Announces the Winners of the 2011 AVN Awards,” *AVN Media Network*, Posted Jan 9, 2011. <http://business.avn.com/articles/video/AVN-Announces-the-Winners-of-the-2011-AVN-Awards-421782.html>

<sup>48</sup> *Bubbe* is Yiddish for grandmother. Used in this context, Bubbe connotes not only a temporal distance from a generation of Jewish immigrants, but a certain tongue-in-cheek ideological move beyond a certain coming-to-America outsider identity. See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for more discussion of Bubbe as political joke material for Jewish comedy personality, Sarah Silverman.

a spiritual community, that while liberal in its sexual politics, cultivates its sexy-ness through outspoken political progressivism and a revitalized return to ritual practice. The former seeks the sexy and sexiness openly, while the latter, in her position of religious authority, does not delimit her agenda in this way. And yet, the various ways in which each figure positions herself in relation to assimilation, feminism, and the ‘post’ provokes a line of inquiry that helps give shape to certain shared concerns. However uneven a comparison of sex work and the rabbinate may be along many lines, the ‘sexy’ I align with both figures is meant to overlay and interrogate superlative ‘best’ in poll titles. A polar Jewess imaginary invoked here pushes in both distinct and overlapping ways against patriarchal limits in the name of the Jewish new, the newly hip and re-affiliated. Rabbi Brous’ post-assimilatory agenda to bring back a disenchanting Jewish generation, and Joanna Angel’s post-feminist agenda to bring back the (Jewish) progressive edge to increasingly popular Alternative Porn embody two versions of the Sexy Jewess. Attention to the striking areas of intersection between these different dimensions of Jewish cultural representation help conceive of what women’s (spectacle) work might have to do with it.

Citing Bubbe and Daddy in the context of pious and porn permissions granted by these youngish matriarchs helps delineate the boundaries of tired, masculinist thinking. Pushing against these borders marks a critical move *away* from ‘traditional’ forms of authority, and offers a conceptual choreography of transgressions and transformations surrounding the spectacle Jewish female body. In an age when many bemoan the waning interest in religious life, it is this period-specific ‘post’ outlined by spectacular Jewish femininities that help construct the frontier choreographies of the Sexy Jewess figuration.

Borrowing also from Sander Gilman's notion of the "Jewish Frontier" as a symbolic space in real time and always under construction, I look to how these seemingly opposed organizations work together to 'choreograph' a frontier of feminist Jewish discourse. Religious and punk-porn institutions and their female heads of house offer literal emblems of LA's westwardness and figurative figures of Jewish unorthodoxy. By broadcasting Jewish female bosses gone a little wild to distinct live and virtual networks both Jewish and not, both sites re-zone socio-spatial performances of contemporary Jewish identity politics. The comparative analysis of choreographic agendas tracks the ways in which these cultural orgs assign meaning to the moving body as well as how they deploy bodies in space and time. What follows maps out a complex and curious Jewish cartography of layered 'frontierist' concerns.

Frontier choreographies of particular pornographer and rabbi women provides analysis of the distinct and overlapping spaces they forge for Jews and Women respectively. The theorization here focuses on how these figures move in and across male-ordered parameters of religiosity and pornography alike as a means to reanimate both categories and mobilize bodies around them. Analysis borrows from Jewish and gender discourse as well as scholarship on dance and sexuality studies to emphasize the cultural work of the Jewish and female 'excessive' body. The interdisciplinary framework helps account for the multisignifying spectacularization of those doubled excesses in distinct genres. In doing so, the argument defends a framework for thinking about today's spectacular Jewish women as sexual symbols of new authority. Its premise situates the self-reflexive and autoexotic displays of the Sexy Jewess described in the

introduction and pursued throughout the dissertation. As such, this first chapter aims to provide foundational insight into the double influences which shape and are shaped by today's Sexy Jewess as a post-feminist, post-assimilationist play on piety and porn. In doing so, the discussion offers ways of indexing a spectrum of spectacle Jewish femininity outlined in the next four chapters.

### **Frontier Femininities: (Flaws of) a Jewish Choreologic**

In a book titled the same, Sander Gilman defines the “Jewish Frontier” as “the conceptual and physical space where groups in motion meet, confront, alter, destroy, and build”.<sup>49</sup> Gilman’s post-modern definition sees the frontier as a symbolic space linked to a variety of concrete locations and histories. Wishing to escape the center-periphery duality of a Diaspora model with Jerusalem at its center, Gilman posits that the “authentic” lives neither at the center (Israel) or the margin (Diaspora). Instead, Gilman’s authentic is at the frontier of fantasy and reality, in perpetual motion, permanently operating - in his analysis - in film, literature, and representations of history. Arguing that a center-periphery model cannot be postmodern in any way, Gilman borrows Jonathan Boyarin’s alternative model. Boyarin writes that “postmodern sensibilities allow us to recuperate the alternative resource of identifying Jews as a collective through continuity (coextension in time) as much as through contiguity

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<sup>49</sup> Sander Gilman. *Jewish Frontiers: Essays on Bodies, Histories and Identities*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15.

(coextension in space).”<sup>50</sup> Such ‘coextensions’ in time and space offer choreographic paradigms for my use of the Jewish frontier. Movements away from the ‘traditional’ authority and authenticity of Israel (in his estimation, its own frontier-myth) dismantle the urtext of Jewish diasporic thinking about *Olim* (full Jewish national identity) versus *Yordim* (the fallen who live everywhere else).

The Jewish frontier Gilman outlines is furthermore as a space where complex boundaries between self and other are constructed, wherein a communal fantasy emerges as a model for understanding oneself in the world.<sup>51</sup> A “narrative” best understood as “superimposed on a landscape,” Gilman explains the frontier “is a means of organizing the world, rather than the world itself”.<sup>52</sup> It is this organization of ‘the world’ in which Jews not only live, but more importantly self-define, that likewise narrates the terms of a Jewish collective identity. Understood also as an ‘organizing’ mechanism that means to bring Jewish bodies together - in ‘meta’ or material terms - the frontier ethos also speaks to the construction of today’s ‘New Jew’. This New Jew is understood as of an unprecedented disaffiliation with traditional organizational models like synagogues and other Jewish cultural institutions.<sup>53</sup> Indicative of a post-assimilatory moment for Jews and Jewishness in the US, the frontier model stands in for a way of newly organizing today’s

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<sup>50</sup> Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*, 8. Gilman cites Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm after Paradise* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xvii.

<sup>51</sup> Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*, 19.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>53</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The ‘New Jews’: Reflections on Emerging Cultural Practices.” Re-thinking Jewish Communities and Networks in an Age of Looser Connections Conference. Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University and Institute for Advanced Studies, Hebrew University. December 6-7, 2005. New York City, 1.

unaffiliated Jews either unwilling to be organized, or unorganizable as such. Gilman answers a longstanding question of vexed Jewish continuity with a postmodern one of blurry reality through frontierist symbols. The result provides a partial resolution of the Jewish new and next through a return to a history of survivance against all odds. If I find the stakes of a contemporary frontier to be ambiguous at best, even the shifty contours of Jewish self-image in his model deserve attention for their perpetual transgression of borders toward the erection of new ones.

Gilman admits that a frontier phenomenon risks the problem of abstraction and ahistoricity as it conceives of a model for the framing of Jewish history.<sup>54</sup> But as a “material” frontier that must be understood “symbolically,” such slippages between the real and the representational, or history and its abstraction, offer prime interpretive opportunities. The slipping itself helps track the unfixity of constructions and deployments of bodies as well as their own movement between symbolic and material valences. The frontierist framework thus performs its own logic of futurity and Jewish continuance, in a postmodern moment of reconfiguration and expanded self-definition. It is this performative force of a frontier fantasy to project the space of the new and give it physical shape through the deployment of bodies ‘doing things’ that lends itself well to a dance studies analysis. How Jewish female spectacular bodies fold in to Gilman’s model is less than fully fleshed out.

In fact, without disclosing a rationale for it either way, Gilman’s examples of Jewish frontiers dwell near-entirely on male authors, filmmakers and representations.

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<sup>54</sup> Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*, 16.

Moreover, when the body is addressed, it is to outline studies of Jewish illnesses, physical inferiorities and various perceived insufficiencies tied to bad behaviors on historically imagined frontiers with either explicit reference to male subjects or no mention of gender specifically.<sup>55</sup> My usage of the frontier as a Jewish phenomenon extends an analysis in search of the authentic and the new, but revises Gilman's Jewish frontier in at least two ways: first, through a focus on spectacular choreographies of intimate service work, and second, as a space centered on women-led practices that manifest zones of (post)feminist discourse into bodily being.

As discussed in the dissertation Introduction, the threat of the feminine has arguably barred Jewish studies from embracing the subject of corporeality.<sup>56</sup> The theoretical move toward a Jewish frontier concept of pornographic sex work and progressive synagogue femininities thus views anew the re-feminized corporeal. The resistance of strict boundaries between the performative fiction and material form of Gilman's frontier phenomena insists upon an idea of spaces and symbols as zones under construction. Such blurring of real and fantasy lends itself to a space of innovation for both 'Jew' and 'Woman' in this figuration of frontier femininities. I argue that this space of innovation is opened up as and through a complex and choreographic 'post'-ing of Jewish American race and gender paradigms.

If a frontier concept envisions a chronic boundary-crossing choreography as one of infinite socio-spatial possibilities and ongoing self-construction, however, then an

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<sup>55</sup>See Also Sander Gilman's featured subjects in *The Jew's Body*. (New York & London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Corporeal Turn," 447.

active practice of violation of borders is always already present. In Gilman's broad-sweeping words, "It is the notion of violation and transcendence of boundaries that is inherent in such a construction of the frontier."<sup>57</sup> In a world - or organizing narrative of one - where violation necessarily occurs in the name of transcendence of boundaries, its social actors are at least as at stake as the norm they may be knocking over. My emphasis here on spectacular Jewish female figures means to attend to these violations that animate, inspire, or otherwise encourage bodies to move in new ways. Such choreographic concerns enact a Jewish futurism with frontierist performativity.

To foreground frontierist movements across space and time, and in California specifically, however, risks the potential forgetting of colonialist histories so critical to any analysis of the American west and its pathologies of progress.<sup>58</sup> While Gilman's Jewish frontiers make explicit claim to a symbolic site of enacting culture, my geography of frontierist doings extends a Jewish history of participation in a dream of land-mined riches and white settlement. Even as the Jewish story of western expansion is beyond the bounds of this essay, I invoke its legacy of wealth and mobility linked to a Jewish Hollywood factory of dreams still tightly entangled in a politics of white guilt. How

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<sup>57</sup> Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*, 28.

<sup>58</sup> Gilman himself makes reference to Frederick Andrew Turner's seminal study on the Frontier mythology, which concerns less the actual expansion into Western America and more the fantasy topography of the frontier wherein "one imagines oneself teleologically as the center and end of history and where one understands one's own physical position in the world as that cutting edge of (divine) history", *Jewish Frontiers*, 27. Gilman's reference is to Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," presented at a meeting of the American Historical Association at the World's Columbian Exposition on Chicago, Illinois, 1893. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/frontierthesis.html> accessed Feb 4, 2011.

Jewish gender dynamics in the American west have extended from this history of westward expansion no doubt deserves more critical attention than this chapter affords.

Beyond even a geographical conceptualization, the online interactive sources I draw from likewise remap this more canonical frontier fantasy on movements across ‘free space’, though in entirely different means. The relevance of a Jewish online frontier is significant in an age identified by the decline in organized religious affiliation, incline in interracial/interethnic marriage, and the fear-factor of American Jewish secularization.<sup>59</sup> That Jewish or Jewish-aspiring individuals are congregating on Jewish sites is significant for this reason. A whole host of online communities presumably allows those turned off by tired temple dynamics to be virtually Jewish, and perhaps, more truthfully so because of it. Slipping between material and symbolic selves, visitors of more and less explicitly sexy sites like KinkyJews.com, Jewish Furry community forums, and Second Life synagogues that promise visitors can “play hard and *daven* [pray] harder” offer just some examples of online Jewish frontiers with similar alternative appeal.

A bodily reading of the frontier as both a female led and expressly feminized figuration inevitably folds back on itself through the social and spatial reference to the female body as a site of appropriation as well as transgression. The “not” which departs from the patriarchal holds of the past in exchange for something new, vast, and yet unfulfilled, suggests the movement into, or the penetration of empty space that implicates the vagina itself. As both anxious frontier and conceptual chasm, the material and symbolic female anatomy landscapes the lenses of lack on the one hand and libidinal

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<sup>59</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The New Jews,” 7.

social desire on the other. A bodily femininity risks foregrounding the obsessive tensions of Jewish continuation as the task of its reproductive organs. I position Brous and Angel here as cultural representatives of a moment when both progressive rabbis and porn stars, are queering the heteronormative ‘love plot’ among other patriarchal narratives through more expansive politics of sexual representation in respective domains. Still, the tension around reproduction that underlies any discussion of Jewish futurity still tethers any titillating play with sexy alternative personas to the most ancient of Jewish dictums: more Jews, not less. The Jewish mother, always already a Bubbe in training, it would seem, still reigns insatiably supreme.

In spite of these flaws of a frontier formulation, and more likely because of them, I reconsider Gilman’s model for contemporary Jewish history in the context of today’s post-assimilatory New Jewishness with growing sexy appeal. My findings reroute typical borders between pious and porn spectacles in order to view how they co-choreograph a shared frontier. In doing so, I mean to map out a layered, dialogic strategy of Jewish renewal in an era when many bemoan a backwards religious logic that bears less and less relevance to issues of pressing current concern. The bearers of tradition in both porn and pious circles may not acknowledge or even notice the cultural work of Brous, Angel and other spectacular Jewish female agents discussed in the dissertation. The building momentum of radical Jewish embodiment reveals a particular gendered tendency toward transgression of the sacred that both ditches these officiating positions and resignifies the sacred in doing so. Such movement in and out of bounds offers insight into the material symbolic status of best-in-show Jewish sex and synagogue femininities.

## Post-feminist Approaches: The Jewish Body Beyond Binary Lines

In claiming the import of a New Jew as Jewess social construction, I acknowledge upfront how slippery the claim can be of a cohesive or singular American Jewish self-image. Jewish discourse has increasingly taken strides to acknowledge a rich demographic diversity within American Jewries in a critical turn toward the ‘actual Jews left out of Jewish studies’.<sup>60</sup> And yet, an overwhelming amount of popular and scholarly attention still circulates the portrait of the near-mythic Jewish subject and the ‘question’ of (his) layered postmodern identity politics in an era post-assimilation.<sup>61</sup> The particular interplays of femininity and Jewishness outlined in this essay mean to investigate the most recent fears and fantasies of this ongoing but newly iterated ‘Jewish question’ alongside an equally nebulous ‘Woman question’ tied to race, class, and sexuality concerns. In privileging the spectacular Jewish female as today’s Jewish femme, such a project would seem to necessarily invert longstanding stereotypes of the effeminate male *shlemiel* arguably still at play in mainstream depictions of Jews and Jewishness.<sup>62</sup> But instead of a simple binary that would merely flip one fiction for the other, it is against

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<sup>60</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. “The Corporeal Turn”, 450.

<sup>61</sup> On the subject of Jewish studies as a majority male discourse, see works discussed in this dissertation including Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties*, Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, and Riv Ellen Prell *Fighting to Become Americans*.

<sup>62</sup> *Shlemiel* or *Schlemiel* is a Yiddish term used to describe a widely popular archetype of the anxious, effeminate Jewish male. Many have cited Woody Allen as one of the most famous performers to embody this stereotype, though the trope has been arguably personified in Hollywood to such a degree that scholars cite the *shlemiel* role as responsible for a “Jewification” of American media. For more on this subject, see Daniel Itzkowitz’s “They Are All Jews” in *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity and Postmodern American Culture*, ed. Vincent Brook. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006) and Jon Stratton’s “*Seinfeld* is a Jewish Sitcom, Isn’t It?” in *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities*. (London: Routledge, 2000).

these misrepresentations of womanly male Jews in Hollywood and beyond that I position ‘actual’ women in spectacle roles. So as to avoid trivializing the visual and material discourse which surrounds the Jewish American female figure as ‘just’ as jokish break with a patriarchal past, I centralize this curious abstraction of a new Jewish American social body and its coed corporeal strategies of a revamped femininity.

In addition to moving beyond a Jewish male femme/female femme binary, the theoretical pairing of this analysis likewise contends with a longstanding imagination of porn and pious opposites. The argument here thus begins from the necessary recognition of and readiness to move beyond a trial within (majority Jewish) white feminist politics around the inherent presumption of right and wrong implicit in a sex/sacred split. It plots out the terms of a post-feminist turn in spectacles of sex and synagogue femininities and their representational bearing over a shift in Jewish cultural production more broadly. I develop upon these early arguments in feminist pornography studies that insist upon anticensorship in order to question the utility and mobilization of sexiness specifically.

For instance, an impassioned historiography has privileged pornography in the hot seat of such morality debates with the seemingly irreconcilable notion of censorship at the core of a yet unbridgeable conceptual chasm.<sup>63</sup> At stake has been an either/or phenomenon of questionable fairness versus the first amendment. Film studies scholar Linda Williams among so many others has argued the defense of fairness for women

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<sup>63</sup> Most well known for her anti-porn stance is Andrea Dworkin whose 1986 testimony before Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography publically lamented the genre’s violence toward women. Along with other big names in second wave feminism like Gloria Steinem, Adrienne Rich and Susan Brownmiller, Dworkin helped solidify a radical feminist antipornography group.

harkens back to masculinist strongholds on power and pleasure. In her quintessential text on hard-core pornography and its significance as national culture, Williams defends an anti-censorship approach as part of a larger critical study of sexuality. She breaks radically with long-held notions of sexual norms, denouncing the mid-80's movements of feminists against pornography who, despite better intentions, rely on a conservative rhetoric of "normal" sexuality.<sup>64</sup> Gayle Rubin's position is even more radical than Williams, as she argues for making space for sexual practices like pedophilia, homosexuality, sadism, transvestitism, and voyeurism that extends far beyond what is familiarly accepted.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 21. While in part agreeing with those that might reject pornography on the premise that it reduces the role of woman to sex object, Williams argues that the cinematic depiction of sexual pleasure in pursuit of visible "confessions" of "truths" deserves critical attention in that such a fascination has sustained since Muybridge's early photographs ogling at horses in midair jumps. In its efforts to ever-advance means of discovering the female body, what she terms a "frenzy of the visible," fueled by the new technologies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, has continued to sustain yet more peculiar forms of blindness to women's sexual pleasure. Such blindness, she argues, becomes the point of contradiction where feminists might seek power in resistance of "a monolithic, masculine, hard-core discourse of sexuality", 57.

<sup>65</sup> Borrowing from Foucault's premise in Rubin argues that sexuality in Western culture is (mis)conceived as a "human product," in "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of Sexuality" in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora, 1992), 275. Rubin writes that sexuality is compartmentalized as a monogamous activity deemed solely for the reproductive purposes, wherein married heterosexuals exist the top of an "erotic pyramid," under whose logic those engaging in variant sexual practices are made to receive medical "cure", 279. I borrow from Rubin's thesis while sexuality, like gender, is political, a theory of gender cannot account entirely for a theory of sexuality, or the modern sexual system. That said, my analysis here necessarily entangles the two concepts in order to map the ways in which spectacle Jewish femininity conflates a tongue-in-cheek sexy female femme figuration with a frontierist charge.

Building upon these arguments in an article on notorious (and also Jewish) porn star and performance artist Annie Sprinkle (born Ellen Steinberg), Williams emphasizes that Sprinkle is an artist *and* a whore, rather than one or the other.<sup>66</sup> Williams intentionally debunks the simplistic rendering of opposites. Collapsing the protective distance between whore and artist categories offers a way to understand the blurriness of boundaries itself as Sprinkle's particular genius and limitation. This blurring that is both promising and paralyzing raises questions about how feminist agency maneuvers with and against the powers that police it. The blurriness appears emblematic of Sprinkle's post-feminist sexualization of aesthetics and identity politics alike. Williams clarifies that post-feminism must not suggest the end of feminism or even the prospect that its goals have already been achieved. Her insistence is clear that the social and political rationale for a move away from feminism is from identification with its name and cultural assignments, and that such a premise presents rich theoretical material for analysis. I borrow this conceptualization of the post-feminist as a contemporary condition with questionable consequences for the future of the so-called Jewish Frontier.

More recently, cultural theorist, Ariel Levy writes an entirely convincing map of a world with raunch on the rise, and introduces the Female Chauvinist Pig as today's shameless perpetrator of sexual commoditization. Levy's fieldwork amongst camera crews of *Girls Gone Wild*<sup>67</sup> ranges to the confessions of sex industry stars to new

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<sup>66</sup> Linda Williams, "A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle." *Social Text*. ed. Anne McClintock. Winter, No. 37 (1993): 117.

<sup>67</sup> *Girls Gone Wild* is an operating unit of GGW, LLC, an adult entertainment company developed by American entrepreneur and filmmaker, Joe Francis in 1997. Camera crews typically film young women at college parties and other venues that 'go wild' through

misogynist trends amongst gay and transsexual “bois”. Connections drawn across these contexts mark a turn away from the women’s movement of the 60s and 70s toward the so-called liberatory attitudes of a post-feminist era. Levy charts a range of female expressions of femininity that accompany just as diverse a set of sexualities, and finds among the diversity a single common thread: a consumptive, all empowering desire to be “like men”.<sup>68</sup> Included as a key example is Levy’s observed post-feminist extraordinaire and producer of cable television raunch, the “Jewish Woman of Inspiration,” Sheila Nevins.<sup>69</sup> The “urbane, articulate, extremely successful; woman who sits on a high perch in the middle of the mainstream” cuts down the reluctant (Jewish) feminists in the room that question the morality of such ‘inspired’ TV. Introducing this undercutting of the industry Jewish executive, Levy makes a direct link between a certain post-feminism of the Jewish frontier and a masculinist drive for sex, money and power more reminiscent of “the kind of man we used to call a Male Chauvinist Pig”.<sup>70</sup> The lines of a regendered chauvinism are cast in relation to a familiar pornography/anti-pornography debate. Marking the move away from ‘traditional’ Jewishness and femininity in more than one way, the very notion of piggishness for Jewish women connotes an unkosher market diet that breaks with Jewish laws of all kinds.

Levy makes it plainly clear that post-feminism undoes the work of the previous generation’s quest for sexual liberation and equal gender treatment. Her impassioned plea

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willing exposure of body parts. Since 2008, products have been sold under the website as streaming videos, downloads and DVDs.

<sup>68</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 90. Levy derives this title from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, who elected Nevins as “Woman of Inspiration” in 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, 93.

for feminism follows for readers with discussion questions at the conclusion of her text to guide and graft a growing generation of new feminists back to a second wave sensibility. Though I continue Levy's task of questioning the post-feminist pig along the lines of her defense of future-minded freedoms, I hesitate to defend a second wave feminism as the more appropriate alternative. Just as the frontierist scheme is wrought with inherent difficulty in its projection of universal good, so too is the legacy Levy outlines of (majority Jewish) second wavers flawed at its white women's core. What if, perhaps, post-feminism and its plays with sexy ruse can extend beyond the race and class limitations of second wave feminism? What if there is more to them than merely undoing the fight for gender fairness as Levy suggests? What shifts if post-feminist thinking is less definitively the direction taken toward raunch as Levy says, and more the disinvestment Williams describes in all that came before under the feminist banner? To the degree that a promise of post-feminism is its ability to decenter second wave feminism, it may be possible to envision and embody reflections on hierarchical structures of power that come to bear differently on women depending on positions in and of dominant culture. It follows that the critical potential of foregrounding the transgressive capacity of post-feminist performance revolves around a focus on the doings of the body to undo normative constructions of power and privilege.

Without reducing my discussions of the pious and porn as veritably good or bad, I aim to track the doubled construction of the New/Sexy Jewess as spectacular icon. In doing so, theorize the roles of Jewish rabbi and porn star as excessive female bodies at the 'sexy' edges of Jewish and gentile contemporary society. As stated earlier, the

particular approaches to sexy-ness vary wildly. That is, porn makes overt demands on sexiness such that a post-feminist framework suits Angel's efforts to both extend from and beyond sexual liberation ideas of second wave feminism. Brous' female rabbinical leadership, however, might fit squarely within a feminist agenda (with women as leading figures in synagogues), with nothing particularly 'post-fem' about that. Still, the 'sexy' I ascribe to her religious and political defiance garners a closely related 'post' stance central to ethnic and gender constructions. Such a two-part (pious/porn) post breaks with the liberal ideals of the baby boomer Jewish generation and its overarching concerns with heterosexual, Jewish marriage and the sustained defense of Israel, specifically. If to read such approaches to sexy-ness and the 'post' together inevitably returns to the tensions of a pious/porn split ditched by the post-feminism Williams describes, it does so in the name of theorizing a Jewish edge that both Brous and Angel embody for their respective (and likely overlapping) crowds.

Such mobilizations of variably post-ing Jews in the name of the sexy 'new' are reminiscent of Foucault's premise of the "New City" as a myth of the sexually liberated future.<sup>71</sup> He writes in volume one of the *History of Sexuality* that today it is "sex that serves as a support for the ancient form—so familiar and important in the West—of preaching". Foucault frames a paradigm for thinking through connections between religiosity and pornography as overlapping subjects saturating public discourse. He writes, "A great sexual sermon—which has had its subtle theologians and its popular voices—has swept through our societies over the last decades; it has chastised the old

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<sup>71</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 8.

order, denounced hypocrisy, and praised the rights of the immediate and the real; it has made people dream of a New City.<sup>72</sup>

Foucault's New City stands in for the space and time of a utopian fantasy where unrepressed sex promises a more free frontier. He suggests a misguided consciousness on the part of the people who would want to liberate sexuality from its repressive holds has overlooked the 'fact' of sex at the center of Western society. Such a 'dream' of the new is positioned against the all-powerful "repression hypothesis" that has sustained a public imagination of sex as silenced by the language of social sin and bourgeois sensibility. Foucault thus examines the society that "speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the powers it exercises, and promised to liberate itself from the very laws that have made it function".<sup>73</sup> I question the ways a post-feminist, post-assimilationist figure of the Sexy Jewess means to reverse the same repressive hypothesis and doubles back on itself while trying. The topic of a curious and contradictory "sexual sermon" preached by pious and porn theologians alike makes a way to view the cat that chases its own tail as a self-circling scheme. This chronic choreography constructs and is constructed by a regenerative imperative of Jewish continuity in the US.

### **"Not Your Bubbe's Synagogue": Essence, Excess and Holy Hutzpah**

Walking into IKAR's High Holiday services in Los Angeles after an unholy hour on the 60 freeway from Riverside, I breathed in the festival curtains, the rented chair

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<sup>72</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

covers, the light sheen of the borrowed *yarmulkes*, and the fashionable cotton basics combined sensibly with see-through linens, muslins and khakis, and thought, “Here they are, my frontier Jews.” Donning white ritual attire as per the rabbi’s unique request, I convened among them in costumed reference to the priestly robes of way back when. Theory-practice forty-niners of an afro-arab-buddha-tinged Jewish birthright, these were the thirty and forty something’s, pro-Palestine and proud of it. Bored with the backwards logics of a billion years of gas and culture wars, they dug deep into the old testament to tease out what had been missing all along: a sense of essential right and wrong strong enough to wake up the crowd of comic writers, young lawyers and nonprofit art educators from the guilty nap of whiteness that plagued our Jewish generation. Core organizers of IKAR’s extensive social action committees came with interlocked shoulders up to the *bima* to read from the Torah. A garden project in Boyle Heights, two groups on education and immigration reform, a team on food justice, and a global partnership with a school in Uganda. All this, and the crowd of straight and same sex couples, interracial pairs and happy singles, orthodox and first time Jews, sat and stood and swayed on cue as unchained children roamed freely through the makeshift pews. This was the portrait of today’s newest Jews, politically awake and willing to work for a greater welfare.

On the holiest day of the year, a unison choreography translated this willing zeal into a wave of bows across a sea of all white. As she does every year in the Yom Kippur Service, Rabbi Brous asked all present to break with the bored temples we grew up in and take off our shoes, drop down to hands and knees in genuine surrender to something

bigger than ourselves. Akin to the Muslim full prostration, and the same movement directives as yoga's child's pose, Rabbi Brous' plea to prayerfulness stages a total revision of any Day of Atonement I had experienced in the hotel conference halls rented for the occasion typically spent thinking about food, flirty glance and fashion faux pas around the room. Calling for a new authenticity in a return to the ancient embodiments of a time before now, Rabbi Brous' high holiday sermon is famous for this biblical bowing before God that means to break with the guilty complicity of a dulled Jewish identity emptied of religious resonance. "Holy hutzpah," as Brous and fellow clergy call it, makes no apology for this use of these cultural markers known to be more current and connected than our own. Rather, a sense of ease with such spiritual borrowings seems to sync its rhythms with the ankle bells of djembe drummers of a professedly idealist, self-consciously intimate new Jewishness. These forward-leaning folds effectively mobilize the possibility of a religious Jewishness complementary to 'just' a 'cultural' one so fiercely defended in today's post-assimilatory moment. As the wave of bows repeats again at the midday breakout restorative yoga session, I join in a sensory Jewish essence that can be felt and experienced in and of a newly animated spiritual body.

But the newness of the bow itself does not suffice for an explanation of its growing appeal. In the sermon Brous offered in the same service, she recalled reactions to the previous year's High Holiday message. She was then thanked profusely by one congregant for her statement made in 'not talking about Israel', while just as profusely questioned by another as to why she stayed quiet on the matter. The congregation laughed in recognition. The split vote is funny enough within the IKAR community,

whose diversity on all matters from religious practice to rationale for its revitalization are reflective of its openness toward a range of leftist perspectives. And yet, to talk about Israel is precisely what gets Brous and her bowing congregation in trouble, if also in the press. In one instance, Brous met intensive media criticism for circulating an email to IKAR members in response to the fall 2012 bombing in Israel/Palestine that called for a balance of perspectives based on the dignity of Israeli and Palestinian lives alike. Rabbi Danny Gordis accused Brous of ultimate betrayal and abandonment.<sup>74</sup> Blaming Brous for her “universalized” Jewishness that has surrendered all sense of Jewish particularity (and as the logic goes, particular reasons for defense), Gordis speaks on behalf of a Jewish world that can no longer overlap with that of his long respected good friend and colleague, Brous.

The criticism, while familiar enough within the Jewish community on matters regarding Jewish statehood, preys upon Brous’ increasingly vulnerable position in the limelight. The position is vulnerable precisely because of the power it both yields and never can. For the reader less familiar with female participation in the rabbinate, it may be helpful to explain that the place of women in positions of religious leadership fits squarely within a longstanding feminist vision of progressive Jewish synagogue practice. That said, the growing presence of female Rabbis across the country still divides the

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<sup>74</sup> Daniel Gordis, “When Balance Comes Betrayal” *Times of Israel*. Nov 18, 2012. <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/when-balance-becomes-betrayel/>

Jewish religious community along lines delineated by age and gender demands for rabbi roles.<sup>75</sup>

If unwanted by the most religiously strict, however, Brous' reputable re-embrace of religious observancy and advocacy of progressive local and global politics garnered her national attention as the official Rabbi presiding over President Obama's 2013 Inaugural reelection ceremony.<sup>76</sup> While her position as a female Rabbi is likely to appeal to an effort to balance genders of clergy invited in this capacity, Brous' growing public recognition as an exceptional character would appear to exceed her gender, specifically. And yet, as is evidenced by the constant flow of young women rabbis in training in addition to a scattered young male one that come to study under her tutelage each year, so do many. This growing network is right to reach out to her, as Brous is one of the few

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<sup>75</sup> While female rabbis are regular fixtures of Reform synagogues, religiously Conservative congregations are less likely than they were even a decade ago to hire a female rabbi. Uriel Heilman, "Gender Gap for Rabbis", *JTA*, Nov 30, 1999. The possibility of a female rabbi is still forbidden in Orthodox practice, where the particular case of Sara Hurwitz, an orthodox woman ordained as Maharat (rabbi by any other name), caused major scandal in the orthodox community. Hilary Krieger, "A woman rabbi (by any other name)" *The Jewish Chronicle*. New York, June 3, 2009. Furthermore, a study headed by Rabbi Suzanne Singer of (Reform) Temple Beth El in Riverside, CA on Second Career Rabbis shows that age discrimination bars men and women from new pulpit positions. Rabbi Suzanne Singer, Chair, "Report From the CCAR Task Force on The Second Career Rabbinate", May, 2005. Though Singer regularly sports a T-shirt that reads, "This is what a Rabbi Looks Like," her own experience of double gender and age bias adds the context of urbanity/suburbanity to the list of tensions present in the application of Gilman's frontier concept.

<sup>76</sup> A video of Rabbi Sharon Brous reciting a blessing at The 57<sup>th</sup> Presidential Inaugural Prayer Service, held at Washington National Cathedral on Jan 13, 2013 can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LLGkY1vmhE>

women to occupy a full time pulpit position in a nondenominational Jewish congregation and the only I know of to start a ‘best-of’ synagogue from scratch.<sup>77</sup>

But Brous’ serious Torah study, countless accolades and tireless human rights advocacy are sadly not the featured storylines of even well-intentioned articles meaning to celebrate the spiritual renaissance at IKAR and plans to erect a new building. In a piece posted just one month before the Inaugural Prayer Service on *The Jewish Daily Forward*, reporter Rex Weiner writes first of male rabbis in LA synagogues nearby who poke fun at Brous’ casual hairstyle in that “little science experiment called IKAR”. The comment reads as a smack of religious authority for a Jewish woman without a wig. Weiner’s more sympathetic reference to Brous’ tousled hippie look and “‘whatever’ spiritual approach” still emboldens a familiar patriarchal condescension naturalized on and of the body in discussions of female leaders, religious or not.<sup>78</sup> The loosening of a grip on orthodox religious observance thus accompanies a fear and fantasy of the rebel woman. As she transgresses patriarchal boundaries of an old Jewish boys club, such maneuvers are monitored and muted by each toss of Brous’ (brown and blow-dried) ‘hippie’ hair. Fundamentally shifting the gender roles of religious leadership means also to re-work a phallic logic of the rabbinical sex symbol in bodily, feminized terms. On the dangerous flip side of the same sexy rhetoric Brous and staff select for their move away

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<sup>77</sup> Steward Ain, “JTS Women Grads Struggling for Pulpits” *The Jewish Week*, May 31, 2011.

[http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new\\_york/jts\\_women\\_grads\\_struggling\\_pulpits](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new_york/jts_women_grads_struggling_pulpits)

<sup>78</sup> Rex Weiner, “IKAR Looks to Build Without Losing Magic,” *The Jewish Daily Forward*, Dec 30, 2012. <http://forward.com/articles/168454/ikar-looks-to-build-without-losing-magic/?p=all>

from traditional authority - even if under Bubbe's banner - is the fatherly flippancy that judges the rebellious girls gone bad and their teenage behaviors. A deep religious connection overlooked by outsiders who can only view a "whatever" attitude only barely veils a longstanding threat of Jewish women speaking out on quite so large a scale.

If violation of boundaries carries a certain sex appeal, Brous and team bring other kinds of (Jewish) sexy back too. At IKAR's 2013 annual adult themed Purim Party, I tried and failed several times to get the right shot of Brous, dressed as Princess Leah, dancing to the "Harlem Shake" with the temple member posing as a stripper and her attending metal pole on wheels.<sup>79</sup> At least I thought she was a temple member. I wondered whether she, like the stilt walker and two DJ-dancers in blown-out rainbow wigs and "afro-circus" T-shirts that spun the top forty rap records of the last twenty years like a trip down Bar Mitzvah party memory lane, was part of the hired help. What, I wondered, might it mean either way? As iPhones and more intentional cameras closed in on all sides, I gave up my attempts to join this self-satisfied revenge of the nerds that gathered around this Star Wars/biblical heroine/rabbi role model and back up pole

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<sup>79</sup> With nearly 10,000 video uploads a day by the end of Feb, 2013 and several with millions of views, the internet dance craze known as the "Harlem Shake" redefined 'viral' in the month the recorded song by Brooklyn DJ and producer, Baauer came out. Tom Heyden, "Harlem Shake: Tracking a Meme Over a Month," *BBC News Magazine*, Mar 1, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21624109>. Ann Power argues that like any dance craze, the "Harlem Shake" combines the double phenomena of hilarity and sexuality in "Long Before the Harlem Shake, We Did the Shimmy," *National Public Radio*, Feb 21, 2013. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2013/02/20/172517323/long-before-the-harlem-shake-we-did-the-shimmy>.

dancer. We shook as one with rhythmic constancy and ‘hard’ ironic expressions to this ecstatic beat.<sup>80</sup>

The dance floor exploded with enthusiasm for the latest craze in a grander music industrial complex none in attendance could take too seriously.<sup>81</sup> One non-Jewish friend of mine who came along for the ride immediately picked up on the vibe, and rushed for the trash can right behind the mobile pole. He hoisted the oversized prop overhead to pump as musical accent in the style of the viral video uploads amassing each day to do and redo the dance in endless variations on a theme. I watched the Rabbi watching him,

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<sup>80</sup> The Purim festival revolves around the participatory recitation of the Megillah, or Book of Esther. Chosen by King Ahasuerus to be his bride, Queen Esther learns of an evil plot to kill the Jews. Being Jewish herself, she appeals to the King not to be so cruel to her people. Having not known previously of her heritage, he immediately reverses his plans and orders his advisor, Haman, to be hung for his horrible death plot. Esther’s saving of the Jews is regularly commemorated with outlandish costume parties and merriment all around. IKAR’s Purim parties are known for being a particularly good time. Readers may be interested to note that feminist Jewish scholars have taken issue with the narrative retelling of the plot in this way, reminding that Esther was selected as Queen in a beauty contest, an offense no less degrading after the previous Queen Vashti refused to dance naked at the King’s banquet. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s queer questioning of her own Queen Esther costume around age 5 in *Epistemology of the Closet* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 82.

<sup>81</sup> The costumed Purim affair with its blend of adult themed mayhem and zany religiosity added live biblical flair to the online cache of videos competing for more absurd setting and bizarre costume accoutrement. Adding an ironic religio-twist to an already ironic dance, IKAR’s hyped crowd closing in on the Rabbi Princess and pole dancer collectively surrendered to mass consumer culture with a ‘meta’ sensibility as if doing it just this once for the sake of the party and its ‘holy hutzpah’. While many bloggers comment on the comic and erotic aspects of the dance, paying no heed to concerns over race or place appropriation, a Harlem based dance group called World Star Hip Hop takes back the Harlem Shake, calling themselves the “Original Harlem Shakers” and dating their free style form to the 1980s when the “actual” Harlem Shake came out. <http://kisscasper.com/the-real-harlem-shake-is-taking-back-the-throne/>. While it would not be consistent with the mission of the “Purim Justice Carnival” to overlook such claims to authenticity, IKAR’s ‘shaking’ tosses up any fixity of its ethics with the ambiguity of the post.

not stopping the even pulse of her extended arms up and down. All was cool and cooler than that as our sci-fi Princess presided over the ritual day of debauchery.

It was not until I paid my two tickets for the motorized bull ride and peered out into the JCC carnival gym looking for my Rabbi moon goddess that I realized Brous was long gone. This attempt at ‘drinking the cool-aid’ via ‘riding the bull’ would not be for naught, I told myself...Instead, it would have to be my single and most successful attempt as the Sexy Jewess once and for all. How easily I had transformed from the modest onlooker to the eager ethnographer-performer, suddenly finding myself playing up my insider status on the barrel chest of a would-be bull in an inflatable rodeo ring. I winked at strangers below as if it were nothing, and waved away the work of squeezing my thighs for dear life when I could spare a limp-affected hand like “it’s nothing, fa’get about it” with the false assurances of an archetypal Jewish mother. I bucked and exaggerated the girlish oohing of my mouth and lift of the eyebrows. Playing to the crowd of congregants I still did not know donned in Angel wings, Luchador masks, Freida Kahlo unibrows and Pregnant Nun habits, I found myself strangely zealous beyond the desire for laughs to newly enter a Jewish realm of reconnection, ‘acting Jewish’ in the newest old ways I knew how.

As divergent as ritual bowing and the Harlem shake may seem to readers less familiar with today’s urban American post-synagogue, my observation of both practices - ethnographically and perhaps religiously too - offered insight on IKAR’s various collective choreographies. Rather than conflicting or competing along lines tied to right/wrong or ritual/raunch, IKAR’s integration of post-assimilationist religious

recuperation and post-feminist play with sexy ruse fields these overlapping concerns through the frontierist temple festival. When viewed together, communal prostration of a yogic child's pose and free surrender to the latest viril dance craze appear as complimentary choreographies of adult-themed devotion expressed with full abandon on the (dance) floor.

### **“Not Your Daddy’s Porn”: Net-Working a New Jewess Proxy**

Manipulating boundaries in entirely different ways, the award winning Burning Angel Studios features the company founder herself heavily among the 200 pierced and tattooed female models she calls her “army of hot punk chicks”. The website invites female site visitors who are “having way too much good sex... behind closed doors, for no pay” to “help take over the world.” Angel’s soliciting advocates an ever-expanding space of sex-positive egalitarianism through the interactive channels of Web 2.0 technologies that encourages viewers to dialog with models and one another. Through user profiles, memberships and merchandise, Angel directs a world webbed by the performative professions of a tatted Jewish girl next door type with an award for best porn website. This user-friendly blurring of ‘best’ business, punk aesthetics, and the jokish renditions of the porn star as deviant, but de-clawed ‘sexy Jewess’ (through Hanukkah spoof videos like “Festival of cocks” and blogged shout outs that muddy any semblance of the sacred) authenticates an online to bedroom frontier of an arguably agential pornography no one’s (Jewish) daddy would presumably like or understand.

Clickable from any Burning Angel page, Joannaangel.com offers a running dialogue with her visitors: “This website is for my special fans who want to know the REAL me...it’s the next best thing to carrying me around in your pocket”. While it may not surprise readers that the fantasy of authenticity functions as an erotic stimulant, the performance of realness via low-fi aesthetics and lay performers helps explain Burning Angel’s in-your-pocket popularity. Netporn theorist Niels van Doorn writes that the desire for ‘real’, authentic sexual practices formed a response to the increasingly spectacular, silicon-enhanced artificiality of commercial feature-length pornography. In opposition to that supposed ‘fakeness’ of big-budget productions, alternative porn that blurs the distinction between pro and amateur posits the real bodies and pleasures of people who could be your neighbor.<sup>82</sup> Even as this explication of the authentic justifies how the punk porn aesthetic puts forth a ‘real’ appeal, there is much to be said about the ways in which such a fantasy is fleshed out as a site of female agency.

An always growing company of female models featured with bios and blogs overwhelms the more anonymous and interchangeable males and gives the impression of a focus on women. As much as so-called post-feminist women are understood to love liberated sex for sex’s sake, the focus *on* women presumes to be *for* women too. As expected, the proliferation of female-female sex in video content reeks of a mainstream hetero-male interest category, however. The participatory interface for women-users and uploaders seems, furthermore, to beg the question of Ariel Levy’s Female Chauvinist Pig

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<sup>82</sup> Niels van Doorn, “Keeping it Real: User-generated Pornography, Gender Reification, and Visual Pleasure,” *Convergence: the International Journal of Research Into New Media Technologies* Vol 16:4 (2010): 414.

and a post-feminist liberatory potential Williams puts forward. The question of Angel's porn by women for (chauvinist pig) women may remain unanswerable so long as the concern hinges around gender and sexual justice served in the process. More measurable is this interactive supply and demand of an ever-expanding number of women posting photos and bios of themselves, as well as male and female users posting comments and proclamations of feeling 'at home' at Burning Angel. What finally emerges beyond the morality tales of hetero or homosocial pleasures are the ways in which Angel's sex-positive army and their female defense of a growing number of user-civilians authenticates a for-profit frontier and its performance of the real.<sup>83</sup> What is Jewish about this?

Perversing the sacrosanct may be nothing new, and debates about its rendering of the female equally as tired, if still hugely significant. But Angel's performances do invoke a do it yourself model of self-promotion and self-production with less than obvious implications for the Jewish female body part in and out of masculinist scripts. That Angel regularly spoofs her Jewish identity through phallic misuse of ritual paraphernalia and a handful of holiday-inspired films like "festival of cocks" or that she is known to traipse around in underwear making sure everyone on set has enough to eat is

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<sup>83</sup> Many such comments are posted throughout the website's "Forum" pages by film models and members alike. BellaVendetta wrote of her experiences working for the company on Apr 5, 2010 that "I've formed some really intense, lasting relationships with some of the girls and I am proud to call them my friends." A member named Cody wrote that among many reasons why Burning Angel rules, they don't treat new people like crap or put them through humiliating games like [Suicide Girls] chat did to [him]". <http://www.burningangel.com/forum/thread/2022/why-burning-angel-rules>

hardly her main point, and yet, isn't not the point either. In the wide expanse of the (post) femme frontier-in-motion concept, Angel's 'real' always returns to the excesses of a doubled Jewish female difference/sameness and its uncertain transgressions of norms ties to white femininity and traditional Jewishness.

In his online article from December 2009 entitled, "The Rise of the Hot Jewish Girl: Why American Men are Lusting after Women of the Tribe," *Details* Reporter Christopher Noxon comments that Jewish pornographers have only just begun to actively 'out' their Jewishness. Joanna Angel is quoted to have said of her hard-core star status, "I never thought my Jewishness would be an asset". But Noxon's article still moralizes the porn starlet's Jewishness over anything else. Of her ethico-religious boundaries, he notes that she rejected offers to perform in a holiday-themed adult fare called "Dr. Suzy's Porn and Purim DVD Bacchanal", which mixes group sex with *hamantaschen* (biblical shaped cookies). "I've desecrated Christian traditions before" says Angel. "In one video, I put a cross-shaped dildo inside me, but I'd never do that with a menorah—that's just creepy."

Where the ends of fantasy meet the aesthetic policing of piety seems significant enough. But the narration itself amuses me. The Jewish body, when it comes to its Jewishness, here, can never be the "Hustler body" that Laura Kipnis describes. In her estimation, the Hustler body rails against the establishment with hyper-sexualized images of pregnant women, amputees, transvestites, and the like meant to shock or scandalize bourgeois sensibilities.<sup>84</sup> As Kipnis explains, the porn star's body is always already a battleground of opposing sexual and cultural forms as religious morality, class

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<sup>84</sup> Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 128.

pretensions, and feminist consciousness duke it out with the armies of bodily vulgarity, kinky fantasy, and “unromanticized fucking”.<sup>85</sup> Angel’s Jewish confessions seem to cancel any serious raunch with a self-ridicule that works to temper any behavior that might be too outlandish (hard core –if commodified- punk or porn respectively). Angel’s prudish testimony upholds such a Jewish taste for right and wrong that her own ‘army of hot punk chicks’ need not bear any Jewish relation whatsoever.

But then, how Jewish is she really? Or, more importantly, how Jewish is her porn? If, for instance, Angel’s candy cane costumes and Christmas photo shoots parody her Jewishness as much as they seem to lodge it more than skin-deep, the Jewishness of her pornography, much more visible as ‘punk’ than anything that looks particularly ‘Jewish’ has been outed primarily by the Jewish culture and humor magazine, *Heeb*. Gracing the cover of *Heeb Magazine* in Spring 2005, Angel blew up, so to speak. After the link to the first Jewish blow up doll to date fashioned in the punkish image of the porn starlet and director herself was posted on the online mag alongside a two-minute cash prize video contest announcement and a ‘dry’ (pun) review of the sex toy.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*, 129.

<sup>86</sup> View Angel’s contest with doll: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5\\_UyrTDY8Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5_UyrTDY8Q). In a return to the central thesis of this dissertation’s Introduction, the Angel/doll paradigm suggests a similar disconnect between the funny face and the sexy body, wherein Angel has all the talking lines while the doll is the embodiment of the voiceless woman in porn. Candidly, Angel says to her audience, “I know you’re used to seeing me blow people, but today, you are going to blow me”. The tenor of the joke exemplifies Angel’s casual, friendly rapport with her audiences as is typical of her personality-driven porn presence, and likewise indexes Angel’s strategic deployment of interactive technologies that are at least in part responsible for the economic success that has blown up her image on quite so large a scale. Although site-user video submissions originally posted on [www.blowjoannaup.com](http://www.blowjoannaup.com) in 2010 have since been taken down, Joanna made a full-length porn with the plastic version of herself in a film called “Doppelganger”. The plot centers

One of the magazine's male interns who looks twenty-one at most speaks candidly to the viewer as he holds the blow up doll next to him. He wears a typical Israeli-tourist's t-shirt that replaces the Superman logo with the Hebrew letter lexicon for "S", as he discusses his anti-heroic sexual encounter with the inflatable prop. The back hole, he says, was much too small, and the un-lubed front failed to satisfy. He refrains from smiling, and his almost strained monotone reveals some effort not to laugh. The puffed-out porn star perfects the same restraint, of course, with mouth wide open and eyes equally unexpressive and into the camera. The sex doll and its online cult offer a heterosexual male encounter with fun, flirty femininity defined by sexual pleasure uncharacteristic of 'real' girls, and especially Jewish ones. Self-castrating in the name of the Sexy Jewess New Jew configuration, his failure to follow through, so to speak, upholds a certain kind of mythical, near-maternalistic sexy power. A self-conscious parody of the Oedipal narrative, he can't have this impossible Jewish mother-girlfriend blown up too tight. And yet, through the 'dirty' dare of his own failed experiment, the intern's joke actually falls back to the Jewish female body and its excessive, humorous unmanageability.

If such humor returns to long-standing Jewish comedic traditions of putting down the female, the Jewishness of the blow up doll is also funny because of how unJewish such a toy seems to be. While Jews outside of ultra orthodox circles are known to be open

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around the doll coming to life and trying to steal the real Joanna's life. Because of the inherent parody of ego doubles through the (Jewish) female horror monster plot, and the timeliness of the connection, the reader may have fun looking ahead to Chapter 4 of this dissertation on Darren Aronofsky's 2010 box office thriller, *Black Swan* and the striking similarity of thrasher/theft themes.

about sex, such normative sex toys venture into a frontier of such regular male behavior (read as white to the extent that beer commercials and the like presume that white males have regular, unrepressed sex) that it is funny to think of (feminized) Jewish boys doing it too. *Heeb* knows its viewers would not scoff at the graphic description of sex with a sex doll. More shocking about the doll-play is its conspicuous display of disinterest in the fully fleshed out coupling and copulation with a ‘real’ Jewish partner. It mocks the hit and (presumably mostly) misses of today’s Jewish hookups on sites like JDate, and places blame on the flawed female. *Heeb* speaks to its coed crowd as a boys club generation driven to inflate and deflate the Jewish woman to toy with the tensions of reproductivity and marriage that traditionally sustain a Jewish future.

### **Jewess Jokes (And their Relation to the Unconscious)**

The subtitle of this section invokes two types of jokes discussed in Freud’s *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*: those of and about Jew and Woman.<sup>87</sup> The Jew that jokes is a doubled subject that Freud understands as the mocker who participates in the defect being mocked. In the translation by Joyce Crick, Freud writes,

A situation particularly favourable to the tendentious joke is set up when the intended criticism of protest is directed against one’s self, or put more circumspetively, against a person in whom that self has a share, a collective person, that is, one’s own people, for example. This determinant of self-criticism may explain to us how it is that a number of the most telling jokes...have grown from the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories invented by Jews and aimed at Jewish character.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Chick (1905. Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 2003).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

This framework of the characteristically self-critical ‘tendentious’ Jewish joke/r has been foundational for readings of minority humor.<sup>89</sup> Distinct from this doubled subject, Freud discusses the “dirty joke” or smut, in which woman functions as the butt of the joke and is structurally excluded. The dirty joke necessitates that the female object of desire be absent and replaced by the one to whom the joke is addressed.<sup>90</sup> To bring the two joke genres together is to suggest a theory for understanding the various tensions and techniques of post-feminist raunch as comedic ‘Jewess’ representation.

In Ruth Johnston’s reading of postmodern Jewish identity construction and American film, the doubled subject of the (Jewish) self-critical joke is displaced by a gendered subject/object binary. The exclusion of the woman as object facilitates the forging of a homosocial relation between the teller and the listener, both constructed as male.<sup>91</sup> The masculinist triangulation of male-male connection via the joke of the female body is right up *Heeb’s* alley with joke-work throughout the print and online mag that would seem to assume the same gendered triangulation. A hostile tenor of such jokes reveals an aggressive avenue for the expression of ideas not otherwise so openly discussed. According to Freud, such animosity of jokes “turns into good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of opposing obstacles would not let us

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<sup>89</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, “Foreword: Joking Aside: the Idea of a Self-Critical Community” in *Modernity, Culture and “The Jew”*, ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), xx.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Ann Doane explains Freud’s theory in, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 30.

<sup>91</sup> Johnston, Ruth. “Joke-Work: The Construction of Postmodern Identity in Contemporary Theory and American Film” in *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern America*. Ed, Vincent Brook. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 215.

utter aloud or consciously; again, that is it *will get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.*”<sup>92</sup> This relationship between Jewish self-critical jokes and the displacing effect of smut highlights how the iconic blow up body may actually take the air out of the agential Jewish woman. As her plastic skin offers some semblance of a sexy object, it likewise deflates the possibility of her sexual wants, directions and desires. That being said, Freud’s description of seeking pleasure in the manipulations of restrictions help flesh out the contours of a choreographic frontier. Co-ed social actors may utilize the very limits posed by the doll and its failures to “get around” and “open up” a post-feminist space of laughter at the very limits of a sex saturated mainstream society.

Joanna Angel’s sample video reel with the doll shows the two in a pool side montage, making light of the whole thing with shots of sun bathing, floating on rafts, and in the visual play that would get the most laughs, attempting not very well, to play catch. That Angel goes *all the way* with this twin joke, personifying the prop beyond its proper usage, encourages the same kind of laughter as the male intern. Simultaneously, however, Angel may subvert this laughter through its reappropriation that “gets around” restrictions tied to traditional smut and its male-male laughter.

Moreover, as interracial, interfaith marriage is on the rise among the very age demographic *Heeb* targets, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett outlines that this is threatening Jewish cultural organizations whose constituencies are dwindling. Such institutions worry about

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<sup>92</sup> Freud, *The Joke*, 98.

the uncertainty of future membership.<sup>93</sup> Hetero male to male jokes about the Jewish woman thus not only poke holes in any Jewish girl-power bubble, but rebel against the ‘enemy’ of their parents and grandparents concerned over Jewish futurity sustained through marriage. Female social actors in more or less spectacular roles may only achieve a partial transgression of these boundaries tied to heteropatriarchal ‘traditions’ of Jewish and gentile mainstreams. To better understand this, I borrow from Johnston’s joining of Jewish and smut joke genres so as to suggest an additional possibility of the female smut shtick and its subversive potential, however imperfect.

Listed under *Heeb*’s “Sections” menu, two of nine dropdown categories explicitly spoof the Jewish female sex object through photo profiles and short biographical interviews, accenting more straight-laced sections on News, Culture, and Israel. These sexier web-archived catalogs of the same would-be calendar centerfolds stage two consecutive years of winning submissions for 2010’s “Gratuitous Jewess” and 2011’s “Shtetl Bunnies” soft-core contests. A female editor who curates the former boasts that she “is an expert on both Israeli tits and ass” and namely “enjoys peach pie, open toe shoes and dating for sport.”<sup>94</sup> The writer speaks on behalf of a carefree conflation of sexy and sexual femininity, but through a self-conscious title (and byline) that renders its female-ness unwarranted, insignificant and jokish. Together with the accompanying text, the images reveal as much as they conceal about this ‘gratuitous’ femme figure and her slew of monthly winners. The handful of models photographed for the site range in looks

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<sup>93</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “New Jews,” 6.

<sup>94</sup> Dana Makover, “Gratuitous Jewess: Sara Copeland,” *Heeb Magazine*, Apr. 5, 2011. <http://heebmagazine.com/gratuitous-jewess-sara-copeland/5457>

and backgrounds, emphasizing especially the foreign origins of hybrid nationalisms with less than stereotypically Jewish American roots. The more mixed race, the hotter, it would seem by the selections for monthly picks: and for those with whiter looks, the columnist's remarks emphasize sex appeal for male audiences in other ways. A paler skinned Ashkenazi looking model is "singelish" and "worth it" because, as the staff author rhetorically defends, "how many girls can say they were 'too drunk to remember' their bat mitzvah?" Wild abandon at one's own rite of passage justifies a sexy-ness offset by her more stereotypical Jewish phenotype, permitting this less-than-exotic to pose among other objects of sexy desire.

To be sure, the editor-curator pimps out the various profiled women with a sense of post-feminist play for a male audience. As she joins in on their sexy fun, the smut joke reforms its more familiar pathways from male joker to male receiver by inserting the hetero female as the presumed head and butt of the joke. Gaining points for her raunch appeal, perhaps more than her models ever could in their positions, the game of competing femininities looks like yet another manipulation of the JDate format through the mediation of a *Yenta*, or matchmaker, role. Like the columnist who pitches herself as one who likes 'dating for sport', the column both mocks any semblance of Jewish marriage tensions and un/does its beauty contest schemes as a fun, post-fem idea.

If the gratuitous Jewess is 'just' a post-feminist smut joke in the end, the following year's Shtetl Bunnies seems to invite more back and forth between models and their audiences, taking out the interloper role of a curatorial-come-dating expert. But without identifying any stated goal, viewers are left to determine the utility of a second

Jewess profile on their own. One comment post even asks among a slew of males equally affirming the model's hotness, "Is this a Brooklyn-based dating feature. Because it should be! Mikey P in the Red Hook Shtetl". The nostalgic return to the good old Jewish ghetto where he and this hot girl would be/could be happily wed fuses with the real possibility of the two hooking up in Red Hook, Brooklyn, a neighborhood adjacent to her own publicized residence in Greenpoint. The fantasy bunny in hipster glasses and pink furry ears for all the online world to see really is the girl next door. The male want for a Jewish mate seems clear enough, if by now necessarily mediated through the open source filter and no longer a Jewish youth group so central to American Jewries generations before.

A "natural redhead" in roller skates catches my attention as particularly successful at the nuanced magic of this complex playboy parody. Her short finger nails painted blue, her classic-styled black skates, and her vintage romper affect a retro appeal that work especially well with the freckles, long nose and deep set eyes of familiar white Jewish face. Hector, a male commentator agrees, but presumably out of respect for her intelligence (indeed the Jewish female feature that justifies the potential exploitative nature of these photo displays), "I like your way with words". His response indicates the few comments she's allotted in her meet-the-bunny bio that outline her interests in super heroes and hopeless attraction to Catholic boys. She responds to Hector with a link to her stand up. I click as do any number of new viewers as interested in her funniness as her sexy camera eyes and pornish posturing: Ms. Shtetl herself on acoustic guitar, singing a rhyming roast of goyish boys in bed to the delight of a giggling off-camera crowd. As Hector flirts with his favorite Jewish pin up, any number of site snoopers wonder if he

will attend her next singing set and succeed at scoring a real-life date or if the spark stops at the casual comments back and forth.

In either case, September's Shtetl Bunny wins over poor Ms. December, who's starker hipster chic is pious enough, 'blinged out' with an oversized Star of David necklace and hoop earrings that reads as a funny-ish 'thug' borrowings, but is thrown to the wayside with just two comments: I. Wikler writes "JAPS with tats just don't do it for me, to which WKReil adds, "HAGS with tats just don't do it for me".<sup>95</sup> The comments tag team to take her down, as JAP presumes a Jewish girl's snobbery and Hag is a derogatory word for unattractive Jewish women too mean to circulate in funny circles. The same interactive channels that allow opportunity for September's model to publicize comedy exploits to far more viewers that she could on her own create the conditions for December's model to be publically defaced as free, 'open source' play.

While the sexiness of one woman as opposed to the other is as nuanced and subjective a story as any, an evident distinction between two amateurs is their approach to the sexy eyes into the camera and their body language. The redhead is made to look 'natural' and thus, amicable, shown on her bed, just 'hanging out' in roller skates. In contrast, the brunette who "works as a paralegal when she's not breaking Jewish boys' hearts" affects a more chilling sex appeal through angular camera shots and the bio of a bona fide badass (read: enemy territory). A choreographic reading of the portraits might indulge interpretation of the contrasting movement-scores implied by struck poses and posture. These signal in leisure/vocational terms ways of walking, or skating about the

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<sup>95</sup> Dr. Mongo, "Shtetl Bunnies: Charlie," *Heeb Magazine*, Dec 8, 2011.  
<http://heebmagazine.com/shtetl-bunnies-charli/31217>

cityscape as babe or boss respectively. But such familiar female archetypes cannot overlook the dominance of nose-issues here. The redhead's smaller freckled nose near-naturally competes with the more stereotypical Jewish nose of the brunette, making the self-pleasuring/paralegal distinction even more pronounced. Where the putdowns reveal the hetero defenses of September's nice Jewish girl gone a little wild (but not too much), a sympathetic viewer like me can only hope December finds her tatted Jewish body and don't-fuck-with-me look a punk-perk on a Burning Angel website just next door.

*Heeb's* confessionals, calendar girls and visitor comments create a comic effect through the failures of a normative, Jewish coupling. That the joke of the Sexy Jewess straddles all of these scenes is crucial to its theorization as a frontier figuration. As the material and symbolic proxy of an ambivalent post-assimilationist, post-feminist period, Sexy Jewess embodiments crisscross patriarchal (pig and bunny) boundaries in pursuit of a Jewish New.

### **Open Source Jews as Sharp as They Come**

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett cites *Heeb Magazine* and this interactive space of Jewish social networking as reflective of today's New Jews as savvy online as they are resistant to the avenues of organized Jewish sociality of their parents' generation. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett cites this "open source Jewishness" as a zone of communality constructed as a "Jewishness without an agenda". As such, it is a concept of the unaffiliated and "hardest to reach" through technologies that don't require the memberships of synagogue or

Jewish organization.<sup>96</sup> In this vein, the Brooklyn-based magazine started in 2001 self-identifies “as a take-no-prisoners zine for the plugged in and preached out”, and adds on that “Heeb has become a multi-media magnet to the young, urban and influential”.

Relaying the data collected from a NFJC/UJA-Federation study, she states that Jewish youth subcultures are a laboratory where new kinds of community are being formed. Aided by the latest technologies, participants are engaging in innovative cultural and artistic expression and forming a distinctive sense of themselves in the process. She goes on to explain that something called an “experimental philanthropy” has been underwriting several projects that are part of the subculture. Defending that while the groups being studied may not be representative, they “are seismographic” and that understanding them and what they signify is of particular interest for policy, planning and philanthropy.<sup>97</sup> I add to her list of various such projects the Six Points Fellowships in NY since 2006 and LA since 2010 that offer \$40,000 over 2 years to Jewish artists in expressive genres with winning proposals.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “New Jews,” 6.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>98</sup> The reader may be interested in helping to think through the particular conundrum of a Jewish male colleague of mine who, while pursuing an MFA in visual art, confessed that while he would love the money of a Six Points Fellowship, it wasn’t worth having to be labeled a ‘Jewish artist’ on his CV. Linda Bloom picks up on this theme in her book, *Jewish Identities in Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), tracking the crisis of identification for Jewish feminist artists wishing to hide ethnic markers in order to make it in the (gentile) art world. I share my friend’s comment here as evidence of an affected and deliberate ‘unreachability’ or unwillingness to affiliate that may be even more confounding than Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes. If Jews are less willing to participate in something expressly described as Jewish culture production today more than ever, such that they would prefer not to be seen Jewishly, it is arguably still tied to some aspect of market success predicated on the impersonation of unmarked (read white, gentile, or worse, *neutral*) identities.

A combination of grass-roots developments, philanthropic underwriting, and articulation by researchers and others has dubbed the phenomena as “New Jews.” Other names like the “un-movement,” the “Heebsters” or the “Heeb generation,” the Rejewvenators, also seek to classify what is understood as alternative Jewish culture. There is a sense, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, that projects that address the needs and interests of these Jews represent “the last hope” for reaching those 18-35 year olds “long considered unreachable”. These Jews are “outside the Jewish mainstream, but attracted to the ethos, aesthetics, sensibility, sociality of youthful expressive edgy and diverse Jewish subcultures.” Furthermore, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett accounts for an “anything goes for a lost cause” clause that allows a form like *Heeb Magazine*, underwritten by mainstream Jewish philanthropy, to “bite the hand that feeds it”.<sup>99</sup> How venomous the bite could be of this adolescent rebellion is uncertain given the subsidized encouragements of such regular parental ‘allowances’. Still, the generational gap, understood in this way, is significant. If violation of borders is at the core of a frontier theory, such that the teenage rebellion of paternalistic structures is part and parcel of their sustained authority, that violation itself may be rendered somewhat ineffectual in its very mission.

So long as it is still within the bounds of an identifiable Jewishness, this is not too big an issue. But, according to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the so-called New Jews who are “new by virtue of the edge that they define and occupy” have turned their back on Jewishness. In her estimation:

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<sup>99</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “New Jews,” 2.

If the historical edge, the outsider and marginal status of Diaspora Jews has dissipated, the New Jews have turned elsewhere for the energy--the stimulus--that comes from the margin: they have turned to subculture and counterculture, and to experimental contemporary art. They may have been born Jewish, but they consider themselves native to Hip Hop or reggae or punk, among others. They espouse an ethics and aesthetics of edge, which, it should be noted, is *not* the same as margin or periphery, both of which suggest an involuntary disadvantage among those striving for the center. Rather, this is about the cutting edge, an edge in constant need of sharpening, a moving--a leading, even a bleeding--edge that resists the center.<sup>100</sup>

Such an edge that is not the margin or periphery sounds strikingly similar to Gilman's frontier, particularly in its reconceptualization of the Diaspora concept of a center-periphery model. The ever-adjusting edge, likewise, articulates a similar postmodern culture-in-motion ideal that Gilman prescriptively outlines. However, in a significant way, it breaks with any model that would claim a Jewish label in particular. This non-affiliation that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls "Jewishness without an agenda" poses the greatest generational threat of all. That its "ethics and aesthetics of edge" cuts across models of marginality and leaves them bloody is crucial here. That such ruthless slashing necessitates an edge in "constant need of sharpening", however, indicates a complex relationship not only between the New Jew Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes and the mechanisms through which it sharpens its tools, but why the edge would have to be so sharp.

What is this obsession with the new, the frontier, and the moving, slicing blade of Jewish becoming? Gilman explains that the struggle lives in the impossibility of Jewish self-definition. "Who are the Jews?" he asks. "Those who understood themselves as

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<sup>100</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "New Jews,"3.

Jews at specific moments in time”.<sup>101</sup> Insisting that the definition is constantly changing, he adds that “The less possible a definition is, the more rigid it appears...Over and over, one group comes to be defined as the authentic Jews.”<sup>102</sup> *Heeb Magazine*’s efforts to appeal to a less defined generation Jewishness appear more rigid through the tendency to cut down the Jewish woman through avenues that would seem to celebrate her sexy power. Still, the mag would likely be loathe to concern itself with anything called ‘authentic Jews’. *Heeb*’s cutting and undercutting may be best understood as comic impulses caught up in the spectacle of using Jewishness to undo itself. In choosing to keep debasing comments visible about the very women they put forward as emblems of their own new Jewishness, for instance, *Heeb* rehearses normative categories of who’s hot/who’s not. *Heeb*’s (female) chauvinist tenor partners a weapon against wimpier depictions of the Jewish (male) past with an equally reactionary offense against Jewish women and the successful sex appeal they stage and sabotage.

As both the “Woman” and the “Jew” are re-appropriated by frameworks that re-feminize the Jewish frontier or resist its feminization, edges of either category would appear to cut themselves open. What bleeds in this conceptual recast of the Jewish femme body? The comfort zones of a more familiar ‘in-between’ identified as a lovable male-ordered liminality? The actual possibility of a Sexy Jewess, all jokes aside? While one has good reason to wonder where women fit in waging a women’s contest as Sexy Jewess success or failure, it would be a mistake to argue that women are used merely as tools of boyish games on *Heeb* or any other spoof as smut routine. Competing interfaces

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<sup>101</sup> Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*, 25.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

of the visual spectacle and the presumably free and unfiltered dialogue commentary reveal a complex viewership that collapses traditional spectatorship through partially unseen/unknown audience make-up. While such an open-source understanding of anonymous spectators questions a simple assumption of a hetero-masculinist gazer, it cannot undo the conditions that construct the presumed way to affect its gaze. ‘

### **Not Your Native Jews or Are They?**

A significant interplay of gender and race in this edge-imaginary cannot be overlooked. The appropriation of “sexy” for New Jews with new access through disassociation with the assimilatory Jewishness of their parents and grandparents is too good to pass up. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett identifies a group that likewise wants to identify as ‘native’ to other others with similar appropriative impersonations. In many senses, such ‘native’ feelings and impersonations emblemize a familiar racialization of the American frontier. While such a ‘going native’ may only coincidentally link back to the colonial fantasy of white Indian hobbyists (from ‘hippies’ to Halloween), cross-cultural dress up and racial drag can be viewed here as a sustained American pastime with Jewish particularity. Understood as more comfortable in countercultural vernaculars (read Black) than Jewish ones, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s New Jews extend a legacy of a US Jewish racial imaginary predicated on the active interplays of assimilation and appropriation that may parallel the altruistic intentions of IKAR’s Harlem Shake at least as much as mean to muddy up “daddy’s porn”.

In addition to the myriad ways Joanna Angel's more 'native' roots in alternative punk porn already layer her careerist move away from religious orthodoxy (that then sells her sex work through the sacrilege of a sacred/profane send-up), her resistance to old guard of mainstream pornography carries over into her work on race in fascinating ways. Marketing her first interracial video starring herself and a black male porn actor as its own frontier in the company's history, Angel boasts in the promotional text that she tried to reverse stereotypes even though she admits some people might find it racist.<sup>103</sup> While the cover image of the video shows Angel in cornrows against a wall of graffiti, wearing the characteristic gold jewelry of a stereotypical rap impersonator, the film plot features the black male as a nerdy chess player. She, the petite, Jewish white woman plays the aggressor she calls a "gangster white chick". The threat of a white-black miscegenation sustains the shock value of a familiar or mainstream interracial fetish category. It simultaneously means to puncture its rote potency through the flipping of the archetypical race roles that loom large in the legacy of national mythology. The words to her own musical score, "if It's big and it's black, Joanna's got to have it" play in the background. The two laugh, (fore)playing with an oversized chess pieces on a building roof top to riff off the fantasy/threat of the famous phallic signifier that Joanna both desires to have and desires to be.

Joanna's Jewishness justifies her racial play here. Her lyrics explain that "My mama wanted me to grow up and marry a Jew/ She set me up with a lawyer who wanted

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<sup>103</sup> "It's Big, It's Black, It's Inside Joanna!!!" comment by Punk Porn Princess, Xoxojoannaangel.com, Posted on July 28, 2009.  
<http://xoxojoannaangel.com/2009/07/this-is-just-a-test/>

to sue/ David Goldstein took me home at the end of the night/ His pants came off and it was a scary sight". She sings of the insufficiency of Jewish men based on the exaggerated trope of the inferior, castrated penis. Joanna also updates the joke of the materialistic Jewish American Princess who would can't give a blow job 'cause she's too busy talking to her mother on the cell phone. The Sexy Jewess personified here is a post-feminist, post-assimilationist one that likes hetero sex so much that "she's gotta have it" no matter her mother's requests for a Jewish mate. Appearing to be agential in the aggressive wants of the JAP revisited (because, perhaps, she writes the smut joke this time), Joanna's next lines spell out the starlet-directors postmodern web savvy prowess. "I'll film it on the HD and get the perfect angle/Then I'll upload the whole thing onto Burning Angel". Positioning herself as the sexual subject as opposed to the sexualized object of an anti-porn argument occurs through a return to a black-Jewish imaginary and the fantasy/threat of yet more othered otherness. Just as Angel purports to leave Daddy—and mommy's fantasies behind—she relies on the pulls of a miscegenation mania that thrills her Jewish fans maybe even more than the American mainstream.

These kinds of racial rationale fit in with the literal and metaphorical race minstrelsy outlined in the dissertation Introduction. The transition from literal Jewish blackface performance at the turn of the twentieth century to a metaphorical one occurred as Jewish women joined white female choreographers in a modern dance appropriation of African American themes.<sup>104</sup> Reference to nonwhite subjects by white concert dance bodies may extend to 'native' identification through similar appropriation and

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<sup>104</sup> See Rogin, *Blackface White Noise*, 29, and Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 10-20.

exploitation. If the Jewish frontier is imagined through post-feminist raunch on one hand and appropriated black vernaculars on the other, it does so through a self-conscious critique of its own postmodern agency. The comedic effect justifies its exploitative potential, marking the limits of its imperfect subversions as flaws in the frontier logic

## **Conclusion**

By partnering Brous and Angel specifically as spectacular Jewish female figures who co-choreograph a Jewish frontier through expansive notions of the feminine and the feminist, I do not erase critical and quite obvious distinctions in their respective projects. Just as the “Jewishness” looks and feels different from one instance to the other, so is the particular claim to different visions of feminism and the prospect of its ‘post’ distinguished by varying influences as they come to bear on pornographic to pious praxis. The frameworks I employ here thus do not mean to contain these women with labels. Instead, they offer theoretical support for a range of tensions against which Brous and Angel alike pursue frontierist-minded femininities. It is the ruse of such finite lines of identification (post/feminist, religious/secular, sacred/profane, good/bad and even pious/porn) that I present a spectrum of progressive Jewish and gender discourse. The ‘genius’ and ‘limitation’, as Williams wrote of Annie Sprinkle, lies in its blurry affectation of both sides of such binary modes.

As multi-genre representations of the Jewish femme through sexy ruse range from the religiously revitalized to the pornish parody, a featured female role consistently revises the Jewish (male) femme figuration tied to an assimilatory American century.

And yet, as Brous and Angel update diminutive stereotypes of the desiring Jewish woman through tongue-in-cheek Princess roles meant to stand in for strong influence over respective domains, they present two models of today's Sexy Jewess with finally much less in common than theoretically imagined. But brought together as founding Jewish anti/mothers of a conceptual and geographically-mapped Jewish frontier, the pairing outlines a spectrum of positions-in-excess I want to call mutually, if quite differently, 'sexy' for that reason.

And yet, as "sexy" has come to stand in for the revamped self-image of a new and improved Jewishness, a certain appropriation of a hotter, hipper Jewish femininity inevitably reestablishes the binary modes it wishes to move beyond. That is, sexiness, and the efforts to embody it through post-feminist and post-assimilationist plays of various kinds, may be precisely the trap these women are working against. So long as sexy is mediated by the marketability of femininity and its hetero approval and consumption, such rhetoric of empowerment may still too easily fold in on itself. If sexy is in fact more the frontierist trapping than any fulfillment of futurehood afterall, what can be said about the Jewish 'edge' that may or may not be sharp enough to cut through its ropes? What finally can be said about this Jewish tendency toward an embodied image of edginess that would seem to teeter right on the line just as readily as violate it?

Examples of *Heeb Magazine's* ambivalent domestication of such feminist-tinged frontiers through the comic 'Shtetl Bunny' and 'Gratuitous Jewess' columns help reflect an equivocal contemporary Jewish culture that both construct worlds of re-appropriative female agency (as self-aware sexy subjects) through user-generated content characteristic

of Web 2.0 technologies and temper or even tear down that agential potential through the limits of those same channels. That is, as such Sexy Jewess evocations of the frontier cut across boundaries of Jew and Woman alike, they also re-contain those categories in order to differently capitulate or capitalize on their excessive thing-ness in the name of new freedoms.

Turned around as a frontier feminization in flux, if still in-between, a critical focus on the roles of women in the sexualization of today's New Jew/ess remaps a contemporary urban American promise. As it trades in the tired old 'Jewish question' for the sexy ruse of a fantastic something else, however, that something else turns out to be the equally worn out "Woman Question". While such a trade would seem to make new space as the emblem of today's Jewishness, it more realistically appropriates the cultural and funny 'thing' about Jewishness and womanness as underdog affiliations and representational anxieties. What can never be reconciled are the tensions between the liberatory potential of re-appropriative power and the reductive reference of the age-old logics it relies upon. A theoretical pairing of pious and porn spectacles as a frame for the fun of flirty Jewish femininity and its pressures on the male femme phenomenon can never shed its age-old binaries so long as it falls back on the promise or policing of the female body. And yet, for those invested in the real power of spectacle Jewish femininity, and its bearings on the survival of porn or pious subcultures alike, it is clear that the work of religious parody, powerful in its sexiness as it may be, is still much easier than the challenge, for instance, against exceptionalism and a Jewish state.

As I have come to understand, a flawed frontier logic is finally aware of its own limits as part of its act. Among my visits to both ends of the sexy scale, Rabbi Brous admits to a crowd of the religiously recommitted that she returned from Jerusalem with the hope to be one day accredited by male colleagues, and Angel wishes on camera that she possessed a male sexual anatomy to make it all easier. Underlining these expressions of lack in leadership roles are the various and distinct limitations foreclosing the transgressive potential of their positions at the top. For Brous, this is the hyper-observant sector of the Jewish community in the US and Israel that refuses her rabbinic authority, and the real power of that traditional patriarchy to contain her within claims of less legitimate Torah study. For Angel, however, the transgressive possibility of her Jewish female topness is finally trumped by her hugely heteroraunch that can not do much to challenge patriarchy or misogyny. And still, with such as the case, here in the spaces left open by these real and conceptual holes - the sustaining 'nots' themselves - live the unforeseen potential of imperfect subversions by any number of less spectacular social actors to broach old questions with a charged comic charm, recycling those very categories of Jew and woman, however sharp their edges, and find them newly and pleasurably sexy.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**Horah at the Highline and Nice Jewish Girls Gone Blue:**  
**Burlesque Nostalgia of the Downwardly Mobile**

New York neo-burlesque act, the Schlep Sisters, packed the house for their 2011 Menorah Horah at the Highline Ballroom, and the celebratory mood of the room buzzed all the way to my corner table up against the balcony rail and behind an obstructing pole.<sup>105</sup> A family affair, I thought, as I took in the aerial view and sound-scape of Jewish faces, gestures, voices, laughter. Onstage, two dancers outfitted in gold and blue fringe improvised easy steps to easier go-go music with far off glances, ignoring onlookers with an air of practiced cool. I watched these heavy-set fly girls in corseted display of breasts and pale fleshiness project airs of casual cattiness over and across the sightline of the crowded dinner theater orchestra seats, filled to capacity at \$20 a pop and a two-drink minimum that may have just broken even.

A three-part kick line candelabra opened the show. Wowing the audience with this signature piece, one burlesquer ‘lights’ the festival candles over each head with fabric flames pulled off of the tips of pasties like pairs of striking matches.<sup>106</sup> Roaring praise for the synchronized steps of a 180-degree circle accompanied the trio as they made available every angle of a burlesque sexiness with campy Jewish appeal. Setting

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<sup>105</sup> Performing together since 2003, the Schlep Sisters are a New York-based burlesque duo starring Minnie Tonka and Darlinda Just Darlinda, touted for bringing Jewish culture and humor to strip tease. These “long lost sisters” claim native roots in Yiddish theater and vaudeville, and also perform independently other burlesque and performance art circuits.

<sup>106</sup> An online video of the signature opening act is available from a hand-held camera at the 2008 Menorah Horah, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQz8izazuf0>

the stage not only for the several performers to come but also for the narrative theme of the evening, this slowed cabaret can-can referenced the iconographic chorus line that both borrowed its techniques from the quintessential leg show and poked fun at them at the same time. This doubled ability to showcase rehearsed dance technique while making light of the dancing act is precisely what I'll argue in this chapter is both so queer and Jewish about it.<sup>107</sup> A femme-as-femme drag of the Jewish female jester dressed up in ritual paraphernalia, this reverse Trinity of faux-religious burlesque fun made light not only of dance but of its possibility of effecting sexiness altogether. The menorah montage entangled dance and sexiness as equal efforts to lampoon through the humor of it all. The legibility of the Sexy Jewess joke lived in this parallel personification of the classic leggy beauty and its ability to undo (guilty) whiteness through Jewish impersonation.

Such was the layered stuff of the evening's narrative arc as well. Interrupting burlesque acts and characteristic one-song strips, a video interlude offered the pre-recorded frenzy of the Schlep Sisters backstage as one gets news of a Rockettes audition at the Radio City Music Hall however many blocks uptown. Ecstatic at the opportunity to finally make it to the top, one sister runs through the real-time audience and out the theater and back up onto the screen to rush into a cab only to decide that the fame of a Rockette fantasy pales in comparison to a home in make shift Menorah Horah productions. A feel-good return to roots in the alternative space of their own 'off off'

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<sup>107</sup> While not synonyms in the sense of sharing precise definitions, my analysis here extends from the premise of the 'Jewish' and the 'queer' as overlapping constructions of sexually-inflected difference for Jewish female comics who foreground their funny girl bodies.

Broadway productions, the mid-show reunion of the Sisters back at the theater offered pause not only for intermission restroom and merch-purchase purposes, but restored a sense for all present as to what the night was all about. A parody of the Rockette dream - newly and enthusiastically within reach but still morally outside the bounds of a Jewish identitarian politics - the taped show within the show revealed the real terms of a post-assimilatory crisis characteristic of today's Jewish burlesque and cabaret scene. As the Schlep Sisters championed a case for Jewishness above all else, the producer-pair centralize a contemporary dilemma of Jewish femininity. A role in the Rockettes would signify the unwanted ultimate stage (pun intended) of an all-American white assimilation.

Making a name for themselves in the neo-burlesque scene as a self-othering Jewish act since 2004, the Schlep Sisters offer up light fare in an otherwise spicier serving of yet more othered burlesque. Regularly on the same bill as bona fide exotics like Tomahawk Tassels and Shanghai Pearl whose foreign names match their respectively feathered acts, the Schlep Sisters pale – literally – in sexy comparison. But as I argue of the Sexy Jewess myth herself, it is their jab at tradition that renders them funny enough for the burlesque stripping feat. Jews hardly sustain public attention as sexy subjects in the same sense as today's Latin, Asian, and Native exotics. It is just for this reason, this tension tied to ethnic whiteness, that the twins and other Jewish burlesque groups like them are finding their comic niche in sexy lineups everywhere.

What is this 'Jewish' burlesque mark that carries its weight among women dressed and undressed in entirely more exotic referendum? And how does it work to 'queer' white hetero-femininity and Jewishness alike through parody? Its parody

functions as both dancing mockery of Jewish female difference/sameness and a more earnest effort to reconcile such anxious inferiorities. Neo-Jewish burlesque and comedy cabaret queer spectacle Jewishness through famously ‘low’ performance forms linked to the humorously grotesque, the inappropriate and the absurd. Willing returns to “low forms” also signal (as they have since their popular start in the Progressive Era) re-adoption of lower-class concerns realistically present for the downwardly mobile dancers I describe.<sup>108</sup> The contemporary revival of these nostalgic genres and class connotations offers an ideal site to consider recuperative aspects of self-othering as well as the social and economic factors delimiting such lowly aspirations. The performances chosen for analysis intentionally queer this citation of the Bakhtin-esque low and lowly as part and parcel their reappropriative potential.<sup>109</sup> I argue it is this shared doing of identities that both ‘queer’ and ‘make Jewish’ a gender and ethnic drag by and for women that drives the sexy-tinged humor of the Menorah Horah and showcases like them.

Whereas the reverse-rejection of the Rockettes audition ultimately refuses a white embrace-within-reach, it also seems to justify the particular in-between position the Schlep Sisters occupy. The fact that they failed to win the title at the Las Vegas 2009 Miss Exotic World Pageant looks nearly intentional in this light. They wear matching pink umbrellas and polka dot dresses and in sync with a playful accompaniment of the

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<sup>108</sup> For rich discussions of Burlesque’s Progressive Era roots and its ties to class concerns, see Linda Tomko’s *Dancing Class* and Robert C. Allen’s *Horrible Prettiness*.

<sup>109</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rebels and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Bakhtin writes that in a world in which a material bodily principle links together the lower bodily stratum with all that stands in for the scatological (including ‘folk humor’ as well as bodily humours like urination or sex acts), the “grotesque realism” of the body, “digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one,” 21.

Yiddish singers, the Barry Sisters. They out themselves and their fans as a farce of real-life Jewish women who choose either to renounce otherness or bask in a nostalgic innocent Yiddish niche that never was.<sup>110</sup> Neither othered enough for the Miss Exotic World title, or (wanting to be) white enough to attempt a Rockette reality, the humor of their act seems to quite consciously render them unfit for either crown.

A specialty act with niche appeal for female spectators, fellow burlesquers, Jewish audiences and their hetero and homosexual audiences alike, the Jewish burlesque number always already exceeds even the most outlandish variety bill of strange and curiously othered burlesque coquettes. Among a burlesque revival community, whose array of costumes and caricatures range from the anthropomorphic to risqué acrobatic, the Jewish burlesque dancer stands admittedly alone, knowingly outside and inside too, consistently and comically resolved with her own Jewish female unresolvedness. It is this compounded Jewish burlesque mark, this willing and self-aware display of a simultaneous white sameness and ethnic otherness embodied through a nostalgic return to a vintage feminine aesthetic that occupies the historical and theoretical scope of this chapter.

In focusing on today's Jewish-themed burlesque and its place in comic, cabaret style formats, I interrogate the im/possibility of a legible Jewish sexiness as the

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<sup>110</sup> The Miss Exotic World Pageant and Striptease Reunion is an annual neo-burlesque pageant and convention and is the annual showcase event and fundraiser for the Burlesque Hall of Fame, which moved from an abandoned desert goat farm in Helendale, California to downtown Las Vegas. Pageant competitors vie for the crown over the course of a weekend of performances, which is quite seriously regarded as the top honor for a burlesque performance. A video of the Schlep Sisters performing "Chribim, Zug es Mir, and Raindrops" is viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHZnAwOE7nI>

ambiguous material of a funny contemporary underground. I take as my central cases the in-crowd performances of a Jewish holiday parody that spans the duration of a single week of Hanukkah in New York.<sup>111</sup> The following synthesis of live performance ethnography wonders what ‘Jewishness’ in particular has to offer in these scenes. The chapter takes as its premise that today’s burlesque sexiness functions as a means through which female participants playfully objectify themselves. In the name of fun, flirty girl power largely for majority-women audiences, this analysis develops a framework for rethinking notions of Jewish sexy ruse through conceptualizations of the autoexotic.<sup>112</sup> In old-timey entertainment formats pitched to insider Jews and non-Jews alike, I aim to understand the theoretical and political stakes of ‘Jewface’ impersonations predicated on a playful critique of a familiar Jewish in-between. As the chapter takes a close look at gender and sexual transgressions staged as light-hearted holiday fun, it calls on readers to

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<sup>111</sup> Both showcases chosen for this chapter analysis repeat as annual holiday events with different themes, acts, and performers as selected and produced by the Schlep Sisters and Nice Girls Gone Bad, respectively. Though I have seen several of these such performances, the choice to focus on a single week of shows is meant to offer readers a detailed account of the performance experience through the ethnographic encounter as I have understood it.

<sup>112</sup> My understanding of autoexoticism in a Jewish context borrows from tango scholar, mentor, and dissertation chair, Marta E Savigliano as she has defended it in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Westview: Boulder, 1995). In Savigliano’s formulation, those identified as ‘exotics’ refer to the categories that keep them bound and struggle to expand their identities through exotic reappropriations, 169. To the degree that it may be theoretically plausible to reach across such distinct contexts, I extend Savigliano’s discussions of such exotic reappropriations in the Argentine colonial context to address my research subjects. The Sexy Jewess performer in the US - a privileged, if guilty white spectacle subject - occupies an entirely different position than the exotic figure of Savigliano’s tango analysis. ‘Jewface’ impersonations perform the Jewish female between positions of sameness and difference to standards of white womanhood, and in doing so, refer to the patriarchal categories that may likewise ‘keep them bound’ but take them on and off at will.

reconsider the performative doings of such embodied displays and the stakes of Jewish female self-parody for fun's sake. My ethnographic analysis thus pays particular attention to the gestural, voiced, costumed, and otherwise caricatured appropriations and subversions of Jewish and female otherness as they both mock and master the ranks of those they may wish to join. Furthermore, as performers embody burlesque nostalgia for a bawdy bodily archive, the revival of vintage sexy ruse reworks Jewish female stereotypes for a post-feminist, post-assimilationist underground.

### **Worth the Schlep for Pinup Perfection: Poster Play and a Jewess Kind of Charm**

The 2011 poster image for the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Menorah Horah envisions the headlining Jewish burlesque duo, the Schlep Sisters, as busty blondes in signature mockery of religious modesty.<sup>113</sup> Back to back against a blank backdrop as if plucked from another world, they stand in poised profile with downstage legs bent, calves flexed and tushes suggestively hinged back. Leaning away from a mirror-like center, they each hold oversized Hanukkah *dreidels*, or holiday tops in mid-spin, that offer the only cover in this jokish cover girl shot. Bare from their matching golden locks down to glittered stilettos, they freeze frame a visual parody of the treasonous *shiksa* fantasy. Embodying this gentile threat to all promise of Jewish continuity, they manifest in mannequin-form

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<sup>113</sup> At least three versions of the poster image circulated online announcing the Dec 2011 event. These include a facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/events/284726601567475/>, Broadwayworld.com press release <http://music.broadwayworld.com/article/The-Schlep-Sisters-Thirsty-Girl-Prod-Present-5th-Annual-MENORAH-HORAH-20111129> and Dose.ca, [http://dose.clubzone.com/events/496826/new\\_york/The-5th-Annual-Menorah-Horah.html](http://dose.clubzone.com/events/496826/new_york/The-5th-Annual-Menorah-Horah.html).

the minx-like menace of goyish sex appeal. Since at least the Jewish invention of Barbie xx years ago, this construct of the cream-colored American babe has fabricated a plastic Jewish promise of assimilatory success<sup>114</sup>: A white girlfriend (or two!) and not a Jewish wife. But as these Brooklyn-based burlesquers usurp the promise of an American wet dream through personifying it, they return to vintage burlesque nostalgia with a newfound Sexy Jewess post-feminist charm. Shape-shifting the familiar Jewish female shtick of a jokish un/sexiness—funny because of its failures—the Schlep Sisters perfect a pin up play with sexy ruse that doubly objectifies and reconstructs a Jewish femininity as holiday fun.

As is consistent with a growing return to Jewish-themed burlesque acts,<sup>115</sup> a longstanding stereotype of the Jewish female as overbearing mother, unattractive hag, and ultra-demanding princess is brought to the forefront of Jewish female spectacle. As performers use gesture, costume and prop to cite Jewishness, they figure the funny high femme in-between impersonations not only of the more typically sexy white pin up model, but of the figure of the sexualized, racialized exotic Other. This in-betweenness that is doubly able to impersonate both sexier stances offers a performance paradigm that brings together the “Jewface” acts outlined in this chapter. What stands out about the Schlep Sisters among other Jewish-themed acts in particular is their evident development from more amateurish vulgarities to polished, post-feminist playmate impersonators.

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<sup>114</sup> Ruth Handler, wife of Mattel co-founder, Elliot Handler, is credited as having tweaked the design of a German doll (not meant for children), and renamed it Barbie, after her pre-teen daughter. The toy was an instant success at the New York toy fair in 1959, rocketing the Jewish company toward fame and fortune.

<sup>115</sup> See Jewish-themed burlesque acts by New Orleans-based Trixie Minx, New York-based Little Brooklyn and Dot Mitzvah, and traveling trio, Burning Bush Burlesque.

Gone is the garishness of previous photo shoots from Horahs of yore where one Schlep Sister might smack the ass of the other amidst bottles of Maneshevitz wine or other drunken Jewish paraphernalia.<sup>116</sup> Instead, the two wear classier sexy expressions with deep red lipstick and smiles more withheld than usual. What I had believed were bleached wigs are better kempt than in previous images of the sisters, convincingly real, and the bodies have evidently slimmed down to buxom pinup perfection. To ‘schlep’, in today’s colloquial Yiddish use, means to carry a heavy burden really or figuratively. If at the funny crux of the Schlepping feat has been the implausibility of a Jewish sexiness, what can be said of this updated photo-play and its assimilatory work to actually make manifest a normative female (sex) appeal? What if such rehearsals of Jewish otherness are more accurately the embodied confessions of sameness rather than difference? What is the ‘price’ of pin up perfection for in-betweens who continue to perform *otherwise*? And in choosing to perform ‘Jewishly’, how does a post-feminist play with sexy ruse blur the lines between the funny (unsexy) and sexy (unfunny) female personages?

If the ‘magic’ of the pin-up poster image for the Schlep Sisters is the (airbrushed) suggestion of the Sexy Jewess laid bare for all to see, then the particular dynamics of their dancing act interrupt this more stationary effort at sexiness. The two-dimensional posing necessarily morphs as it materializes through movement for the stage. Like the affectation of voice for stand up comics also discussed in the chapter, a visual analysis of the stilled performer cannot fully account for the layered and competing registers of the moving, sounding Sexy Jewess as the kidding queen of burlesque and comedy cabaret.

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<sup>116</sup> See poster photo for 2010 performance of “The Family Shenanigans”  
<http://www.myspace.com/schlepsisters/blog/536453138>

That said, through their use of visual imagery to promote theatrical identities as Sexy Jewesses, the Schlep Sisters rely on a history of the pin up to repeat a nostalgic burlesque allure and distance themselves from it at the same time. With design technologies of today, the photo references the early burlesque's sexual "awarishness" that Robert C. Allen defines as the quintessential attitude of turn-of-the-twentieth-century burlesque.<sup>117</sup> The awarish nudes featured in the sister act pin up parody remounts a cultural practice of female self-display. Perpetuating a sinister kind of sexiness, they self-fetishize the female form free from moral panic. Complicit with Woman's flesh fetish in overt ways, the citational aspects of reference through parody likewise deem it a distant past with retro appeal.

Such modern-day citations of an old-time gender rebellion underlies what cultural studies scholar Maria Elena Buszek calls "the transgressive and unabashedly feminist" agenda of today's burlesque.<sup>118</sup> Even without spelling out what critical distinctions there might be in a discourse on feminism surrounding the first pin up and today's deployments of pro-women visual politics, Buszek's reference to feminist transgression is helpful. I situate Buszek's pairing of transgressive, feminist agendas within the context of post-feminist, post-assimilatory spectacle Jewish femininity more broadly. It is the subversive

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<sup>117</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 1991. For Allen, the Low represents a fusion of power, fear, and desire in the construction of subjectivity, and reflects a psychological dependence on those Others excluded from society, 146. Most interesting here is the "boundary phenomenon of hybridization," or intermixing between self and Other in a "dangerously unstable zone", 146. The "horrible prettiness" of burlesque thus offered a voluptuous challenge to sentimental ideas of feminine beauty for bourgeois male audiences, 138.

<sup>118</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, "Representing 'Awarishness': Burlesque, Feminist Transgression, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pin-Up," *TDR*, Vol. 43, No. 4, (Winter 1999): 142.

potential of such 'awarish' self-displays to upturn or upset patriarchal controls that carries the power to re-establish the limits of in/appropriate femininity. Performers outlined here return to the categories that otherwise contain them in intentional projects of pushing boundaries tied to ethnic and sexual identities. A parallel project returns also to nostalgic performance formats like burlesque to revive histories of (feminist) transgressions to likewise appropriate the platforms of dancing parody and sexy ruse in the name of liberatory progress.

This ability to slide in and out of feminist temporalities that date back to vaudeville and early minstrelsy circuits as often as the sexual revolution of the civil rights era and second wave feminism perhaps best identifies the showcases selected for analysis. The capacity for performances to reference both histories in the name of moving both toward them and 'beyond' them encapsulates a certain slipperiness of the Jewish post-feminism I outline. Linda William's understanding of post-feminism (see Chapter 1) as that which is not beyond feminism, but more accurately understood as in motion because of it offers helpful insight. As is indicated in the previous chapter's discussion of pious and porn spectacles, the post feminist plays with sexy ruse assist a theorization of a post-feminist spectrum, wherein a certain kind of sexiness is employed toward various ends. Overlapping conceptualizations of the Sexy Jewess as an embodied break with patriarchal controls of the past can furthermore work toward quite distinct projects, with near-opposing doctrines. And yet, along that spectrum sexiness and its deployment in progressive Jewish discourse, a post-feminist 'frontier' model makes possible strategic returns to the past in the name of the new. Burlesque nostalgia may mean just as much

mockery of old feminisms as much as it rematerializes their very modes of meaning making through funny sex appeal.

While the Schlep Sisters make clear reference to the early pin-up with post-feminist poise, the contemporary context of the poster art plays with that very referentiality in a way that both develops and undoes the “feminist” as a yet unfulfilled and no longer fulfilling cultural project of the sixties and seventies. By situating a post-feminist framework for the poster photo and its dancing pair, I theorize how the Schlep Sisters and other burlesque groups like them strategically evolve the figure of the Sexy Jewess. They modify liberatory models of (particularly Jewish) second wave feminism through a return to a sexier past. In doing so, I position a burlesque nostalgia for a ‘pre-feminist’ performance pastime. The sexy ruse of the poster and its featured affair undoubtedly poke fun at standards of appropriate femininity through citation of a distant otherness. Fessing up to a guilty whiteness through its overstated impersonation in this image, a Hanukkah entertainment form foregrounds the reflexive, or self-referential racial plays of an updated Sexy Jewess imaginary. Through such returns to an earlier sex appeal, the Schlep Sisters and burlesque groups like them likewise return to a more racially-stigmatized Jewish past. In what follows, I question this updated ‘awarishness’ ala early burlesque as a post-assimilatory, post-feminist Jewish prerogative that in returning to transgressive femininities of yore, may only muddle their sustained agential power through light-hearted holiday fun.

### **A Jewess (Pre)Face to Transgression: Parody, Profanation and the Limits Within**

Central to situating the political and social power of this conceptual and chronological connection across a century is a theory of parody that frames such embodiments of Jewish female difference through what Linda Hutcheon calls “repetition with critical distance”.<sup>119</sup> That is, through repeated citation of a Jewish signified hyper femininity, performers like the Schlep Sisters distance themselves from those very categories and attendant stereotypes through various techniques that mark layered relationships to “difference”. A self-reflexive double move re-presents the Jewish funny girl as always already ‘different’ from appropriate standards of white heterofemininity and at the same time, uses tools of parody to reiterate a secondary distance from that ‘difference’ itself. Spiraling in on itself, this not-not relationship personifies precisely the parodic potential of today’s Jewish female burlesque and cabaret performers. The performers I describe utilize humor as well as irony, quotation, satire, and imitation to negotiate Jewish identities—post-feminist and post-assimilatory—within shifting boundaries tied to race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality.

The degree to which such negotiations are transgressive, however, is less than clear. According to Hutcheon, parody can be conservative or revolutionary, and necessitates understandings of both the intent of the author-artist in such “acknowledged borrowings” and its reception, which she outlines as a theory of hypertextuality.<sup>120</sup> Close readings of stage performances and remarks on the subject by performers in the field help situate how conservative or revolutionary the rhetoric of transgression may be. I thus test

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<sup>119</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 75.

<sup>120</sup> Hutcheon, 75.

the terms of these autoexotic self-displays of funniness and sexiness against their bodily ties to a politics of transgression as a particular condition of agency that oscillates between an incomplete and incompletable privilege of Jewish whiteness.

In his “Preface to Transgression,” Michel Foucault defines transgression as a “will-to-power” in and against social and political “limits” that define and police normalcy.<sup>121</sup> Foucault writes that in a secular world that has renounced God and the governing role of divinity since the Enlightenment, sexuality remains the sole site for the profanation—or boundary crossing—of such limits.<sup>122</sup> Boundary crossing, as Foucault imagines it, is the continued movement between or spiraling of the appropriate and the inappropriate. Transgression thus explains the prevalence of extremes or of ‘excess’ within cultural practices that flirt with sexualized notions of the inappropriate.

Especially significant to my study of self-reflexive spectacles of Jewish femininity is Foucault’s understanding of limits as remapped on and of the body. In his own words, an inner profanation both “marks the limit within us, and designates us as a limit”.<sup>123</sup> In his formulation, the excessive, uncontainable body always already transgresses such internalized limits, whether willingly or not.<sup>124</sup> Foucault’s spiral of the sexually imagined appropriate and perversely inappropriate accounts for the ongoing evolution of ever-dissipating boundaries. In the context of Jewish spectacle femininity

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<sup>121</sup> Foucault, Michel F. “A Preface to Transgression” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 29-52.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>124</sup> Foucault relates his notion of excess in the discourse on sexuality to George Bataille’s definition of excess, which pivots around economies of consumption more broadly. See George Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1946-1949).

and the pin up parody described above, the tension of a secular and sexual Jewish female subject crosses normative boundaries still tied up in appropriate (reproductive) purposes of female nudity. The pin up also crosses boundaries assigned to the appropriate (white ideal) femininity they arguably achieve in the poster's parody. The Schlep Sisters thus mark their Jewish excess (nose, funniness) and simultaneous bodily achievement of normative limits (whiteness, bloneness). In doing so, the Schlep Sisters stage Jewish and female difference and sameness as doubled limit-experiences imposed by race and gender norms.

Following Foucault's logic here, Jewish and female excesses designate the limits, which in crossing, reference back to the body itself. In dancing parody of such limit-experiences, the degree to which the focus can be on what performers are doing deliberately or not becomes vague at best. Does the Jewish face, for instance, in a sexy show, always already transgress? Does the mere Jewish label likewise always assume transgression? It is clear enough that a focus on the material and visual doings of dance highlights the work of performance to subvert appropriate standards of femininity. But what to make of the funny face that would always appear subversive, despite what the moving body may mean to do? The conflation of the transgressive limit marked within the body, and the mark limiting the transgressive body may be more complex for Jewish female performers than Foucault's framework suggests. As the boundary-crosser and the physical site of its inner profanations, the Jewish female body 'gone bad' through sexy ruse that outs her implausible sexiness spirals in on herself first and foremost.

Just as the discussion of pious/porn in Chapter 1 meant to dismantle the a priori significance of a sacred/profane binary, the particular dimensions of Jewishness as a doubled religious and secular realm cannot be overlooked in the plays with sexy ruse. Foucault outlines a theory of profanation (boundary crossing) in a world post-God, replacing an insufficient sacred/profane paradigm with a limit/transgression framework. While I borrow here from his interpretive lens, I find it relevant to return to the particular resonance of re-feminized religiosity as it inflects a Jewess brand of contemporary sexy ruse and its parodic technique of profanation. How embodied self-parody allows for the simultaneous renouncement and reconfiguration of religiosity as a “limit-experience” seems particularly relevant. It intersects with borders of race, gender and class thinking on the Other, the inappropriate, the perverse. But why performers would return to religious-inflected sacred/profane premises of sexualized femininity in order to stage and transgress Jewish difference in a post-assimilatory era continues to elude easy understanding.

To the degree that this “limit-experience” might slip from ego to body in infinite permutations forever and always, the utility of Foucault’s analysis for a discussion of Jewish female burlesque nostalgia revolves around psychic and somatic dimensions of the perverse, or inappropriate, excessive body. As the doings and the doers of sexy ruse make explicit the deployments of self-parody as strategies of agency and critique, further review of perversion itself helps understand the stakes of transgressive sexiness. If taken to suggest a performance of desire—that is, a certain desire of and/or for the performers themselves—such transgressions of a perverse Jewish femininity can be viewed as

embodiments of a largely same-sex female fetish. In her reading of lesbian sexuality as perverse desire, Teresa de Lauretis reworks Freud's theory of the phallic signifier of desire to position lesbian subjectivity. She explains that the fetish, as perverse desire, "goes beyond the Oedipus complex and in its own way resolves it".<sup>125</sup> In her estimation, "penis envy" incorrectly translates the experience of lack or dispossession, which rather than longing for the male signified phallus, wishes to heal an absent female body-image. De Lauretis relates her work directly to the focus on the performative 'doings' of embodied endeavors like dance. She insists that the "practice of love" (the title of her book) "is meant to emphasize the material, embodied component of desire as a psychic activity whose effects on the subject's bodily ego constitute a sort of habit or knowledge of the body, what the body 'knows' –or better, has come to know –about its instinctual aims."<sup>126</sup> The "erotic power" de Lauretis details, moreover, both relates to and diverges from Foucault's discussion of a "will-to-power" in ways that offer overlapping models to thinking of transgression as and through a perversity of desire.

While de Lauretis admits that her focus on lesbian subjectivity cannot necessarily translate across all realms of female desire, I extend her analysis to address the queer social and sexual components of Jewish female burlesque and its role in comic, cabaret scenes. Although lesbian and sexually queer couples make up a notable percentage of the audiences in this study, I borrow from de Lauretis in order to draw out the broader homosociality of burlesque nostalgia as a recuperative, reappropriative performance

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<sup>125</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 289.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 285-286.

form. Furthermore, the lesbian desire de Lauretis details helps specify an embodied practice of perversion that relates to Foucault's theory of transgression in important ways. Adding the critical dimension of subjectivity to theories of perversion, and naming it specifically female and fetishistic, de Lauretis both compliments and complicates Foucault's self-spiraling limit-experience. Constructing what de Lauretis calls "sociosexual masquerades," the performance of the more feminine (like that of the more masculine butch) has the power to acknowledge or deny notions of lack or loss as "styles of self-presentation". For de Lauretis, "the damage, castration, the loss of a libidinally invested body-image, the lack of being in the female body-ego" offers material for masquerading both the self as a social and sexual subject.

Distinct from Foucault's notion of transgression and its inherent perversity, the perverse subjectivity that de Lauretis details is one that specifically supports a subject performing or presenting herself. Through discussion of self-presentation styling, de Lauretis outlines a disavowal with Freudian theories of female loss and lack, typified by lesbian desire. It is this performance of self-styling presentation that Jewish burlesquers also adopt in 'sociosexual masquerades'. Perversing positions of ethnic and gender excess by unfixing their definitions and rendering them fun, performers disavow normative parameters of the sexual (effeminate, castrated) Jew and (absent ego) Woman on purpose. On purpose too, they willingly spiral back to the same limits they cross, as if to suggest that the very trappings of identity categories are ripe material for critique. In the next section, I explain how in embodying those limits (of Jew and Woman), performers intentionally queer the perverse potential of the Sexy Jewess.

## **On Queering the Sexy Jewess, Ethnographic Methods, and The ‘It’ Factor**

At the intersections of dance and performance studies, gender and sexuality discourse, and scholarship on race and Jewishness is a central concern with the ‘doing’ of identities. Burlesque and cabaret comedy offer performers and their audiences a venue for the negotiation—or doing—of Jewishness as a kind of catch all for ‘alternative’ femininities in between sameness and difference. The corporeal construction of a subculture largely for and by women works as an oppositional strategy to transgress cultural norms tied to race, class, gender and sexuality.<sup>127</sup> By attending to the intersectionality of performed realities and representations in this way, it becomes possible to foreground the role of comically sexy Jewish burlesque dance and cabaret showcases as a “queering” of Jewish femininities in relation to larger discourses of heteronormative power.

As I write, “queer” in its academic and colloquial usages cites both the site of the nonnormative, resistive act and the gender or sexually imagined queer subject himself, herself, shimselves and themselves. Especially in relation to dance and the study of performance, scholars, activities, artists and audiences by now readily ‘queer’ time, space, and technique across genres and disciplines.<sup>128</sup> As a multivalent framework-in-

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<sup>127</sup> For more on this theme beyond a discussion of Jewishness, see also Natalie Marie Peluso, “High Heels and Fast Wheels: Alternative Femininities in Neo-Burlesque and Flat-Track Roller Derby” (PhD Diss, University of Connecticut, 2010).

<sup>128</sup> The scholarship on queer/ing dance discourse is increasingly vast. For a range of queer definitions, dances, and methods, see Marta E. Savigliano, “Notes on Tango (as) Queer (Commodity)” *Anthropological Notebooks* 16 (3) (2010): 135-143; Jose Esteban Munoz, “Gesture, Ephemerality, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance” *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (Sexual Cultures)* (New York: NYU

progress, its meanings extend from the practice of rehistoricizing archival absences to praxes that decolonize discourse in pursuit of fragmented hunches, intuitive interpretations, and revisionist histories.<sup>129</sup> Along a spectrum of queer imagining, utopic premises envision the queer as a futurist imagination of radical change. A contrary case made for no such futurity has garnered critical attention for scholars who have questioned the reproductive tensions of futurity as a heteronormative conceptualization.<sup>130</sup> Deployments of the term have increasingly dislodged their definitions from the confinements of non-normative sexuality itself. In some cases this move expressly desexualizes subjects and doings to include more expansive notions of a political and social potentiality not tied to individual identitarian politics.

My usage of queer here encompasses an operative promise of homosociality evidenced in the performance of Jewish burlesque and cabaret by and for women, inclusive but not reducible to same-sex expressions of sexual identities. Indicative of a queer turn in contemporary burlesque and its potential as political critique more broadly, Jewish-themed performances occupy particular positions of alterity that offer additional

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Press, 2009) 65-82; Cindy Garcia, *Dancing Salsa "Wrong": Pausing on Latinidad in Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, Forthcoming).

<sup>129</sup> See Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (Sacramento: Litwin Books, LLC, 2012).

<sup>130</sup> Here I am referencing specifically the central arguments of Jose Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (Sexual Cultures)* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). In a conference paper shared at UCLA's annual Thinking Gender conference entitled, "Which Child? Whose Queerness? On Situated Knowledges, Queer Embodiment and *No Future*," PhD Candidate in Women's Studies, Jacob Lau positioned this 'death drive' as a white gay male discourse. He poses the contrasting occurrence of Thomas Beatie's 2008 transgender pregnancy and its queer promise of reproductive futurity.

and complementary platforms to dance ‘differently’. Building on that theme, the performance events I chose for ethnographic analysis reveal my intentions to both queer (as verb) Jewish burlesque as a performance of sameness and difference, and in doing so, ‘out’ a queer (as adjective) Jewish performative potential of dances. Through both approaches, I account for performances that intentionally break with standards of appropriate womanhood from platforms of race privilege. As socio-sexual spaces of broad cultural and political critique, such scenes ‘queer’ notions of the feminine by strategically blurring expectations around sex, sexiness and sexuality as distinct but overlapping discourses. This contrasts theories of the queer as a utopic premise that squarely disidentify with normative notions of the ‘appropriate’. Instead, what I find as particularly queer about Jewish burlesque is the space of ambiguity itself as a politics of critical in-betweenness. This includes the simultaneity of in/appropriate doings and undoings, the performance of racialized and sexualized sameness and difference, and the movements toward and away from new ‘limits’ through nostalgic forms.

Moreover, my focus on performances that construct and deconstruct a Jewish female imaginary ‘gone bad’ through humor and gender rebellion develops a conceptual framework placing neo-Jewish-burlesque within queer (Jewish) dance discourse and its multiple points of focus.<sup>131</sup> In contributing to a queer/queering of Jewish dance discourse,

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<sup>131</sup>While queer Jewish studies is a growing field, to date there are still quite few scholarly texts on dance contexts specifically. See Nina Haft, “36 Jewish Gestures for Embodied Cognition” (Forthcoming), 1-17. Warren Hoffman offers a queer reading of Yiddish theater in *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture: Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music and Art* (Syracuse University Press, 2009) and Stacy Wolf writes a queer interpretation of the 1968 film, *Funny Girl* in “Barbra’s ‘Funny Girl’ Body” in

I also perform a queer and Jewish writerly gesture that frames the research in particular ways. Navigating an insider position that both understands the jokes and makes them too, I sift through the strange space of laughter—my own and that of those around me in different audiences—as a curious embodied resonance of an interactive queer performativity. The autoethnographic thus weaves in and between the theoretical and political as a reflexive methodological strategy to in distinct but overlapping ways both ‘queer’ and (cringe) ‘Jew’ the writing itself so as to articulate the ways both concepts perform modes of seeing and perceiving. Both practices no doubt extend from derogatory ways of putting people down by impersonating them, but their usage here means to reposition such labels as en/active politics of imagination rather than fixed essentialist paradigms. As performative doings both affected by performers and imposed upon them through scholarly interpretation, both terms slip from actual bodies to their stereotypes and back as theoretical prerogatives that return to those stereotypes, as de Lauretis might suggest, to “move beyond them”. Just as my familiarity and free usage of self-deprecating humor helped establish my ‘insider’ status in Jewish scenes, my own identification as queer (inseparably linked sexual and social politics) informs my treatment of performances and performing women as well as their treatment of me. And yet, to queer the writing on Jews and vice versa means most importantly to ‘out’ my

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*Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, eds. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

simultaneous enchantment and disenchantment, or in Munoz's words, identifications and disidentifications with such representational spectacles of Jewish femininity.<sup>132</sup>

The important question of methodology for the scholar so entangled in the identitarian politics of her research area is not obvious or simple. In a concrete and measurable way, the combination of live performance ethnography, interview, archival research and internet snooping has revealed a constancy of physical and verbal humor. This comic impulse returns to the excessive Jewish female body as always funny about its sexiness, and quite 'inappropriately' sexy about her funniness. And yet, a quantifiable sense of the performance tropes themselves cannot fully account for the notes to follow. By choosing to write about those topics closest to home, I acknowledge and address the ways in which I am personally implicated in how and why my subject matter comes to matter and materialize.<sup>133</sup> A different dissertation might present 'field findings' devoid of the personal, but this would defy the intentions and preoccupations of my own study,

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<sup>132</sup> Jose Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Munoz defines disidentificatory performances as those that circulate in subcultural circuits/minoritarian counterpublic spheres that envision and animate new social relations, 5. His understanding of performances that "work on and against" dominant ideology helps position the queer potential of Jewish female burlesque that "neither opts to assimilate into such a structure nor strictly opposes it" in related, if also ethnically distinct ways, 11.

<sup>133</sup> In the confessional footnotes of "Gambling Femininity: Wallflowers and Femme Fatales," *Angora Matta: A Tango-Opera* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 166-190, Marta E. Savigliano writes that her investments as a full dancing participant in the tango scenes she writes about have been compromised by her roles as a researcher, 166. Her conflictive insider/outsider position informs my own. I also wonder like Savigliano, "Am I here to dance or am I doing research?" as an issue of where to draw the line between participation and observation. Savigliano writes of the dance ethnographer that "she is a troubled observer obsessively preoccupied by her desire to participate in the dance, while that desire strongly informs her renderings of the dance," 169. My own analysis is guided by complex (queer) desires to be onstage, having 'gone bad' too.

which means to mine the complex facets of authorial desire and privilege to enter and explicate these scenes at will.

At a conference talk delivered in the writing phase of this chapter, an attendant asked the entire panel on ethnography when research is about ‘me’, and when it is about...‘it’. I found the question a fair one, and more importantly, squarely relevant to the current state and stakes of dance ethnography and the decolonization of anthropological approaches through scrutiny of authorial subject position. It is this very slippage (to use a popular dance studies term) between the personal and the something else that informs the ‘it’ itself. The realm of the affective (relevant feelings, attitudes, experiences) and effective (strategic selections of what to write about) thus constructs an ‘it’ entirely inseparable from a critical insider-outsider authorial position.

Being a dance performer and choreographer also informs the questions of research methodology and writing strategy. Everything from what I think I see to what I ‘know’ about movement and technique from a lifetime in dance theater, including those roles I’ve been assigned and those I’ve assigned myself depend entirely on a practiced sexy ruse I have come to understand as inseparably Jewish and female. From my own tendencies to talk while dancing to the concrete sense of how much time it takes to make movement look better or worse, I am the not-quite insider scholar-performer who both gets it and never will, always already in the show through overlapping identitarian politics and not yet or not ever invited to be. I likewise both understand and take for granted the distance between myself and fellow artist, fellow dancer, fellow Jewish chick and fellow radical femme that allows me the privilege and proximity of an authorial

voice. It is for this reason, this rationale of the scholar-usher ‘in between’ that I occupy a certain uncertain middle ground between critical distance and celebration that both questions the resistive potential of so-called feminist revival and lauds its stunts done well enough to make me laugh.

### **Big Laughs for Little Brooklyn and Feminist Cues from a Balcony Corner**

About halfway down the lineup and anything but little, Little Brooklyn entered at least twice as tall as the rest with a weathered smoker’s charm and an Asian-esque polyester dress cut on a severe diagonal bias. She wore a black beehive, fashioned to mimic a mythic far-east inspired suburban housewife from a McCarthy era dream that never really was. “Does anyone else feel like a little Chinese?” the voice recording asked as the pear shaped 30-something traipsed heavily across the front of the stage. The orientalist fantasy read legibly to the in-crowd cackles of an audience familiar with the Jewish Christmas Eve take out tradition. Updating a hundred-year legacy of vaudeville’s yellowface minstrel acts, this particular Jewish rendition commented on itself with ‘awarishness’ only right for the self-conscious crew of today’s Jewish burlesques.

But even as big Little Brooklyn stripped, her canned voiceover took the spotlight, stealing comedic timing from a weight shift gone intentionally wrong. When her body took center, it would saunter instead of strut, a visceral and weighted gait instead of grapevine. She played to the crowd with the comic fling of her own arm flab and the overture of her own raspy vocals pronounced a matriarchal inheritance: her grandmother’s great feat of aerating a living room with the swing of the same fleshy

parts. As if Jewishness itself stood in for the signs of inevitable aging, the professedly undame diva embodied the portrait of fading beauty and a gimmicky grasp at a Jewish MILF revisited. Her own Oy Veys punctuated each efforted kink and kick, and the audience squealed with delight when “the floor work” on hands and knees was much too much for the professed sciatica the performer may or may not actually have had. But by the time Brooklyn loosened her bodice to spill out a rolodex of her children’s photographs, the anticipation of a sexy reveal was spoiled in the most Jewish way possible: a re-prioritization of what really mattered. Not you, not me, but my *kids*, god bless them.

It felt good, right, familiar, Jewish, if also a repriviliging of the Mother joke so long in favor for Jews and non-Jews alike. Laughing out loud for the first time in the evening, I realized this was the humor of the long gone Golden Era of Jewish female comedy that I eulogize in Chapter 3. While tensions of the Jewish woman as between poles of white/exotic resonate through Brooklyn’s humor, most funny was her nonsense unsexiness that may have been as satisfying to me as it was old school. As it mocked the third wave imperative to be sexy at all, what became clear was a certain battle of wits between versions of Jewish female funniness. In contrast to the Sexy Jewess types who worked with a range of dance, visual, and narrative techniques to present the Jewish femme en route to a newly reconciled Jewish sexiness, Little Brooklyn embodied the self-derogatory stereotype of unsexy Jewish women head on. In doing so, she won my personal title for the evening without having to convince me of much. Giving up a fantasy of sexiness altogether, Little Brooklyn seems to sacrifice a desire for

something the others—even in sexy ruse—still buy into. As the Schlep Sisters renounce the Rockette Show, but still fail to win the Las Vegas Miss Exotic title, they are both not same enough or different enough so long as title-ordaining sexy desires demand one or the other. More convincing in her transgressive edge than the others, Little Brooklyn makes tangible her critique of the contest conditions themselves. Her file-fold photographs spill like flab and her heavy (hearted) steps affect a physically efforting, noticeably aging female body across the stage. The effect is one that finally forces viewers to laugh at their own readiness to rehearse the same old comparative scripts of beauty contests in the name of feminine fun.

In that split second of comic pleasure that threw me back to the Jewish female greats of earlier decades, I realized that the relief of actually laughing has shaped the bounds of my research. It has become a noticing practice to track when and how a Jewess joke hits a laughing nerve of surprise and recognition as perhaps both out of place and right on because of it. I've understood my feminist "homework" in this way, as a task of taking cues from my own complicity or refusal of the comic scene spectator. I borrow this concept of "homework" from Kamala Visweswaran, who positions it against a notion of the troublesome notion of fieldwork in a larger movement to decolonize anthropology. Specifically, the focus of my project takes seriously her call to question unexamined points of privilege and blindness through ethnographic research and its failures.<sup>134</sup> She notes "failure" (of method) as itself ethnographic and epistemic, explaining that the "alertness to the possibilities of failure" leads to recognition of new possibilities.

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<sup>134</sup> This notion of feminist "homework" comes from Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of a Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 104.

Borrowing from that recuperative potentiality, I position the constructive/deconstructive valences of laughter as a related site of disruption and self-reckoning. As a corporeal impulse as much as an ideological or psychosocial one, laughter generates just as complex a set of concerns in negotiation of privilege and blindness.

Internalized as they are, and perhaps for that reason, my uptight refusals to laugh—largely in those moments of embarrassment for myself and the performer—require just as much unpacking. Throughout the dissertation research and writing process, I have made central a method of mining the morality tales I tell myself about good and bad jokes, good and bad dancing, and good and bad ethnography too. I have sifted through the stakes of such judgments on what is understood as appropriate femininity (and its carryovers into dance ethnography) and not only how it should look and move, but how it should move me as audience. I have, moreover, made a practice of flagging discomforts as opportunities to consider the roles of shame or fear in my sense of ‘taste’ and humor. The ways in which I do or don’t want Jewish women to be depicted is close to the (funny) bone.

### **Laughing that Matters, and a Social Theory of the Funny Body**

In order to assess how laughing comes to matter and materialize in relation to funny and sexy spectacles of Jewish femininity, my section title performs its own citational reference to Judith Butler’s theorization of power that make things/bodies

(come to) matter.<sup>135</sup> Beginning from this premise of bodies mattering through social and sexual discourse tied to structures of power, thinking and feeling, I introduce the possibility of humorous material and the laughing act as critical matter both structured by and in defiance of similar normative structures. A single framework for theorizing laughter would struggle to find coherency in the nuances of its embodiment, its pleasures and its pains, its snickering judgments and confused uncertainties, its nervousness, its self-assuredness, its lack of control, and contrastingly, its forced nature. That said, however much laughter reveals an unruly politics of feeling and affectation, a longstanding quest in scholarship has aimed to understand the effects of humor in order to theorize its various forms and functions across a range of disciplines.

In a seminal turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century study on laughter and the comic, Henri Bergson understood the social function of laughter as “necessarily human” (we laugh at ourselves and what we do), “purely cerebral” (detached from the object of laughter), and indicative of complicity with a group or social mentality.<sup>136</sup> Addressing a universal ‘we’ as if explaining to the reader why ‘we all’ laugh, Bergson outlines several causes of comic effect linked to the “mechanism” of human life and the humor of its diversion

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<sup>135</sup> Judith Butler introduces her concept that hegemonic heterosexuality forms the “matter” of bodies, sex and gender in *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9-12.

<sup>136</sup> Henry Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911). Sigmund Freud also offers a rationale for the ‘all’ of comic impulses in his formulation of jokes out of his earlier theory on dreams. See his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and my discussion of its relevance to the Sexy Jewess in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

through various techniques.<sup>137</sup> In portions of his argument focused on the body in particular, Bergson defends that imitation of the most mechanical, most unconscious movements and gestures are as funny as the performance of stiffness. He describes stillness quite poetically as “when materiality succeeds in fixing the movement of the soul, in hindering its grace.” This is because “really lively life is not supposed to repeat itself”. When it does, “we suspect that there is mechanism behind life. The diversion of life towards mechanism is the real cause of laughter”.<sup>138</sup> While Bergson trades in the cultural specificity of humor for universalist themes, the contemporary reader can understand this humor of machine-like bodies in its historical context of a western world overwhelmed by radical changes in industry. The notion of repetition, viewed in this context of increasing machinization of life, offers at least this doubled valence in relation to humor. Where Hutcheon also defends the parodic potential of citational repetition, including but not limited to humor/laughter, Bergson’s comic repetition seems to address a more literal bodily repetition of gesture and affect that produces the funny.

While the terms of technological prowess have shifted such that machine-like bodies would hardly produce today’s humor, there may be much to glean from this conceptualization of the stiff body and “its hindering of grace” in the context of today’s funny/sexy spectacles of Jewish femininity. If bodily ‘technologies’ of grace may still be conceived of as the bodily urtext of white femininity, and arguably extend from even earlier notions of white feminine bodies (ala classical ballet), its absence, however

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<sup>137</sup> Bergson emphasizes in italics, “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a machine,” 29.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 25.

intentional or not, is necessarily funny (see Chapter 4 for more on this theme of ballet's white cultural milieu and the funniness of Jewish ballet failures).

In the context of Jewish humor itself, a rich comic legacy has been most commonly understood as the amenable way to process the pain of diasporic displacement and ongoing rhetoric of unlikely survival. The lachrymose history-come-humor of wandering Jews projected most notoriously onto the castrated, effeminate Jewish figure himself has been well theorized.<sup>139</sup> The comic endeavors of Jewish female performers in the US that have sustained just as long and rich a history have been less theorized. Writing on the subject focuses primarily on progressive era vaudeville stars and their legacies in the mainstage acts of a handful of Jewish female celebrities across a century of performance. The showcases discussed in this chapter variably bring together the masculinist orientation of that notorious Jewish suffering as survivalist humor (and humor as survival) and its less valorized female counterpart through mockeries of Jewish femininity and its variable lack of technical/technological graces.

There is much to be said about the nature of the ethnic woman joke and the particulars of from whom and to whom it circulates. No doubt the reader has confronted the discourse of the insider/outsider split in this regard. If the joke is self-addressing to a crowd of one's own kind, it matters in much different a way than if the joke is lodged at

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<sup>139</sup> See Theodor Reik, *Jewish Wit* (New York: Gamut Press, 1962); Kalus L Berghan, "Comedy Without Laughter: Jewish Characters in Comedies from Shylock to Nathan," and Irving Saposnik, "The Yiddish are Coming! The Yiddish are Coming! Some Thoughts on Yiddish Comedy" in *Laughter Unlimited: Essays on Humor, Satire, and the Comic*, eds. Grimm, Reinhold and Jost Hermand. (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 3-26 and 99-105.

an individual or group from the outside. The distinction of ‘a laughing at’ versus a ‘laughing with’ might seem to ease the discomfort of any disrespect directed toward the female performer. And yet, it is critical that such a false sense of laughter’s ethics be traded in for a more fully explored theorization of what it might mean to laugh at all in response to punch lines that poke at or with the Jewish female body. This is particularly significant if the butt of the joke in either case emphasizes this literal low body excess itself.

This prevailing thought on the fairness of jokes no doubt applies here (my confessed sensitivity to the non-Jewish Anita Cookie’s “All I Want For Christmas is a Jew” for instance<sup>140</sup>). More significant, however, may be the ways in which an ‘insider’ audience/ethnographer positionality is generally thought to offer better or keener insight into the ‘truth’ of what’s ‘really’ happening through complex (if also cumbersome) assumptions of belonging. In the ethnographic description that follows, I disrupt that simple reading of inside/insider jokes by analyzing moments when I either could not laugh and others did, or found myself entirely embarrassed to be implicated, disappointed to not be, or worse, bored either way.

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<sup>140</sup> Brooklyn-based burlesque performer, Anita Cookie is a non-Jewish mainstay on the Menorah Hoorah yearly bill. Her performance, set to the lyrics of also non-Jewish comedian Melissa McQueen’s “All I Want For Christmas is Jew” joins in on the spoof of pop singer, Mariah Carey’s “All I Want For Christmas,” released by Columbia Records on Nov1, 1994. See McQueen’s online version of herself in the role: <http://nj1015.com/all-i-want-for-christmas-is-video/>

## Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad and Ordering Chinese on Christmas Eve<sup>141</sup>

If I found it easy enough to laugh at Little Brooklyn's parody of Jewish Asiapilia and twist on secular 'traditions', there was a certain degree of discomfort at having to participate in the racial play of ordering Chinese on Christmas eve later that week. I'd offered to usher for the New York based cabaret comedy and burlesque group, the Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad, in exchange for seeing the show. I hadn't anticipated the pre-show craze of checking the three-item menu desires of gold star members who'd paid the additional ticket fee for front row seats and take out served hot at curtain up. Before the steady rush of Jewish and gentile holiday tourists, groupies, and Soho event hoppers, I scrambled more than a little, phone and emcee-director-producer Goddess Perlman's credit card in hand, price-checking the several varieties of General Tsao's chicken across the handful of local delivery options. With no time to delay, Perlman assured me 'They'll have the address on file'. *Pick one, pick one, pick one.* 'Just give them my name,' she said.

In a conference presentation detailing what happened next, I performed the phone call, the awkward stress, the yelling to ask Perlman in the bathroom whether we'd want brown or white rice, lingering on the punning 'White... right?' I paused. "*White*, but not quite," I said to the room of academics, my own comedic timing shifting the topic to

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<sup>141</sup> Readers familiar with Phillip Roth's portrait of Jewish American life in *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969) may recall the scene in which Alex Portnoy's defended his family's unkosher choice to eat shrimp and pork in Chinese restaurants because "to them we are not Jews but *white*—and maybe even Anglo Saxon", 90. See more on Jewish adoption of Chinese food as "Safe Treyf" in the context of urban American assimilation: Gaye Tuchman and Harry G. Levine, "New York Jews and Chinese Food: The Social Construction of an Ethnic Pattern" *Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol 22 No 3 (1992): 382-407.

suggest the racial implication of a familiar Jewish ‘in-between’. I went back to the story, Perlman belting the next set of Jewish tasks and trading in any pretense of professionalism was traded out for a get-it-done demeanor. As she trotted back from the stall in a drag queen’s blue ball gown with the high camp of Cinderella’s evil stepsisters, a simple question marked my moment of no return - a sort of deal or no deal bargain. Stopping in her frenzied tracks for the fleeting seconds it took to hear the wrong answer, she asked, was I *from* New York or not? “Not, I lied” I confessed to my conference audience was an approach to keep some kind of feigned critical distance, and hung up the red plastic phone receiver I brought as a prop.

Jump back. I had met Susannah Pearlman on a previous research trip at the Funny Girls on Film festival she curated at the same gallery in the summer of 2011.<sup>142</sup> There, I had written copious notes and sat next to a big guy who loved Jewish women, he confessed, and seemed to love me even more. By the end of the night, him laughing at every punch line and me sitting stone-still at Jewish jokes too close for comfort, he was ready to consider living in LA for a while, or, “where is Riverside again?” I had rehearsed that answer enough times to keep one eye on Perlman, post-show, scanning for some evidence of a bad Jewish girl gone a little nicer, or, any indicator of an opportunity to go up and talk to her. In that first meeting, I said too much about my interest in her work and the ways her company recuperated the Jewess figure through nostalgia that everyone can access through stereotypes, but ultimately laugh at, uncomfortably. But I was the uncomfortable one, flailing through the over-efforted wrap up of who knows

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<sup>142</sup> Funny Girls on Film Festival, Soho Gallery for Digital Art, New York City, July 8-10, 2011.

what compliment I wasn't sure I meant. She pulled out a business card and handed it to me as if to make it stop. I registered her chosen title: Girl Gone Blue; Ringleader. With an unimpressed and incriminating tone of voice (we can joke about now) that came off like a tough kind of 'get in line, kid' attitude, she asked to feign interest, "How do you say you heard about the show again?" I imploded.

After a humbled email attempt to reiterate my funny, sexy interests in her funny, sexy work, I got the facebook friend invite and email notice of the Christmas Eve show. Perlman's green light now glared on my gchat list of available friends. "Need an extra usher?" I took a breath and chatted. "You are hired," my new boss wrote back. Jump forward. Nice Jewish Girl Gone goodie two shoes. In black tights and a short black dress draped in an oversized smurfy blue turtleneck sweater, I dressed the part as usher ethnographer. Heavy black boots helped lengthen my short legs and ground my nervous energy with ankle weights into the floor. At ground level, I greeted guests, spending way too long on the online sign in forum anyone familiar with Brown Paper Tickets will immediately understand. Name. Address. Credit Card info. Number of Guests in Party. First Born. Walk ins and Call ins. The opposite of New York quickness for the line accruing out into the cold, and it doesn't help I'm from out of town. Deep into this matrix, I learn that the younger, bubblier friend of Perlman's family in the barely busy reservations line is getting paid for the job. I take her up on the delayed offer to switch, trying not to roll my eyes. By now, guests are nearly all downstairs and I head down too, to the side seat reserved for me so I can switch on and off the rigged clip lights on signal.

In the front row of about fifty seats total, my chair faced in on the tiny stage and stole a partial side view behind the makeshift backstage curtain. I watched legs and elbows pull and hoist homemade costumes and store bought accoutrements as mostly stand-up performers onstage warmed up the crowd. My live split screen stayed subtle enough until Perlman popped any protective layer of my ethnographer bubble with her revelation to the audience mid-set that someone here (point to me) “is actually studying this stuff.” I inhale against the laugh track and hold a half smile: How many would suddenly wonder if the smurf that had held them up in line was taking notes the whole time? I had ushered my way into her comic line of vision as material for her riffing bit. For the fleeting moments in the show, and somehow even farther from it, my usher researcher in-between added a layer of meta-meaning. Incredulous as Perlman made it seem, I studied this stuff, and I was doing it *right now*. I knew the joke was a shout out of acknowledgement, and a certain kind of thanks. I loved her suddenly, rising above my embarrassment, and quietly promised to say something nice.

Still, it wasn't until Perlman appeared in her third or fourth ringleader act of the evening that I realized what the partial belonging here actually meant to me. I was piercing nearly through this person for some semblance of myself: a conflation of self and character an Asian American lit professor in college told us never to do. But Dr. Kim's Ivy League identity politics of reading for and across difference were lost to me now as I tracked the figure in front of me splat wildly across the stage with a sense of surrender I both feared and loved like family. I was at once tickled by the sheer delight of my twin-like reflection, and unsettled by the flash-fear of being outed not as a fellow Jew

but as a farce of a real dancer by this self-sabotaging doppelganger covered from head to toe. I both related deeply to this comic in that moment and did my best to make her strange: Who *was* this masked woman in a royal blue spandex onesie, flailing limbs against the heavy drum and base beat? Shrink-wrapped in a smurfy Blue Man Group's apparel that hid the hands, feet and face, the obscured female form appeared to me in that moment as the most genuine Jewish hospitality of the evening from the Girl Gone Blue herself—an unpracticed solo improvisation, worse than bad and intentionally so, partnered with the most rehearsed of routine Jewess jokes: laugh at me or laugh with me, it doesn't matter as long as you keep laughing. Laughing a little on the inside, I took note of this Jewish imperative to go 'bad' by dancing bad that felt so familiar and so intentionally self-sabotaging.

The friend I had brought along for the ride whispered, "I knew that wasn't going to work," as the words "divine" and "goddess" we'd both carefully cut out and spray painted before the show teetered on the edges of Perlman's breast and belly before falling off completely. Now dressed in the enhanced adult footsie pajamas with an exposed rear end looking out to the audience from an opened back flap, our master of ceremonies delivered the bulk of her set with her bottom bared as a cabinet of crass curiosity for all to see. The crowd squealed in delight at this play on the quintessential burlesque reveal, and the infamous Jewish booty.

I couldn't help but flash another look at Minnie Tonka, still seated in the audience. She shot an instant one back. One half of the Schlep Sisters duo I had seen earlier that week, and the single burlesquer of the evening among stand-up comics doing

some intentionally defiant dancing and some standing, Minnie carried a certain Jewish mystique. Her self-pleasuring *juissance* less familiar among jokier Jewish acts, but very much the curious embodiment of a Sexy Jewish subject matter. We looked at each other again and it seemed important that we weren't laughing at Pearlman's butt the way others were. Minnie got up to leave between acts and I saw for the first time sateen short blue robe with a hand-stitched Jewish star on the back. I ogled my svelte double walking up the stairs, at once jealous that it wasn't me in the bedazzled bikini and guilty of the stare my true older sister didn't even need to be there to reprimand. Hunting down some evidence of a girl out of character, I surveyed for shift of weight or gait that would signal the girl beneath the gimmick. I was suddenly the heckler Perlman herself had made wait outside when he showed up 45 minutes before show time, stalking my subject for what, I wondered. What was this jealous ethnographic guilt? Was I flirting with her? Was I begging for her approval?

If my gawking was as unladylike as it was uncomfortable, it had something to do with Minnie's strange mastery of the hyper-femme spectacle I both desired and mistrusted. When Minnie took the stage, she moved with smoothness of step. There was a polished mastery about the quick and tight suggestions of small kicks and cross backs. Well rehearsed weight changes allowed the figurine to travel side to side, and, by working up and down on the stage slight diagonal, show off the widest variety of angles. For the catcalls of the majority female audience, Minnie crowd-pleased with near-opposite techniques of Perlman's 'no I can't dance' comic routine. Minnie's was the perfected number that could balance codified 'exotic' steps and the Jewish face. She

married for the audience the strange bedfellows of the trained dancer body (legs, largely) with the conspicuous Jewish nose. Another note in my book, this time less assuredly: if parody is citation through critical distance, what about the body that pulls off the stunts and in doing so, closes the gap rather than broadening it? What if Minnie achieves the Jewish sexy she doesn't really even mean to mock and the crowd laughs anyway?

At some point, I realize that these two women, while seemingly opposite in their approach, more accurately reflect two points along a sexy Jewess spectrum. Having 'gone bad' through similar confession-style reveal and conceal games, the Goddess Perlman and Minnie Tonka parody Jewish bawdy excesses through distinct physical maneuvers of bodily nudity. Against the more aggressive blues, let's say, of Susannah's various costume changes, Minnie's pastel pasties offered its own critique, by way of juxtaposition to the harder humor of the self-basing Jewish jester role. Inverses of one another in a certain sense, the two performers embodied the edges of a blue-scale Jewish feminine spectrum. Blue girls with bluer jokes gone equally bad, but differently so. In Minnie's visible engagement with actual dance techniques of today's burlesque revival,<sup>143</sup> however much that genre is always already a comic send up of classical female

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<sup>143</sup> As with the earliest burlesque exploits, the resurgence of the form typically emphasizes the tease in striptease more than the strip, even as it encompasses a wider range of performance styles than the traditional burlesque. Of the several personages I have watched Minnie Tonka perform that vary from Jewish to non-Jewish content (costume and song, usually) depending on the show context, the dancing itself tends to shift accordingly. In numbers in which Minnie has played up a rocker chick persona, for instance, her movements emphasized more sharpness and angularity than in the routine selected for the holiday theme. To be sure, in order to cause the 8 inch record-pasties to "spin me right round baby right round" in time with the famous Dead or Alive song lyrics, Minnie's physical range would necessarily include controlled hops and particular

dance styles, there was earnest material evidence of practiced perfection, and a right way to dance the exotic--and thereby ironic-- Jewess role. The Divine Goddess made no claims to careful or codified steps, and filled her number with more duncce than dance. Contrastingly, the impeccable execution of Minnie's obvious technical training disrupted the myth of a defunct Jewish female body and traded it in for polished performances of an identifiably sexy dance.

Where dancerliness or its parodic implausibility would seem to ultimately divide these women as emblems of opposite feminine archetypes (as more or less Jewish, and more or less sexy) the shared rubric of a 'gone bad' phenomena instructs its viewers how to see these two performers as versions of a more dynamic Sexy Jewess spectrum. Not reducible to its dichotomized trained and untrained (body) parts, or just as binarized notion of the more or less feminine, a spectrum Sexy Jewessness more accurately accounts for a range of different politics, desires, risks, costs and benefits at stake in the dancing act. The order in which the acts unfold is also meaningful. Sandwiched between deliberately unsexy acts, Minnie's moves managed only a fleeting moment of nostalgic naughtiness associated with a vintage assimilatory shtick in an evening dominated by stand-up mostly geared toward the depressive confessions of the girl next door. And yet, as Perlman's dance-duncce femininity goes bad in its grotesque unsexiness, and Minnie Tonka goes bad through naughtiness, the tensions between the two are important. As I felt embarrassed by the former and then jealous of the latter, the potential of the showcase format to flip staid notions of sexiness through Jewish shtick also turned upside down my

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shifts of weight that would seem out of place in the more tamed promenade-styled Hanukkah presentation in sequined bikini.

own ability to feel any one way about the Jewish woman in question. Furthermore, as Perlman's drag queen's platform patent leather boots and Minnie Tonka's cream-colored character shoes fleshed out a range of Jewish female identifications, they provided just as diverse a range of rationale behind badness too.

To the degree that such badness implies a subversive potentiality, a 'bad' Jewess branding of sexy ruse appears to queer the conditions of performing selfhood. And yet, if such queering results from transgression of normative roles for women as I have said above, what might yield from a comparative interpretive wish to know whether the two performances are equally 'queer'? To measure these performances along such a scale would appear to prioritize performative power in assignments of more or less queer value. But rather than rate these performances against each other in these ways (as I perhaps have not withheld from doing my personal embarrassment/appreciation meter), it may be more apt to assess the degree of conformist and disruptive performance tactics within a larger scale or social system which itself is both unstable and unescapable. My research privileges the agential potential of performers working both within and between social parameters of acceptability. And yet, I also sit in-between interpretive lenses that would fully valorize one performer over the other with any license beyond personal preference. However much the pageant format insists upon such comparisons as it pits women against each other as willing exotics or their feathery impersonators, complicity with this judging urge unavoidably repeats the normative lenses of evaluation a working premise of queer performance reacts against. Beyond even this usher-ethnographer angst, any claim to queer value must consider its own inevitable limitations. And here, a

conceptual chasm borrowed from Derrida's legacy of deconstruction whose influence has come to bear on the thrust of queer theory: As in every performance, while the proportion of conformity to disruption varies, the consequences are always more or less ambiguous; that is, they are unclear because they are multiple. It follows this line of thought that there is something disruptive in even the most conformist performance, just as there is something conformist in even the most disruptive one. And yet, while all the world may be found queer in this deconstructed sense of the term, a closer look at the specific bawdy spectrum of the Jewess bad sheds light on the term. Collective invocations of vintage kitsch performance tropes work together to index the queer away from contest-conditions of one over the other and toward a communal Jewish female representation. Such a queer paradigm stages its most poignant subversion through its spectrum sensibility.

### **The Bawdy Body: Too Much and Not Enough**

In the previous chapter, I theorized the potential for overlap in Freud's theories of the Jewish joke (self-critical) and the dirty joke (smut).<sup>144</sup> I reworked the joke narrator as a Jewish woman, rather than merely as a man, or merely as a man talking to other men about women. In doing so, I posited the Jewish dirty joke and its embodied forms for women by women as a site of imperfect subversions through sexy ruse. But there is yet another category of joke under Freud's theory that deserves critical attention here: that of the bawdry, or bawdy talk, which in his definition, deliberately emphasizes sexual facts

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<sup>144</sup> Freud, *The Joke*.

and relations by talking about them.<sup>145</sup> However, as Freud reminds, this definition is no more conclusive than any other. As if to say that sex itself is not necessarily sexy, Freud gives the unbawdy examples of a lecture on the sexual organs or on the physiology of reproduction.<sup>146</sup> What follows in Freud's logic is incredible. It is a characteristic of bawdy talk that it is directed at a particular person by whom the speaker is sexually aroused, and is meant to make them aware of this arousal by listening to the bawdry and so becoming sexually aroused themselves. Instead of being aroused, however, Freud suggests the person might also feel shame or embarrassment, which he argues, only implies a reaction against their arousal and thus, a roundabout admission of it. Quite plainly, Freud concludes, "Bawdy talk, then, is in origin directed at women and is to be regarded as the equivalent of an attempt at seduction" and furthermore, "Anyone who laughs at the bawdy talk they have heard is laughing like a spectator at an act of sexual aggression"<sup>147</sup> Freud thus encases his understanding of the bawdy/bawdry not only in heterosexist imagination, but squarely in talk. To develop a theory that supports a homosocial dirty girl's comedy necessarily returns again and again to the limits of these frameworks in forging subcultural female identities in difference. But to depart from these psychoanalytical lenses *because of* their heterosexual assumptions misses the opportunity to mine critically how Freud articulates a rationale for how a burlesque-styled bawdy humor might happen because of them.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 93.

The Jewish female bawdy body, in all its tassels, bodytards and sequins, is a layered archive of excesses: A funny girl body, a basement holiday body, an insatiably wanting word play body, a busty, big booty body, a third wave feminist burlesque body, and a raunchy no-wave, no-rhythm talking body all in one night. The update imagination of woman (and her seduction) is simultaneously the accumulated collective embodiment of a Jewish female comic tradition labeled under the ‘bawdy’ made in America since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today’s bawdy body beauty contest gone wrong performs a stage satire that celebrates and skewers the excesses of (by now widely acknowledged and acclimatized) Jewish female bodily assets and attributes.

More than just a semantic play, an archival imagination of the bawdy Jewish female body helps situate just how bad today’s Jewish girls appear to have gone, and when. To have gone from nice to bad not only suggests a tamer teleological beginning busted by a new generation of showbiz broads, but relies on a history of Jewish stage women whose rhetoric of sexy change has carried across a long-standing American assimilatory arc. To document the ways in which a Jewish female comic legacy has sustained its bawdy tenor throughout well-researched sites of assimilation demands a more in-depth review that exceeds the bounds of this chapter (more detailed historical discussion offered in Ch. 3). Suffice it to say here that the crass comedy of bawdy Jewish performers has consistently maneuvered between borders of acceptability and accessibility assigned to white womanhood and its imposing cult/ure of domesticity. Performances throughout an era of whitenization reveal both an adoption of debased collective perceptions of the Jewish woman’s body and their displacement through

bawdy bodily humor. They laugh defiantly at their own jokes, or craftily deny that pleasure through the fully physical suspension of not laughing while others, entirely on cue, do.

The Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad, like the Schlep Sisters and Little Brooklyn, resource an always already bad femininity to command a corrective creative license that not only challenges stereotypes. Badness temporarily subverts such stereotypes through cartoonish exaggeration that make laughing a layered experience. This reappropriation of Jewish female excess through self-parody functions as an evaluative measure of not just what constitutes Jewish femininity, but also the work of the body to construct race and gender discourse. As if to keep track of changing Jewish proximity to acceptable whiteness and its holds on appropriate femininity, the sexy Jewess impersonator employs the bawdy body. The bawdy body under review categorically sources both its materiality in and through movement as well as its use as comic material in stationary stand-up sets.

And yet, as the showcase likewise lampoons today's girls gone wild sensibility it also espouses, there is much to be said about the ways it also invokes an earlier bawdy feminism with longing and loss. To go back to a time when Jewish women were spotlighted as outspoken funny girls of the mainstage (discussed at more depth in chapter three) at once acts out a living history museum complete with costumes, accents, gestures and affects, and physicalizes a contemporary wish for a fantastic something else-ness. Ironically, the performance of a more abrasive activist past conflates a gendered resistance to patriarchy with a time when Jews were not yet white. Yearning for a time of a legible gender rebellion marked by ethnic otherness, Jewish female performers use

Jewishness to return to a politicized femininity that no longer exists above ground, so to speak, in mainstream markets.

In this basement of the Soho Gallery for Digital Arts on Christmas, Pearlman's Nice Jewish Girls staked claim to Jewish femininity as X-rated fun. They flagged the characteristic informality of an underground contemporary performance genre in more than one way. A fitting venue for all things illicit, the basement venue helped make tactile the atmospheric implications of a dark humored holiday and its dingy-appeal. For sold out seats too squished together, the 'gone bad' showcase stood in for the sinister and seedy underground of an American hallmark, a nightmare before Christmas in the most quintessential New York Jewish way. In the performative appeal of a stepping and stooping down to dimly lit performance dugouts of low ceilings, low halves of the body and the do-it-yourself dens of lowly ethnic humor were the pathways of bawdy body excesses made manifest. Downwardly mobile citations of a vintage Jewishness otherness less affluent, less white, and less sexy than now, these embodiments exaggerated excesses in the name of the radical and the resistive. But what to make of these lowly impersonations that seemed to imply an uncertain 'post' relationship to Jewishness as well as early versions of feminism through parody?

### **“Polyester Feminism” and a Bawdy Body in Birks *and* High Heels**

Darlinda Just Darlinda, Minnie Tonka's Schlep Sister, offers an insider account of what she calls a feminist neo-burlesque movement with political implications. In a speech to students at the University of London and then posted on her personal website, she

outlines a “polyester performance” style that borrows from classic burlesque striptease, performance art, various forms of dance and comedy sketch with a feminist agenda that regards the equal rights of all genders.<sup>148</sup> Drawing important connections between generations of feminism that develop a burlesque revival in relation to sustained legacies of a civil rights era agenda, she claims:

To be a feminist is to be aware of those rights, understand that we have choices in life, and work toward implementing them in our society in daily life or political, performance based action. My mother was part of the feminist movement at UC Berkeley in the 1960’s; she raised me to believe that I do whatever it is that I choose to do in life regardless of my gender. She even told me NOT to shave my legs. Well how do I live my life as a feminist? I wear a bright orange spandex outfit to a speech at the University of London, not all feminists wear Birkenstocks. I wear Birkenstocks AND high heels! I have a day job at a women owned and operated education sex toy store. I am an active member of the New York City Burlesque community. I have made a choice to live the life that I live.<sup>149</sup>

Pointing towards unshaven legs as the bodily legacy of a (white) second wave feminism, Darlinda centralizes the reconstruction of normative gender expectations as key to the “polyester performances” of neo-burlesque. Noting the agency inherent in “how” she pursues a “life as a feminist” through those sex-positive credentials as a modern-day woman links burlesque community membership and leadership with the liberatory sexual politics of women run spaces. In “Birkenstocks AND high heels,” Darlinda politicizes life in her own shoes as she refashions the sandaled freedoms of her mother’s generation as interchangeable with the dress up garb of a third wave sex appeal.

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<sup>148</sup> Darlinda Just Darlinda, “Feminist Neo-Burlesque Speech”, Speech, The Feminist Neo-Burlesque Symposium at The Central School of Speech and Drama at the University of London, Oct 26, 2007. <http://darlindajustdarlinda.com/darlinda-just-darlinda-bio-and-press/feminist-neo-burlesque-speech-from-102607/>

<sup>149</sup> Darlinda Just Darlinda, “Feminist Neo-Burlesque Speech”.

If there is something that is particularly ‘neo’ about this both/and rather than either/or footwear philosophy, it is the revealing way it interrelates race, gender and Jewishness as overlapping discourses of the burlesque dancing body.

Admittedly drawn to NY burlesque because of its evident openness to a wider range of body types than mainstream burlesque or other dance formats, Darlinda recalls feeling immediately accepted by majority women audiences that could relate to her larger size. “They saw my 5’4”, size 12, 160 pound body and immediately identified, they had a positive reaction because they saw themselves in me.” In defense of a performance form that celebrates female bodies that don’t fit the cookie cutter images found on runways and in magazines, she argues, “I am by no means a supermodel, but according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, the average U.S woman is 5’3. 7” (162 centimeters) tall and weighs 152 pounds (69 Kilograms), so I’m almost average!” The remark reaffirms the spaces burlesque makes for alternative notions of sexy femininity through the acceptance of real-looking female bodies. If burlesque’s neo-sexiness openly embraces the ‘almost average’ however, there are interesting implications for Jewish women in particular. Stereotypes have most frequently depicted the Jewish American woman as excessive in her wants (material, emotional) as well as in her bodies (boobs, nose, butt, voice, volume, laughter), such that she has been seen as entirely un-sexy. A neo-sexiness that celebrates her near-averageness is as ethnically and racially significant. For Jewish women in particular, ‘almost average’ sounds like a more positive spin on the familiar ‘not quite right’, ‘not quite white’ positionality mapped in the girth of the body itself. Darlinda’s exclamation of an enthusiastic ‘almost average’ at once points to the

absurdity of a mainstream that disregards average bodies and celebrates a dance form that honors real curves. It is this realness of her (Jewish) curves that drive her burlesque career as an exotic in acts deemed Jewish and not.

Burlesque, Jewish or not, thus queers the stakes of spectacle femininity through its normalization of ‘excessive’ female body types and autoexotic sexy ruse. Queering also the female-female performer/spectator relationship as a space of willing exoticizing and being exoticized, today’s “polyester feminism” appears to occupy an ‘almost average’ position always in relation/reaction to the mainstream. Reacting with and against a second wave safe-space conceptualization, and doing it through the bawdy embodiment of burlesque kitsch, Darlinda’s neo-burlesque both returns to and resists heteronormative standards of femininity in its radicalization of a sexy, funny femme identity.<sup>150</sup> The ‘almost’ offers a space for queer and Jewish critique alike, while the ‘average’ reveals awareness of majoritarian white privilege that could no longer radicalize from a position in excess in the same way. This self-conscious play with autoexoticism offers a framework for thinking about the ways performers construct and deploy images of themselves as self-sexualizing subjects as objects of sexy ruse and agents under malleable conditions of difference. As autoexotic stagings of Jewish femininity use sameness-otherness tensions to remount old themes in new contexts, there is much to be said about how performers negotiate the lines between feminist and exploitative avenues, attitudes and bodily affectations. Blurring the parody of a girls gone wild gimmick that also sells their act, what is ‘feminist’ according to Darlinda may

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<sup>150</sup> See the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this dissertation for more discussion of “Girl Power” as post-feminist performance.

also co-opt an exploitative corporeal paradigm to meet and even continue to attempt to radicalize its own 'neo'-ends.

Central to Darlinda's manifesto is the question of agency to 'live my life as a feminist' in the combined ways she finds most fulfilling. A critical part of that explication is a theory of today's (post) feminism and its still unanswered questions of agency. References to the 'polyester' past make manifest a contemporary gender rebellion through citation of (and proximal distance from) a yet more liberatory, or resistive impression of the sixties and seventies. The bawdy legacy it pulls from reaches farther back still, to the performance dens of the earlier and raunchier vaudevillians (Chapter 3). But when and whether today's Jewish burlesque appropriates those earlier feminist models in an exploitative way, or even returns to performance forms that could be deemed exploitative in their previous iterations, Darlinda argues that "the resurgence of Burlesque is not exploitative when the producers, performers and promoters are willing and inspired to participate in the said show. Shows can be exploitative if performers don't understand their choice to be in the show, if they are the brunt of the joke, if they are continuing a stereotype." Highlighting choice of all involved parties as the key distinction between feminist acts and exploitative ones, this explication seems to insist upon a binary either/or relationship. With a notion of agency at its core, the remark seems to gloss over the reappropriative potential of such shows. A utopic sensibility of producers, performers and promoters imagines burlesque as a safe space free of stereotypes. And yet, an autoexotic and parodic form like burlesque uses the very categories of the stereotype that bind them - like excessive Jewishness - to expand

identities 'in-between' acceptable feminine subject/same and commodified object/other. Whether they are successful in this mission is less than clear.

One cannot help but wonder about the co-option of stereotypes so thick in Jewish burlesque and where Darlinda's theory of the exploitative intersects with Jewishness in particular. What particular kind of choice is it that usurps the questionably exploitative lenses of Jewish female stereotypes and deploys them as feminist performance? More measurable than when and whether a given performance is/not exploitative and is or is/not feminist is a conceptual framework that theorizes the strategic something-elseness envisioned in the blurriness itself. Rather than entrap these women in a catch 22 of inevitable disempowerment, there may be more utility and uplift in a framework that regards the maneuvers of the Sexy Jewess as the self-deprecating Jewish cousin of the "feminist trickster" figure. Visweswaran writes that the feminist trickster mediates between possibility and impossibility as a strategy of gender rebellion. Toying between Gayatri Spivak's notion of "cognitive failure", or a project facing its own impossibility, and the hope of its success, trickster feminists (as performers *and* as ethnographers) work to "give voice" as Visweswaran writes even when they know they can never fully.<sup>151</sup> In recognition of the double consciousness implied by a trickster feminism, it seems clear that the Schlep Sisters just as the Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad and me, their writer, give voice and body too to tricks that parody Jewish female positions-in-difference/sameness.

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<sup>151</sup> Visweswaran, 100. She cites Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" in *Other Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1987), 200 and *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

As I have tried to show, the “Sexy Jewess” figure is the self-conscious commoditization of both female as sex appeal and the Jewish body as both sacrosanct and inferior. In the ‘almost average’ spaces of neo-burlesque, the struggle against limiting identity categories tied to race, class, gender and sexuality aims to ‘queer’ staid notions of white and Jewish femininity (and even earlier versions of feminism) that keep them bound, if still underground. In the case of the Sexy Jewess joke in its variety of unsexy funny and unfunny sexy figurizations, the potential for reappropriation revolves around this agential ‘downward mobility’ as a refusal of western patriarchal patterning. Such performances of Jewish femininity reject scripted assignments of Jewish American class affluence and its attending assignments of heteronormativity. Intentionally failing masculinist expectations of ‘traditional’ Judaism as well as more bourgeois fears/desires relating to gender and sexuality, sexy funniness and funny sexiness construct the New Jewish femme through exotic ruse.

As Savigliano argues of such quests for identity through practices that rehearse the exotic, it is exoticism (in a colonial Argentine context) that “creates the need for Identity and assures it cannot be attained,” and moreover, “It is the imperialist hook” she insists “that cannot be unhooked”.<sup>152</sup> The quest for identity stems, she continues, from an imperialist impulse. Personified as a modernizing “drug,” such questing allows previously nonexistent middle classes to emerge from massive pits of poverty to enjoy “crumbs of wealth” and the promises of incorporation into Civilization.<sup>153</sup> In low budget shows that barely bring in enough to cover overhead costs, these ‘crumbs of wealth’

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<sup>152</sup> Savigliano, *Tango*, 75.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

might appear to promise an “incorporation” as iffy as the measly money involved. But in choosing these conditions as desired alternatives to ‘civilized’ formats that ideologically and economically (if no longer racially) exclude them, as Darlinda just Darlinda implies, there is an embodied return to the impoverished ‘pits’ seemingly on purpose.

At once both demarcating an “imperialist hook” of commodified Jewishness and femininity “that cannot be unhooked”, and constructing the Jewess joke that aims to perform its own hooking (dancing, gazing, queering, othering), Jewish burlesque goes intentionally ‘bad’ in-between both pulls. Sympathetic with more accurately ‘hooked’ exotics that cannot so easily take off markers of identity at will, they are also aware of their own doubled positions in sameness and difference that seem to sell with playful appeal. Performers thus use Jewishness to enter a discourse in defense of the ‘universal woman’. Given that such a woman doesn’t exist, it remains unclear if performances of Jewish female otherness ultimately empower a mythic position of female excess or argue more fully for assimilation into white standards of femininity (to be sexy), while apologizing for it (through being funny). If ironically conceived through self-mockery, funny sex appeal here arguably comes to stand in for a benevolent or sympathetic white girl power that Jewish women in the US largely already possess.

### **A Jewfaced Joke Between Black and White**

In exaggeration of Jewish themes, showcases like the Menorah Horah and the Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad distance themselves and their fans from the very epoch they evoke, and in turn, whiten through reference to their vintage nonwhiteness. Just like the

retro appeal of old time costumes, comic timing, and Yiddish-inflected tropes, the “Jewface” impersonations they perform recycles a Jewish past as nostalgic Americana. This performance of a temporal distance from a more Jewish-as-othered past creates an illusory sense of a renounced ‘actual’ Jewishness that can be taken on and off at will. Rehearsing whiteness in this way through the impersonation of its opposite other (Jewishness), Jewface carefully choreographs the precise steps that dance in-between desire for and denial of an ethnic whiteness that affords ambivalent race and gender privileges and rejections.

To catalogue bodily attitudes, actions and affects that construct the funny and sexy Jewish stage female as the most recent innovations of a longstanding Jewface performance tradition, I borrow from the dance studies scholarship of Rebecca Rossen. Rossen historicizes the use of Jewface makeup in early 20<sup>th</sup> century modern dance to exaggerate stereotypically Jewish features.<sup>154</sup> Where her work largely focuses on male choreographers ‘Jewing up’ to read as legibly ethnic in concert modern dance works on Jewish themes, my usage of the term extends that reference to the reappropriative masquerade of today’s Jewish female burlesque and cabaret performers. In the small theaters of the showcases I describe, Jewish features (of and around the nose mainly) are perhaps more legible than in the concert halls of Rossen’s male choreographers. But more significantly, today’s visual politics/visual economies of Jewishness no longer make these kinds of demands. In place of make up, today’s performers construct and deploy a vintage nostalgia embodied through burlesque and cabaret costumes, contexts, cadence

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<sup>154</sup> Rossen, “Dancing Jewish,” 211.

and gesture that function in different ways to mark what's different about her. The folk-inspired modern dance of male choreographers meant to seriously embody an ethnic experience of yore (complete with Russian Cossack imitations and bottle dancing similar to those imagined in *Fiddler on the Roof*<sup>155</sup>). In curious contrast, today's funny girls can just title their shows 'Jewishly' and it already gets a laugh.

Extending a US history of Jewish participation in cross-race impersonations, this contemporary Jewface genre cites the construction and disruption of race and raciality as critical to the performance of Jewishness. Reflective of both literal and 'metaphorical' blackface minstrelsy traditions as they have evolved over more than a century, contemporary Jewface continues a project of Jewish acculturation, class mobility and whitenization. There is necessary distinction to be made between contemporary Jewface performances by Jewish comic dancers and stand ups and a legacy of Jewish participation in literal and metaphorical blackface. And still, there are important ways in which the codification of female Jewface jokes cannot be severed from a proximal relation to nonwhiteness that fetishizes a yet more othered otherness. As is outlined in the Introduction of this dissertation, dance scholar Susan Manning historicizes the transition from literal blackface performance to a metaphorical one as Jewish women joined white

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<sup>155</sup> Based on a story by Yiddish author and playwright, Sholem Aleichem, *Fiddler on the Roof* is a 1964 American musical choreographed by Jerome Robbins, with music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, and book by Joseph Stein, set in Tsarist Russia in 1905. The musical was made into a movie in 1971, directed by Norman Jewison, filmed at MGM studios, and produced by The Mirish Corporation and Cartier Productions. The bottle dance from the wedding scene can be viewed online at <http://movieclips.com/zvskg-fiddler-on-the-roof-movie-the-bottle-dance/>

female choreographers in a modern dance appropriation of African American themes. In Chapter 1, I offer a reading of Joanna Angel's interracial pornography as an experiment in updating the metaphorical minstrelsy Manning outlines. In Chapter 4, I discuss yet another Jewish female cultural icon, Natalie Portman, in a related commodification of black male gangster rap with reverse implications. In the former bad girl and latter good girl personages, a longstanding assumption of sympathetic Jewish-black relations are traded in for a 'funny' guilt of ethnic whites and their self-conscious upper hand in a sustained hierarchical white-black binary.

The particular humor of Little Brooklyn's forays with a sino-semitic translation described earlier, however much I found it funnier, speaks to the continued anxiety around race and the hierarchical proximity to other Others. Such conspicuous cross-race impersonations doubly offer a way to both relate to nonwhiteness and disavow that difference through exaggeration of ethnic markers that can be played up or down. Routing Jewface via its roots in yellowface references vaudevillian tropes of Jewish women in performances as yet more othered exotics. This triangulation of othernesses reveals significant tensions still circulating about the il/logic of a Jewish in-betweenness. Such ability to attach or detach 'Jewface' through the additional valence of the yellowface shtick has everything to do with the malleability of Jewishness. In its ability to move in and out of other/othering categories, the legibility of Jewishness seems to depend on the degree to which it embodies or effects a race impersonation predicated on difference or sameness linked respectively to blackness or whiteness.

As is also addressed in the dissertation introduction, a central debate within the scholarly discourse on cross-race impersonations at the turn of the twentieth century and in the context of metaphorical minstrelsy has largely focused on the degree to which such performances are sympathetic or not. That is, scholars have argued on the subject less of fairness in the abstract and more on intentionality. Jewish studies scholars like Irving Howe and Michael Alexander defend that Jewish participation in blackface was a foundational avenue through which Jews Americanized in relation to blackness from the position of similar non-belonging.<sup>156</sup> Scholars such as Michael Rogin and Eric Lott align more closely with critical race and whiteness studies arguments that insist upon cultures of a one-way exploitation.<sup>157</sup> Insisting on historical accounts of two-way interactions between black and Jewish women, however “uneven”, Harrison reenvision the racial imaginary of the same time period. Rather than a unidirectional sense of Jewish alliance *with* or exploitation *of* African American subjects, spaces, vernaculars, cultural production, Harrison offers a literary analysis that provides evidence of mutually informing female-female relationships across racial difference. While this reading helps

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<sup>156</sup> Irving Howe’s *World of Out Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) is one of the first studies to document the prevalence of Jewish minstrelsy. He argues that Jews asserted Jewishness, not whiteness. Michael Alexander’s *Jazz Age Jews* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) begins with a similar sympathetic assumption of Jewish blackface to discuss the popularity of black vernacular among Jews who continued to identify with marginalized Americans through an “exceptional Jewish liberalism”, 1. Alexander positions that such cultural forms were less about assimilation or the desire to acculturate, and more about marking oneself as different—by using a language familiar from centuries of being different—and imagining that you are a better American because of it.

<sup>157</sup> See Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise* and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

highlight the homosociality among Jewish and non-Jewish performers within my own research on burlesque and cabaret, I maintain that the Jewish prioritization of orientalizing suggestions like those of Little Brooklyn and tongue-in-cheek ‘traditions’ of ordering Chinese on Xmas eve, layer the Jewish woman joke with a jab at her own legacy of more othered, exotic cultural consumption. If there is a sympathetic aspect of such impersonations of the Ma Jong-playing Jewish mother, it is in the name of anyone who looks at their own behavior and renders it worth ridicule.

When Rogin asks of Jews in turn-of-the-century blackface, “What does it mean that a structure of exploitation produced a culture of identification?” I look to performances of Jewish impersonation, and pursue my hunch that Jewface offers not only a racial mimicry but also a gender drag that, like blackface and yellowface did for Jewish Eastern European immigrants, negotiates (acceptable) femininity for contemporary Jewish women.<sup>158</sup> Fascinating here is the way parodic renditions of self continue such impersonations as gender and race rebellion. But if Jewface ultimately extends the white aspirations of a historical blackface and yellowface, through similar donning of detachable masks, it does so through and alongside a self-conscious construction and critique of its own reappropriative agency.

To be sure, there is an important difference between self-consciousness and critique, particularly as it relates to Jewface performances between racialized sameness and difference to standards of white femininity. The stakes of one’s own othering pushes for further reflection. It maneuvers beyond the mere flirtation with stereotypes (“limits”)

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<sup>158</sup> Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 29.

implied by self-conscious 'awarishness' about race and gender alike. Where flirting may imply provoking with no commitment, fueling desire for a less promising objectification, critique contains the power to return to rote rehearsals of the Jewish, female, and sexy in order to "move beyond them," as de Lauretis suggests. The comedic effect of such reappropriations appears to offer at least as much justification of its exploitative potential as its strategic way out. But if I have indicated some Sexy Jewess spectacles as more successfully funny than others, it is because of this evident ability to enact a convincing critique.

If spectacles of the Sexy Jewess reveal a spectrum of representations and gain momentum through that range, my own delineation of those more and less funny fall along these lines. While poking fun at a girls gone wild sensibility it also espouses, new definitions of burlesque (post) feminism queer a familiar Jewish in-between. If freed or newly failed again differently, the Schlep Sisters, Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad, and acts just like them ultimately identify in the 'not yet' resolve of a white-Jewish matrix whose boundaries of self and other keep 'spiraling' around one another. And yet, questions still remain. In gestures to simultaneously reclaim exoticism while also commenting on the implausibility of such a thing as post-assimilatory whites, are performers carving a niche for themselves as 'bad' via Jewishness after realizing it is finally not so 'good' (meaning in this case, pleasurable and/or profitable) to be same, white and mainstream? What sustained fears (or fantasies) of an anti-semitic 'above ground' do these performers mock or cover up through more favorable feelings of Jewish-*philia*? If racial in-betweenness itself is by now a long-time Jewish commodity with downwardly mobile prospects, what

might be the stakes of its changing visibility? As neither convincing exotics nor fully emerged and guiltless whites, what resentment brews beyond even the overhead bills for these performers, more rightfully 'basement' now than sustainably 'in-between'?

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to show how various techniques of marking of the Jewish female body as indistinguishably funny about sexiness repeat again and again what is so strange, other, and self-referentially perverse about her. In parodic plays with a familiar 'not yet' or 'not quite' right/white Jewish shtick figured on and of the female body and then able to be taken off completely, a catalogue of contemporary Jewish burlesque and cabaret showcases updates a historical legacy of racial appropriations. Through Jewface impersonations that distance the performer from an outmoded otherness, burlesque and stand up performers work to restore and reconfigure the role of the Jewish female body in rehearsals of simultaneous sameness (whiteness) and difference (otherness). In nostalgic reference to twentieth century vaudeville and minstrelsy circuits alike, neo-Jewish burlesque and the comedy basements that house it update bodily discourses of a two-fold identification and exploitation. Today's funny sexy performers in Jewish-themed acts thus enter into a middle ground between efforts to subvert hegemonic structures of race privilege on the one hand, and on the other, a Jewface autoexoticization. Otherness thus b a self-conscious performance tool of an 'almost average' whiteness.

The transgressive potential of these reappropriations lives in the question mark of their ability to queer heteronormative structures of power, Jewishly. To the degree that

Jewface offers a racial and gender drag that wants to doubly invoke and then cancel the racism and sexism involved in the process, spectacles of the funny and sexy spiral around notions of the appropriate and the inappropriate with ultimate unresolve. Re-crossing boundaries tied to race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality each year as niche entertainment, audiences and performers alike lean on the effects of comic laughter with less than clear consequences. And yet, as citation and repetition of the low and lowly house the sexy tinge of female-female funniness, a spectrum spectacle of the post-feminist Jewess animates the underground dens of New York's holiday tourism. Finally, spiraling in and around what they can get away with, showgirls and stand ups in sinister acts move like my own usher body in between positions that placate or risk puncturing a sympathetic stance among even the in-crowd majority.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **The (Post) Bawdy Body and the End of a Golden Era**

Many may recall with good humor the life of the dance-joke herself in a now near forgotten American century of the Jewish female comic star. Amidst all her perfect imperfections and choreographed confessions, a beloved bawdy body has by now been laid to rest and wrestle in an anxious, quieted peace. As is Jewish funereal tradition free from frill, I place a rock on her flowerless grave, a sober reminder that she is not forgotten, this dancing dame of a Golden Era stage and screen. No doubt many have speculated as to the cause of premature death, seeking some logic behind the untimely exit. Mourners are left only to wonder what may have been are forced forward with visions of what will become of a world beyond the now wilted wits of Jewish female shtick and its comic dancing feet/feat.

As stereotypes of the Jewish American Princess, the unsexy HAG and the Jewish Mother proliferated in the decades following the Second World War, so did mainstream fame of Jewish comediennes. Taking on and taking apart images of Jewish and female excesses, funny dancing by Bette Midler, Barbra Streisand, Gilda Radner, and Madeline Kahn during the late 1960s through 1980s offer rich examples of a Golden Era of humor and gender radicalism no longer viable in today's mainstream markets. This chapter attends to how these 'Golden Girls' of Jewish female comedy (that references back to earlier Yiddish femme figuration I imagine through Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker and

Betty Boop) humored a feminist critique of race, class and sexuality through various techniques of a legacy bawdy body.<sup>159</sup>

In a performative gesture that eulogizes the death of such a dancing bawdiness in Jewish female comedy, I theorize an end of an era where Jewish female physical humor functioned as a critical site of ideological and embodied resistance. I ask how and why the regeneration of the Jewish female shtick in today's mainstream comedy contexts, exhibited most publically in the stand-up success of Sarah Silverman, no longer makes (or markets) a funny Jewish feminism. In order to question what the dancing joke itself has to do with it, I look to the ways Silverman embodies Jewishness and womanness through dancing bits and other physical humor in ways that both return and react to a genealogy of Jewish female stars before her.

While a slew of bawdy Jewish female performers continue on dancing in character shoes and feathered acts in basement venues of NY's holiday tourism, these queer-ish femme reminders of an earlier era enact an in-crowd clubhouse feel of Jewish nostalgia with vintage appeal (see Chapter 2). Sprinkled between acts of stand-up up-and-

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<sup>159</sup> Joyce Antler, "Pomander Ball," 123-138. Antler categorizes the humor traditions of comic pioneers that stretched the boundaries of conventional thinking about comedy and gender roles, wherein the vaudeville and comedy circuit characterizations affected by Sophie Tucker and Fanny Brice extend two legacies along the more or less brass bawdy lines, respectively. Divided into the "representative vulgarians" liked to Tucker and those on the "gentler side of things" linked more with Brice, Antler notes that both styles of Jewish female comedy have engendered laughter that has been both powerful and subversive. Whereas Bette Midler has made explicit reference throughout her career to Tucker, in many cases using her same material, and Streisand has met huge celebrity success for her role as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*, there are significant ways in which a huge range of Jewish female performers since then seem to fall squarely within this split.

comings who either can't dance or won't, these practiced burlesque and cabaret comediennes still smiling through sinister song and dance routines look like would-be or remnant sexy exotics of a distant past, costumed thrills of showgirl choreography styled in loving memory of a classic leg show, revisited. But if the funny-sexy Jewish cabaret and burlesque act is by now a downwardly mobile underground kitsch dance item, above ground, Jewish female comics abound as talking heads in t-shirts and jeans in countless comedy clubs and self-promoting you-tubed clips. Following Silverman's star lead, these more amateurish acts pursue new self-definitions of what it means to be Jewish and female in a moment when either category resists unifying doctrines of any kind. As Jewish female performing roles as such seem to have fallen out of favor from the mainstream stage and silver screen (Jewish female performers are prevalent in non-Jewish roles like Nina in *Black Swan*, see Chapter 4), so too have tap and toe shoes alike been closeted in comic exploits. Those talking heads left in the limelight stand pretty and pretty stationary at upright mics, just as stiff.

This undancerly talking body of today's Jewish female stand up literally gives face to an end-of-century shift, wherein a bodily turn in Jewish American female comedy has generally eschewed the dancing-joke genre for less feminized conceptions of the comic icon. As compared to the dancerly comic scenes of the Golden Era I outline here, contemporary demands on the stand up female body, Jewish or not, arguably refocus attention to her face-work, posture, carriage and gait in ways that read as exaggerations of the quotidian or pedestrian gesture. In direct opposition to fully staged, costumed choreographies of the beloved greats of a Golden Era (who may live on among the off-off

gimmicks of the less glamorous modern girly show of the previous chapter) today's stand up and sketch TV circles leaves a rich dancing legacy behind. Revealing a more universal end of the song and dance act and its replacement by the proliferation of stand up clubs and sketch comedy TV since the early 80s, the turn I identify here follows general trends in national entertainment that render comic dance as social parody a thing of the past. What the disappearing dance act may have to do with Jewishness and gender specifically is less than self-evident, however. By focusing on a post-assimilationist 'Jewish question' and post-feminist 'Woman question' as doubled trouble of a contemporary gendered and racialized threat, I offer yet more questions for thinking about dance specifically as it is ditched in order to sustain Jewish female comic celebrity spotlight. Are Jewish women too talkative to be sexy? Too daring? Too much of a subject (because of talking) to be taken for objects of desire? Do they have to choose between dancing and joking? In so, which would or should they choose, when? And to what effect?

This chapter follows the disappearance of dance shtick for celebrity comic women today in order to ask what it is about being Jewish and Woman that has meant the tapering and tempering of dance in today's funny acts. As the stand-up bawdy quite physically stills the dancing comic diva in her tracks, a theoretical cadaver offers an unmoving Jewish female body in a curious contemporary Cartesian split. A funny girl body is severed from its talking head in a cultural crime scene framed to look fairly mundane, unbloodied by shifting market desire. But upon closer examination, the lifeless lounge act extraordinaire lying across the floor looks more like a murder mystery than a simple sign of the changing times. Where such a framework might too easily romance my

own nostalgic sense of the funnier past, it does so in order to dramatize the rationale behind today's unfunny un-tolerance for a body dancing 'Jewishly'. That is to say, so long as Jewish women are dancing in spectacle formats, they are neither intending to be too funny, nor are they center stage in celebrity send-up scenes as they once were.

Paying specific attention to the central roles of dance in post World War II Jewish female stage shows, television and film screen parodies, I start with the post-assimilationist, post-feminist disappearance of dancing joke-work for mainstream industry Jewish women and work back across a Golden Era. In sketching out a genealogy of 20<sup>th</sup> century US Jewish female entertainers gone silver-grey as the Greats just get older, I favor select scenes to compare with today's biggest industry acts.<sup>160</sup> I thus choose for analysis the performances from an earlier era that amuse me most and see how they hold against a contemporary mainstream comic appetite. To be sure, this is a biased review; a methodology admittedly made up for the purposes of emphasizing comic effect and affecting a comic emphasis very much on purpose.

### **Ironic In-between and the Body Back and Forth**

Sarah Silverman's star success makes clear that Jewish female comedy is alive and still pretty cute at just under 40 years old.<sup>161</sup> Famous for her edgy social

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<sup>160</sup> While such dancing parts abound for men in Hollywood (Think films, *Zoolander* (2001) and *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004)), examples of a comparable female dancing joke are rare if visible at all.

<sup>161</sup> Comic writer and actress, Sarah Silverman first gained national attention on the 1993-4 season of *Saturday Night Live*, and in addition to many TV, stand up and film accolades, debuted her television sitcom, *The Sarah Silverman Program* on Comedy

commentary rendered through uncouth comic lies, Silverman's sacrosanct verbal sparring leaves her most often looking up to the side, lips bitten, and slightly confused. She thus envisages the complex stance of today's post-feminist comedy and its new face on the Jewish female figure. Silverman's infamous recycling of blackface and its public paranoia marks ironically, and also unfortunately, what is so 'Jewish' about her. In racial plays that may mean most to look 'sympathetic' as much of the discourse on turn of the century blackface still suggests, Silverman's post-feminist and post-assimilatory appeal reconstructs contemporary Jewish femininity. She constructs a guilty white womanhood that means to make such overstated Jewish-black alliances look like simple mistakes with the best of intentions.

A poster child for left-leaning politics and more just social practices of equitable civil rights,<sup>162</sup> Silverman (and writers) has made a name for herself as a baby-voiced bad girl with good Samaritan-aspirations, derivative Jewish jokes and passable (white) sex appeal. Playing on both the cultural memory and modification of earlier blue comedy

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Central in 2007. Her satire is well known for its plays with social taboos and controversial comments on racism, sexism, and religion.

<sup>162</sup> Boosting Obama's 2008 Presidential Election via a seriocomic Florida swing vote video and its viral web distribution, Silverman outlines key commonalities between aging Jews in Boca Raton and young black males, including the shared prevalence of friends dying, interest in material wealth or bling, and love of track suits and Cadillacs. View "The Great Schlep" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHHX9R4Qtk>. Basing her humor entirely on stereotypes, Silverman feigns a childish naiveté as the voice of the politically incorrect presumably in the name of earnest campaign advocacy. She thus plays upon the self-consciousness of Jewish-black relations that distinguish between a generation of conservative/racist Florida Jewish grandparents and the "New Jew" outlined in Chapter 1 and 'native' to hip hop to blur in/appropriate femininity.

women, Silverman's stage antics antagonize with childlike affectation that both speaks for her celebrity largess and downplays it through a muted female prowess. The appeal to adolescent male imaginations embodies its best blend of fart jokes and anal sex references. Silverman thus meets her target 18-35 male demographic by making her sexual body the site of the ultimate social faux pas. Alongside critiques as far ranging as people taking things too personally and the Christian right, Silverman's repeating staple is her seeming filter-free innocence around sexual matters. Fusing the frankness of generations before her with regular acknowledgement of her own white privileges, Silverman carries into contemporary cultural contexts the vulgar bawdiness of Sophie Tucker and the childlike play of Fanny Brice and Betty Boop, carried on in the harder and softer-core comedic exploits of the Golden Era that followed. Lost in between Silverman's translations of either trajectory, however, is the clear-cut ways in which the feminist charge of these earlier stars 'choreograph' - or use the body deliberately to - convincingly critique diminutive depictions of the Jewish woman.

Even as her stand up body generally stiffens up a movement-based parody of the generations she borrows from, I emphasize here the few instances when Silverman does borrow from a bawdy bodily tradition to play (however briefly) with more dancery personas. Those before her broke conscientiously with stereotypes of the Jewish woman as unsexy, avaricious, materialistic most often through foregrounding those tropes front and center. Even when 'dancing' Silverman shape-shifts this sympathetic cadre of jokes about the Jewish woman by re-citing the stereotypes as funny enough as they are. Leaving the spectator guessing as to what she actually ever really thinks, Silverman

trades in a squarely feminist stance for a 'post' sensibility that returns to stereotypes as ironic social commentary presumably beyond need of critique. It is this ironic use or technique of parody that I cite here as a product and productive component of post-assimilatory, post-feminist Jewish female comedy.

While it is clear enough that a stand-up genre would generally limit the deliberate engagement of something called 'choreography,' there is much to be said about the particular choices Silverman makes in relation to the corporeal as an ironic, or *passé* trope that aids her 'post' appeal. In Silverman's 2005 stage show, *Jesus is Magic*, dancery bodily comportment competes with lowbrow humor and gestural display of butt hole jokes.<sup>163</sup> As the latter is meant to win out by large margins, however, the moments when Silverman does do something like dance defendably do in fact do something like critique (this 'do do' formulation may circle readers back to bathroom humor previously described). This space of the 'something-like' is precisely the gap marked by the 'post' irony as tool of Jewish female parody. Borrowing the solo stage show format and flashing forays into the dance joke from a Golden Era gone grey, Silverman's stance on the Jew and the Woman slips into something-like the earlier Jewish feminism as easily as it thrashes it. The following analysis means to make that irony evident as an ambivalent borrowing/break with the past.

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<sup>163</sup> *Jesus is Magic*, Dir. Liam Lynch. Written and performed by Sarah Silverman, Black Gold Films, 2005.

### Silverman's *Jesus is Magic* and Revivalist Stage Show Spectacle

In an attempt to impress her friends—also aspiring comics played by co-star of the Sarah Silverman Television Program, Brian Posehn and her sister, Laura Silverman, the competitive but clueless Sarah Silverman playing herself sets out to stage a solo show in a day. The narcissism of such a premise pokes fun at the self-described procrastination that marks her career and excuses it at the same time. It also makes sure to signal to her audience that the material need not be taken too seriously (advice she gives again at the end of the show). As she dreams up a show in the opening song about the same, Silverman's intro living room skit-come-digitalized fantasy video of herself driving in the clouds leads into her entrance onto a proscenium stage with a large theater audience and full band. Sitting in front of a vanity mirror, she situates herself within a particular Jewish female performance lineage, telling the image of herself how beautiful she looks ala Streisand's opening line, "Hello Gorgeous," as Fanny Brice in the 1968 film, *Funny Girl*.<sup>164</sup> For those who miss the reference, Silverman's shout out to herself in this moment in the mirror suffices as that of the ultimate egomaniacal stage woman who, in such a setting, may be nothing more than the vain queen of a *Snow White* send up. Either reading works. It is the near classic female battle with the 'truth' of her own flawed reflection that Silverman parodies in either case.

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<sup>164</sup> *Funny Girl*, dir. William Wyler, feat. Barbra Streisand, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1968. More discussion of this film is developed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation in direct relation to psychological thriller, *Black Swan*, dir. Darren Aronofsky, feat. Natalie Portman, 2010. A noteworthy opportunity exists to compare Silverman's citational moment in the mirror to the ominous use of mirrors in *Black Swan*. While the former presumes an extension of the self-critical joke Freud and others discuss, the latter, appropriates a related doubling of the (Jewish) female consciousness to make a horror monster.

Silverman's stand up then takes on these self-conscious reflections on feminine perfection through the corporeal interruptions of a Jewish body she identifies as inappropriately hairy and hypersexual. In one joke early on in her set, Silverman seems to ask seriously why everyone thinks Jewish women aren't sexy. She then insists that yes, they *can* be sexy, pretends to put on lingerie and accompanies a Yiddish inflected "*Yeidel deidel deidel*" into a minstrel-like dance to the crowd's enormous delight. She shrugs her shoulders, pushes forward and pulls up her pelvis, and sends folded elbows one at a time to each side with a matching hop to each foot.<sup>165</sup> Even for those less familiar with the quintessential Yiddish shoulder lift and catch-all expressive shrug - "*Nu?*"- of which this clownishly mocks, the effect is clear enough. Silverman's version of the Sexy Jewess joke is one that can only reaffirm the unsexiness of Jewish women, presumably too noisy even in negligee to turn anyone on. The specifically Yidish sounding noise (*Yeidel deidel deidel*) contrasts the appropriately WASPy-feminine signs (As well as silence) that supposedly happen in regular (white) sex. Reifying the media-soaked notion that to be hot, a woman (white or passing as white) would have to shut up, the humor here relies on familiar stereotypes of the Jewish woman as impossibly sexy (to white and Jewish men alike) because she talks too much. With Jewish assimilatory expectations of normative, white heterosexuality at its core, even just a few seconds of the dancing joke achieves its minstrelsy of Jewish femininity in ways similar to Jewface performances outlined in chapter 2. Moreover, in the practiced pause of the comedian cues the crowd to keep laughing, Silverman spotlights the space of the 'post' (from here on out a doubled

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<sup>165</sup> A video clip is available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_IUu\\_RyFpI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_IUu_RyFpI)

assimilatory and feminist ‘beyond’) as a play with comic timing. As she encourages her crowd to keep laughing, Silverman usurps the Jewish joke of unsexy femininity made famous by earlier female comics as kitsch appeal but blurs its clear critique.

Shortly thereafter, Silverman introduces a song she would like to sing and asks for the lights to dim. When the stage goes fully black at her request for “sexy lighting”, the audience laughs as Silverman wonders aloud, “Is there anything on me at all?” In other words, in order to be convincingly sexy and Jewish, to make space for erotic fantasies, the lights would have to be out completely. She plays off the parity between female star as diva and her tenuous success in the spotlight. The meta-moments standing in the dark make visible the fact of her female stardom still mitigated by male-run industry whims that could take it away as soon she either too old to be quite so cute, or too raunchy (and too masculine) to be convincingly sexy. Either of these ‘smarts’ of savvy and experience would arguably undo sexy femininity by knowing too much, or at least as much as men.

Cut to Silverman in a velvet red dress and a blown out perm ala David Lynch’s mysterious dame in his 1986 neo-noir film, *Blue Velvet*.<sup>166</sup> The pre-recorded bit features Silverman’s long, shapely figure poised in contrapposto, characteristic of a femme fatale icon. She sings in a low, soft voice, and for a convincing instant, our gen x Jewish girl is a real Jessica Rabbit. Affecting a vibrato with slowed words that build anticipation, the close up of Silverman’s more made-up face figures her as a bona fide sex pot, but before we can indulge, the camera cuts back to Silverman on stage as she one-eighties back to a

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<sup>166</sup> *Blue Velvet*, Dir. David Lynch, 1986. Silverman’s sexy shtick takes on the ‘torch singer’ tenor of Lynch’s mysterious female lead, Dorothy Vallens (performed by Isabella Rossellini). Torch singers typically lament through lyrics of unrequited love, as they purport to ‘carry the torch for someone’ who has forgotten them.

dorkier affect in the honky-tonk tenor of her original song, “Put the Penis in the Hole.” Adding arm gestures that match with literality the excrement and anal sex lines of the lyrics, Silverman adopts a cartoonish voice akin to Bart Simpson’s before switching briefly back to sexy singer once again. Pointing the index finger of her long black-gloved hand at the camera, she asks in a line, “Have you ever done drugs so that you could have sex without crying?” She accents the “yea yea” with jazz hands framing her bosom and pulsing in time.

While the viewer is asked to shift back to the live Sarah just as readily as she does, dismissing the sexier Sarah as a failed attempt, a critical eye can’t help but notice what real and symbolic capital her sexy seconds provide. Silverman asserts heterosexiness as a role in her repertoire, and in its exchange for the coarser joker, she simultaneously mocks a whiter feminine sex appeal and proves she could do it if she tried. This doubled ability to fulfill both a role and its reversal is precisely her post-feminist, post-assimilationist regeneration of Jewish female shtick. The bodily bawdiness that is both affected and then disarmed nods to a near-century of Jewish woman in show biz with just as doubled a performance consciousness, but does it with a new (white girl) guilt complex.

Tall and ambiguously Jewish in the stereotypic gauges of Jewish appearance (chest, nose, frizzy hair), she can play with ‘acting Jewish’ differently than icons like Bette Midler and Barbra Streisand, made famous by their nonnormative looks. As if in reference to those women of an earlier decade, Silverman makes fun of her body, but the Jewishness of such humor (and its assumption of an inappropriate femininity) is more

clearly a choice than a visual mark. In an instance when she clearly deploys the body-effacing tradition of her Jewish industry mothers with the acknowledgement that her own body could pass more easily into whiteness, Silverman brags of her swan-like neck (by all accounts not a Jewish feature). Perversing the chaste swan image with raunchy know-how, Silverman jokes that her long, perfect-looking neck measures six inches at its most flaccid state. She assures between waves of laughter that she is measuring from the balls up. Dismantling the very standards of (white) perfection, the joke pokes fun at the assimilatory anxieties themselves that constantly compare female bodies against unrealistic white aesthetic ideals. In this way, Silverman stands squarely with Streisand, who makes similar statements with her chicken leg ballet discussed in chapter 4. Layering the joke with a gender-bending component, Silverman measures her Jewish female body against a male one. By making reference to her phallic neck in penis terms, she both cites the Jewish and gentile obsession with the problem of Jewish castration. In her mockery of whiteness and masculinist power, Silverman convincingly critiques the comparative tendencies of both women and men to posture as white and powerful for that reason.<sup>167</sup>

While lounge act and long neck jokes draw attention to Silverman's body as somehow falsely feminine, they both work also to reaffirm her visual and material access to a raunchy white womanhood. As they both reference a feminized and dancier body

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<sup>167</sup> This idea is fleshed out in Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, in which she outlines the rise of raunch culture and a consummate desire across a range of ethnographic research among women who wanted to be "one of the guys" and experienced "like a man", 4. For more discussion of Levy's work in the context of contemporary Jewish female performers, see chapters 1, 2 and 4.

to then eschew it, Silverman takes on a both/and position that looks at once similar to the revived “Polyester feminism” described in Chapter 2 and a break with its full embrace of the feminine body. That the (Jewish) girl comic has to do quickly and then undo so completely her dancery affectations in order to stand-up with and for her majority male audiences, co-writers, colleagues and critics suggests something about the need to domesticate her excessive femininity. In the context of Jewishness and gender studies in particular, this amounts to a consummate re-closeting of the effeminate so entangled in the representations of male Jews.<sup>168</sup>

Competing with popular male and female comics, Jewish and not, Silverman’s joke styling has to be viewed in the context of market salability and its roles for Jewish women. It is within this context that her persuasive performance - however brief - of the heterosexual lounge singer fantasy buys her more clout as a mainstream comic, and ironically, is the very thing that sells her not-a-pretty-girl shtick. If Silverman gets laughs with this material, it is not because Jews are in fact unsexy. Rather, as many scholars of Jewishness and gender have attested of a history of Eastern European Jews in 20<sup>th</sup> century US, the trope negotiates male assimilatory status anxieties projected onto the

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<sup>168</sup>As is discussed in the Introduction to the dissertation and more fully addressed in regards to spectacle femininity in chapter 1, the gender and sexuality occupation of Jewish studies has focused most on depictions of womanly men. In my notion here of the re-closeting of the effeminate, I mean to reference scholarly developments in queer Jewish studies that overlap a social fear-fantasy of the sexually queer with Jewish male effeminacy. Where Jewish feminist scholars have advocated the privileging of women in the studies of Jews and Jewishness, Silverman’s double rehearsal and renunciation of her own Jewish and female identities ultimately participates in a continued closeting of otherness, and its interruption of masculinist authority.

Jewish female figure by men and women, Jewish and gentile.<sup>169</sup> Silverman's *Sexy Jewess* adds the next stereotype to the list; that of the assimilated Jewish woman and her guilty white pleasures to look and live like the majority and still claim a selective and salable marginality with market savvy. As Silverman embodies the revamped Jewish female stereotype somehow beyond or even instead of a feminist critique, all fears of a more fleshed out stance against patriarchy are muted for coed Jewish and gentile audiences alike. A momentary throwback to a nostalgic bawdiness on one hand and a guilty confession of status security without much more to rebel against on the other, even just a few moments of Silverman's sexy exploit-flop updates a Jewish minstrel shtick and its access to the white, masculinist mainstream. Silverman makes ironic the work of exposing the Jewish woman as excessively different while at the same time outs a (guilty) position within the white majority. In one instance, for example, she asks self-consciously later in the show of her own barrage on Asian men, "Is that an edgy joke, or a racist joke?" Needing no resolve for this in-between Jewface bit, Silverman slips in and out of derivative 'Jewishness' and 'womanness' alike as cultural commodities to skewer seemingly just for star power.

The joke about Jewish girls and their funny sexiness returns to vaudeville's 'pre-feminist' legacy of Jewish women like Sophie Tucker and Fanny Brice who played with sexual frankness through more and less brassy acts. Those women are credited for

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<sup>169</sup> Such policing of her so-called excessive desires in stereotypes like the insatiable but prude Jewish American Princess and the Jewish Mother whose need for total loyalty can never be satisfied scapegoat the woman as butt of an American genre of the self-conscious status joke.

centralizing their own marginality as Jewish women either too ugly or too unlucky for men and marriage, and thereby sourcing their own ‘truths’ as material. In contrast, Silverman’s reliance on the same Jewish female stereotypes appears disingenuous in its delivery and detached from a bodily difference. This insistence upon punch lines that blur the possibility of getting to know her too well may be the very thing that writers of comic Jewish women throughout the century seem to love most. Yet Silverman’s act intentionally conceals such intimate connections with audience through ‘honest’ confessions she twists upside down. In one case wishing not to be labeled gay or straight, for instance, Silverman says she prefers to be seen as the white woman she is. And in a line delivered later on, Silverman defends herself against recently received criticism of her lack of racial sensitivity. She confesses, “I don’t care if you think I’m a racist. I just care that you think I’m thin.” These reverse apologies for the guilty pleasures of (heterosexual) whiteness cannot be disentangled from the parallel movements of post-assimilationist, post-feminist Jewish female identitarian politics to morph a hip and edgy new funny girl bawdy.<sup>170</sup>

By looking at the body moving and choosing not to move or make fun of moving all together, we can see the icon of a generation of Jewish female humor and representational politics nearly paralyzed by a life beyond Jewish assimilation and second wave feminism no one knows quite how to handle. The show title, *Jesus is Magic*, perhaps outlines that best, as the line itself emerges in the set when Silverman addresses

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<sup>170</sup> For more discussion of hip, edgy Jewish femininity as a cultural construct of overlapping post-assimilation and post-feminism, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation on pious and porn spectacles as they relate to Sander Gilman’s concept of “Jewish frontiers” and Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s “New Jews”.

the issue of interracial marriage. Seeming to dispel what's well known to be one of the biggest fear-factors of acculturation within Jewish communities, she uses the example of her own Catholic boyfriend and would-be children who will just have to understand that Mommy thinks something rational and Jewish while daddy thinks that "Jesus is Magic". Coming to stand in for the spurious nature of the white mainstream and its magical thinking about values and truths, Silverman's Jesus jokes just help to affirm her racial and gender play with incongruity as an ironic technique and uncertain symptom of a status in sameness that, paradoxically, might never sell as well. That she plays the Pentecostal preacher in a full-staged pants role with penises and rainbows in projected backdrop just sends it all home. The Jewish girl is comic chameleon, working both insider and outsider roles from the privileged seat of parallel 'post' positions.

### **Morphing Into the Mainstream by Any (Jewish) Means Necessary**

If Silverman's stage show musical is a novelty item pitched for a crowd more familiar with stand up and sketch television, its basic concept borrows heavily from the Golden Era song and dance acts of a lost comic century. The show pulls together the live and filmed musical theater number and its references back to cabaret and burlesque of the early vaudeville circuits. Playing to live and living room audiences in this way, *Jesus is Magic* extends multiple lines of US Jewish female performance history with new post-feminist, post-assimilationist punch. That said, there are significant ways in which that combination of 'post' phenomena presumes to move past or beyond the realms it borrows from, disappearing deeper investments in funny dancing as poignant social critique. If the

brash or bawdy Jewish female body sustains in public circulation as outspoken, outlandish, and out of luck when it comes to love (think personifications of Fran Drescher, Sarah Jessica Parker), Silverman can minstrel the ambiguously sexy Jewish woman to guffawing applause. Considered by historical comparison, the Golden Era greats of a generational jump just before bore as bawdy an image without so fleeting a funny physicality.

To make fun of the Jewish female ‘thing’ now (in stereotypes that still circulate her excessive needs as inappropriate woman) is entirely different than in a post war age defined by the promise of middle class access via the economic gains of a GI bill and what that meant for a newly Jewish ‘white flight’ into the suburbs. Plotting out that period in *How Jews Became White Folks*, Karen Brodtkin recalls how the gravitas of blonde ambitions for young Jewish girls of the late 60s and 70s carried over into the humor of TV caricatures like Gilda Radner’s Rhonda Weiss. Radner’s parody epitomized the Jewish American Princess in the first season of *Saturday Night Live*.<sup>171</sup> In that character’s most famous video short, “Jewess Jeans”, Radner’s Weiss wears high waisted, skin-tight jeans in the style of the Horace brand of a regularly airing commercial at that same time. The parody not only underscores a more ‘universal’ materialism of a late 70s America, but assigns its most conspicuous consumption to the Jewish daughters of upwardly mobile parents. With lyrics that skewer the “Jewish look” of rhyming designer

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<sup>171</sup> Wishing not to be labeled gay or straight, for instance, Silverman prefers to be seen as...white. In a line delivered later on, Silverman defends herself against criticism and confesses, “I don’t care if you think I’m a racist. I just care that you think I’m thin.”

clothes and matching designer nose, the joke makes explicit the Jewish woman designing and being designed by a new American femininity.

Not only was gendered racial passing an assimilatory promise for Jews as they became ‘white folks’, to use Brodtkin’s terms, but such personifications on TV highlight the ways an American public could read a play on/of/with female Jewishness itself. As it appeared to offer a certain bodily malleability, the princess stereotype invited laughter at the real possibility of shape shifting through surgical and material means the status of Jewish women. Not only could one stay Jewish as she morphed into the mainstream, but she could use Jewishness as a means to get there. When viewed within the historical scope of American industry entertainment and the role of Jewish female comedy, the jeans commercial spoof and its legibility as a Jewish American Princess joke flesh out Riv Ellen Prell’s understanding of Jewish women as the “meter of middle class access”.<sup>172</sup> Offset in the parody by a multiracial trio of back up singers in the same jeans, Radner’s role as ethnic front-woman of a late civil rights era socioeconomic latter establishes whiteness as an image category within minority reach. The JAP song and dance also indexes a laughter-producing social tension among ethnoracial groups vying for newly promised equal rights. When the male voice that comes in as the final tagline of the commercial says you don’t have to be Jewish, Radner adds with head turned back to the camera, “But it wouldn’t hurt”. While reminiscent of a Yiddish-inflected cadence,

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<sup>172</sup> Prell, *Fighting*, 207. Prell explains here that scapegoating of the Jewish woman within the Jewish community fictionalized the female as meter of middle class access for Jews and non-Jews so much that life in the middle class could be thought of as Jewish and female.

the line unfixes what it might mean to look Jewish in a period of new consumer wealth and government-encouraged spending. As the punch line suggests jokingly that anyone can do it, the ‘it’ of course has less to do with anyone aspiring to ‘looking’ like Jewish women than the post-war promise of an attainable American dream.

Shuly Rubin Schwartz discusses the ad in the context of a changing Jewish female material “messaging,” in which clothing announced the arrival into the middle class.<sup>173</sup> While no doubt SNL pokes fun at just that, I’d argue that the parody-performance form does more than simply announce an arrival of middle class Jews. As it ‘messages’ back to television network and beyond through the female costume of upwardly mobility rendered as Jewish, Radner’s parody invites attention to her body as the physical and anxious ‘truth’ driving the joke. Claiming comic authority through the ability of the body itself to ‘pass’ in pants that hug model-ready hips, it is her ‘achievement’ of the long and lean ‘ideal’ female form (biographies of Radner make regular reference to her long battle with weight and self-image) that makes the parody possible.

While scholars such as Schwartz, Brodtkin, Prell have celebrated the Jewess Jeans parody in discussions of Jewish female representations, the particular ways in which Radner dances through the parody has not been discussed.<sup>174</sup> Radner embodies the

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<sup>173</sup>Shuly Rubin Schwartz, “From Jewess Jeans to Juicy JAPs: Clothing and Jewish Stereotypes” What to Wear event, Mar 11, 2012, Jewish Theological Seminary. Posted at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZWz\\_XL\\_zWg&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZWz_XL_zWg&feature=youtube_gdata_player)

<sup>174</sup>Schwartz “Jewess Jeans”. See also Brodtkin’s reference to Radner’s commercial in *How Jews Became White Folks*, 169 and Prell’s discussion of the same in *Fighting*, 182. For more on why US Jewish female stereotypes were so limited to princess personifications, see also Joyce Antler, “Jewish Women on Television, Too Jewish or Not Enough?” *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover: Brandeis University Press), 242-252.

princess trope through unmuscular movements that appear to gesture but not complete full extensions of elbows or wrists especially. In moving like this, Radner makes visible and physical the more spoiled and unlaboring stereotypes that class and classify the JAP as entitled brat. Such physicality also mocks the mainstream aspirations of the upwardly mobile through such affects of fashionable effortlessness. Moving constantly through a camera shoot shown on screen, Radner chews gum to the beat of canned accompaniment, accenting disco-esque arms with an intentionally lackadaisical go-go feel. Doing, it seems, 'just enough', Radner's dancing physicalizes the lyrical narrative in full-bodied frames rarely visible on television then or now. Strutting her stuff in plain sight, spoof or not, Radner shows off more than the Jewess label of her starred back pocket. It is her body that doubly matters here most in that it both comes into jokish material being and significance. It is through the physicalization of the Jewess-princess joke that Radner implicates herself as master manipulator of a Jewess corporeality that lyrics alone cannot fully capture.

If the Jewess joke as song and dance parody necessitates the Jewish woman to mock and master a certain ideal feminine appeal and then says anyone can do it, its humor lies in its ability to both refix and unfix the ability of the Jewish body to pass as sexy woman in spite of/depite the face (together with big hair, glasses and overstated expressions of opinion). Whereas Silverman's humor makes frequent use of stereotypes that pitch Jewish woman as categorically unsexy (and sells it through her more mainstream pretty face/swan-like neck), Radner's physical humor seems to stem from the refusal of the Jewish face to cooperate with the white fashion model body it achieves.

The problem, moreover, revolves around the agential aspects of sexiness, or the degree to which it is espoused intentionally or externally assigned. The Silverman/Radner difference marks a turn in cultural consciousness from second wave feminism (and the Jewish majority of its key speakers) to a post-feminist platform arguably more open to reappropriations of a masculinist or ‘chauvinist’ sensibility. In what I argue here, such a shift is partnered with a parallel progression from assimilatory status anxieties to a post-assimilationist identity more in flux about what it means to be Jewish and part of the white majority.

### **Sexy Jews and Leggy Moves: Bunnies, Babes, and Mermaid Maneuvers**

When Radner’s commercial aired in 1980, it was 12 years since Streisand starred as Fanny Brice in the 1968, *Funny Girl*, and just three years since the iconic Jewish media star studded the cover of *Playboy* magazine.<sup>175</sup> Wearing white shorts and a T-shirt emblazoned with the *Playboy* logo, Streisand poses with the self-referential caption, “What’s a nice girl like me doing on the cover of playboy?” In Henry Bial’s discussion of the career-affirming maneuver, the question reads like a thought-bubble for the unconventional cover girl. Arguing that Jews had effectively won public favor in his explication of “How Jews Became Sexy, 1968-1983,” he defends that celebrity successes of Woody Allen and Barbra Streisand account for a consummate shift in the roles of Jews

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<sup>175</sup> *Playboy Magazine*, Oct (1977). Cited in Henry Bial, “How Jews Became Sexy, 1968-1983” *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), 86-106. Bial’s process-oriented chapter title makes clever reference to Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks*, and though he does not articulate the explicit connection, focuses his argument on economic factors of ‘sexiness’ in ways that fit well within Brodtkin’s discussion of ethnic whiteness as class mobility.

in American entertainment history. Citing in his title a reference to Brodtkin's seminal work on Jewish whiteness, Bial suggests an intersectionality of cultural contracts, extending a question of whiteness to one of sexiness. The assumed Jewish question, outlined in his article through the "Q"-shaped visual display of Streisand's spread (her leg extends below the semi circle of the rounded platform she sits on), is paired with a sexy one. Both emblemize processes of becoming a part of categories that previously excluded them.

But where the terms of Bial's focus emphasize the increase in Jewish celebrity visibility, his discussion of sexiness deals with gender peripherally at most. Even as he says that Streisand's *Playboy* debut represented the "apotheosis of an evolution in the way the Jewish body is perceived by an American audience," he seems to point to a gender discussion without fleshing it out entirely.<sup>176</sup> An opaque conflation of playboy and Hollywood success leaves readers to fill in the blanks as to the precise relation between celebrity Jewish bodies and something called sexiness. In his estimation, the "gawky singer," together with "geeky comedian" Woody Allen, helped shift the way Jewishness was perceived as an element of sexual desirability.<sup>177</sup> As so-called "sexy superstars of the 1980s", Allen and Streisand appear to complete a coed entertainment coup where money equals power and power equals sex appeal. Where that may be true on some abstract level difficult to argue, Bial's absencing of gender analysis appears to render the particular market prospect of playboy-ready femininity a shared male and female Jewish representational break through. Without spelling it out, Bial points to *Playboy* as the

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<sup>176</sup> Bial, "How Jews Became Sexy," 86.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 87

achievement of an acceptable Jewish femininity always already linked with a male effeminate Jewishness more broadly.

Even as the Jewish question seems to over-determine a gender one, there is much to be gleaned from Bial's framing of a period Jewishness no doubt linked to a shift in mainstream cultural production. If media-soaked sex appeal '68-83 is code for Hollywood permissions to look and act more Jewish, Bial's thesis helps defend the argument that a Golden Era for Jewish woman specifically came and went. Whereas the wealth of *schlemiel* roles ever-widens for male actors to play Jewishly (and in comic dance roles to boot!), the same cannot be seen in careers of their comic female counterparts.<sup>178</sup> In what scholars have termed a "Jewification" of American media more broadly, the naturalization of Jewish themes on screen is by now a hetero-masculinist norm. Playing parts designated for the lovable but pathetic neurotic (ala Allen's oeuvre), the inferior and effeminate foil to an all-American bully of whatever breed reads as the most butched up masculinity du jour, the Jew-ish male *schlemiel* can be played by Jews or non-Jews alike. This Jewish schlemiel has effectively become the American 'anti-hero' that film scholar, Richard Dyer characterizes as the one who "confuses the boundaries between good and bad behaviour, [and] presses the anti-social into the service of the

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<sup>178</sup> See, for instance, Vincent Brook, "Boy-Man Schlemiels and Super-Nebishes: Adam Sandler and Ben Stiller" in *Hollywood's Chosen and the Jewish Experience in American Cinema*, eds., Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance and Hava Tirosh-Samuels (Wayne State University Press, 2012): 173-192. In relation to dance on the concert stage, Rebecca Rossen, "The Jewish Man and His Dancing Shtick: Stock Characterization and Postmodern Dance" in *"You Should See Yourself!" Jewish Identity and Postmodern American Culture*, ed. Vincent Brook (Rutgers University Press, 2006)

social and vice versa”.<sup>179</sup> The opposite of anything physically virile, the seemingly gender-neutral sexiness Bial references looks plainly like an economic perspective on material success. However, in light of this dissertation’s focus on spectacle Jewish femininity, the entanglement of Jewish male and female effeminacy cannot be easily overlooked as simultaneous co-desires of the gentile mainstream and co-evils of a coed Jewish assimilatory concern.

When Bial does talk about gender specifically, it is in relation to the manipulation of the same anxious Jewish looks that underscore both examples of Radner and Streisand’s humor. Even as Bial admits that the idea of what it means to look Jewish has varied significantly from time to time and place to place, he offers a significant statement regarding Jewish female *visible* otherness when he says that woman who look Jewish can gain acceptance not by erasing, hiding, or avoiding her Jewish looks but by “acting Jewish” (92). If Radner’s face looks familiarly ethnic to some audiences more than others, it is her overstated and fully embodied JAP impersonation that renders her most visibly Jewish. But what “acting Jewish” might mean in relationship to femininity in the period he delineates is less than totally clear. Without engaging in a gestural or bodily analysis, Bial’s “acting” paradigm is vague at best. As is indicated by the Streisand cover he begins with, ‘acting Jewish’ is somehow to show surprise about newly accepted sexiness. Outlining an (internalized) un-feminine expectation of those with more Jewish looks in this formulation, Bial fails to account for those who might choose to act Jewishly despite and even through their passing looks.

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<sup>179</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars*, Second Edition. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 49.

Acting Jewish rather than looking Jewish, Madeline Kahn stands out among her Jewish female contemporaries for choosing Jewishness, perhaps, even when it would not need to... choose her in this way. In a saloon-styled burlesque inversion, Kahn makes it funny to foreground an en-acted Jewishness through its impersonated *shiksa* opposite her looks allow. In the 1974 satirical Western comedy, *Blazing Saddles* directed by Mel Brooks, Kahn plays the parodic Lili von Shtupp, a German seductress-for-hire and a humorously mediocre lounge singer.<sup>180</sup> The scene sits within the larger scope of the film's revision of history and nationalist lore. Full of narrative, character and musical anachronisms that mean to reverse racial stereotypes, Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* poke holes in Hollywood's mythic personification of the American west.<sup>181</sup> In one scene in which Lili von Shtupp performs burlesque for the saloon boys, she enters with a blank expression to offset the hypersexual look of her lingerie and garter belt, stockings, heels, and blonde wig, and sometimes reaches and misses her grip on the wall. She plays the temptress well and mocks it at the same time, dragging her chair and herself across the stage "so tired of being admired".

The tenor of the humor is sheer perfection for Brooks' Jewish American viewers and sympathetic comic cult following who can relate to/laugh at such a strike at the sexy blonde bad girl of a baloney Americana. *Shtupping*, cunningly, is a Yiddish obscenity for heterosexual male penetration, and thus encodes in the character's name the farce of her

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<sup>180</sup> *Blazing Saddles*, dir. Mel Brooks, Warner Brothers Pictures, 1974. View saloon scene at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-pmpgrYQgs&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-pmpgrYQgs&feature=player_embedded)

<sup>181</sup> The hero is a black sheriff in an all white town, The Count Basie orchestra plays April in Paris in the wild west, and well known cowboy radio Slim Pickens introducing the Wide World of Sports.

Jewish attempt at a more genteel *shiksa* sexiness.<sup>182</sup> As opposed to Streisand's pronounced nose, Kahn's visible Jewishness is less than obvious, and her pin-up look (in and out of the costume) doesn't reveal anything particularly *funny* ('ha ha' or 'uh oh'). It is in her vocal and bodily shtick that she plays Jewish, and through that Jewishness that the parody materializes.<sup>183</sup> The unsexy 'truths' of a Jewish woman interrupt her ability to fully embody the femme ideal as her long, guttural "ahhhhs" are more moan than tuned note, and the affectation of raunch in the unapologetic way she sits with her legs open is muted by a vocal lisp that slips into more typically Eastern European sounding inflections. Citing the burlesque-styled bawdiness of an earlier era and its particular Jewish legacy of self-mockery, Kahn's caricature relies on the ability to slip in and out of Jewishness in the name of social critique. The practiced undoing of her own pretty looks thus signals a full-fledged refusal of white femininity. Known for his outspoken bitterness toward all things German, Brooks' regular casting of Kahn in funny femme roles arguably affects a retaliation of inane Aryan logics through Kahn's passing looks.

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<sup>182</sup> *Shiksa* is Yiddish for non-Jewish, blonde woman with all the attributes Jewish women purportedly lack. The jokish term, "Shiks-appeal" was coined in Season 9, Episode 3 of *Seinfeld*, (NBC, July 5, 1989 to May 14, 1998). Elaine says to a Rabbi, "Rabbi, what am I going to do with my shiks-appeal?" and the Rabbi answers back, "Oh Elaine, that's just an urban legend like the Yeti or its cousin, the sasquatch. Now, another interesting fact is that Rabbis are allowed to date!"

<sup>183</sup> Kahn's personification also riffs off the sexual boredom of the stereotypical Jewish American Princess, who is regularly depicted too busy talking on the phone with her mother to give a blow job, or otherwise unenthusiastic about sex (e.g., How do you know when a JAP has an orgasm? She drops her nail file). It is worth explaining here that the joke starkly contrasts the prudishness of both religious conservatism and notions of 'appropriate' American femininity at the same time as it also lampoons the white feminine/sexy ideal of horny passivity.

Kahn is joined by three back up dancers as rifle-wielding German soldiers enter with the unison steps of a spoofed Nazi army in defense of her sexual exploits. In one instance, Brooks' own voice dubs over a chorus dancer with the sympathies of a Jewish Mother joke, exclaiming "Don't you know that she's pooped!" Such caricatures of wild or excessively sexual front-women parody the dangers of female power in leggy Jewish renditions of the femme fatale. When considered through the lens of US assimilatory status and its occupations not only with economic mobility, but broader aspirations of acceptance, the characterization relates a parody of non/Jewish femininity with fears of anti-Semitism. Through Kahn's femme fatale, Brooks foregrounds a gendered imagination of power in gross terms. Famous for his portrayals of the US Jew and his comedy as products of the male shlemiel (weak, effeminate, famously 'anxious' about assimilation), this parody of Nazi iconography through a (fatal female) feminine threat mobilizes the Shiska star with fears and fantasies of her sexual power. Against the absurdist background of a wild West remixed, Brook's parody at once pokes fun at the prospect of a such a sexy villainous (and her Nazi entourage), and returns attention to the equally as lawless dominance of anti-Semitism still alive and at large in his American imaginary.

It is these (dancing) legs, I'd like to argue, and their ability to affect or interrupt an image of the female ideal (linked back to white balletic ephemerality on the one hand and dangerous, exotic female sexual powers on the other) that bring together a generation of Jewish female dancing humor. Evidenced even in the camera's framing of the body is the shift in parameters for what the female body can appear to do. The most frequent

camera lens of *Jesus is Magic* (and arguably most comic female entertainers on camera) tends to frame the upper body, showing off Silverman's exposed mid-drift but honing in on her mouth at center. The comedy of a Jewish feminist heyday, constrastingly, showcased a less dissected female figure free to move arms and legs.<sup>184</sup>

Or at least playfully free not to move them.

Among her cache of characters, Bette Midler's Delores De Lago is a personal favorite; part island exotic, part swamp lady, Midler's mermaid muse, by now beached permanently in a wheelchair, evolved over a long and varied career in self-reflexive roles of a revived Jewish vaudeville. Initially conceived as a lounge act under another name, the bit began as a bipedal babe and reoccurred many times before its ultimate iterations as paraplegic fish out of water. In Midler's made-for-TV "Hawaiian Oklahoma" on NBC she emerges in an oversized clam after having been fished out and presumably rescued by the singing and dancing 'natives'.<sup>185</sup> The early island act predates the de Lago role by some years, but makes reference to Midler's Hawaiian origins in related ways. A play on her own *haole* upbringing, the orientalist fantasy returns to the ethnoracial appropriations of Jewish vaudeville with self-suggesting implications. As if in acknowledgement of her own privileged outsider-status as white, Jewish woman grown up in Hawaii, Midler sings and dances with the cast in choreo-choral unison for the length of a remixed "Oklahoma". Returning to the large shell for an end-of-song denouement, she dramatizes the on-stage

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<sup>184</sup> See this same shift in camera-splicing themes in Chapter 4 of this dissertation on depictions of the Jewish female body in the award-winning major motion picture films of two generations.

<sup>185</sup> "Hawaiin Oklahoma" NBC, 1977, viewed at Paley Center for Media, Los Angeles. Also available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rolxQPogXqU>

exit by pulling one of the male chorus conch blowers into the clam bed with her just as it closes, in time for the coed cast to hit the hood with happy blessings and send them both back to sea.

The role evolved over time, appearing in various musical numbers with versions of the same, until the anonymous island chorus and clam was replaced by a mermaid-in-a-wheelchair act with back up singer-dancers in similar get ups. A regular part of Midler's stage show with additions to costume and choreography made new for each iteration, the mistress with bound legs plays out the impossible sexiness of a washed up underwater nymph in a busty sequined bikini and chiffon accents. Always returning in highly aerobic roles, Midler's mermaid and the taper of the scaly tale regularly requires her to jump through the entirety of song and dance portions, often with tricky dives and dismounts that stick perfect landings, even into her fifties. The dancerly skill is always evident, as she ends quite exhausting routines with just as routine a contagious smile and her characteristic gesture of one very graceful arm up in high 'fifth,' exposing her early ballet training. Midler's ability to play well with her practiced dance body through verbal and physical punch lines is what drives the parody of this fish-out-of-water portrait of a woman.

In one Delores De Lago number named "Ballin' with the Oldies," Midler and her backup mermaids mock up a Richard Simmons-esque workout with sexually suggestive, and as Midler explains, divinely ordained exercise balls that to use properly, sustain the

bounce of her breasts to the beat of the song.<sup>186</sup> Mocking the exercise mania that best estimates the eighties and its associations with blonder icons like Jane Fonda, Midler's campy play contends with the for-male gaze presumed through that scantily dressed workout video genre and throws balls in its face. Master prop manipulation and expert movement parody thus re-render the less-than-human female mermaid fantasy. With powers to uplift herself and her crowd from the slew of underground storylines, she takes up the lounge act femme fatale through its raunchy ruse.

Midler's career biography upholds a certain queer appeal, having begun a varied entertainment career as actor, singer, and comic star in the gay male bathhouses of her younger performance years. At once breaking with waspy ideals of demure femininity and overriding the role of heterosexual man as 'top', Midler makes visible and material reference to her own bawdy sexual power, treating 'his' balls and her own breasts alike as playthings. To jump in jest of her own bust to the hoots and hollers of gay men and their friends corporealizes a counter-femininity that accompanies a signature blend of outlandish characterizations and support for underdog political causes.<sup>187</sup> Flaunting her Jewish and female excess as 'godly' gifts of a jokish divine ordinance, the flirtatious tail flapping of Delores de Lago's auto-impersonations seem to flip staid notions of sexy upside down with choreographed control. As Midler is confined in a wheelchair of

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<sup>186</sup> *Diva Las Vegas*, dir. Marty Callner, written by Madalyn Minch, Bruce Vilanch and Lon Weyland, filmed at MGM Grand Garden Arena, Las Vegas. Los Angeles: Cream Cheese Films, Home Box Office (HBO),. The one-time performance aired on HBO, Jan 18, 1997. "Balls!" available to view at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P\\_JlAx-TtXU&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_JlAx-TtXU&feature=related)

<sup>187</sup> A list of Midler's charity support can be found on the official website of Look to the Stars: A World of Celebrity Giving at <http://www.looktothestars.org/celebrity/bette-midler>

chastity and Kahn too-freely straddles its inverse, both acts spotlight the lower body and how it moves as a send up of sacred-profane archetypes. In comic confessions of their own sexual in/activity, the bawdy female body is a leggy endeavor with demands on dance to do and undo a Jewish sex appeal tied to assimilatory status increasingly accepted as part of the American mainstream.

Midler makes yet more explicit her simultaneous return to and refusal of sexy stereotypes in her staged returns to the famous ‘leg shows’ of early burlesque.<sup>188</sup> In the same recording of her live stage show, *Diva Las Vegas*, that features the ball-play a little later on, Midler marks the midway point of the career retrospective with a mash up of lines from her career-long muse, Sophie Tucker, and her own persona as Gypsy Rose Lee in *Gypsy*.<sup>189</sup> Reminiscing on the immense pleasure it gave her to research the role, Midler describes to the audience the fun of coming to learn burlesque and striptease. A chorus of women and her back up singer-dancers dressed in unique costumed burlesque personages emerge on stage to strut a bit before the unison strip sequence hits each beat of the live orchestration with more and more of Midler’s feigned surprise. Pretending to be shocked by what is happening, Midler makes a slew of excuses to justify why the act cannot continue. In her signature tiny steps that she rushes across enormous stages for humorous effect, Midler moves in and between the flashy dancers, trying (and failing) to cover up their fleshy parts. “But you don’t understand,” she begs the dancers into the microphone, “I’ve worked for Disney!” As Midler lets on like she has lost total

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<sup>188</sup> Robert C Allen notes that late 19<sup>th</sup> century burlesque was commonly known as the “leg show”, *Horrible Prettiness*.

<sup>189</sup> Midler starred in *Gypsy*, a television adaptation of the Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim musical, dir. Emile Ardolino, Lions Gate Studio, 1993.

choreographic control (which audiences lovingly know she never would or could), she cries to the audience and the dancers alike that this bawdy stuff no longer flies in her show now that she has officially crossed into “Family entertainment”. Mocking her parallel maturation of age and sell-out star accolades in this way, Midler makes believe that she should guard her audience against the baring of the female body and its explicit sexy dancing. Calling her bluff, the audience laughs on cue, clued in by her prudish romp that she is anything but conservative about naked women or any other female behaviors deemed socially scandalous.

Eventually swept up in the fun and fast-paced fury of unison chorus steps alongside these supposed ‘fallen women’, Midler becomes the focal deviant as she takes back total creative control. Selecting the tallest two chorus girls for her next act center stage, Midler grabs a third showgirl with paint brush and palette props to pose as accomplice. As all the others scurry off, Midler tips the audience in with a look that says she will do something ‘bad’, and begins to paint blue eyes around the pasties, black noses down the extra long torsos, and red lines for lips just underneath the navel. Once she sufficiently butchers up the elongated busts, Midler runs to grab the oversized hats with hair attached that in hoisting over the dancers’ heads, completely cover their neck and shoulders. The tuxedo pants that one of the dancers wears versus the long beige skirt of the other now become quite visible against their equally gendered male and female headwear. Puppets of their own proportions, the effect of painted torsos emerges as a middrift mockery of an old fashioned (hat-wearing) blonde bride and her slightly wiggly groom. In stiletto heels instead of stilts, and painted breasts instead of more covering

costumes, Midler's matrimonial pair queers the burlesque exotics as clownish marionettes. From her short stature that measures only as tall as their ribcages, our Diva who holds the masterful strings rocks the stage and roles for women from a position all can pleasurably see. Both the madam of sexy ceremonies, and the "soccer mom" she claims earlier in the bit to be, Midler queers a sexy play with breasts and burlesque through illicit funny faces drawn on the fronts of bodily bawdy's most featured parts.

The up-beat chorus of "She looks good" that opens the show repeats throughout the show as a comic motif and self-affirming sensibility. It at once embodies the Golden Era Jewish girls of the main stage in this idolization of pre-feminist bawdiness, and laying the groundwork for the post-feminist plays with self-objectification to come. With back up dancers singing into personal hand held mirrors, Midler parades across the proscenium to the hoots and hollers of all in attendance as the self-professed good-looking Diva herself. Surrounding Midler with the mirror props at the end of the song, the moment looks a little like Silverman's opening act. This bit about the Jewish woman and her (self) reflection in the looking glass carries its own (post) assimilatory, (post) feminist legacy. As a certain double consciousness of Jewish femininity sustains across the sexy plays of both generations, affirmations of aesthetic goodness measure against self-parodic plays with badness. The mirror that references at once a sinister kind of Snow White queen authority and a Streisand-esque 'funny girl' star power suggests both the acknowledgement of and ascension out of more masculinist assimilatory assignments of Jewish and female undesirability.

### **Pre-feminist Return and Proto-Poise of the Red Hot (Grand) Mamas**

However reflective of the liberatory femininity of her day, the pro-women stance Midler calls on motions back to a ‘pre-feminist’ sexual frankness figured by Tucker and her generation of vaudevillian bawdiness. Setting the stage in this way for the burlesque nostalgia outlined in chapter 2, Midler returns to the blue jokes of Jewish female acts in an era identified by its first-wave tides in American feminism and assimilation alike. The citation of Sophie Tucker as the emblem of a Jewish and female Golden era in its embryonic stages is well known. Widely heralded as the penultimate of the “Red Hot Mamas,” Tucker is famous for her outspoken bawdy humor on men and relations made her famous in hit songs like “I Ain’t Takin Orders from No One” that indicated her rule of a world untethered to heteropatriarchal logics.

Tuckers’ cartoon contemporary, Betty Boop, takes off on similar themes in her rendition of the Red Hot Mama in the 1934 animation drawn by Dave Fleisher named the same. The ventures in hell and its freezing over invokes the naiveté of Betty’s bad girl behavior and softens it as sympathetic. Against all odds, Betty’s innocence wins out. As opposed to the vulgar frankness of Tucker’s milieu, Betty’s childish charms feminize the idiot-savant characterization that seems both to unknowingly happen upon her sexiness and rely on it to get out of trouble. More aligned with the young girlish comic plays of another early legacy, Fanny Brice, Betty Boop re-animates that vaudevillian’s signature baby voice and its connotations of harmless hubris. In the same episode where Betty Boop sings Brice’s “I am an Indian” in a show-within-the-show stage performance, she also borrows from Josephine Baker’s Banana Dance island exotic as multiple acts in her

repertoire.<sup>190</sup> Citing the big names of female performance, and their variant styles of humor both more and less brass, Fleischer situates Betty's bawdy cartoon body squarely between the poles and impersonations of these more expressly Jewish acts of an early Golden Era and the other hugely popular comic personages they loved.

Media studies scholar Amelia Holberg tracks how Betty Boop initiated as a Yiddish cartoon and underwent an American assimilation during the initial years of the show's near-decade run in the 1930s.<sup>191</sup> Whitewashing her character paralleled a career-ending desexualization of her figure in accordance with the Production Code of 1934. Protecting family entertainment through protocol that enforced restrictions on content with sexual innuendos, the carefree flapper from the Jewish Lower East Side now was limited to roles as husbandless housewife and career girl in fuller skirt or dress. While it was not written into policy that Betty should shirk her Jewish roots, Yiddish-language signs of the old neighborhood along with signaling within the music and narrative entangled with Betty's adventures with American boyfriend, Bimbo, ultimately followed suit, eventually disassociating the de-sexed star with any early ethnic signs.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Betty Boop's impersonations appear in the cartoon, "Stopping the Show," directed and produced by the Fleischer Brothers, voice by Mae Questal, and music by Sam Timburg, Fleischer Studios, Aug 12, 1932. A poster of Fanny Brice's portrait comes to life as it lifts up a megaphone with a cartoon hand and asks it Betty to "maybe giving out a little 'personation of meeee, nooo?" to which the always-willing Betty happily obliges. As Betty plays Brice's "Indian", the show-within-the-show thus humourously partners an impersonation within an impersonation. Available for view at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x\\_W-xsLfozU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_W-xsLfozU)

<sup>191</sup> Amelia Holberg, "Betty Boop: Yiddish Film Star," *American Jewish History*, Vol 87, No. 4 (Dec 1999): 291-312.

Holberg's close reading of "Minnie the Moocher" returns to Michael Rogin's discussion of Jewish participation in blackface as it engendered access to white America.<sup>193</sup> As she explains of the episode featuring the jazz music and movement style of Cab Calloway and his Cotton Club Orchestra, references to Yiddish culture in the cartoon are played out against the background of American popular culture. The true Other, African-Americans, alternately entertain and frighten mostly assimilated Betty and her boyfriend Bimbo.<sup>194</sup> As Rogin suggests, it is this very tension around assimilation that is reconciled for Yiddish audiences through the racial minstrel show.

In other Betty cartoons, like "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal," Bimbo and Koko the clown carry a dark-skinned Betty across the rural African veldt and in "Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle", Betty is Samoan. If the Fleischer brothers intentionally blur Betty's ethnic allegiances, however, it can be argued that this ability to take on and take off markers of Jewish origins is key to a specifically assimilatory Jewish female

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<sup>192</sup> For more on the Production Code of 1934 and its impact on representational culture, see Jenna Simpson, "Oh, Ya Got Trouble. Right Here in New York City! Or Gotta Find a Way to Keep the Young Ones Moral After School: The Boycott of Hollywood, March-July 1934" *Constructing the Past*. Vol 5. Issue 1 (2004): 1-12. Simpson questions whether general Jewish support for the boycott of 'dirty' film was a genuine interest in cleaning up content, or a fear of increased anti-semitism scapegoating Jews in media, 9. In addition to desexualizing and deethnicizing Betty's image, the Production Code eliminated Bimbo's character from the show on the basis of his being a dog and the purported link to bestiality. Though it may be difficult to prove, the depictions of Bimbo as a fairly stupid, bimbo himself (the US usage of the term was a male derogatory slang circa 1920), may have been cartoonish depictions of 'doggish' or unintellectual black masculinity and another example of Betty's assimilatory trajectory via (a sexually inflected) mastery of more othered Otherness in her impoverished urban landscape.

<sup>193</sup> For further discussion of Rogin's analysis, see the analysis of racial impersonations in the Introduction to this dissertation and Chapter 4's direct reference to his work on minstrelsy.

<sup>194</sup> Holberg, "Betty Boop," 299.

shtick. Still relevant for Streisand, Radner, Midler, and Kahn, and recycled even in Silverman's stand-up with entirely different implications, Jewish female assimilatory shtick rubs against contemporary racial tensions with layered (facial, gestural, verbal) indications of irony.

This doubled fun with fixing and unfixing what it means to play Jewish and play Woman is critical to the conception of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish female performers, and increasingly in the 'sexier' era Bial outlines. Just as their funny brothers in the business were scouring Jewish Mothers, Hags and JAPS in their humor on and off camera, a slew of famous female comics embodied those stereotypes in dancing acts that dared to take them on. This willing recuperation of defunct femininity as social critique circa the late sixties and seventies extends a legacy bawdiness of a Jewish female comic genealogy that dates back to the funniest girls of a comparatively pre-feminist era.

The sexy solo stage show and its opportunities for self-parody offer an ideal platform to view the changing character of Jewish female shtick as a bawdy body in flux. The threat-fantasy of all that exaggerates Woman, the sexy Jewish female figure from burlesque to lounge singer stands in for the im/possibility of a Semitic femme fatale, a phantom which Jewish female comics have given real legs in funny bits for close to a century. A seductress in her every move, a femme fatale in any of these forms played 'straight' (unJewish and unqueer) is always already its own parodic citations, however unfunny it is meant to be. As performances of Woman by women wield a certain power of "awarishness" discussed in earlier chapters more and less radical potential, such exaggerations of the feminine necessarily cite their own distance from a more banal,

possessed womanness through its reconstruction as sexy strategist. The stage construction of embodied feminine sexiness necessarily parodies femininity through the proximal distance of abstraction referenced more or less in her ‘actual’ figure. This is not unlike the burlesque dancer’s display of sexy ruse (Chapter 2) or the magazine spread’s “Ironic knowingness” (Chapter 5). As such performances of the fatal woman force audiences (and ethnographers too) how to look at her, she more fiercely ‘looks back’ at her crowd with her sinister strategies in step with her own sexiness.<sup>195</sup> That so many female comics like Radner, Midler and Kahn take on this role in conspicuous subversion or sabotage of its image can be understood as both a legacy rebellious act and a certain rite of passage whose path has been well paved by star personalities from the progressive era on.

Perhaps the most iconic citation in contemporary circulation of the sexy stage act played is Jessica Rabbit’s cartoon personage in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988).<sup>196</sup> Costumed in the same curvy red dress Silverman copies, she sings of a nostalgic Depression Era in “Do Right” to the dropped jaws of a male audience. Her femme fatale appears to embody danger itself with glossy lips, weapon-like stilettos and an hourglass physique that hoists huge breasts and heart-shaped hips from an impossibly tiny waste. The ultimate sex symbol animates the modern manifestation of the red-haired hot mama.

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<sup>195</sup> This potential of dancers looking back at their audiences has been central to feminist moves in dance studies to reposition the terms of spectatorship from a masculinist gaze to the various privileged and complex perspectives of the dancer (female or feminized in this orientation) ‘gazing back’. See for instance, Katherine Frank, “Thinking Critically about Strip Club Research” *Sexualities*, Vol.10, No. 4 (Oct 2007): 501-517 and Jennifer K. Wesley, “Negotiating Myself: The Impact of Studying Female Exotic Dancers on a Feminist Researcher” *Qualitative Inquiry* Vol. 12, no. 1 (Feb 2006): 146-162.

<sup>196</sup> *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, dir. Robert Zemeckis, Touchstone Pictures, 1988. The film was the first animation movie to include live actors. Jessica Rabbit’s talking voice was performed by Kathleen Turner and her singer voice performed by Amy Irving.

But if Jessica Rabbit embodies the urtext of unfunny feminine mystique, it is through her upstaging of the earlier red hot mama, Betty Boop herself, that we understand just how serious Rabbit's sexy really is. Betty appears in black and white, a forgotten 'has been' of an outdated decade before and its overwritten animation technology. In a cameo meant for the sake of sexy comparison, Betty fails to hold the attention of the detective character that cannot for a moment take his eyes off Jessica. If the icon of the early talkies is still heralded as the first sexy cartoon, Jessica Rabbit certainly out-stages her with Barbie-esque proportions made even more pronounced. But if Jessica's unending legs and cold heart are meant to trample over Betty's back-grounded flapper image, the scene seems to mark more than mere evolution of changing sexy styles.

Where Betty appears polite enough in the scene at the problem parading right in front of her, a catty competition between sexy icons is a familiar enough trope for viewers less knowledgeable about Betty's Jewish roots. Still, the shorter, softer Ghetto Girl pales so drastically in comparison to Jessica Rabbit that Betty's shadowy presence engenders more than a ghostlike foil of a funny, flirty femininity of a generation long gone. The cutesy curls of Betty's former fame (she's also depicted as red-headed in her first color cartoon, "Poor Cinderella" in 1934) cannot hold against Jessica's imagined physique, no matter how sweetly she tells the detective that "Work's been pretty slow since cartoons went to color, but I still got it Eddie, boop oop a doop". However explicit or not, the Disney imagination of the urban US nightclub just years after the war picks up on the comparative lens of white and not quite white femininity carried through a Golden Era of Jewish female comedy. Whether its read Jewishly or not, short and approachable

just won't cut it, the showdown seems to say, when it comes to real deal (if always already cartoonish) sex appeal.

However much in jest for the range of comics and cartoons discussed here, the embodiment of the sexy stage woman both cites affiliation and disconnection with Woman as erotic 'frenzy' made visible and material.<sup>197</sup> Cartooning their own (impossible) feminine mystique and labeling it Jewish has given permission for audiences to laugh throughout a shift I mean to outline. What distinguishes the works of Radner, Midler and Kahn from that of Silverman, I'd like to suggest, is the different proximal distance to white femininity that labeling something "Jewish" affords. Where the body can or cannot affect a white ideal no doubt has everything to do with changing constructions of whiteness over time. Some have argued that the very possibility of Jewish racial assimilation explodes any understanding of whiteness as a monolithic or fixed category. I'd argue that the movement of Jews from 'not white' to then 'not quite' and finally to a postmodern 'pretty much mainstream' white guilt complex, necessarily changes the punch line when it comes to racial and gender jokes and their transgressive potential. In what I'm identifying as a post-feminist, post-assimilatory turn most publically embodied by Sarah Silverman, new pressures to de-Jewishize, de-sexualize and de-feminize through slippery self-displays of those very same categories disappears

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<sup>197</sup> Here, I reference Linda Williams' reference to the early "frenzy of the visible" made possible by new visual technologies that captured the fetish of the female body in *Hard Core*. I add a focus on materiality to wonder what a focus on the woman looking or dancing 'back' may have to bear on conceptualizations of agency or "girl power". What happens, for instance, when she is an actual cartoon body and not just a cartooned actual body?

the feminist potential of a Golden Era through its conscious cooption and commodification.

### **On (No More) Dancing in the Dark: Heteroplays and Partner-Parody**

If dance's role in the lounge act is lost in the comic sets of stand up's Jewish female stars such that Silverman's stiffened silhouette is all her crowd can get, the prospect of a partner dancing parody reeks of an even mustier misty past. 'Woman' as she is personified in the classic partner dancing lead-and-follow pair made popular in the fray of musical theater styled films is as foreign to contemporary comedy as its ballroom influences. Even in a cultural milieu newly returned to ballroom dance styling in shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Dancing with the Stars*,<sup>198</sup> the notion of Silverman, or other comic women dancing demurely has faded far from view. Not unlike the hyper-heterosexuality of the solo lounge act, whose sinister portrait of female perfection is spun in sillier ways, the parody of the female 'follow' not only presumes a naturalized heterosexuality that must be undone, but wrecks havoc on the formality of its near-ceremonial pomp and circumstance. The arguably feminist potential of dueted dance parody, nowhere now in sight, perhaps best indicates the post-feminist bawdy turn I outline here. Somehow 'beyond' a moment when masculinist holds on lead partner roles need be bedeviled by the dancing of comedy industry performers, a post-feminist

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<sup>198</sup> *So You Think You Can Dance* (FOX 2005-) and *Dancing With the Stars* (ABC 2005-) are just two examples of a growing return to dance competition television. The former partners professional dancers with highly trained young stars in the making, while the latter, already licensed in 42 countries around the world and adopted from the UK based BBC show, *Strictly Come Dancing*, pairs professional dancers with Celebrity partners that may have little to no such dance training.

stand-up and sketch comedy sensibility seems to have moved past such embodied partnered hetero-plays. The following section pays homage to one of the best partner dance parodies of an era left behind. Its feminist mark, felt as much in the footwork as in the funniness of its defiled hetero-fantasy, underscores a Jewish dancing shtick that inverts the portrait of proper lead-and-follow femininity. But what reigns supreme in the love bird scene is the showcasing throughout of the funny physicality itself that does its best to fully execute each dancing dip and lean.

In yet another of Radner's expert *Saturday Night Live* dance parodies, she partners up with Steve Martin in "Dancing in the Dark", named after the famous duet performed by Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse in the 1953 musical comedy film *The Band Wagon*. In the original, the two actor-dancers stroll together through the faux rock walls and painted set of a Central Park scene. As the rhythm and gait of their turned-out steps begin to mirror one other, the seemingly effortless dance unfolds 'in the dark,' illuminated by white elegant dress and the dim of a simple street lamp. Astaire's shadow-like partnering of the coolly elegant Charisse showcase a sophisticated sequence of the ideal hetero dance duo that highlights the union of His and Her roles with a casual air of some supernatural spontaneity. Brassy accents in the orchestral score link up with every controlled jump and gesture so seamlessly that the viewer need not notice any undo strain or excess effort exerted by the pair. In one instance, Astaire jumps up on a bench in time to partner Charisse's next graceful, controlled move. Even a dancer-spectator might overlook that he just lifted his whole body in one beat because attention is given toward Charisse's next series of fairly basic but perfectly executed *pirouettes*, *tombes*, *pas de*

*bourrees*, and *chasses* always in the classical ballet tradition. If the force-free lifts, landings and transitions affected by Astaire and Charisse invisibilize the physical labor demanded by the dance behind glances of admiration and an overall happy feel, the scene effectively foregrounds its plot-work.

The synchronicity of the original dancing pair means to make visible the happy coming together of co-stars who, for the first half of the film, do not initially gel so well. Summarized briefly, Charisse's character, Gaby Gerard, is brought in as the impossible and otherwise spoken-for prima ballerina that partners Astaire's veteran star but fallen-from-favor character, Tony, in a fictional Broadway musical that tanks until the two finally confess their love for each other. As they ride off in a horse and carriage, expertly denying any evidence of much-needed breath, they exit the scene in precisely the dream like state that offers such ripe material for parody. Radner and Martin's "seriocomic parody homage" aired originally on April 22, 1978. Mocking at once the supposed naturalness of the spontaneous dance break and its insistence upon just as effortless a hetero love fantasy, the abbreviated TV adaption makes light of an American musical comedy genre long gone. The basis of the humor, of course, is dance itself; its para-narrative abilities to evince verbiage of any sort, erupting as easily at it ends with all the imaginative magic of the early color film classics. Dressed similarly in white garb and titled in direct quotation of the film, the parody inserts a slapstick humor as Martin's hyper-stepping, attention-grabbing movements tend to push more than glide the somewhat clueless Radner more off-center than on. Their partnering intentionally plays with pretend poise and exaggerated lust. The comic bodies both resist and reify the

rigidity of classical ballet comportment and its assignments of proper or appropriate heterosexual desire (not unlike Barbra Streisand's earlier *Swan Lake* parody discussed in Chapter 4).

The SNL skit sustains the old storyline in some sense as it opens with Radner at a table with another man, a la Gaby's scandalous switching of men, but sets the scene at a nightclub where extras are dancing freely to disco music. The schmaltzy orchestral score interrupts the action as the fantasy lovers meet at center, put out a cigarette with an unplanned simultaneity, and dance their way through that fourth wall into the studio audience seated before an actual proscenium stage. After the two attempt paraphrased steps of the original choreography with an air of intended butchery, Radner jumps off the stage into Martin's arms. She lands in an off-color straddle with legs wrapped around his waist. He carries her wildly back into the bar in humorous contrast to any contained dancierly calm of the original cast. As Radner's tush is finally plunked on the bar table like a sack of potatoes, exposing the full display of her legs and backside, she is anything but the ladylike Charisse and the iconographic feminine ideal.

But even if the overarching joke intends to poke fun at (the waning public interest in) a genre of musical comedy where dancing equals romance, Radner shows off a degree of dancierly technique that she chooses to eschew here for fun's sake. Following Martin's wild and seemingly improvised lead with echoed arms and fast footwork, she frames him well and with evidence of formal training. A send up of Astaire's infamous show-stealing suave and perhaps gendered partnering more broadly (in a decade when such scenes indicate all that is passé), the sketch's choreographic score seems to permit the comic

idiosyncrasy of his inner dance diva to purposely outshine hers. And yet, it is Radner who must take on the virtuosic steps of Gaby Girard. Albeit with a kind of klutziness that works for the scene, she executes them with convincingly extended leggy maneuvers. Ending with a turned out leg extending under the nearby table to quote the more glossy original, Radner perfects a grand *rond de jamb en l'air* into a lunge *plie* on the supporting leg.

If Midler and Kahn's acts display a forthrightness on sexual matters in an era of sexual revolution, Radner's persona here physically parodies the figure of demure femininity that indicates a related gender rebellion. She is bawdy by nature of breaking apart the image of feminine perfection and its association with the white, slender elegance of a dancer body she also has but defies. What is 'dark' about Radner's dancer may be the way she uses Jewish shtick to undercut the image of white femininity linked to 'natural' balletic graces.<sup>199</sup>

Entangled in her defiance of the serious dancing female is Radner's oft-noted strained self-image and battle with weight and its regular rationalization by biographers as a key factor in finding a home in comedy.<sup>200</sup> Radner purportedly said that if she wasn't going to be the prettiest girl on stage, she would be the funniest, a line referencing Fanny Brice who said the same.<sup>201</sup> Not unlike the honest confessions of ugliness or unattractiveness of Sophie Tucker and infamous rhinoplasty that tried and failed to make

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<sup>199</sup> Radner's dance training is noted in her biographies. See, for instance, Andrea Most, "Gilda Radner 1946-1989: From Dancing Lessons to Saturday Night Live" available at <http://jwa.org/discover/infocus/comedy/radner.html>

<sup>200</sup> *Making Trouble*, dir. Rachel Talbot. *Jewish Women's Archive*, 2007.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

a name for Fanny Brice outside of Jewish ‘sight-gags’, Radner’s comments and commentators point back to her appearance-based anxieties as inferior woman. And yet, the assertion that Radner presents her own body as that of a failed femme does not fully account for the fairly effortless sexiness of her bodily presentation in the Jewess Jeans commercial. The humor of her struggle to mimic shiksa sexiness in the duet with Steve Martin seems to come from the contrast between Radner’s fashion-model body and her Jewish face (including the huge, glittery glasses and big hair). In both cases, the dancing joke itself, and its ambivalent un/doing of dancing expectations of elegance and excellence adds another lens through which to view her particular contribution to a genealogy of female comedians in an era still very much run by men and pitched toward hetero male desires.<sup>202</sup> In a time period still less than friendly to women in comedy, it is interesting to consider the advantage of Radner’s ‘seriocomic’ dancing capabilities (and fashion-model body). This paradox of a both/and in-between afforded Radner specific conditions to participate in the liberatory pulse of a new television arena both supportive and still suspicious of second wave feminism.

## **Conclusion**

Inseparable from its roots in show business, “shtick” belongs invariably to the brand of Americanized yiddishisms made famous by the well-documented history of Jewish humor in the US. While in many ways invoking a genealogy of entertainers that

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<sup>202</sup> Comic writer and performer, Tina Fey remarks on the industry’s reluctance to see women as equally deserving of roles as men even today in her autobiography, *Bossypants*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011.

have largely pursued a male-scripted, and therefore, only partial Jewish experience, shtick here has offered an opportunity to investigate both a female focus and a gender analysis. A dance studies approach interrogates shtick as it relates to techniques of the body and more broadly, to Jewish female corporeality. A focus on physicality and the doings of the body complicates more general analysis of comedy, which has most often been discussed through the verbal and visual registers of theater, film, and psychoanalytic frameworks. While my analysis borrows from those disciplines, the material focus of dance studies insists upon a reading of the ways in which bodies work with and against what is said or even seen. The doing of dance—in this case, extended to physical humor across genres—thus accompanies other forms of body talk (body language and language about the body) that so characterizes Jewish female shtick.

Jewish female assimilatory shtick and its ‘post’ offer tangible, technical evidence that both reveals the codes of cultural commentary, and strategically conceals the work of its craft. As discussed here, it is both a cultural continuation of Yiddish-inspired thematics and a conspicuous show biz gimmick invariably contrived for the legibility of Jewish difference for Jews and gentiles alike. A set of salable tactics reiterates the angst so familiar to Jewish male comics and hunts down an altogether female approach, often and quite facetiously, in just the bawdy-body ways their stereotypes promised. This *bawdy body* means to account for the ways Jewish female humor plays lewd to position an implausible Jewish attractiveness at the core of its self-image.

As I have tried to show, comic figures like Bette Midler, Madeline Kahn and Gilda Radner perfected versions of this routine through various tactics that either

personified Jewishness as more raunchy than pretty, or made it funny to play sexy. In between the sexually frigid demands of the Jewish American Princess stereotype and the largess of the overbearing Mother written mostly by her sons, these performers variably downplayed their sexual desirability in caricatures of themselves as other sexually defunct women. Within this context, Radner and Martin's "Dancing in the Dark" parodies white hetero fantasy via the spontaneous dance break. The parody is legible because of its historical context and the humor possible in poking fun at such rehearsed 'ease' or effortlessness and its repressive connotations in a civil rights world bent on exposing all artifice in the name of upturning staid social conservatism. What appears Jewish about it is its refusal of normal white love and all that goes with it, even as it proves it could (almost) do it if it really tried. And yet, what may be the possibility of a Jewish 'love' to fall back into? A proper marriage between Jewish man and wife? The promise of Jewish continuity in an age defined for many Jews by the threat of progressive reform or increasing disaffiliation of Jews with even secular modes of participation?

Whereas white love may be positioned as the a priori premise of the dance duet, Silverman's joke about Jewish women working at sexiness renders dance in totally different ways. Dancing, she seems to suggest, can only lead to minstrelled self-mockery; a misfired sexy attempt as meaningless as *Yeidel deidel deidel* and as poisonous as any cultural epithet appropriated in the name of the 'post'. In endless talk that tends to torch topics from the seemingly sacred to the profane, the bawdiest of today's Jewish generation begs us to laugh from behind an upright mic. Echoing the thin, unmoving equipment with masculinist stand-up meant to still excessive or uncontainable Jewish

femininity, Silverman's body-talk becomes her own masculine/feminine duet. As she sneaks just enough split seconds of the Jewish female dance shtick into her act to get her old laughs, Silverman revamps parodic embodiments of Jewishness as guilty white gimmicks. In doing so, Silverman epitomizes the female chauvinist pig who mimics masculinist power.<sup>203</sup>

In what I have tried to argue, a post-feminist, post-assimilationist bawdy turn has shifted and shape shifted the Jewish female in mainstream comedy formats. Following a more general trend in the entertainment industry advanced by the proliferation of comedy clubs since the 1980s, Jewish female dancing shtick has also moved from more dancery comic formats to still embodied, but more stilled stage shows, stand-up and sketch TV. Bearing influence on this ambivalent death of dance parody has been the parallel resurgence of more serious contest dance television and the increasing mainstream emphasis of 'good' dancing (in TV terms, with the single exception of *Glee's* Rachel Barry, not a Jewish thing). Still, revealed in this shift from fun to unfunny dance is a consummate increase in the threat of and threat to the (Jewish and funny) female body. A completed Jewish assimilation and a parallel 'post' tension in feminism thus necessarily co-determine a partial cause and construction of an unfunny death and uncertain afterlife

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<sup>203</sup> In Ariel Levy's characterization of the Female Chauvinist Pig, she underscores the personage's defining ability to get the joke of Comedy Central's *The Man Show*, created in 1999 to simultaneously promote and pick apart a stereotypically loutish male perspective. Amongst the variety of pre-recorded sketches and live in-studio events, the "juggy dance squad" of buxom female models would open each show with costumed-themed dancing in the audience aisles and return before the end of show for the "Girls on Trampoline" segment. Readers may recall that Silverman dated the television show's original creator and co-host, Jimmy Kimmel for many years, and may well have been the woman who best got the (dancing) joke.

of dancing Jewish female jokes. Dance appears to have been deemed as excessively feminine for comic women in male comedy circuits, indicative of a post-feminist assimilation into masculinism, or at least a move post gender difference. This parallels the (post-) assimilatory move from Jews as not white to almost white to guilty white. For a comic so openly Jewish (and dance trained) as Silverman, the wicked-but-wistful girl next door restricts her movement choices by necessity. Silverman appears only to dance through its Jewish and female failures, making up for its meanness through false expressions of remorse.

As Silverman declares Jewish sexiness defunct in her casual attack on heteronormativity, she renders tired, passé and ineffective the feminist ‘awarishness’ of earlier performers. This post-feminist premise together with her post-assimilationist confessional style puts down Jewishness as it engenders bitter laughs. The postassimilatory, postfeminist Jewish woman she presents is finally not only anti-intellectual, but against “intelligence” so notoriously associated with American Jewishness (in familiar stereotypes of its control of the media, its religious bookishness, etc). While Silverman makes a certain degree of room for the Jewish woman in this male portrait of the Jew, she does it through the simultaneous devaluations of Jew and Woman. Shedding stereotypes of cultural smartness, for instance, Silverman reassigns the characteristics of unsexiness long attributed to the Jewish American female. But undoubtably a Sexy Jewess spectacle herself – by Bial’s economic standards at the least - Silverman returns to derivative depictions of Jewish femininity in ways that garner her more attention in the spotlight. If success in the doubled ‘post’ has come with a price of

race and gender representation, Silverman's comic oeuvre calls attention to the costs of (her own) assimilation to mainstream whiteness and its roles for women through her dummied-up critique.

The disappearance of the dancing joke, moreover, starts to reek of a re-closeting of the effeminate Jew more familiar in the discussion of the Jewish male and his humor.<sup>204</sup> The disavowed effeminate male is thus coupled with the likewise unwanted feminine female who, in affirming her position in the white spotlight, must give up femininity, if not Jewishness altogether. And yet, if what is at stake for Silverman is to occupy a masculinist 'whiteness', 'Jewishness' --as she plays it-- marks an unwanted femininity too. To the degree that Jewishness is 'feminine' in this formulation, it is altogether curious if in line with the logic unfolded here to note that neither men nor women can openly embrace it. Adopting masculinist assimilation anxieties projected onto the feminine with ironic chauvinist prowess, today's Jewish female comic is hard-pressed not to undo the dancier doings of generation before her. Where and when the female comic moves in and out of this threat of the feminine male, by now nearly emblematic of American (masculinist) humor, seems inseparably tied to the stakes of her changing allure in the context of broad-scale acceptance.

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<sup>204</sup> Though it is deserving of more attention than this analysis permits, further study might help point to historical distinctions in the constructions of comic Jewish masculinity versus femininity in terms of race and gender difference. If, as Karen Brodtkin suggests in *How Jews Became White Folks* that Jewish men became white in the 1950s while Jewish women bore the burden of being marked as racially different (with strong "blonde" ambitions, as Brodtkin calls them), it may follow that the 1970s saw Jewish women becoming sexy as Bial's economic perspective defends while Jewish men bore the burden of being marked as differently gendered.

**CHAPTER 4**  
***Black Swan, White Nose:***  
**Un/Jewish Ballet and a Dancing Bird By Any Other Name**

Since the first stagings of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*<sup>205</sup>, the White Swan figurine has embodied the promise of transcendent perfection: the divine, ethereal and impossibly light female form.<sup>206</sup> Forever entrapped as a wistful were-woman under the jealous spell of an evil sorcerer, the fate of a Princess-turned Swan lives in the kiss of Prince Siegfried, who must love her back to full life. A fairytale of infinite proportions with an infamous thirty-two fouettés, the ballet's charm in countless remakes no doubt extends from the codified 'universal' appeal of its timeless aesthetics.<sup>207</sup> But the very fixity of its hold on classic concert dance programs as a remnant of archaic beauty has rendered its material

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<sup>205</sup> *Swan Lake* ballet, Op. 20, by Poytr Illyach Tchaikovsky, was composed in 1875-1876, and premiered at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow on Mar 4, 1877 by the Bolshoi Ballet under the title, *The Lake of the Swans*. Julius Reisinger choreographed the original production, though most ballet companies base their stagings on the choreography and music of the 1895 revival of Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, first performed at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg by the Imperial Ballet.

<sup>206</sup> Cultural studies scholar, Richard Dyer elaborates on the 'something else' -ness of whiteness, "in but not of the body", and therefore "not reducible to the corporeal or racial" in "The Matter of Whiteness," *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 15. He assigns the behavior of whiteness to the racist tropes of Christianity, biology and enterprise, addressing in all three scenarios the impossible "white ideal" to transcend the body, 15-17. I borrow from his theory of white 'transcendence' to discuss the terms of terms of the ballet body as the site of racial doing, wherein I develop the myth of corporeal elevation as an assimilatory project with resonances in parody and humor.

<sup>207</sup> This is consistent with Joann Kealiinohomoku's personification of ballet as a set of Western aesthetic tropes in "An Anthropologist Looks at ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance" in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures*, eds. Ann Dils and Ann cooper Albright (Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 33-43. She argues that recurring themes of unrequited love, sorcery, self-sacrifice, villains and seductresses in black, and especially beautiful and pure young women have come to seem so 'acultural' that we forget to acknowledge its ethnic, geographic specificity in Western culture, 9.

ideal for a wide range of parodic quotation and citational humor.<sup>208</sup> Analysis of such “borrowings” offers opportunity to reconsider the cultural and aesthetic relevance of a classic, debatably static repertory standard as it is reimagined by different means for a range of critical purposes. As less-than-static cultural scores, I argue that *Swan Lake* borrowings in particular both reveal and reflect upon heteropatriachal standards of femininity tied to period-specific constructs of whiteness. A critical analysis of its more and less funny reconstructions by Jewish female performers outside of professional ballet offers possibilities to consider the broader relevance of archetypal balletic tropes to race, class, gender and sexuality concerns within historical contexts. It is this linkage of ballet and period whiteness that drives my analysis of Jewish female spectacle and the im/possibilities of looking, acting, or dancing acceptable roles of (white) womanhood.

This chapter compares Darren Aronofsky’s Academy Award winning psychological thriller, *Black Swan* (2010), to Barbra Streisand’s rendition of *Swan Lake* in *Funny Girl* (1968) as richly opposed examples of Jewish dancing spectacle with variable investments in visual representations of Jewishness.<sup>209</sup> I argue that both films

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<sup>208</sup> Here, I make reference to Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody*. Hutcheon argues that in all cases, parody can be viewed as “repetition with critical distance,” that forces a reassessment of aesthetic and social norms. Even as my dissertation focuses on the tropes of the Jewish female performer that most usually harken back to humor, this divorcing of parody from laughter invites discussion of how unfunny efforts to mimic, repeat, or reference *Swan Lake* might similarly wage what Hutcheon describes as either “conservative” or “revolutionary” critique, 75.

<sup>209</sup> *Black Swan*, dir. Darren Aronofsky, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2010; *Funny Girl*, dir. William Wyler. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1968. The former tells the story of Nina Sayers and revolves around a revamped production of Tchaicovsky’s *Swan Lake* ballet by a prestigious New York City company. The production requires Nina to play the innocent and fragile white swan role (for which she is deemed a perfect fit), as well as the dark and sensual black swan role better embodied by her loser and more sexually

reflect not only when the Jewish female body may be depicted as same (white) or other (Jewish), but reflect upon the cultural imagination of ballet as a white institutional milieu.<sup>210</sup> As each ballet borrowing continues to circulate a mythos of exclusion for “funny girls” with big noses, I argue that a shared disfiguring of the Jewish female body desexualizes Jewishness in the service of white aspirations. Via horror and humor categories, both reimagine the Jewish female body as overly demanding, desiring, and un/sexy sexy.<sup>211</sup>

### **Aronofsky’s Thriller: A Jewish Movie or Just Another Passing Moment**

Where the Jewishness of *Funny Girl* is inseparable from Streisand’s own career beginnings as an aggressive and awkward looking Jewish female force, the Jewish

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liberated ego double, Lily (played by Mila Kunis). *Funny Girl* narrates the biography of vaudevillian, Fanny Brice, who came to be loved for her quirkiness and (Jewish) refusal normative femininity. Analysis of the film takes on both the legacies of Fanny Brice and Barbra Streisand’s career launching role.

<sup>210</sup> Though scholarship is limited on the subject of Jewish dancers in ballet history, Janice Ross’ essay on the late Russian choreographer, Leonid Jacobson makes clear how Soviet government authorities disapproval of his ballet content on Jewish themes defended the official anti-semitism that barred the choreographer’s public display of Jewish identity. See Janice Ross, “Jewish Culture and Identity in the Russian Ballet: The Case of Leonid Jacobson” in *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, ed. Judith Brin Ingber (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 57-69.

<sup>211</sup> Riv Ellen Prell offers the most extensive cataloguing of Jewish female stereotypes in *Fighting to Become Americans*. Prell argues that the vilification of Jewish female desire as overly demanding projects Jewish male status anxieties onto the female figure, 44. While she doesn’t discuss dance in particular, Prell explores a century of literary and comic projections of the Jewish woman’s “insatiable appetite” for food, fashion, acceptance, and loyalty through the figures of the Ghetto Girl, The Wife, The Mother, and the JAP, instructing that such personifications have served as justification for a yet incomplete American assimilation. See also: Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, Linda J. Tomko. *Dancing Class*, and Susan Glenn *Daughters of the Shtetl* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990).

background of *Black Swan*'s protagonist and megastar, Natalie Portman, may surprise some. Her career-launching stage role as Broadway's Anne Frank notwithstanding, those who follow a bit more closely know the movie star as today's Jewish poster girl for fair play. In the early summer headlines of 2010, Portman's public statement in protest of Dior-designer John Galliano and his anti-Semitic remark single-handedly tarried the image of her soon to be employer.<sup>212</sup> She issued this statement just as she signed on as the new face of fashion in a makeup contract as Miss Dior. But if her Jewish persona is potent enough to boycott the couture boys with badmouth remarks, Portman's onscreen image - in unabashedly unJewish roles - is the face of a much whiter world. A debatably unJewish Jewish appeal is Portman's biggest contribution to Jewish visual representation, and the small-nosed subject of this chapter's analysis. The chapter's title, "*Black Swan, White Nose*", pokes fun at the very contradiction of unJewish Jewishness and the dilemmas it poses for Jewish female faces and the role of the good or evil nose.

Portman is not the only Jewish actress-come-ballerina among Aronofsky's cast. As anyone keeping tally of Jewish celebrities will know, in addition to the Brooklyn-born director himself, the film's four leading women in ballet roles are Jewish, and most have changed their names for Hollywood. Portman was born Natalie Hershlag, Barbara Hershey was originally Barbara Herzstein, and Winona Ryder was first Horowitz. Mila

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<sup>212</sup> Matthew Saltmarsh "Dior Fires John Galliano After Bigotry Complaints," *New York Times*, Mar 1 2011, Fashion & Style. See also "John Galliano: 'I Love Hitler' (VIDEO)," *The Huffington Post*, Feb 28, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/28/galliano-hitler-racist-rant-arrest\\_n\\_828955.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/28/galliano-hitler-racist-rant-arrest_n_828955.html) and "Natalie Portman 'Disgusted' by John Galliano Video," *The Huffinton Post*, Mar 1, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/01/natalie-portman-galliano-video-dior\\_n\\_829522.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/01/natalie-portman-galliano-video-dior_n_829522.html)

Kunis' abnormal name perhaps never needed fixing, particularly in roles like 'Lily', where the 'exotic' appeal of an actress' nonwhite name suits the part. The tanned emigré from San Francisco incarnates the capital city of sexual liberation, alternative ideology, and political deviance across the board. If Jewish actors have long renounced ethnic names in service of Hollywood dreams, there is much to be said about the corporeal dimensions of such de-ethnicization projects, and the possibilities of Jewish female bodies to play ballerina roles as designated by mainstream films like *Black Swan*. As the film conflates four ballerina parts into the single and complex characterization of the one, it appears deliberate to cast Jewish women across the board in order to effectively present them as multiple doubles for Nina. As far as noses are concerned, Portman and Ryder are widely believed to have had nose jobs, and some websites say that Kunis had one too. This analysis makes possible a mode of considering how name changes, nose jobs, and ballet aspirations work in combination to whiten Hollywood's starlets.<sup>213</sup>

In the film's normalization of its Jewish actresses, visual markers of Jewishness are erased such that ethnic otherness remains off screen, and strikingly, off the body. In its ability to remain distinct from the physical form such that it can be unseen, 'Jewishness' - when it passes as whiteness - poses a unique kind of assimilatory threat/fantasy that a film like *Black Swan* takes as its given premise. Does Jewishness really live off the body for girls with whiter noses, versus on/in/or of the body for those

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<sup>213</sup> For more on the theme of media-soaked confluences of nose jobs and name changes for Jewish women, see Marjorie Garber's essay on Monica Lewinsky called, "Moniker" in her book of essays, *Quotation Marks* (Routledge, 2002).

with more stereotypically visual indicators of not-quite-whiteness? Can such a thing (a ‘white nose’) define a Jewish film from an unJewish one?

To read *Black Swan* as an ambiguously Jewish film with horror appeal insists upon both an alternative reading of the film’s performative (what it “does”) and thrilling uncertainties (how it does it). Such a reading also challenges the notion that stereotypically “Jewish” content defines the Jewish film.<sup>214</sup> Moreover, even in *Black Swan*’s white and black world, seemingly free of Jews, there may be evidence of what cultural studies scholar Jon Stratton calls “Jewish moments,” where viewers with a knowledge of Jewish tropes will read Jewishly.<sup>215</sup> Developing the idea of “Jewish moments” based on Alexander Doty’s theorization of “queer moments,” Stratton argues that Jewishness can be understood as a variable textual attribute not necessarily tied to characters identified as Jews.

To make special note of the cast’s ethnic background begs the “Jewish question” of passing through dance more broadly: How much does the body do to change, erase, ignore, or pass through its appearances? Is such passing different in the body’s movements? As Rebecca Rossen asks in her dissertation on postmodern Jewish choreographers, how can dance itself act like a form of plastic surgery?<sup>216</sup> The metaphor likens dance to a quite Jewish preoccupation with nose jobs (and though it is less documented, breast reduction surgeries) that achieve white standards of feminine beauty, when at the root of the question is the anxious dis/placement of Jewish women in

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<sup>214</sup> Here I refer to the dominant categorizations of American Jewish films in recent memory as either serious (Holocaust) or funny (sex-less shlemiel roles).

<sup>215</sup> Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, 300.

<sup>216</sup> Rebecca Rossen, “Dancing Jewish”, 30.

assimilation. In this comparison of dance to aesthetic surgery, the need for dance and gender theories of Jews becoming white folks is driven home. As Jewish dancers became white folks through various bodily techniques of de-ethnicization, a ‘white nose,’ however realized, came to signify shifting allegiances within ethico-religious concerns. Attending to bodily training, versus more bodily marks conceived to be “given” like stereotypically Semitic noses, a central tension exists in the realm of visibility, where the seeing of Jewish dancing bodies may be less than ever certain. The body in dance spectacles renders meaning through the social construction of dance techniques and of Jewishness. The study of these two separate looks questions the doing of dancers, or actors in dancing roles and their various producers, to persuade us to look in one way or the other.<sup>217</sup>

A passing Jewish actress, or four of them in a single box office hit, may no longer raise an eyebrow. This may be the case for those scholars invested in an overall Jewification of America who, like Rebecca Rossen, argue that mainstream film is supersaturated by Jewish figures whose images by now reflect everyman concerns.<sup>218</sup>

Such a process may reflect an assimilatory project familiar to studies of particularly male

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<sup>217</sup> Eva Cherniavsky distinguishes between a bodily *mark* and a *bodily* mark in “Introduction: The Body Politics of Capital” and Chapter 4, “Hollywood’s Hot Voodoo” in *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xi-xxvii and 71-99. Differentiating a body formed dialectically and thus not property of its organic figure, and the body that “has priority with respect to its own markings,” she thus points to the modern social and economic order predicated on mobility in a way that agrees with class-based discussions of white ethnics in processes of whitenization and Americanization. This interarticulation of race and body theories offers both a material and discursive focus on the mobility of—as Cherniavsky calls it—“bodily form” under capital, xiii.

<sup>218</sup> Rossen, “Dancing Jewish,” 40; See also Daniel Itzkovitz, “They are all Jews”, 231-232.

Jews and Jewishness. And yet, I argue that *Black Swan*'s rendering of the invisibly Jewish aspects of a female dancing body reifies the marriage between ballet and whiteness, such that the very thing the film says it celebrates (a "fresh face to present to the world"<sup>219</sup>) actually further establishes the movie's investments in whiteness. I will outline how *Black Swan*'s whiteness constructs as an impossible, and even deadly *barre* for ethnic girls even when they can pass.

The movie's overarching racial and gender logic underlies the threat of the 'white nose' as the centerpiece of *Black Swan*'s unJewish Jewishness. Portman's Jewishness is both justified and visibly erased by her character's aspirations at whiteness, which range from the psychic and physical stresses of racial impersonation to a year of publicly commended weight loss and intense year of ballet training. Because of her "classic" looks, Portman and Nina alike are made to 'innately' know the white swan's attributes. Before Nina devolves fully into darkness, she appears so 'normal' that the viewer has little cause to question her ability to dance the white swan role. It is taken for granted that the normalness (whiteness) of the girl will be able to perform the aesthetic and symbolic parts of demure femininity, lightness, ethereality, and ultimate innocence associated with ballet. The persuasive image of her intense balletic training is so entangled in her white looks (small frame, small nose, bony cheeks), that the former appears almost secondary if not incidental to her mastery of white feminine perfection.

Paradoxically, the lenses of the film ascribe this rhetoric of an innate bodily connection to dance to Kunis' character in a sexually inflected assignment of liberated

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<sup>219</sup> Thomas (Vincent Cassel) announces this to the company at the ballet studio early in the film.

embodiment to blackness. This return-to-nature conflates symbolic black villainous with epidermal blackness so explicitly that Lily –despite the floral signification of her name– reads as the darker-skinned (spray tanned?) exotic foil to Nina’s white patina. As Nina impersonates Lily’s sexiness, and thereby tries on the film’s sensationalized appropriation of the other in the name of “new” cutting edge ballet, the personification of excessive sexuality ultimately renders both characters more white. In this way, the racialized Nina/Lily double exaggerates what is horrible for today’s guilt-ridden Jewish audiences: the admission that impersonations of blackness have historically secured whiteness. The film and its central ballet borrowing boast of a more contemporaneous rendition of *Swan Lake*, and yet reinstate the were-swan as yet another ‘whiteface’ impersonation in its self-conscious citation of a vexed white ethereal ideal. Through this reinstated construction of whiteness and the dramatization of Nina’s manic dark side, the film continues a history of blackface - and its points of mainstream access - for Jewish performers.<sup>220</sup> Portman's character travels from pure white swan to fatalistic black swan through similar privileges of racial impersonation, but in persuading us of this monstrous trajectory toward animality and all things dangerous, primal and bad, her role sustains white-black stereotypes still so forcefully at play in Hollywood and beyond.

Moreover, as Nina’s ego-double, Lily is a foiled second shadow of unJewish Jewishness. More ‘naturally’ desirable than Nina, her visual markers of an otherness

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<sup>220</sup> The chapter title “Black Swan, White Nose” makes intentional reference to Michael Rogin’s thesis in *Black Face, White Noise* to reference and build upon the study of Jewish use of blackface in minstrel shows at the turn of the 20th century as a process of becoming white through the donning of black masks. Critical to this practice was the ability of performers to take on and off the burnt cork makeup.

affected on her skin as much as in her looser carriage, depict the sexually liberated body in battle with its more frigid second self. Lily's slutty sexual rapport with men and women alike is posed against the autoeroticism of Nina's masturbatory exploits as would-be opposite ends of a more universal female sexuality.<sup>221</sup> But seen as two halves of an un/Jewish whole, the imagination of passing Jewish female bodies entangled in spiteful lust relegates both characters to the ever-anxious sexualized space. This sexy space spirals between a masculinist (Jewish) trope of Jewish female frigidity on one hand and an exoticized appeal of the white shiksa on the other. The film pairs these versions of femininity against one another as in competition. However, I argue that they work in tandem to help both Jewish female bodies pass into Hollywood's ballet borrowings. As if along a continuum of white becoming measured by libidinous acts, the Nina/Lily dyad

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<sup>221</sup> In one scene, Nina experiments with masturbation as directed by ballet patriarch, Tomas. As the camera moves from Nina in bed to a shot of her mother sitting by, asleep, both Nina and the viewer are 'caught' in action. To the degree that Nina's attempts at self-pleasuring mean to justify her egomaniacal fall from girlish innocence in the logic of the film, it is interesting to consider what it might mean that Nina must stop herself once she realizes (or imagines) the presence of her mother sleeping beside the bed, and how this translates back to a reading of Nina as the horror monster of the film. A definitive twist on the archetypal Jewish Mother, Nina (and the film's narrative) projection of the mother as the ultimate (cock) block to her delayed pubescent onanism is interesting when viewed through a mother-daughter relationship as opposed to the typical Freudian reading of this same interruption that occurs between father and his son. The resulting castration anxiety or fear of circumcision that results in such paternal prohibitions, according to Freudian thought, may play out for Nina in other scenes showing Nina's bleeding toes, which also self-castrate in direct response to the demands of her mother. When, in yet another scene, Nina's mother forces her to eat birthday cake and then throws it away when Nina resists it, the overt sabotage of Nina's ballet body (which even nondancers understand necessitates a no-cake diet and makes horrific the Jewish Mother's stereotypical need to feed) and then interference of its guilty enjoyment is yet another castration of self-pleasuring to which both characters are manically complicit.

imagines the singular (Jewish) female body embattled by uncertain expectations of today's empowered (white) woman and her ambivalent sexuality.

### **Lesbian Sex and Swan Sin: Domesticating the Queer as White Pathology**

In its efforts to 'out' dance as a conniving careerist circus, *Black Swan* uses unrecognizably Jewish bodies untrained as dancers and less trained as lesbians to reaffirm ballet as a whitening project entrenched in various techniques of heteropatriarchy. Dance is the means and the material through which the hypersexualized, blacklisted edges of culture can be managed and marketed for mainstream audiences. Such domestication of the 'other' houstrains the homoerotic not only alongside but also through the passing bodies of the film's Jewish actresses. Portman, Kunis, Ryder and half-Jewish Hershey wade into the muck of perfect prudish swans gone wrong, passing out of the excessively wanting but classically unwanted Jewish female stereotypes of the Mother, Hag and Princess that dominate film and TV roles. An exaggerated American dream-turned-nightmare of mismanaged sexual discovery, the film imagines ballet as a way to transcend the Jewish body's humors and horrors. A Jewish assimilatory promise is partnered with a deviant sexual transformation. The film overlaps distinct economies of desire as it entangles overt sexual exploration and covert Jewish passing as accomplices in white impersonations of the other. The re-closeting of the queer through its domestication and the visibly Jewish through adoption of white balletic codes offer hazmat experiments in a two-part and doubled-edged bodily becoming. As depictions of class mobility coded through dance desires made demonic, the film appears to relate the

particular dangers of a familiar Jewish in-between to those of the bi-sexual or bi-curious ambivalence of a position between goodness and badness. In the film's intended unclarity of both identities, the threat of the other's ability to pass in and out of the non-normal is blurry enough to bury all fears of a stance against patriarchy.

In what I want to call a domestication of the queer, *Black Swan* exploits the horror of repressed desire only to recontain the ambiguously Jewish, ambiguously sexual female and restore status quo norms of white womanhood both within and beyond the narrative frame of the film.<sup>222</sup> But in blacking up the not-quite-white femme fatale through the psychotic atavism of a more sexually adventurous swan, the film appropriates the creative and sexual potential of queer desire to ultimately reaffirm the social and psychological pathology of whiteness. Perhaps nowhere in the film says it better than the crazed cunnilingus that never really happens.

In a stoned stupor masterminded by ego-double 'Lily' played by the spray-tanned but also Jewish Mila Kunis, the two leads return to Nina's apartment and securing a wooden door block against the mother's aggressive surveillance, engage in were-swan sin of oral sex. The "pas-de-chat" as one blogger punned, exaggerated the cattiness of the dancer doubles. In a blurry hallucination of self-pleasure as self-sabotage, the plot

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<sup>222</sup> In her book chapter, "Hollywood's Hot Voodoo" included in *Incorporations: Race, Nation and the Politics of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), Eva Cherniavsky fleshes out this possibility of a film's digetic and extra-digetic components in her discussion of Joseph Steinberg's 1929 film, *Blonde Venus*. Cherniavsky's analysis of the white actress, Marlene Dietrich emerging from a gorilla suit to sing "Hot Voodoo" against a tropical backdrop and chorus line in black face brings up similar questions as to how the hypersexualized body of the female film star complies with the Anglo-American racial norm while simultaneously suggesting stereotypes of animality and lawlessness associated with racial otherness.

immediately erases the lesbian encounter through the conflation of fantasy and dance-induced mental illness. When Nina arrives late to rehearsal the next morning only to see Lily on stage dancing the black swan role, any clinging hope that the two would actually rise up through homoromance against the evil choreographer's manipulative plot was crushed by its 'just a dream' justification. When Nina brings it up with Lily at the first water break, Lily ensures that no such thing ever happened. Lily mocks Nina for her monstrous mixup, teasingly asking, "Was I good?" The impulse to side with Lily, the more sexually expressed, and thus the more resolved of the two, is meant to win out for the viewer in this diminutive instant.

But even if Nina is nuts, for a flash we feel the wrath of this painful bitch slap. For the flickering moment in which we pity the fool, our monster looks almost human. And while reeking of middle school mean girls, this episode of shame and self-doubt resonates momentarily with a queerer gaze that recognizes the tensions between what is understood to be real or not as aligned with oppressive norms of socialized sexuality. Quite simply, the sex that 'didn't really happen,' did, for Nina as for the viewer. As opposed to a viewership that itself gets contained and regulated by the logic of the film, a critical opportunity exists for the productive power of watching for a gesture toward homoeroticism that appears even vaguely 'sympathetic' the morning after. Upon reconsideration of this 'just a dream' justification, I wonder about the possibility (the right?) to elevate this dream-like state as a kinesthetic or felt reality, if not a narrative one. In so far as the wet dream punctures the otherwise overwhelmingly misogynistic

grand narrative, I question a possible ‘queer moment’ here that felt real for me even as I knew it was my imagination, and not Nina’s that the film was working to tame.

But this is my prerogative: To pay special attention to the moments I desire to view queerly. Stratton’s related viewership of Jewish moments makes this particular comparison implicit in his book’s title and central premise, *Coming Out Jewish*. While Stratton deploys the rhetoric of a sexual ‘coming out’ to articulate the implications for Jewish cultural studies concerned with projects of acculturation, (he says ‘coming out’ is part of the discourse of assimilation<sup>223</sup>), I argue that a film like *Black Swan* makes clear how an overlapping desire for a Queer and Jewish viewership works to expose the ruse of the regular/right way to watch ballet movies. In its efforts to invisibilize Jewishness and appropriate queerness, various components of the film work in tandem to perpetuate the structural binaries of white and black. It is through this awareness of my own excessive desire to view queerly and Jewishly that I position *Black Swan* as a poignant counterpoint to the queer(er) Jewish potential I discuss elsewhere in the dissertation in overlapping pious/porn spectacles (Chapter 1), burlesque and cabaret (Chapter 2), and a long gone Golden Era of Jewish female comedy (Chapter 3).

### **Swan as a Pawn of Social Control: Uncertain Jew, Less Certain Subject**

*Black Swan* names its monster, and from the initial scenes, establishes the threat of female desire and derangement as the central danger and horror plot of this contemporary *Swan Lake* remake. Not unlike other recent Hollywood depictions of the

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<sup>223</sup>Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, 12.

market-driven femme fatale who finally breaks under the pressure of her own wanton excesses, the protagonist's dizzying efforts at artistic achievement and the possibility of creative or economic capital dissolves as the cause/effect of her fatal femininity.<sup>224</sup> Even worse, her fully physical and psychological crackup at precisely the moment of her ultimate peak of success reveal the near-proverbial female who can never be whole under capital, despite - but more truly because of - her wildest, darkest dreams. But in reclaiming the ways in which the film realizes its lead woman through a series of uncertain realities, the film makes space to view other identities with ambivalent relationships to normalcy. Folded into the film's narrative and stylistic exploitation of female desire through the psychotic power of its excesses is an equally potent comment on spectacles of Jewish femininity and its (monstrous) relationships to dance.

As Nina morphs into total madness under the spell of a dance-induced mania, less-than-clear plot twists force viewers to wonder what is 'real' among of a slew of career-crazed hallucinations. Unexplainable skin sores and graphic imaginations of self-harm parallel the devolution of mental assuredness, crafting a kinesthetic mind fuck for the presumably willing viewer. But where these physical and psychic uncertainties reveal a reality in constant flux, evolving interpretation, and ambivalent conclusion, there is

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<sup>224</sup> Think of such psychobitch protagonists Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) and Jennifer Aniston in *Horrible Bosses* (2011). But where these female leads are personified in 'boss' roles that caricature the woman in professional positions of power, *Black Swan*'s Nina Sayers can only command power through self-annihilation. Within the opening scenes, company director, Thomas relays this to the company: "We all know the story. Virginal girl, pure and sweet, trapped in the body of a swan. She desires freedom but only true love can break the spell. Her wish is nearly granted in the form of a prince, but before he can declare his love her lustful twin, the black swan, tricks and seduces him. Devastated the white swan leaps off a cliff killing herself and, in death, finds freedom."

opportunity to read identities in crisis - like passing Jewishness and its domestication of the queer - beyond the film's narration.

In the film's projections of monstrosity onto excessive femininity, an underlying tension exists around Portman's image as an un/Jewish 'face of perfection' (as she's been called by Dior's fashion team). The very possibility of Portman as the female monster in a horror film like *Black Swan* extends from this perfectly petite, contained figure. It is also where the visual ambiguities of un/Jewishness and her nose in particular are concerned. It is this nose and its visual promise of perfection that offers convincing Jewish entrance into the film's ballet elite, but that ultimately fails to withhold the psychosomatic stress of a passing moment at the top. This imagination of personal crisis embodied through the un/Jewish female monster-dancer translates the disciplining powers of ballet (read as whiteness here) onto the scapegoat of a singular subject/object of social control. I argue it is this tarnishing of the good girl persona that both haunts and taunts the heteropatriarchal imagination of (even Jewish) America.

A compelling parallel exists between the potential of a 'white nose' to threaten Jewish allegiances and the protagonist's lack of loyalty to anyone but herself. As the film demonizes Nina's self-sabotaging impulses, her efforts at perfection look less and less sympathetic. The film strips the protagonist of any redeeming humanness through literal and figurative animality of Nina's gruesome transformation. By the time the character's knees crack backward, and Nina replaces pale, pink outfits with black tank tops, leggings, and eventually skin piercing swan feathers, it becomes possible to reject her as altogether illogical, irrational, selfish, and sick. The unsympathetic dehumanization of Aronofsky's

monster not only assists the nightmarish depiction of ballet, but also projects the burden (and the brunt) of creative, ethnic, and sexual repression onto the psychic and corporeal plane of the singular, self-obsessed ballerina.<sup>225</sup>

In unearthing the repressive ‘psychological’ recesses of social order enough to generate box office ‘thrills’ for its audiences, *Black Swan* ultimately returns the repressed back to her more obscure non-place; a less-than-totally convincing fatal fall seeped in blood we are already taught to distrust. In the previous scene’s battle with her own image backstage, Nina breaks the mirror and stabs what looks to be Lily but turns out to be herself. When in the next green room shot Lily returns to congratulate her on a well-danced black swan, Nina does or doesn’t realize her own madness at losing all grip on reality, and in her return to dance the final act, does or doesn’t actually die. As the film leaves its ending undone in this way, it knocks our swan off her balletic perch in a single, final gesture that climaxes with the fun, or thrill, let’s say, of her ambivalent demise. It is this uncertain fall from view (behind the set and ending the film) that perhaps best identifies the limits of today’s repressive fantasies of sexual, creative, and ethnic otherness and our ambivalent willingness to see them sustain at front and center.

Less of a cliff hanger than an intentional blurring, however, the ambiguous death intends to cause pause for the viewer, as if to say, you choose how you want her, dead or

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<sup>225</sup> Film Scholar Robin Wood relates this aspect of the horror film monster to ‘surplus’ repression in “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*. Ed, Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 195-219. At the crux of Wood’s argument is the Freudian theory that in a society built on monogamy and family there will be an enormous surplus of sexual and creative energy as well as alternative ethnic and ideological identities that will have to be repressed; and that what is repressed must always strive to return, 205.

alive. In this invitation to determine the outcome, the film defers a certain power of attorney to the viewer to make meaning of what horror film scholar Reynold Humphries calls a “failure of closure”, or an ending that doesn’t truly end.<sup>226</sup> But to say that the audience gets to choose is more deceptive than freely open to interpretation. Underneath the guessing game of what becomes of Nina, or any number of ballerinas the film imagines will crumble in search of their own self-sabotaging swan song, is the pervasive, and unambiguous suppression of the ‘masculine’ female to the realm of the unlovable, unmarried, excessively wanting were-woman. She tempts the bourgeois “dread” as Wood describes it, of women “usurping the active, aggressive role that patriarchal ideology assigns to the male.” Nina’s portrait of the manly woman thus marks precisely what the market-driven glass ceiling on female sexual and creative energy is so wont to repress.<sup>227</sup>

Read Jewishly, Nina’s murderous jealousy and manipulative revenge work to contain her excessive assimilatory desires. Repressed sexuality and its connotations of suppressed ethnic and creative identities are rerouted and falsely reconciled through the horror-pleasure of her autoerotic self-sabotage. The ‘horrible’ acts, which finally only demolish the protagonist herself, perhaps most pointedly indicate the utility of a horror monster analysis to readings of passing Jewish femininity. Only truly harming herself,

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<sup>226</sup> Reynold Humphries, *The American Horror Film: an introduction*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2002), 166.

<sup>227</sup> Wood, “American Horror Film,” 217. I wonder how *Black Swan*’s portrait of female identities in mind and body splitting crises comments less on sexual repression and more on the trappings of so-called sexual liberation, as if to ask the viewer to decide to what degree the woman controls her own image, and to then pleasurably judge what she chooses to do with it.

her monstrous aims at beauty and success are made a matter of her own self-derailment. It is this assignment of culpability to the passing Jewish female body that both personify structurally repressive forces that repress sexually, creatively, ethnically othered identities as much as physically possible (passable) and functions as the bodily site on which to project that same violence. This subject/object ambiguity returns once again to the Jewish female monster-figure in stereotypes of her ominous excesses that render her (only) fit to be contained.

### **Swan Queen Kills Herself, Strains Ballet: 32 *Fouettés* and Trouble of Dancing Badly**

While the gatekeepers of ballet's near-private sector snootiness might be loath to admit it, *Black Swan* brought ballet back to the public purview, and in style. According to reviewer Luke Jennings for the London-based *The Observer*, that city's infamous Royal Ballet received too many phone calls to count that winter of the film's release in hopes of securing tickets for Portman's performance of the Swan Queen.<sup>228</sup> *New York Times* dance reviewer Alistair Macaulay said audiences would surely be disappointed when they came to the Metropolitan Opera House if they came to see something akin to *Black Swan*, and went on to dump on the ignorant crowd as much as the unenthused fourth and final act of American Ballet Theater's poorly envisioned flop.<sup>229</sup> Moreover, several reviewers took issue with the doubling of white and black swan as mean-girl alter egos, insisting upon

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<sup>228</sup> Luke Jennings, "Swan Lake: 'The Royal Ballet are on a High'" *The Observer*, 30 January 2011, The New Review Section.

<sup>229</sup> Alistair Macaulay, "A 'Swan' of Complex Shades" *The New York Times*, 14 Feb 2011, Dance.

the necessity of swan roles as two distinct characters played by the sometimes one and other times two dancers.

But evidenced in the matching sentiments of so many dance reviews of the multi-city *Swan Lakes* staged since the film is the monstrous offense of the film's sensationalized misrepresentation, and the horror of Hollywood's butchering of ballet's most beloved repertory classic. The most impassioned protest of the film from the ballet community was written by a former Swan Queen dancer with the Royal Ballet, Deborah Bull, who lauded the lifetime of work it takes to become a ballerina, and finds Portman's meager year of training for the role a blasphemous offense to the discipline. In an article entitled, "The Truth About Ballet," Bull says that *Black Swan* has set the public's perception of ballet back 50 years, and that the film reveals "precious little about what it's like to dance" and bears no relation to the reality of being a professional ballerina. Bull says that ballet has long been a favorite for film scripts with themes regularly detailing the ballerina's willingness to subjugate health, happiness and reason to a relentless quest for perfection. Most, she defends, have told a version of the same story; a pushy mother, an autocratic director, and the sacrifice of relationships, sanity, and it would seem, life itself to the art form.<sup>230</sup>

Underlying these perspectives is an anxiety around Portman's dancing itself, which no doubt includes the media scandal that ensued in defense of the stunt double's uncredited contributions. Responding to claims that Portman did not actually do the

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<sup>230</sup> Deborah Bull, "The Truth About Ballet," *The Telegraph*, Jan 21 2011  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/8272365/The-truth-about-ballet.html>

majority of on-screen dancing for her Oscar-winning role, Aronofsky released a statement through studio Fox Searchlight. Of 139 dance shots in the film, 111 are Portman presumably untouched and 28 are her dance double Sarah Lane.<sup>231</sup> *Black Swan* choreographer (and Portman's fiancé) Benjamin Millepied likewise told the *Los Angeles Times* that Natalie did "85 percent" of the dancing in the film.<sup>232</sup> Meanwhile, 27-year-old American Ballet Theater ballerina Sarah Lane told Entertainment Weekly (EW.com) that Portman only danced 5 percent of the full-body shots in the film. She also claimed that one of the film's producers asked her not to speak publicly about her work during Oscar season. "The shots that are just her face with arms, those shots are definitely Natalie," Lane says. "But that doesn't show the actual dancing." Though she was never promised a particular title for her six weeks of work on the film, Lane admits she was disappointed to see that she is credited only as "Hand Model," "Stunt Double," and "Lady in the Lane" (a brief walk-on role).<sup>233</sup> The only true ballerina of the cast, it is interesting to note that she is the only unJewish one too. In a compelling inversion of normative white privilege, which would order the structural hierarchy of gentile white women over Jewish white

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<sup>231</sup> Adam Markovitz, "Black Swan director Darren Aronofsky defends Natalie Portman in body-double controversy", *Inside Movies*, Mar 28, 2011 <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2011/03/28/darren-aronofsky-black-swan-controversy/>. Of the 85 seconds of Portman on pointe as she exists the opening prologue, Aronofsky stated, "That is completely her without any digital magic. I am responding to this to put this to rest and to defend my actor. Natalie sweated long and hard to deliver a great physical and emotional performance. And I don't want anyone to think that's not her they are watching. It is."

<sup>232</sup> Jean Linihan, "Benjamin Millepied on 'Black Swan,' Natalie Portman and his Dancing Future" *Los Angeles Times* Mar 23, 2011, Entertainment, Arts & Culture.

<sup>233</sup> Adam Markovitz, "'Black Swan' Double Claims Natalie Portman only did '5 percent' of Full-Body Dance Shots in the Movie," *Inside Movies*, Mar 25, 2011 <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2011/03/25/portman-black-swan-double/>

women, Portman and her passing act wins the contest of white perfection. If the price of not winning means uncredited labor and invisible bodies, imagined ‘inside’ the film through Nina’s multiple Jewish ego doubles and ‘outside’ the film through the forgetting of Sarah Lane, perhaps it can follow in order to win, one must be ever-striving at whiteness and its promise of (dancerly) perfection. The diminutive position of not winning, for Nina’s various doubles Jewish or gentile, may reek of not being so perfectly ‘white’ in quite the prized and paranoid way Hollywood would have us believe.

Exposing the ruse of Portman’s undanced dancing arguably added to the film’s appeal, of course, but more critical to this analysis, it brings to the forefront a public outcry over uncertain or ambiguous identities.<sup>234</sup> As if lied to over the realness of fictional representation, such concerns in the guise of so-called fairness for dancers reveal the double threat and intrigue of the film’s persuasive tricks. Ballet criticisms and scandal bloggers alike raise questions as to how dance practices, politics, precedents work or fail, but also seem to agree over the displeasure of such dance-altering cinematic tricks. As the moneymaking media trap pits one woman’s word against another’s fame, it no doubt engenders another swan doubling with yet more ‘real’ were-woman appeal. But it also highlights the public anxiety over identities caught in-between. Here, I argue, there is opportunity to view dancer and undancer against a parallel anxieties of Jew and unJew, sexually deviant and not. While quite different in the scope of their concern, I argue the

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<sup>234</sup> Not only does the undanced dancing help render ambiguous the identifications of Jewish female bodies, but it also works to cover up actual black bodies in the construction of its white/black dancing roles. See Carol J. Clover for more discussion of body doubles and white guilt over uncredited (black) sources in “Dancin’ in the Rain” *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Summer 1995): 722-47.

constructions of identity cannot be read separately, as their representations are likewise wrapped up in the labors to look right and white in the limelight of acceptable femininity.

The direction of cinematography does its own work to splice such identities in half. As the camera fragments the figure into short, severe cuts, the dancing body in motion is rarely fully visible. A combination of Portman and her stunt double, the splicing of the ballerina into quick edits works at once to build the tension of the scene and disfigures the dancer into variably signified, fetishized segments (feet in and out of pointe shoes are severed from arms, upper torso and face). This partial view works to piece together the whole girl from a composite of two women's variant limbs, and in doing so, dices up the body in ways that distract nearly entirely from the dancing.

Perhaps the most pointed blow to ballet purists is the camera's conspicuous concealing of the ballet's central climax; the thirty two *fouettés en tournant* at the coda of the black swan *pas de deux*. We 'see' the coda two times in the film. The first time occurs after her audition for the black swan was sabotaged by Lily's late entrance to the dance studio, when Nina returns home devastated but more determined to practice the fouettes in the triptych mirrors of her apartment ballet *barre*. And the second time happens as Nina feverishly dances the part on opening night accompanied by the final growth of her full feathers at the near orgasmic point of insanity. In both cases, the camera splits the body into top (Portman) and bottom (her double), and any pleasure of viewing the ballerina at work is replaced with the horrible sense of her mania moving at full speed. Where the missing piece of the whole ballerina adds salt to a purist's wounds, the lack of fully-in-tact *fouettés* or any on-camera balletic feat for that matter draws

interesting parallels for other in/visible matters of the movie. To be legible for major audiences, the notoriously torturous aspects of ballet training are abstracted from the dancing itself. A fictive separation of labor, body and psyche would seem to say that it suffices for technique to be alluded to, but not seen. The conspicuous absence of the athletic mainstay of any serious *Swan Lake* reconstruction not only disappoints dance viewers even remotely familiar with the ballet, but also reframes the dancing body in ways more drastic than even strategic body-chopping camera cuts.

The film's distortion of the ballet's classic coda further enunciates the differences between *Swan Lake* and this cinematic redramatization and criticisms for inaccurate portrayals of technical training. Even if the film makes no claims to being true to the ballet, its efforts at dancerly authenticity through camera trickery fragment the body in ways more significant than merely hiding an actor's lack of dance technique. Left only to assume that, as the black swan, Nina does in fact *fouetté* (we pretend her upper body is attached to the lower body we see on camera), I catalog this unseen segment as yet another factor figured beyond the frame and beyond the body. The invisible *fouettés* sever the evidence of technique from actual bodies in ways similar to the in/visibility of Jewish ethnicity in that they impersonate a fully functional white female dancing body and mask its inferior excesses. The use of the body double and the splicing alike may additionally suggest the uncertain possibility of full Jewish passing into upper class whiteness. Likewise, in the ways the camera dissects the dancing scene from what's seen, left in its failures of full translation are also the uncertain, and off camera consequences of Nina's sexual awakening.

When we do see Portman's body in motion, however, defenders of the field say she dances...badly. Extensions of the elbow leave something to be desired, the committee of professors in my PhD oral examination insisted, as they gestured to explain she was "here," not "here." One member of the committee even suggested that Portman's bad dancing was reminiscent of the not-quite-right, not-quite-white aspects of the Jewish female dancing body I address in the dissertation more broadly, and connected Portman's bad ballet to the similarly weak technique of the Schlep Sisters' 'bad' dancing.<sup>235</sup> But where the Schlep Sisters and groups just like them dance badly as part of their shtick, Portman's inferior movements do not intend to invite laughter. The ways in which both cases make conspicuous the badness of Jewish female performers who lack sufficient ballet training is striking. Through physical and cinematic techniques, passing and not passing divide along an axis of visual reveal and concealment, even as bodies themselves work to parody white forms. As comic shtick resists the very (white thing) the film's dance sequences put forth, there is something significant to be said about the role of the female monster as the Jewish predicament in both horror and humor scenarios. In order to view both citations of *Swan Lake* as critical forms through radically different agendas, I use the counter-example of Barbra Streisand's comic rendition to point to the borrowing of ballet for intentionally othered means.

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<sup>235</sup> For more discussion of the Schlep Sisters and their 'bad' dancing, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

### **A Chicken or Duck is no Mistake in a Funny Girl's *Swan Lake***

A reenactment of the Ziegfeld Follies' 1931 *Swan Lake* parody, Barbra Streisand's swan shtick in *Funny Girl* (1968) recalls one of the many in Fanny Brice's repertoire. As the stage unfurls classically pretty swans in perfect unison, sweeping camera angles do their part to match Prince Siegfried's sense of a hunter-lover's overwhelm. Enter Streisand, Queen of the bunch, arms in high fifth, and for an instant, regally convincing. As he gestures to shoot, she flaps her arms and runs without haste in a flatfooted circle to interrupt him and the Tchaikovsky overture. "Vat are you gonna do, shoot da svans? Dese lovelies? My svans girls?! What are you, dumb?" she asks in a Yiddish accent, and begins to sing over a stringy score more familiar to musical theater than classical ballet. A pigeon-toed stance and a duckish walk highlight the long, lean limbs exposed under her high-cut tutu, as both her looks and her limericks mock the image of waspy feminine perfection a White Swan is meant to fully suggest.

The play on schmaltzy—the ballet's traditional sentimentality and the double entendre of a kosher chicken's cooking fat—is driven home through lyrics like, "A chicken or a duck is a mistake, when you do *Swan Lake*". A bird by any other name than a swanlike princess she seems to call herself and her funny girl Jewish looks. Testing out the theory of her swan imperfections she seems to know too well are "only fit for consommé," she calls in a temptresses voice, "Prince," to which he responds with a heroic leap across the proscenium. "Vas that necessary?" she retorts, as baffled as not amused. Hands on her hips, she is the picture of an expert Yiddishe Mama, doubly insulting and clueless as to his efforts at charm and grace. "You coidn't walk ova here like

a pouoisson?” The irony of a chicken-like swan is thus revised as a heterosexual misfit; a goose from the Jewish ghetto, too demanding, too prude, and utterly unfit for marriage—and to a Prince no less!

The swan act follows the same script of the film’s central love story; a lovable clown whose immigrant roots prove charming enough to win the heart of the hotshot husband-to-be Nicky Arnstein, played by Egyptian heartthrob Omar Shariff. But too publicly lovable to keep a ‘private’ man, her performance success strangles their relationship as Arnstein pales in pathetic comparison. An illicit gambling bout gone too far, his career drives plummet as hers soar. In a significant review of the film’s queer potential, Stacey Wolf writes about Streisand’s characterization outside of normative relationship to men and power.<sup>236</sup> While there are no “homofolk” in the film, Wolf defends that the narrative and direction break from traditional filmic representations of gender and sexuality. While I do find the film’s central relationship ultimately filtered through the tensions of masculinity and the fear of female creative (read sexual) power ala the repressed dimensions of the female monster, I borrow Wolf’s argument in so far as it makes room for a similarly queer reading of Streisand’s dancing in particular.

It is my sense that the comic success of Streisand’s physical puns does not dismiss the fact that she actually dances the role, which stands as one of if not the most dance-heavy roles she’s ever played on film. She needs no stunt double for the several *chaine* turns across the stage, though it is her dizziness that is featured in the swelling camera

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<sup>236</sup> Stacy Wolf, “Barbra’s ‘Funny Girl’ Body,” 247.

work and the clutzy way she lands out of the turns and into the Prince's arms. Elbowing ensemble dancers to get to the front of the v-shaped corps de ballet, she leads them in a simple, but elegant sequence. For the few moments free of a vocal or physical punch line, Streisand appears unscathed by her clear lack of ballet training. Moreover, where Aronosky's camera cuts Portman's figure such that the film viewer never fully sees Portman's body in motion, Streisand's less edgy spoof is filmed with total visibility. A play within the play, as it were, Streisand's ballet takes place on stage for a recreated audience, just as in the onstage denouement of *Black Swan*'s final scenes.

While intentionally parodying the portrait of poise *Black Swan* also tries its best to dis/embody, the similarities in dancing motifs cannot be overlooked too quickly. The star known for her singing range is workin' it here without breaking a sweat, and again, in the dancery athleticism required when Siegfried lifts her overhead two times before the two bump into each other for comedic effect. Even this intentional mess-up looks strikingly similar to *Black Swan*'s intentional faux pas as Portman's black swan falls from her partner's embrace. Where the one makes us laugh and the other aims to make us gasp, there is a function of the strategic blip that breaks with how it is "supposed to be", and in doing so, makes visual the parodic potential of a critical distance from the normal.

A significant link between horror and humor may exist in the potential for a horror film to 'safely' express hostility in ways similar to the devices of a joke. Both are seen as non-threats despite their subversive potential to bolster or break with social norms. Ultimately, when the female monster makes her own joke, the joke may not as easily make a monster out of her. It is this Jewish female monster that dances as variably

within the discourse of the female trickster, whose actions unite the paradoxical through humor.<sup>237</sup> A feminist revisionist approach as personified by the monster-trickster might take its best shot at the very ‘jokes’ that would dehumanize, disfigure, or otherwise divide her in two. By claiming a disjunctive good-badness as the impossibly cute misfit or some version thereof, the self-reflexive monster masters both parts like it were her own dichotomous invention. She usurps male assertiveness in the autoexotic assignment of her own duplicitous nature, and her dancing deviously refuses to stay put. This master monster plays the swan even as she mocks it on her own terms. Both the face and the butt of the joke, she appears to direct her own light board and shine in its spotlight. As if to damn the price of perfection before it can even topple her down, Streisand’s ‘monster’ looms largest as she is tumbling and fumbling around.

As Streisand claims her perfect imperfections, she eases the blow for those that would find fault in her fowl-like attempts at more assured womanhood. Reasoning in this way with herself, she teases them too. As the intentionally foiled ‘chicken legged ballet’ brings funny attention to Streisand’s own bad dancing, such that the dance viewer can actually appreciate her attempts at the *corp de ballet* sequences, Portman’s biggest and blackest swan efforts at dancery authenticity seem to fall flat on their humorless face. Still, regardless of how or whether we laugh, the potential for parody is present right from the start of both *Swan Lake* reimaginings as the white cultural milieu of ballet is stripped of its high art aesthetics down to lowlier entertainment forms of horror and

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<sup>237</sup> This focus on the female trickster’s unification of the paradoxical through humor comes from Riki Stephanie Tannen, *The Mask That Reveals, Post-Jungian and Postmodern Psychological Perspectives on Women in Contemporary Culture* (New York & London: Routledge 2007).

humor. The Jewish female in the part of impossible Swan Queen and, thus, monster in either case, performs her maneuvers with more or less control over her own lines of in/visible acceptance. Through traps of institutionalization, whiteness, maleness, and acceptable womanness as they are set out ambiguously for - and then circuitously by - her horribly Jewish and not quite right female body, she dances 'badly' as best she can.

### **Good (Nose), Bad (Nose): The Un/Funny Face of Jewish Mobility**

I situate this comparison of Jewish female performers and their debatably 'bad' dancing within the history of Jewish race and class mobility. As Jews became white folks through critical distance from yet more othered others, a legacy of self-critical humor with masculinist tendencies accessed whiteness by mocking the Jewish female.<sup>238</sup> Moralizing her good characteristics (traditional Jewish values) from her bad characteristics (excessive demands in everything but sex), the comedy of mostly male performers thus boosted the assimilatory project by laughing at the female bodily referent as the bearer of its best and worst extremes. But where female comics have joked all along, the defunct Jewish female body and its impossible sexiness has sustained at front and center. Where Streisand's funny girl persona fully maps the dichotomy of Jew/Swan in line with postwar personifications of the Jewish woman so prevalent at the time, Portman's passing swan-dom offers an important critique of contemporary Jewish female spectacle.

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<sup>238</sup> A movement of scholarship on Jewish identity in relation to gender and sexuality theorizes the Jewish female body as the site of projected status anxieties. See Prell, *Fighting*, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "New Jew", and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet".

The very lack of intended narrative humor in *Black Swan* insists that viewers regard the severity of ballet's (white nose) disciplines with utmost seriousness. In doing so, the film imagines concert dance and the suspense genre as complimentary zones of strict, high art humorlessness. The combination of the monster thriller and ballet's insatiable demands create the effect of a world so intense it quite literally hurts. Where for some, this painful personification of psychic and physical burden produces empathic kinesthetic viscera as if it were happening the same for Nina as for the viewer, others may sustain a critical space of distance from the 'feelings' of the film as unconvincingly over-the-top, and laughably so.

While horror films often invite laughter for audiences who seek out a campy, cult movie appeal, the Academy reception of *Black Swan* refuses this impulse altogether, pitching the film as the year's most respected high-drama. But in a screening of the film among colleagues and friends more iffy about the film's art appeal, viewers laughed variably at parts that they later explained felt sensationalistic, disingenuous, or just plain 'bad'.<sup>239</sup> Quite the contrary to rose punch line reflexes, the instances of laughter offer their own space of a Bakhtin-esque critical resistance. Bakhtin writes that "laughter has

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<sup>239</sup> A focus group of seven male and female friends, visual artists, dancers, and PhD students in Critical Dance Studies, History, Anthropology, and Ethnomusicology screened and discussed the film on August 26, 2011. The group shared a unanimous sense of the film and Portman's character in particular as totally lacking in humor. One participant observed that the only gag moment was when the actor-dancer playing Von Rothbart walks past Nina backstage in the final scenes, and the viewer predicts this will scare Nina as yet another unsure hallucination, but instead we/she hears von Rothbart say simply "hi" as he walks by with the corps members. Another participant suggested that the bits of laughing that punctured an otherwise deadly silent screening responded to the film's overall 'badness', which he ascribed to the script, the acting, and the overall concept of the film. This notion of badness resonates with other responses to Portman's 'bad' dancing.

the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can figure it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its centre, examine it freely and experiment with it.”<sup>240</sup> In other words, laughter’s ability to queer repressive controls on us, to quell the power of its psychological thrills as mere cheap thrills that could dupe only Hollywood’s hoards of the sexually and artistically bored.

The space of laughter here, rebellious in its refusal of the film’s emotional trajectory, reconsiders the power of the film through its active resistance. As this ‘over-it’ attitude scoffs at the film’s incredulous affectations, it also disregards the overarching logic the film puts forth. By laughing at the film, presumably instead of gasping, the commentators reveal an ineffectuality of the film’s performative gestures; in other words, to argue it doesn’t do what it says it’s doing. To laugh at the horrible moments of Nina’s gruesome cuticle tearing, for instance, refuses to fully enter the contract of spectatorship and its requirements of blind acceptance. The laughter at bad acting, bad dialog, incredulous sex, and equally unpersuasive splicing of Portman and dance double stunts resist complacency with the film’s dismissive premise of an excessively female struggle for success blown - as per usual - way out of proportion.

In the rest of my dissertation chapters on Jewish ‘funny girls,’ I take up an inverse potential of ‘badness’ as a particularly Jewish, intentionally queer dance impulse. When classmates in one seminar found Brooklyn’s burlesque duo the Schlep Sisters to dance

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<sup>240</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. “Epic and the Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study in the Novel” in *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 23.

‘badly’, I began to have fun tracing all the reasons why scantily clad, fleshy Jewish girls in sexy Jewish acts would never try to be ‘good’ dancers so long as standards of dance were tied to appropriate femininity a la the White Swan Queen. The very name of the 40-member cabaret showcase, Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad suggests as much. The ‘gone bad’ of course parodies an expectation of prudish religious chicks by trading in pious ethics for sexy fun, but group ringleader Susannah Perlman offered *Black Swan* as precisely what her Nice Jewish Girls were riling against (in cardboard costumes of oversized dreidels and spandex blue bodytards in the spirit of a shorter legged, big breasted Blue Man Group).<sup>241</sup>

Where the bad (Jewish) girls of *Black Swan* couldn’t seem to be having less fun with themselves or one another, it is significant that the rhetoric of their ‘badness’ similarly pivots around unresolved sexual politics and the representation of Jewish female bodies. Such badness accounts both for the intended badness of their deviant experiments in homocurious eroticism and the unintended badness remarked upon by my nonplussed peers. And yet, where Jewish burlesque and related comedy formats acknowledge that they react against Hollywood’s weak depictions of women in similar ways, films like *Black Swan* make house pets of those same queer spaces.

An analysis of what is intentionally or unintentionally funny in *Black Swan* and Streisand’s *Swan Lake* citations lends itself to an important historical critique of humor in relation to period specific Jewish whiteness. As Portman’s ‘white nose’ constructs today’s good girl image as the White Swan the same as it does for her celebrity appeal

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<sup>241</sup> Susannah Perlman, phone interview, Aug. 20, 2011. See more discussion of the Nice Jewish Girls in Chapter 2.

outside of dramatic roles, the absence of a Jewish female bodily mark becomes the very (un)thing that lets her be funny too. In one *Saturday Night Live* sketch written and directed by Adam Samburg, Portman parodies her own perfectness in a black and white gangster rap music video.<sup>242</sup> The refrain, “Shut the fuck up and suck my dick,” substitutes the irony of a ‘white nose’ for a pretend penis-phallus. Playing with the implausibility of a badass persona for Hollywood’s sweetheart, the humor highlights the whiteness of her image through the video’s distance from actual blackness. As a riff on the so-called Jewish-Black alliance that now makes its way into so much of Jewish written and directed humor, Samburg and Portman’s comic debut makes laughable the anxious Jewish appropriation of rap.<sup>243</sup> As it commodifies blackness as a guilty white pleasure, the skit also works to heighten the gap between the media-soaked masculinity of black cultural forms and Portman’s white femininity. Were she to be more Jewish looking, this parody of the black, male rapper would not work, because her nose, I’d argue, would be monstrous (read, phallic) enough.

As if announcing the race and gender anxieties provoked by her white passing, horror roles and garish humor deface her perfect image. To the extent that a stereotypical Jewish nose is monstrously funny good or funny bad, Portman’s power lies in her perfect non-possession of such a bodily mark. Defacing her image is at once tied to and in substitution for a process of de-facing (as in, a literal detachment off the face) the nose

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<sup>242</sup> “Natalie Raps”, *Saturday Night Live*, Season 31, Episode 14, NBC, Aired Mar 4, 2006. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVPCz0W7Rm0>.

<sup>243</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the anxiety stems from the very component that makes blackface most legible; its ability to be taken off. The mega-famous hardcore punk turned hip hop group, the Beastie Boys, formed in 1981 in NYC, are doubtlessly the most popular and longest-running example of Jews who performed blackface via rap.

from the Jewish actress. In the case of *Black Swan*, this absence amounts to an invisibilization of Jewishness in the film's narrative and cast components. In the case of the sketch with Adam Samburg, this absence of Portman's Jewish bodily mark is brought to the forefront. Samburg's more stereotypical Jewish features, falsely masculinizing Viking helmet and gender-reversing 'back-up role' help make legible the farce as a Jewish (male) joke that has no room for Jewish looking women.

While the story of 'Jewish looking' figures on television and film records an important history of Jewish assimilation throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is significant to note that today's screen representations of Jewish looking characters are reserved almost entirely for men. Scholars of film and television have remarked on the recent resurgence of Jewish visual representation, and in particular the contemporary creation of a postmodern self-reflexivity made 'new' by its self-conscious repetition of old insider/outsider tropes.<sup>244</sup> From Seinfeld's tenure on TV to any number of recent films with Ben Stiller, Adam Sandler, Seth Rogen, etc, these writers note a renaissance of updated schlemiel roles. Jewish and non-Jewish actors (think Steve Carell's *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005) and *Dinner for Schmucks* (2010)) play sexually inept, insecure dweebs, for whom a castrated but still loveable caricature extends to joblessness, wifelessness, and general male-less-ness. The widespread popularity of this emasculated *putz* circulates well beyond Jewish-oriented circles. Stratton argues that its recurrence in Hollywood

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<sup>244</sup> Ruth D. Johnston defines Jewishness as the secular set of self-reflexive concerns rather than a set 'identity' in "Joke-Work", *You Should See Yourself*, 208. I extend this postmodern 'unfixity' to a corporeal investigation of in/visible Jewishness marked in relation to the gendered body.

suggests an overall Yiddishization of American culture.<sup>245</sup> But where ties to Jewishness per se are explicit for some, Stratton argues that schlemiel characters often offer the viewer the possibility of being read as a Jew (via looks, behavior, name) but no certainty.<sup>246</sup> Where Stratton finds evidence of an ambivalence of representation, however, a more gender-sensitive approach will notice that male Jewish actors/characters can freely look more ‘Jewish’ than Jewish female actresses, who lack any equivalently acceptable archetype.

Where the Jewish male face has been embraced as the mascot of a (sym)pathetic misguided American masculinity, the Jewish looking female has been pushed off camera. Even as Fox’s *Glee* features a Jewish American nose-conscious character desperately seeking Streisand, gone are the day of that singer’s Hollywood heyday in *Funny Girl* and *Yentl* (1983). Gone with her are the period starlets of Jewish sitcoms like Gertrude Berg’s ‘Molly Goldberg’ *The Goldbergs* (1949-1956), and the more recent but still passé Fran Drescher on *The Nanny* (1993-1999). Despite the decline of Jewish-acting actresses, or maybe because of it, an obsessive log kept by countless Jewish sites have become interested near-exclusively in those celebrity personalities that ‘pass’ into roles just like Nina, Lily, and Beth.<sup>247</sup> Itzkovitz has argued that these sites offer strange pleasures for Jewish and neo Nazi groups alike, but does not entirely explain why. In the context of this chapter’s focus on a monstrous black swan and her unJewish Jewishness, I defend

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<sup>245</sup> Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, 26.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>247</sup> A good example is “The 50 Sexiest Jewish Girls We Can’t Passover [Photos],” *Coed Magazine*, Apr 18, 2011 <http://coedmagazine.com/2011/04/18/the-50-sexiest-jewish-girls-we-cant-passover-photos/>

that the presence of hot Jewish chicks that do not look Jewish is as scary as it is sexy to viewers both pro and anti-Semite. A failure of visible ethnic identity interrupts the logic of a biologically bigoted premise so central to the projection of internalized Jewish assimilatory anxieties onto the female body, even as ‘passing’ promises to gain access points to whiter privileges. When read as an un/Jewish film, the uncertain threat of femininity translates in this unclear sense of whether its scarier—and funnier for that matter—for Jewish girls to look ‘Jewish’ or not.

## Conclusion

Passing into whiteness through ‘neutral’ noses, Jewish actresses in unJewish roles slide through the cracks of popular culture’s color lines today as they have through racial impersonations of various means for over a hundred years to access whiteness, whatever that entails at its historical moment.<sup>248</sup> In the comparative whiteness of Jewish performers in roles like *Black Swan*’s and Jewishness of *Funny Girl*, an important distinction between visual representations of Jewishness and its embodied efforts at whiteness is

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<sup>248</sup> Historical approaches to Jews acting, assimilating, or passing as ‘white’ differ on the precise conditions that engendered a Jewish transition from blackness to whiteness. For instance, while Michael Rogin locates this moment in blackface minstrel circuits of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as Jewish men and women whitened through blacking up in *Black Face, White Noise*, Brodtkin argues in *How Jews Became White Folks*, that whiteness was a post world war II reality for suburban Jews who fled the city with upwardly mobile dreams. For more on whiteness as a corporeal investment, see also works by David Roediger, “Whiteness and Ethnicity in the History of ‘White Ethnics’ in the United States” in *Race Critical Theories*, eds. Philomen Essed and David Theo Goldberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 325-34; James Baldwin, “Blacks and Jews” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed and with an introduction by Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 139-157; and Robyn Wiegman, “Visual Modernity” *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 21–42.

mapped in bodily terms. The Jewishness of *Black Swan*'s characters, writers, and directors is overlooked in the white/black world of ballet's demands for perfection as opposed to the deliberate duckishness of *Funny Girl*'s 'perfect imperfections'. In both cases, the implications of ethnic in/visibility brings to light mainstream ideas of where and how Jewishness can or should be seen in relation to the female ballet body, or filmic depictions thereof. And what, ultimately are audiences tuned in to a Jewish reading left with? As horror and not humor, *Black Swan* makes scary and un/funny the reversal of the upwardly mobile passing Jewish female act, and yet thrills audiences with its crazy-making improbability. To paraphrase Marx of history being repeated as farce, the notion here that *Black Swan* repeats as horror what *Funny Girl* presented as humor, tells of the crisis finally leftover: that the noses will grow back, the name changes will regress to ethnic originals, and the filmic and nonfictive careers among Hollywood's ballet elite be made moot by muddy signs of difference.<sup>249</sup>

Laughing at and laughing with may ultimately distinguish the performance that intends to be funny from the one that poorly executes its opposite aims at seriousness, but both scenarios offer a space for viewers to resist dogma in more or less radical ways. Comedy and horror lend themselves to parody in comparative ways, as both construct worlds of funhouse social commentary to the mundane concerns of its respective audiences. What is funny, as what is scary, forces a reframing of the familiar wherein Jewishness exaggerates its moves in and out of mainstream scripts. Taken to their

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<sup>249</sup> The reader may recall the scene in the comical gothic-horror-style family movie *Addam's Family Values* (1993), in which Wednesday Addams (played by Cristina Ricci) spooks her fellow campers with a similar scary story of a reversed nose job.

absurdist ends, Jewish jokes may frighten and ambiguously Jewish horror may look pretty funny. Releasing the steam valves of social insecurities, either approach bedevils through self-conscious roles of the not-quite-white star and the threat/fun of her excessive desires.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Sexy *Sabras*, Guns and Calendar Girls: Defensive Desires of a Global Diaspora**

It comes as no surprise to my generation of Jewish American readers that a whole dissertation on Jewish spectacle goes by without mention of Israel. In fact, the mere suggestion of Israel in the context of US Jewish female self-parody and its particular entanglements of funniness and sexiness seems somehow to miss the mark (of a specific Americanness and its distinct performance genealogy). If anything can be said about a shared politics of the sexy ruse I describe in do-it-yourself performance dugouts and its appropriations in Hollywood, it seems to be the conspicuous absence of any discussion of Israel or the trace of a Zionist project. That said, in recent years, personifications of the gun-wielding *Sexy Sabra* (or Israeli-born Jew) have proliferated in US-based print and online media. Sexualized representations of hot Israeli Jewish women have become so common that one wonders if the open sourcing of today's decentralized Jews re-connects to a 'biblical' imagination of the holy land through this militant triple X, or if the popularity of the famously olive-toned, 'sloe eyed,'<sup>250</sup> Israeli twenty-something speaks to a larger audience as the real-life sacrosanct of a religious GI Jane.<sup>251</sup> If these sites

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<sup>250</sup> Former Boston Herald sportswriter, Michael Gee was fired from his teaching position at Boston University after blogging an offensive comment about the "sloe eyes and bitchin' bod" of one of his students, and "a true Sabra". See post by glasscastle on blog, *Dowbrigade* from July 20, 2005 (<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/dowbrigade/2005/07/20/sexy-sabra-sluts-spell-danger-will-robinson/>), and also blogger, David Scott's post from July 15, 2005 recounting the same event (<http://shots.bostonsportsmedia.com/2005/07/gee-gone-again/>).

<sup>251</sup> See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for more discussion of the sacred/profane as not only popular pornographic trope, but also fundamental to its frontierist imagination of its own transgressive social and political potential. Where the discussion of "punk-porn princess" Joanna Angel engages a US Jewishness as religious ruse, however, this chapter points to

circulate on search engines through the power of their ‘hits’, then one can only assume that the popularity of an Israeli Defense Force female icon throws sexy missiles at heterosexual male viewers with mass appeal.<sup>252</sup>

This chapter begins by looking at the (viral) personification of this Sexy Sabra as archetypal foil of the unsexy funny girl grown up in the US. As the embodiment of authentic Jewish female allure, she stands in marked contrast to the performance plays of the Sexy Jewess spectrum I have outlined in the previous chapters.<sup>253</sup> While entirely distinct from depictions of and by the US Jewess/Jewface performer, hypersexualized representations of the Sexy Sabra in Jewish and gentile American magazines alike offer significant insight into a parallel imagination of Jewishness and gender for US Jews and

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quite distinct stakes of a sabra hotness, that while often intentionally humorous, invites a different kind of laughter tied to changing Zionist allegiances.

<sup>252</sup> It is critical to acknowledge that the particular construction of the Sexy Sabra described here is entirely entangled in the workings of an internet porn boom, by now exploded beyond categories of professional and amateur such that Niels Van Doorn has insisted upon a more complex analysis of Web 2.0 technologies, “Keeping it Real,” 411-430. While sites of analysis selected for case study here vary widely on their relations to the pornographic, I position them here as part of a larger sexualization of consumer society inseparably tied to the rise of raunch and its influences on visual culture. As discussed in Chapter 1, while I point to the pornographic as a realm of complex cultural desire, power and appropriation of femininity in particular, I resist any debate about its goodness or badness in moral terms.

<sup>253</sup> The Sexy Jewess variously mocks and modifies standards of white femininity so as to justify, apologize, criticize, pass into or otherwise make up for the guilty pleasures of (if still conditional entrance into) post-assimilatory sameness. While quite distinct to the context of this chapter’s discussion of Israel/Diaspora, it is significant to note that this militarized and sexualized “allure” extends previous theorizations of “girl power” outlined elsewhere in the dissertation. If this theme carries through the dissertation, however, I have tried to show how malleable a...monster it can be. See, for instance, the Jewish female monster in Chapter 4 of this dissertation who can ‘only’ self-sabotage, as directly and indirectly opposed to the frontierist femmes of Chapter 1 that mean to effect broad-sweeping social and political change from strikingly similar positions of Jewish and female (bodily) excess.

non-Jews. As the product and producer of defensive heteromasculinist desire – both sexual and I will argue, diasporic- this secondary US portrait of the sabra soldier plays both upon and beyond the post-assimilationist, post-feminist points of the Sexy Jewess jokerness. Embodying what I’m calling the defensive desires of a global Diaspora, sexualized sabra portrayals constitute a curious erotic imaginary of Jewish statehood. By attending to the gendered corporeal dimensions of this defensive desire and the conceptual crises they impose upon US representations of Jewishness, I likewise aim to introduce particular workings and reworkings of spectacle Jewish femininity that complicate aforementioned doctoral findings on the US Jewish funny girl body.

Despite Sander Gilman’s insistence on a postmodern imagination of the Jewish frontier that would update outmoded models of Diaspora thinking (discussed in Chapter 1), I return here deliberately to a diasporic frame in order to question its sustained and ambiguous position in shifting global ties to an Israeli nationalist project. Against the backdrop of growing global support for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions in/of Israel, I consider the terms of Sexy Sabra femininity and its ties to militarism in the context of a critical turn in Jewish diasporic definition. I thus extend the dissertation focus on Jewish spectacle femininity by looking at its work in representations that either support or resist an imperialist agenda in the Middle East. The chapter title’s “defensive desires” means to suggest that such personifications of sexy Israeli model and military women alike appropriate the figure of the sexy villainess ‘in defense’ of a Jewish state. Such desirous portrayals reflect a global Diaspora increasingly uncertain of its sustained support for Israel.

By positioning the *sabra* sex pot as the appropriated body of discursive desires ‘in defense’ also of a center-periphery, or Diaspora model more broadly, I contribute to scholarship that has focused on the gendered “Eros” of Jewish statehood in a larger focus on the sexualization of Jewishness.<sup>254</sup> Specifically, I mean to question how the heterosexual stereotype of military girls and their calendar exposés reinforce and rematerialize a discourse of the “muscular Jews”. This research question builds off of David Biale’s formulation of muscular Jews that has stood in for the Zionist nationalist project through the hyper-hetero virility promised by its sexy femme figures. Such a move returns to theories of the New Jew as personified through the material, visual and ideological valences of the Sexy Jewess (Chapter 1). This chapter re-situates previous discussions of post-feminist, post-assimilatory frameworks in the context of US-Israeli relations and the anti-Zionist critique of undue imperial expressions of power. To do so, I borrow especially from Judith Butler’s thesis in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* there are Jewish resources for a stance against Jewish statehood. I add to her critical analysis the live and online performance of femininity as part and parcel of that embattled ethico-religious agenda.

To contrast the sexy online gallery of *sabra* military-models with live performance examples that both reiterate and reformulate her image, I offer a close reading of *New Eyes* (2010-current), a solo performance created and performed by

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<sup>254</sup> Scholarship on the subject ranges from the cultural theories of David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), to more pointedly personal reflections on contemporary politics in Israel by Kathy Fergusson in *Kibbutz Journal: Reflections on Gender, Race & Militarism in Israel* (Trilogy Books, 1995), and Sarah Schulman’s *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

Israeli-American actress, Yafit Josephson. The one-act drama is currently on tour across a number of US college campus after a 90-show run in Los Angeles and more in New York. Analysis provides insight into the modes of marketing and moralizing of a personal portrait of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) through the funny and fun-loving female lead. I offer embodied ways of reading *New Eyes* as a right-wing portrayal of Jewish-Israeli identity and focus on the strategic ways it relies on stage conventions to literally and figuratively invisibilize a Palestinian experience. I compare the play's pro-Israeli politics to the support for Palestine stressed in the film *Miral* (2010) in order to draw specific attention to the personifications of women as sympathetic figurations and fighting femmes of national identity.<sup>255</sup> Finally, the chapter returns to the politics of a more expressly revisionist diasporic Jewish representation with a reading of Bay Area-based choreographer Nina Haft's evening-length *T:HERE*, a work reflective of her company's travels to a Palestine, which, Haft blogs, is carried "inside of us [all] in some way".<sup>256</sup>

The interdisciplinary scope of the chapter's performance analysis reaches across magazine, theater, film and contemporary concert dance and likewise across significant differences in scale of circulation. Doing so allows important focus on the dis/connections between heteromasculinist representations of sabra women in mass media and the efforts by less spectacular agents to emphasize women relating to other women in war and conflict. My interpretive lens approaches the particular work of the

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<sup>255</sup> *Miral*. DVD. Dir. Julian Schnabel. Directed by Julian Schnabel. Pathe (UK), Eran Riklis Productions (Syria), Eagle Pictures (Italy), India Take One Productions (India), Canal + (France), CineCinema (France), 2010.

<sup>256</sup> Nina Haft & Company Blog. <http://ninahaftandcompany.wordpress.com>

Jewish female body in overlapping representations of religious, ethical and political crisis. It thus intervenes in the study of Jewish gender and sexuality through an emphasis on the visual and material implications of embodied representation. Adding to a huge body of scholarship on the study of Jewish Diaspora by focusing on female performances for/from clashing diasporic points of view, I track how the sexy *sabra* stereotype continues to circulate in dialogical relation to increasing ambiguity around Jewish American support for Israel.

### **Squinting Into the Closet Mirror: a Blurry Jewish Hero**

At ten, I'd stand in the mirror of my older brother's room, the sliding door of his closet closed all the way so as to frame the fullest view of myself. Bare-chested but for a German Army jacket he'd confiscated from a local thrift store and a simple chain with Star of David pendant, I stood, boob-less, feeling out my masculinity, just like my new friend from Hebrew school who wore an authentic defense force button-down with a fierceness I understood as loyalty to country. I'd squint, wondering if it was bad for wrinkles, until the illicit jacket my brother and I both knew didn't belong in our house looked just like hers. Wishing somehow that the Jewish star could wield a gold cross-like power on my pale neck, I'd wish too that my skin could darken up a few shades more than the fetish tan of my vain circle of Sunday school friends. Sagging my brother's hemmed pants and sucking in my cheeks to look tough for the audience of his garden snake that would shed itchy, shadowy skins and produce a surrealist second self, I would also double in that instant a few times; a girl-boy hero of peace in the Middle East and an

underdog activist-warrior of the '92 LA riots wreaking necessary havoc on sequestered parts of the cityscape.

My own gender drag was a raced fantasy of war and peace re-placed in a West LA world wired around sheltered sensibilities of religious education and a televised Rodney King revolution bussed in to my elementary school across the street.<sup>257</sup> Distance, from all that seemed important, was a daily privilege. For the years growing up, we'd collect change in a *tzedakah* box and project just as much small change for a country we'd never really know. This young militant me in the mirror was the secret, squinty impersonation of that uncertain place, a pledge of a more promising allegiance that temporarily relieved an early sense of faraway dread, and a stance in just as blurry support for these foreign wars at home and abroad.

Against the public funny face gimmicks that got me parts in silly stage roles where I could only dance as a clownish female klutz, this more private me made meaning of the world through the costumes that hoped to undo a guilty Jewish whiteness of west LA middle class privilege. Trying on the garb of my make believe Jewish hero, I tested crossover connections most compelling to me, appropriating cultural forms and figures of

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<sup>257</sup> Also known as the South Central Riots, the Los Angeles Riots, the 1992 LA Civil Disturbance and for South Korean immigrants, the Sah-E-Goo, or the date the unrest began on "four-two-nine", the Rodney King Riots ensued in Los Angeles for six days after the acquittal of police officers who were video taped while assaulting black motorcyclist, Rodney King. In the world of my privileged distance of proximity on the Westside, public attention on wide-scale looting, arson, and assault demonized poor blacks as villains of murderous revenge against capital society who took out abstract social and political rage on innocent Korean small business owners. Soldiers of the California Army National Guard soldiers and US Marines were called in to end the rioting of what became one of the most explicit race wars of the LA metropolitan area in recent history. Concurrent riots also occurred in San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, Las Vegas and Chicago.

the underprivileged as heartfelt fictions within imaginary reach. To write about myself in this way, I not only fess up to the self-conscious reflections of a young queerish girl but mean to recuperate foundational linkages of gender, racial, sexual and religious selves that doubtlessly still influence my thinking about diasporic identity. In my early embodiments of the Jewish hero, I necessarily named it nonwhite, male, and just as concerned with righting American racism as with a birthright patriotism that had no notion of a Palestinian experience, let alone the trouble of unquestioned Black-Jewish affinities. Now, as I theorize a framework for thinking about spectacle femininity in the context of Israeli political Zionism and its critique, I return to this early reflection on Jewish ethics and its complex conflation of leftist domestic and international concerns. Furthermore, as political Zionism sustains a spotlight in spectacles of the sexy Jewess I outline here, I fold in my fantasies of an authentic home in Israel with narratives of guilty whiteness in the US. I source these overlaps as indicative of a period-specific set of ‘defensive desires’ defined at the interstices of a local (urban Jewish US) and global (its broader circulation) Jewish Diaspora.

As for what ‘side’ I’ve taken on the notion of home in Israel now, I’ll confess here, at the risk of losing readers, that an either/or stance cannot begin to reconcile the gaps of religious identity, cultural affiliations, race and class privileges and the regard for (Jewish) ethics that demand the responsible regard for all human life. To many, these claims to faith and reason are made moot at the moment a Jew betrays the home he’d never know from here, on the ‘outside.’ And yet, there is my own sense of the one who will always already break open those narrow bounds of birthright as soon as she writes its

necessary critique, from the ‘inside’ of an updated Jewish diasporic frame. I understand that process of coming to terms with this tear as a Jewish feminist impulse that extends the work of a critical community of scholars, activists and choreographers.<sup>258</sup> I join here a growing diasporic body that has turned toward Jewishness and its social drives for human rights and away from a Jewish exceptionalism that would preserve a notion of justice ‘just’ for Jews.

### **Sexy Spreads and Spoof Magazines**

Jewish urbanite magazine *Heeb*, posted its first-ever swimsuit calendar as the ironic erotica of its 2008 Jewish New Year’s issue.<sup>259</sup> While monthly Jewish models are selected from the US and Israel, the positioning of Israel as humorously ‘most kosher’ not only makes reference to dietary law in its analogous relations between women and food, but plays on a Jewish appetite for authenticity that sustains a Jewish center in Israel.

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<sup>258</sup> In addition to the work of Judith Butler outlined in *Parting Ways* and the choreographic work of Nina Haft discussed here, I also see my work in dialog with the political actions staged by Students for Justice in Palestine on a collective host of college campuses, recent civil disobedience of Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (QUIT) such as their pink sponge awards at the 2012 LGBT Film Festival called Frameline (<http://truth-out.org/news/item/12553-de-pinkwashing-israel>). The Jewish stance against occupation risks a lot, as is demonstrated in the career-turning decision of the scholar previously known Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, author of *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1992. At a conference on religious leadership and pedagogy, Schwartz (de dropped his hyphenated last name thereafter) describes meeting intense aggression from colleagues for his views against the centrality of Israel to American Jewishness. See, Jonathan Mahler’s article on the controversy, entitled "Howard's End: Why A Leading Jewish Studies Scholar Gave Up His Academic Career," *Lingua Franca* (Mar 1997):51-57.

<sup>259</sup> Joshua Neuman, “The Making of the First Ever Jewish Swimsuit,” *Heeb Magazine*. July 28, 2008. (<http://heebmagazine.com/the-making-of-the-first-ever-jewish-swimsuit-calendar/3392>)

Meant to be funny, or at least “meta” in this hetero-masculinist view of sexy women it heralds as seemingly unattainable, the mag outs itself as awkwardly still attached to a previous US generation’s Jewish self-image as the/an unlovable male schlemiel hoping to get lucky. To make light of a Zionist stance through a semi-serious affection for its sexiest women mocks the same allegiances it undermines. Self-consuming visual rehearsals of kosher eye candy, part and parcel of a contemporary Jewish response to unceasing tensions between Israel and Palestine, implicate versions of the Israeli female figure and her exceptional sexiness as both comic relief and oddly, the safest path toward critique. The claim to Israeli hotness here thus both placates and parodies diasporic affinities of *Heeb*’s target Jews.

That said, the notion of ‘girl power’ as a potential agential resource for women participants in sexy display formats cannot be overlooked so easily. As I have outlined in previous chapters and across a variety of spectacles of US Jewish femininity, the liberatory or utopic premise of a broad scale post-feminist representational milieu lives at the crux of a vexed gender construction. Given that it may be impossible to measure how much gain or loss of agency occurs through these channels, it may be more plausible and productive to consider the paradox of such a conceptual girl power itself. Underwriting its own possibility in its very phrasing, girl power at once delimits a neutral or unqualified idea of power as male, condescends women as girls who will presumably grow out of a naïve or pre-mature outspokenness, and conflates “girl” with “power” when, in English-language at least, such nouns imply conflicting and even contrasting meanings. Still, to dismiss the agential potential of women in sexy spreads as merely part

of a masculinist machinery would overlook the work of interdisciplinary studies on feminist material and visual discourse that positions the female subject ‘gazing back’ in conscious and considered self-display.<sup>260</sup> In what follows, the theorization of IDF girl power engages these questions of ironic display as a strategy of Diaspora particular to a post-feminist (coed and chauvinistic), post-assimilatory (religiously and culturally ambivalent) US humor of desire and distance.

To the degree that such spoof spreads may accentuate and appropriate girl power as both a tactic of diasporic desire and distance, female-shot and ‘directed’ cameos from the ‘inside’ play differently with sexy self-objectification. A four-minute soft-core video of a female IDF soldier dancing in her tent, shot with a hand-held device, quickly went viral in 2011.<sup>261</sup> The topless figure whips around the center pole of a tent somewhere unspecified, while the regular bursts of group laughter compete with the female voice directing the dancer in Hebrew. The idea that IDF women spend their time-off filming one another for online porn posts is just the girls-gone-wild sensibility Ariel Levy points to as the raunchy prerogative of the Female Chauvinist Pig.<sup>262</sup> That these soldiers make collective fun of their *sabra* stereotype by embodying it through erotic dance typifies the sexy ruse characteristic of the Sexy Jewess outlined in previous chapters. The “burlesque nostalgia” in Chapter 2 playfully adopts a queer homosociality, in which dancing and

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<sup>260</sup> See discussion of such “awarishness” in Chapter 2 of this chapter on burlesque nostalgia in reference to Robert C. Allen’s *Horrible Prettiness* and Marta E. Savigliano’s explication of autoexoticism in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*.

<sup>261</sup> “Israeli Soldier Girl Doing Strip Dance in Army Tent” Posted September 1, 2011. [http://xhamster.com/movies/829707/israeli\\_soldier\\_girl\\_doing\\_strip\\_dance\\_in\\_army\\_tent.html](http://xhamster.com/movies/829707/israeli_soldier_girl_doing_strip_dance_in_army_tent.html)

<sup>262</sup> In *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy writes of “women who make sex objects of other women and [them]selves”, 4.

looking at dancing are female empowerment activities arguably even in contest formats. In contrast, the candid cameo from inside the canvas tent walls uploaded as sinister soldier ‘behind the scenes’ for the world to see fulfills a fantasy of the real even as it invites libidinous attention to a fun and free feminine flipside to Israeli imperial power. Just as Chapter 4 indicates a domestication of the queer, or lesbian desire, so does this video and its viral depiction of IDF female homosociality make palatable through soft pornography the raw sexual (girl) power of a mythic female soldier. Her exceptional status acts as foil to perceptions of a more conservative, much less friendly Middle East (male).

Videos and photographs of IDF women as sexy spectacles are regular viral acts. A female soldier stands in one image wearing a bikini and a machine gun strapped across her shoulders and dangling down her back.<sup>263</sup> The bend in her left knee sends her hips to the right as she stands facing away from the camera, toward the crowded beach, in a relaxed shift of weight. The war of comments posted below argue about the nature of her business, either defending that the female in question just avoided the hassle of checking in her weapons before heading out for midday break, or teasing about where the soldier would have kept her bullet magazine. The hype about Israeli hot women, mediated as much through an erotic fascination with mandatory co-ed military duty as its justified defenses, reveals an embattled femininity at the frontlines of an insider/outsider IDF intrigue.

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<sup>263</sup> Jill Reilly, “They Really Are Dangerous Curves: Heavily Armed and Bikini-clad Female Israeli Soldiers ‘Mingle’ with Beachgoers,” *Daily Mail*, July 13, 2012 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2173050/Do-NOT-steal-woman-s-towel-Heavily-armed-bikini-clad-female-Israeli-soldiers-mingle-Tel-Aviv-beachgoers.html>

Editorial blogger Robert Mackey of *The New York Times*' "The Lede" caused much scandal when he reported that the featured photographs of female soldiers on the official IDF website depict contrasting images on English and Hebrew-language sites.<sup>264</sup> Whereas his view of women portrayed on the English site suggested non-threatening poses that veer toward fashion magazine imagery, the Hebrew language version of the site showed only one woman among many male soldiers, adopting a more "aggressive" visual tone Mackey describes as both more masculine and more typically militaristic. Among several pages of angry comments in response to the article's false and unsympathetic dichotomy, one simply said "thanks for the war-porn" while others expressed upset with such trivializations of war as pseudo-scholarly interpretations of site-design. Less popular, but still present among the long lists of accusatory responses, were the handful that asked for *The New York Times* to stop delivering such Israel-centric reports of the region and turn its gaze toward more critical inclusion of Palestinian perspectives.

While I'd argue that the blog and commentary format does leave room for the interaction and inclusion of multiple perspectives, I'd also hesitate to 'side' with a demand on scholarship that deems the study of visual representation and embodied politics of virtual coding unworthy of critical review. Rather, I make a case for the very thing, cataloging this interest in IDF's roles for women and its attending online ambush

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<sup>264</sup> Robert Mackey, "Online, Two Pictures of the Israeli Military," *The New York Times*, Jan 6, 2009. <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/06/online-two-pictures-of-the-israeli-military/>

of comments as proof of the destabilizing nature of reading gender and femininity more specifically in times of (male personified legitimations of) war.

The viral circulation of sexy soldier image is backed at least in part by key parties in Israel itself. As reported in an article about the military beach babe image on Dailymail.com, Israel's Foreign Ministry backed a New York-based campaign to bolster public relations and invite tourism via photographs of bikini-clad ex-soldier women on sunny beaches. Aviv Shiron, the Deputy Director General of Media and Public Affairs in Israel's Foreign Ministry, explains, "We want to make people in the world to see Israel through our glasses . . . The image of Israel is not only men, either armed in uniform, or Jewish orthodox dressed in black . . . You have beautiful women here".<sup>265</sup> Though such a thing may not be measurable, I argue here that this 'world' Shiron imagines specifically targets US audiences and presumptions of its heteromasculinist male desire. The not so hidden logic would seem to be that defense of Israel's beautiful women slides easily into defense for a national project. Where this diverges from other exoticized images of the typical global woman whose image is exploited to promote tourism, however, is its particular erotic twist of her gun at center of US-Israeli relations.

In the same year, five pages of *Maxim*'s July issue featured female ex-soldiers in a swimsuit spread called, "Women of the Israel Defense Forces."<sup>266</sup> Subtitled "the

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<sup>265</sup> Reilly, "Dangerous Curves"

<sup>266</sup> "Israeli Defense Forces" *Maxim Magazine* (July 2007), photos posted online July 9, 2007 <http://www.maxim.com/girls-of-maxim/israeli-defense-forces>. In an article on the spread in Adbusters.org called, "Maxim's Sex War" Oct 1, 2007, the staff reporter explains as above that the branding campaign by the Consulate General of New York meant to improve Israel's public image. It is the article's opinion that the consulate used women in *Maxim* to make readers forget Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine and use

Chosen Ones,” the caption introduces what’s so exceptional about these sexy *sabras* when it goes on to say “they’re drop-dead gorgeous,” playing with the double entendre of these national ex-servicewomen as Semitic femme fatales who “can take apart an Uzi in seconds”. Nivit, Yarden, Natalie, Gal and Nivit-number-two each wears a different black bikini and, stylized to look like flawless fashion models, they are only distinguishable as soldiers through prop-like additions: a single dog tag, a uniform shirt left unbuttoned, a soldier’s black beret tilted off-center in s-curve with the model’s pelvic side-push. On a model with no military garb, the thin black strap that weaves around her waist a few times to connect bikini top and bottom looks in this context a little like the *tefillin* which religious men wrap around one arm in daily prayer.<sup>267</sup> The religious visual reference, subtle or abstract as it may be for some, works as its own camouflaging of religious connection between the calendar spread and anything especially “Jewish.” The shoot’s sites range from a field of daisies that seem near-inadvertently to match and maybe mock one model’s blonde locks, to the cement or steel structures against which the others lean, lay, or link a finger grip that exaggerate the cold, hard-hearted military personae. The tag

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of hundreds of thousands of clusters of bombs in Lebanon in the conflict the summer prior, in 2006. It was Maxim’s choice to use ex-soldiers, whose photo shoot was funded by American-Israel Friendship League and Israel21C. Explaining that Maxim refused an interview request and only responded that it was “pleased” with its work, the staff writer concludes that there has been yet no discussion of doing a feature on the “Girls of Hamas” or “Hezbollah Girls Gone Wild” anytime soon.

[http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/74/Maxims\\_Sex\\_War.html](http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/74/Maxims_Sex_War.html)

<sup>267</sup> It may or may not have influenced the photo shoot styling that such *tefillin* imagery has been part of a Jewish female spectacles in other formats like modern dance. Anna Sokolow resourced the use of *tefillin* in her solo female costume in the infamous *Kaddish* (1945), and Pearl Lang wrapped her biblical heroine in *Song of Deborah* (orig. 1949 and televised version in 1970) with the ritualistic black-leather strap. For more on this see Rebecca Rossen’s “Dancing Jewish,” 167 and Hannah Kosstrin, “Honest Bodies,” 225-227.

line to both the print and web gallery of swimsuit photos reads simply, “We surrender,” with a link online to “read more” that leads, amusingly, to nothing more.

Also known for its irreverent and ironic sensibility, *Maxim* is more explicitly geared toward a male audience than *Heeb* claims it is. The monthly men’s lifestyle magazine is commonly referred to as a “lad mag” for just that reason.<sup>268</sup> But the “we” who surrender in this context is less than totally clear. While *Maxim* does not delineate a Jewish viewership as *Heeb* does, its spread may offer good evidence of the same American men supposedly “lusting for women of the tribe” discussed in relation to Jewish porn star and director, Joanna Angel (see Chapter 1). However, where the gist of the Joanna joke is her irreverence for all things sacred, the portraiture of *Maxim*’s military models makes use of a Jewish sex appeal that carries more sinister political implications.

In her Masters thesis profiling the magazine, Kristen Wisneski argues that humor plays a central role in *Maxim*’s construction of masculinity because of its strategic role in negotiating potential threats to masculinity.<sup>269</sup> By establishing a lack of seriousness and distance from its subject matter, she argues that the mag successfully insulates itself from its very critique.<sup>270</sup> Male-male bonding occurs, she writes, through and alongside the

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<sup>268</sup> Laddism, in the British context from which the “lad mag” title is borrowed, is known to be a class appropriation of an assumed working-class masculinity.

<sup>269</sup> Kristen Wisneski, “Maximizing Masculinity: A Textual Analysis of Maxim Magazine” (MA Thesis, University of Mass, Amherst, 2007), 2. She explains this as hostility toward wives and girlfriends because they are seen as preventing men from living the lives they want to, 106. Wisneski accounts for Maxim’s continued preference for those women with a guy sensibility but in an ultra-feminine body who appear more attainable than real wives and girlfriends on one hand, and celebrities on the other, 113.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

putting apart of real and fantasy women. In the case of the IDF spread, I borrow from Wisneski's notion of the distance from the subject through a lack of seriousness. I would argue in addition that the dichotomy of real and fantasy women is intentionally conflated in this instance to perpetuate a sexy villain stereotype of the ex(xx)-soldier through the seemingly consensual commodification of her image. Later on in the thesis, Wisneski goes on to say that in performing the fantasy woman, such scantily clad women display an "ironic knowingness" about their own objectification.<sup>271</sup> It is this uncertain space of agency and knowingness, ironic as it may be, that, like other sexy ruse outlined in previous chapters, make use of an autoexotic female awarishness to both sell and unsettle sex appeal in support or protest of hetero-masculinist spaces.

Without doubt, this uncertain irony adds to the allure of hot military women outside of Israel, too ("GI Jane", etc.), who might pose similar threats to phallogocentric American masculinity. However, I'd argue that the particular components of female soldiers as the projected site of "defensive desires" of and for a Jewish Diaspora in relation to a jokish gentile interest cannot be overlooked. Such sexy portraits of Israeli militarism, authentic enough as real women and fantasy fighters, doubly effect and undermine any personage of Jewish heroism in the same image. They at once justify the sustained US political support for Israel as an American (hetero) interest and neuter it by pretending to "surrender." Of course, as Wisneski points out, such "last word tendencies" do anything but surrender to their female subjects. Instead, the women act as stabilizing and comforting force because they counter the women the *Maxim* readers interact with

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<sup>271</sup> Wisneski, 109.

and have relationships with in their interpersonal lives. The women in the magazine do not challenge men, she argues.<sup>272</sup> Rather, the magazine relies on a form of biological essentialism or sex role theory where gender and sexuality are assumed to be natural and fixed. Where male-male bonding of the Jewish and gentile male joke converge in this instant is hugely relevant, if also ambiguous. To have selected a spread so significant for Jewish audiences implicates an American masculinity entangled in Jewish affairs. Whether to interpret a Jewification of American media or an Americanization of Jewish media is finally only an abstract consideration, particularly when either perspective privileges white manliness in such heteronormative ways. The construction of heteromasculinist desire for sabra hotness works to whiten its American readers through the exoticization of a foreign image. For Heeb readers in particular, this amounts to an assimilatory maneuver in pursuit of mainstream white hetero masculinity, however chauvinistic for its Jewish female readers too. For gentile readers, presumably of both sexes and multiple races, this jokish surrender to female ex soldiers sustains paternalistic power plays of US/Israeli political ties through ironic reversal of its equally patriarchal sexual suggestions. In poking fun at surrender, however, both mags displace a Palestinian presence more powerless under Israeli expressions of force. How such mocking works in tandem for Jewish and gentile magazines alike to both affirm and reconfigure heteropatriarchal whiteness through depictions of Israel offers rich material for further critique.

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<sup>272</sup> Wisneski, "Maximizing Masculinity," 110.

Launched in 1997 for “the regular guy market” of 18-24 year-old male readers, *Maxim* would soon be named *Advertising Age’s* “Magazine of the Year” in 2000 and *Adweek’s* “Hottest Magazine of the Year” in 2002. Despite the statistical estimation that 1 in 4 *Maxim* readers are women, Wisneski offers the magazine as a male homosocial space where men are looking at and competing with each other more than with women. Wisneski defends that the mag asserts a vengeful, “defensive heterosexuality” to their readers that is at best heteronormative and at worst homophobic. She explains that such ‘laddism’ meant to off-set a homoeroticism of imagery used to advertise male fashion, style and accessories and the perceived effeminacy of the ‘metro-sexual’ and thus openly style-conscious “new man”.<sup>273</sup> The sexy depiction of women may be deliberate strategies to both declaw the perception of women as threats and part of the compensation Wisneski describes for a more effeminate new male identity that makes *Maxim* uncomfortable.<sup>274</sup>

What renders the ex-soldiers particularly fit for such calendar features in this context are the plays with masculine-feminine, real-fantasy, and, I’d add, ethical-unethical global citizens. That these bronzed, sleek soldiers are *Jews* (incredulous perhaps to *Maxim’s* readers) just adds to their irony. But the “ironic knowingness” that Wisneski describes of women who willingly autoexoticize takes on distinct meaning when displayed for American audiences less familiar with the mandatory Israeli national service for women. There may be nothing particularly ironic about the fact that these super hot women were once soldiers and still maintained hetero gender norms in Israel. But for *Maxim* readers, male or female, the irony more likely lives in the falsity of the

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<sup>273</sup> Wisneski, “Maximizing Masculinity,” 39.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

libidinous “surrender” that would pretend to resolve international tensions around political Zionism through sexual submission.

### **‘Eros’ of War and an Old Jewish Man Made New**

While Wisneski does not include the IDF swimsuit spread or any discussion of Jewishness per se in her general overview of the magazine, I want to recontextualize the effeminate “new man” in terms of the sexualized *sabra* stereotype and its ties to longstanding Jewish gender constructions. The depiction of the male Jew as weakened, effeminate, or womanly has pervaded the discourse of Eastern European Jews in America, especially, and has occupied a privileged, paranoid position in the performance legacies of Jewish men and women in the US. Even as such depictions of Jews have found major success in Hollywood’s starring male roles to such a degree that even gentile men can play them, political Zionism has issued a substitutive challenge to stereotypes of unmanly Jews since its start.

In *Eros and the Jews*, David Biale explains early Zionist thinking as a utopian movement of erotic liberation of the senses from the traditional and bourgeois suffocation of Europe. Seeking not only a metaphor based on the body but a means to transform the Jewish body itself, and especially the sexual body, Zionism attempted to reclaim the body of the New Hebrew Man as well as reject a gender inequality of traditional religious doctrines and practices.<sup>275</sup> According to Biale, a tension between sexual liberation and asceticism channeled erotic energies into the tasks of nation building. As a secular form

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<sup>275</sup> Biale, *Eros*, 177.

of the sublimation and displacement already present in aspects of Talmudic and medieval Jewish culture, such thinking tethered Zionist ideology to polarities of revolution and continuity.<sup>276</sup> A “constellation of Zionist symbols” that included physical strength, youth, nature, and secularism was thus set against the degeneracy, old age, and urban and religious signs of exile. A revolutionary continuum made synonymous a return to nature and a return to the body.<sup>277</sup>

Biale tracks how discussions of the Jewish community from this period commonly recognized the problem of diminished Jewish fertility. General concern in Germany, France, and elsewhere was troubled with the low birth rate resulting from urban life and, after WWI, with the population loss caused by war. But for Jews, low fertility was exacerbated by intermarriage.<sup>278</sup> A return to the soil, a resurrection of the family, would revolutionize erotic relations. The appropriation and transformation of traditional language was crucial to many of these attempts to construct a new sexual ethos. Stable and social marriage was evidently the cure, as either excessive sexual desire or excessive abstinence were signs of degeneration. The medical community even deemed late marriage a problem in the European context, where it stood in for the worst of a so-called “skewed occupational structure.” Early Zionist philosopher Max Nordau backed this theory most prominently in the 1890s. His notion of degeneration regarded both a physiological and psychological condition: a disease of the nervous system,

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<sup>276</sup> Biale, *Eros*, 177.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid*, 179.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

corresponding to fashionable diagnosis of “neurasthenia.”<sup>279</sup> His Zionism reflected this diatribe against degeneration, popularizing the vision of “Judaism with muscles” in a 1900 German Zionist journal.<sup>280</sup> As opposed to being slaves of their nerves, it was his idea that one adapts the organs to stress through exercise, and the Jews could overcome hereditary nervousness by developing their bodies.<sup>281</sup> As a justification for Zionist thinking, the lachrymose portrait of the inferior Jew appears to sustain an imagination of internalized or interiorized lack as reversed through an embodied or exterior muscularity assigned to the national project.

As personifications of Zionist promise reversed the image of exilic infertility, rendering the New Jew through a hetero-masculinist muscularity, an inverse construction of effeminacy justified the erasure of the Palestinian Arab. While scholarship now recognizes the significant presence of Jewish Arabs (previously erased as political incongruity) as one rationale for complicating an easy understanding of ethnically

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<sup>279</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 1895. Eng. Trans of 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., intro by George Mosse (New York, 1968), 167-68. On neurasthenia specifically, Biale instructs readers to review Anson Rabinach’s *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York, 1990), Ch. 6.

<sup>280</sup> Max Nordau, “Muskeljudentum” in *Judische Turnzeitung* (June 1900): 10-11 and “Was bedeutet Turner für uns Juden?” in *Judische Turnzeitung* (July 1902): 109-112.

<sup>281</sup> While it may be beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss a comparison to Frantz Fanon’s theories of the oppressed, it is worth mentioning here that such impressions of a physical and physiological projection of political power in gendered terms is reminiscent of Fanon’s critical confessions of “muscular tonus” in *Wretched of the Earth*. (1963. Reprint, New York: Grove, 2004), 17. Before Fanon, these themes were articulated by Tunisian-Jewish writer, Albert Memmi in his semi-autobiographical *Pillar of Salt* (1955. Reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) through the notion of “muscular tensions” and even “muscular dreams” specifically in relation to his teenaged oppressed body preparing for retaliatory violence against the colonial oppressor. When viewed in this light, a colonialist narrative of political lack as understood through the limits of bodily sovereignty may offer fodder for reframing Nordau’s vision of Jewish statehood.

defined 'sides,' Biale shows how the image of the Arab as a sensual savage played a key role in Zionist mythology. The virile modernism of Jewish nationalism frequently rendered the Arab as effeminate. The impotent image of Palestinian now stood in for the *Galut* Jew, or the effeminate (male) Jew from Europe, who somehow refused to free himself from medieval traditions.

Biale's binary constructions of gendered power relations pit new Israelis against Palestinians and European Jews alike during the formation of the Jewish state. Such a framework helps establish how visual and material articulations of the sexy *sabra* simultaneously reify and morph the masculinist assignments of an old Zionist hetero-virility. As stated earlier, the sexy *sabra* is the post-feminist product of coed militarism in sustained defense of a global Jewish Diaspora. As such, the calendar girl autoexoticizes in the name of a sympathetic pro-Israeli propaganda made more complex through the "ironic knowingness" of a Sexy Jewess brand of Levy's female chauvinist pig. The irony of the Israeli pinup exists in her ability to both reinforce positive feelings toward Israel (via masculinist self-objectification as sexual plaything of more powerful US) and re-embody the sexy villain (sexual subject) stereotype of the Middle East that can only be tamed through such 'knowing' displays. This reversal of gendered assignments re-personifies virile male/female fantasies of longstanding Zionist philosophy and frames the analytical scope of the next section.

### **Sabra Stage Shots and the Sexy Villain Revisited**

The audience of Yafit Josephson's one-woman show, *New Eyes*, co-written with Susan Bressler and directed by Sammie Wayne, is louder than usual.<sup>282</sup> The crowd claps along to Israeli songs at celebratory moments of the play and seems to bust at the slightest suggestion of a joke, sometimes even before the joke. Often, the mostly Middle-Eastern locals at the West LA Odyssey Theater coo at moments that appear, to me, fairly mundane aspects of a single person show: the performer changing her clothes onstage to signal a new character, the mood-setting music that plays between scenes, the use of lights to create a club feel. The generous laugh track of *recognition* demonstrated that the show brought in more Israeli enthusiasts than typically tamed theatergoers; an *insider* thing, or, as Josephson goes to great lengths to explain in the overlaid monologues of eighteen characters in five languages, an *Israeli* thing. Not only is there no fourth wall, but Josephson's one-act makes bare how the very presumption of such a boundary between audience and performer is a western construction in a slew of clashing Israeli and US cultural expectations over acting and aesthetics. Josephson features this fundamental disagreement over place and identity as she performs that difference and distance through techniques of emotionality, gesture, and especially loudness.

Josephson begins by marching on in Israeli army regalia, her arms taut in right angles and her face in full profile. She's doing her best job at a male IDF officer, *and all I can notice is her nose. Shit. Is that what I look like when I walk onstage? I try to make concessions, tell myself that I am more physically something or other, less awkward in*

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<sup>282</sup> I attended a performance of *New Eyes* at the Odyssey Theater on July 31, 2011.

*my body, more confident in my presence, but nothing works until...* She then turns toward the audience and becomes herself at an LA acting audition. The marching stops. The voice-over of a casting director asks her to turn to the left. “That side?” she clarifies as she clears her throat with unease. She answers with a painstaking quarter-turn, exaggerating the very embarrassment of a Jewish nose I know well. Foreshadowing the central drama of the show, Josephson’s Jewish nose appears in this instant of full self-exposure as if ‘othered’ by her own body. Her unalarming feminine figure, with no other cause to be outed in such a way, appears instantly defied by the nose she personifies as an oversized casting problem. Angling her body as requested, but all the while maintaining a front-facing plastic smile, Josephson fixes her hair as a desperate distracter, and the audience regains its laughter, laughing harder now that the painful part is put forth in plain view.

This moment of collective release (we can laugh with her instead of at her) humorously disarms the familiar attack on the Jewish nose that Josephson says bars her from jobs in Hollywood. In doing so, she introduces the bigness of her own nose as a barrier to industry success and its visual and material construction of the normal or the appropriate. The nose-story Josephson tells throughout the show narrates the same appendage-anxieties that are so rote in representations of Jewish femininity. The nose must be fixed, refashioned, and ultimately reconciled either through surgical means or spiritual return in order to redeem the girl and, quite literally, save face for/of one ethnonational norm or the other. The French plastic surgeon she impersonates through a hunchbacked scrooge of Notre Dame snobbery punctuates a secularized stance that is

characteristic of a divested Diaspora (“Why do we need Israel when we have LA, Chicago, Miami and New York?”) with the money-hungry comments and postural indications of a sly shylock. He is as certain about Israel as he is about her nose, seeming to speak to both hang-ups when he insists, “Trust me, you’re better off without it.” The three male ‘voices’ of Israeli military man, American casting agent, and French doctor function as authoritarian voices of competing Jewish diatribes. In their emphasis on conflicting feelings toward the face of Jewishness, so to speak, they heighten the drama through their attempts to direct and/or otherwise dominate the Jewish female through a familiar patriarchal persuasive power.

Josephson’s outspoken Jewish Mother character gets lots of laughs throughout the play and, as is typical of such personifications in the US comic tradition, is the bleeding heart of the show. More poignant to the plot than even the fact that Josephson’s real mother makes the *schnitzel* fresh for each show is the Mother character’s echoing mantra that links the significance of a literal and national profile. She says that to remove the bump off the nose is to remove Jerusalem from Israel. When, finally, Josephson sets straight her spinsterish doctor in a narrative reconciliation that revisits and tells off each of the not-so-subtly anti-Semitic acting coaches, yoga teachers, and casting directors we meet in the play, her allegiances not only to Israel but to its excessive mark on her face and acting career are clear. This resolution of allegiances makes her hour-long tour de force legible to its home crowd and is precisely the thing which mark/et the show as a ‘universal story’ of self-acceptance through a roots-type return.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Read play synopsis: <http://www.neweyesplay.com/content/about-play>

As her disparaged Jewish nose takes on the shape of a ‘no matter what’ pro-Israeli politics, Josephson’s embrace of her face ‘as is’ parallels her final refusal to play Hollywood parts that demonize the Israel military. But, folded into this noble sacrifice, which prefers peace of mind to piece of the industry cake, is perhaps a yet more loaded critique of good and bad. Framing much of her autobiographical account through her disappointments in Hollywood, she bemoans the fact of her limited casting in evil roles of the (sexy) villain or wicked witch. Whereas in Israel, she says in the play and again in a personal phone interview, she is not asked to change, in the US, her Jewish looks and weapon training garner only “bad guy” parts that she refuses on ethical grounds.<sup>284</sup> With acceptable looks illegible outside of Israel, and weapon training too exotic for Hollywood to pass up but too wicked for Josephson to take, the protagonist-playwright centralizes her own journey ‘out’ of these trappings through a self-made role that critiques it all. She disrupts stereotypes of the aggressor through a heartfelt ‘homecoming’ to a pro-Israeli politics. In doing so, Josephson willingly appropriates the Jewish female ‘thing’ (her own funny nose) to allay cultural anxieties about sustained Jewish statehood. By appealing to Jewish nose-dramas familiar to US audiences obsessed with assimilation and its anxieties, Josephson personalizes a Zionist politics in sympathetic bodily terms and the happy ending of a homecoming narrative.

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<sup>284</sup> In a phone interview with the artist on August 10, 2011, Josephson defended that Israeli women were always stereotyped as sexy villains, and that her show meant to move away from that stereotype by showing a ‘real’ portrait.

### **New Eyes and Sighting the Un(fore)seeable: The Other Face of Cultural Diplomacy**

In one especially dramatic scene of the play, matched only by the moment when Josephson has a flashback to being on base during an air attack, she remembers being on a bus in Tel Aviv and her panic at the entrance of a man she feared was a suicide bomber. Fully embodying the fright of a schoolgirl holding a backpack, she recounts the play-by-play of an anonymous figure she fears (as so we do) *could be* a terrorist. Gesturing her eyes to the empty chair next to her, this threat stands in for the brown villain the West LA audience immediately comprehends. As ‘we’ might feel her fear in this instant, the Muslim male intifada insurgent replaces the villainess as the real threat/fantasy. Playing to a US affirmation of Israelis as the good off-whites of the Middle East, the physicality of the scene materializes all fears of a post-911 Arab Spring return of the repressed in the seat *right next to her*. The pairing positions innocent female (Israel as victim) in defensive stance against the villainous male terrorist (an abstracted Middle East aggressor), and seals the support for Israeli nationalism through this moment of moral panic re: a Jewish state in need of defense.

When Josephson incites the faceless male terrorist, she re-visualizes a history of violence committed against Palestinians through the very vilification of its invisible image. Garnering critical audience sympathy through the theatricality of this climactic reversal of the colonial imagination (it’s him who is scary, not me), Josephson effectively usurps the victim role and her audience’s willingness to go along with it. The significant ways in which Josephson’s justification for fearing so fully the threat seated just beside

her is inextricable from a gendered reading of an Israeli vulnerability that returns to effeminized representations of defenseless, victimized Jews.

In large part an effort to humanize the portrait of the real girl behind the ridiculed mask and misrepresented militarism, the sympathetic depiction of an innocent, self-protective, self-reflexive Israeliness displaces a villainization of Israel onto a racialized, sexualized “Other” made hyper-visible through his absence. Whereas Josephson plays eighteen characters in five different languages, the emotional and theatrical counterpoint to all that she self-characterizes remains unseen and unembodied. The real antagonist surpasses any dissonance with the doctor, the agent, and even the yoga teacher who insists upon silence while stretching (this is funny for Israelis who laugh at their own loudness among groups). The universal enemy to them all is brought onstage through the uninhabitable presence of the deadly Muslim male defector. Though this unperson is implicated throughout the show by various means (such as an air attack of the base where she is stationed during military service which serves to justify the injustice of Hollywood’s lumping of her with *him*), his ghostly presence appears onstage only this once. As the imagined foreign presence takes the seat beside her in near slow motion, the audience understands the gravitas of the anxious scene and sides unquestionably with our young girl protagonist.

Through the abstraction of the Israeli-Jewish female nose and its connotations with gun-wielding militancy *off* the petite body of a ‘regular’ girl, any blame that could be tied to a phallic Israeli imperial power is reattached to the figure of the invisible enemy. While this defense of Jewish statehood complicates the depiction of Jewish

women in the US as Funny Girls with funny faces by imbuing the nose with Zionist material resonance, it also interrupts a stereotype of the sexy with striking similarity. But as Josephson de-sexualizes the stereotype of Israeli hotness and its villainous connotations, what can it mean that the most intense action of the play, the most anticipated bodily threat of the scene, occurs through the encounter with the unseen Other? As the nothingness sitting next to Josephson comes to sit in as the absented presence of displaced violence, what is implied about the (excessive) material of her body and the (just as spectacularized) immaterial of his?

The invitation to imagine the worst in this moment of the play assumes an audience will collectively reverse what is seen as acceptable and not about the looks of Josephson or any other Jewish female performer with funny face issues. But, I'd argue, as the hypermasculine terrorist threat becomes the (sexy) villain and not her, any diasporic desire for the female IDF soldier/calendar girl is re-corporealized through this deliberately ambiguous a/physical projection. A gendered relationship of Palestine (male) and Israel (female) lodged in the materiality of an innocent One and guilty Other can thus not be disentangled from sexualized constructions of the un-inhabitable gender and sexual foil that defines the self but is not the self.

The crux of this re-presentation of the Israeli through the imagination of the Palestinian falls well within other discourses of a personal and/or political self-other imaginary. Still, the particular attention it brings to Jewish corporeality (through face) in stark contrast to ominous, invisible Palestinian threat/fantasy complicates the understanding of Jewish female "face issues" addressed in previous chapters. Critical to

my analysis here is the way in which *New Eyes* centralizes the bodily mark of its featured Jewish female nose in the same assimilatory senses outlined in the Dissertation Introduction, “Moving Face and Funny Girl Bodies” and places them in a right-wing, conservative context.<sup>285</sup> Not only is the bump of the Jewish female nose the presence of Jerusalem on the face, but the demands it seems to make on its viewers tell the sympathetic story of its cultural and cosmetic needs for protection. As Josephson literally and religiously saves face through opting out of a nose job *and* witchy roles in Hollywood through a self-created lead part, she sights and cites herself as a good Jew, a successful performance strategist and ‘universal’ woman.

It is presumably Josephson’s “New Eyes” that let her and her audiences see her own face anew as pivotal to a sustained support of Jewish statehood. But not at all new in such a gaze is the rendering of the faceless Palestinian. As the piece travels across US college campuses as the honest portrait of the IDF, that absence magnifies to such a degree that such projections are naturalized as the normal, nameless figure of the radical religious enemy ‘all’ can relate to by now. To question such naturalization no doubt slams headfirst into the very dividing walls that characterize ideological and territorial claims of anti-Semitic one-sidedness. To be sure, any effort to de-naturalize the invisible Other is to risk a critique of Israel itself. The face itself enacts the physio-ethics of a Zionist stance distinct from but inevitably tied to today’s Jewface performances in the

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<sup>285</sup> In a phone conversation with the artist on August 10, 2011, Josephson described her perspective on Israel as explicitly “right-wing”. It is important to note that to be right-wing in defense of Israelis statement does not typically suggest the conservative agenda tied to the political Right in the US context on matters of current concern re: health care, taxes, immigration, education, gay marriage, and sexual politics more broadly.

US. Its contribution to scholarship situates an inevitable, if unwanted, entanglement of Jewish cultural production and the politics of performing Zionism.

### **(Just) Jewish Resources for a Critique of Zionism?**

In *Parting Ways*, Butler names her “symptom” the same as her “error” and “hope” to disassociate the anti-Zionist stance from an anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish one so naturalized in dominant discourse on the subject of Israeli statehood. Her response is to such claims that would see such stances as inseparably tied, and devastatingly so. Butler spells out a Jewish critique of political Zionism that specifically severs “Jewishness” from the sustained colonial subjugation of Palestinian people and land rights. She thus exposes the sustained violence of a polity erected to represent and keep safe the Jews and Jewishness from such destruction. Still, mining what she terms “Jewish resources” for the very foundations of a critique of Zionism, Butler advocates both a return to a Jewish practice and philosophy predicated on justice and a simultaneous departure from Jewish exceptionalism that would argue for the specialness of such values as ‘just’ Jewish or, worse, ‘just’ for Jews.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Butler advocates a critical and necessary practice of “derivation” in which principles derived from Jewish resources like themes of social justice must have some way to depart from the tradition that claims it in order to demonstrate its applicability, 4. Arguing that such departure from tradition is a precondition of any tradition yielding strong political values, Butler calls for a future polity that would not only shelter multiple frameworks but commit to binationalism only thinkable with the end of colonial rule. To do so requires what she calls an “ethical self-departure” that involves a process of “ceding ground”. This ethics of personal and political dispersion that partners a derivation of religious and cultural resources with a “departure from ourselves” offers the central model for Zionist critique I take up in writing this chapter.

The performance of *New Eyes* that I attended was packed with a ‘home’ audience (evidenced by the Hebrew English code-switching before, after and during the show). Its current and expanding tour through college campuses states its goals to broaden the piece’s significance and viewership as a universal story and, in this way, markets its impact beyond ‘just’ the Jews. But whereas Butler’s critique of Jewish exceptionalism means to trouble the expectation of Zionism as ‘just’ a Jewish issue, *New Eyes*’ privileging of an Israeli-American Jewish story toward ‘universal’ ends attempts to neutralize Zionism as a global project. And yet, the ruse is up. So long as colloquial usage of ‘universal’ in this context would imply heartfelt and female driven narratives of home and homecoming, no play about Israel, particularly in defense of sustained statehood under the conditions of colonial occupation, could ever assume such global agreement. Right?

It is worth noting that available online press reviews have offered only praise for *New Eyes* in the run of 100 performances since 2010 despite its one-sided view in support of Israel.<sup>287</sup> As compared to the regular protests staging picket lines at international performance tours of Israeli modern dance company Bat Sheva, which have become frequent dance fixtures at venues worldwide, *New Eyes* appears to have flown entirely under the radar of such resistance. Circulating on a much smaller circuit than Bat Sheva, *New Eyes* offers an important counterpoint or alternative to larger-scaled Israeli sponsored groups like Bat Sheva that can afford, perhaps, to claim apoliticism, however

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<sup>287</sup> See Charlotte Stoudt’s review of *New Eyes* at the Whitefire theater on the Los Angeles Times blog, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/01/theater-review-new-eyes-at-the-whitefire-theatre.html> and Katie Celia’s less formal review on <http://www.comediva.com/review-yafit-josephsons-new-eyes>.

flawed. It is significant that in seeking to appeal to smaller performance-going audiences, particularly those interested in right wing Israeli-US ties, Josephson can foreground Palestinian-Israel conflict more openly than Bat Sheva would or could. At the time of this writing, the growing global movement to disinvest in Israeli productions of all kinds in the name of political justice is garnering major support for the end of “apartheid rule.”<sup>288</sup> Despite Bat Sheva artistic director Ohad Naharin’s ‘apolitical’ claims, the renowned dance company cannot exist, it would seem from the tampered program notes given out as protest pamphlets, outside a sphere of political imperialism and its increasing global resistance.<sup>289</sup> To date, however, the student-driven campaign on public universities gaining momentum in the US to divest in corporate sponsors with financial ties to Israel has not yet clashed with the *New Eyes* performance network of college campuses. How to explain this gap in response in terms of the sabra spectacle, in terms of difference in scale? While more research is required in order to adequately explain the fiscal and foundational supports for public and college performances of *New Eyes*, the paradox of

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<sup>288</sup> The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign was launched in July 2005 with the initial endorsement of over 170 Palestinian organizations to strengthen a culture of boycott as a central form of civil resistance to Israeli occupation, colonialism and apartheid. Jewish groups like the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network have also aligned themselves with the BDS movement, which finds clear resonances between the current Israeli/Palestinian climate of occupation and South African apartheid, where strategies of boycott helped end colonial rule. International Israeli Apartheid Week began in 2006 and is hosted in a number of global cities each year to raise awareness and bolster support for the BDS message.

<sup>289</sup> Bat Sheva Artistic Director, Ohad Naharin is notorious for his claim that his choreography is non-political. Despite this, protesters regularly gather outside tours, often staging their own performances, and trading out program notes for BDS pamphlets, I attended one such performance of Bat Sheva plus protestors at UCLA, Feb 21, 2009. See Eric Herschthal’s discussion of Ohad Naharin in “The Politics (Or Not) of Dance” *The Jewish Week*, September 28, 2010, [http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/short\\_takes/politicsor\\_not\\_dance](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/short_takes/politicsor_not_dance)

unchallenged support for a ‘universal story’ that claims its ‘political’ nature upfront would seem to be its necessary stay on smaller scale circuits of the one-act solo.

Still, however low profile this expressive sabra scene, of political and theoretical relevance to my reading of *New Eyes* is the particular counterpoint to Bat Sheva’s style of supposed neutrality it aims to offer in the name of universality. For this, I turn to Butler’s inclusion of Levinas on the issue of violence as predicated on a certain ‘facelessness’ she assigns here to subjugated Palestinian populations. In his formulation, to possess a ‘face’ that is reflective and recognizable as such is to possess a certain control or authority over one’s own life.<sup>290</sup> With no face, or as Butler phrases it, a face that “makes no demands” on its viewer, there is no obligation to preserve the life of the inferior figure to which it belongs.<sup>291</sup> Resonating with Spivakian assignments of the subaltern who cannot speak, the figure rendered faceless under imperial rule is Butler’s understanding of a colonial condition that could never be adequately understood as a tension between “two sides” or any other disposition that would assume such a balanced equitability.<sup>292</sup> One consequence of this distinction from a speechless to ‘faceless’ theorization may be the particular material presence of face to racialize and gender a politics of power and authority differently than voice or verballity. If the politics of power in both conceptualizations rely

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<sup>290</sup> Butler, 38. For Emmanuel Levinas, Butler explains, the face is not necessarily the literal face. It is an injunction to nonviolence conducted through any number of senses. The back of the neck could be the face for Levinas, she argues, suggesting that the “face” is that dimension of human living that bears its vulnerability and imposes an ethical obligation upon those to whom it appears. Levinas defends that Palestinians have no face in “Ethics and Politics”, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 289.

<sup>291</sup> Butler, *Parting Ways*, 39.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

on the blurring of metaphor and its bodily manifestations, the emphasis on nonverbality here helps draw attention to the Palestinian body, its inhabitation, incomprehensibility, and impersonation.

In the context of state violence toward Palestinians and Josephson's self-described right-wing refusal of its acknowledgement, Butler's borrowing of Levinasian theory necessarily complicates my original reading of (my own) Jewish female "face issues." Consider that to have a face that makes such demands on its viewer, a face that cannot be overlooked (in spectacle performance), is to have a face that is too much. To have too much face, however, connotes the same problem that causes Josephson to ponder rhinoplasty throughout the show. Viewed in this regard, Levinasian politics of face and facelessness take on additional Jewish and female meaning. What can be said about Josephson's and my own hypervisible noses that make demands of the viewer rather than the "faceless" terrorist, or Palestinian body made excessively vulnerable for that lack? That is to say, what if excessive face in a Jewish context is understood not only as funny performance trope true to an American diasporic experience but also as a physical protection of political enfranchisement and bodily sovereignty? What then might appear so exceptional about the Jewish face (the nose) is this capacity to materialize added meaning when viewed in relation to offensive and defensive projections of Jewish statehood.

To speak of viral depictions of Israeli women and vet them against the personifications of an ex-soldier in self-scripted solo performance necessarily reinforces a periphery-center/Diaspora-Home relationship. It also blurs the boundaries between those

categories through analysis of representation and performance formats that do not entirely line up. That they both contend with depictions of the un/sexy female Israeli national may be reason enough to read them together. The former follows a male *schlemiel* joke formula presumably leftover from left-wing Jewish generations before. The latter (an admittedly right-wing Zionist self-determinism via the soldier as more sympathetic than sexy) both sights and cites the Jewish female figure as bearer of national allegiances for audiences presumed not only to be Jew-ish but in agreement about what that means. Beyond the genres that distinguish them, the ideological boundaries that render the sexy spread and solo show formats within a world of interpretation together revolve around similar assumptions of today's Jewishness as tied to Israel that Butler means to dispel. Whereas Butler insists upon critical scrutiny of Jewish = Israel formulations, the *sabra* spreads and soldier sympathies perform Jewish femininities that depend upon a conflation of physio-religious markers of representation and political Zionism.

### **Re: Facing Palestine and the National Femme Body**

Winner of both UNESCO and UNICEF awards in the year it came out, *Miral* (2010), directed by Julian Schnabel, offers a Palestinian perspective on the history of political conflict in the region through the narration of three female portraits. Hind Husseini (the daughter of a wealthy family who opens a refugee orphanage just after the formation of the state that develops as a privately sponsored, sheltered girl's school), Nadiya (a Yaffa runaway who experiences abuse of all kinds before eventual suicide),

and Miral (her daughter and central character of the story, sent to the school of “Mama Hind” by her religious, widowed father to protect her from the devastating wars of the outside world). As Miral grows up and becomes increasingly impassioned about the Palestinian plight from which she has been shielded, the narrative arc of her politicization follows the logic of a romance with one of the most militant PLO intifada activists and group leader. However sensationalist in that aspect, the opinion of the film privileges a minoritarian representation of Palestinian experiences overlooked in dominant Middle East discourse as it circulates in the West.

As written in the final text frame of the film, *Miral* is dedicated to “everyone on both sides who still believe peace is possible.”<sup>293</sup> It conceives of a kind of reconciliatory message of globality that while contrasting the view of *New Eyes*, picks up on the same claims to a universal right of people to their land. But as opposed to a birthright to place ‘just’ for Jews, the Palestinian-Israeli-Indian production made in English reaches across geographical borders to help influence an ideological, political alliance in the name of more equitable cohabitation. Concluding with title pages that teach about a 1993 Oslo two-state contract that has yet to be honored, *Miral* makes an urgent call to its viewers to become more informed about Israeli imperial power. The coming-of-age political awakening of its female protagonist occurs through her love relationship with radical Hani (he makes her an unknowing accomplice in one car bomb and an increasingly less innocent assistant to several other covert missions). It also emerges through the bloodline of an activist aunt serving a three-life prison sentence for a failed bomb threat in a movie

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<sup>293</sup> The dedication appears at the end of the film in simple white letters against a black screen, just before movie credits.

theater. Like these narrative instances, the film asks its viewer to ‘grow up,’ too, through the re-education it means to provide. *Miral* reflects a more complex view of Palestinian perspectives than previously seen in a film of such high production value and distribution. The film effectively broadcasts its own project of decolonization, not only for its characters and those like them but for global viewers who must shed the layers of internalized coloniality in thinking about Middle East occupation and suppressed civil rights.

Like *New Eyes*, the film focuses on the lives of women to tell the story of the nation, staging for screen the female effects and affects of war at emotional center. The call *Miral* makes to decolonization likewise accompanies and is accomplished through a feminization of Palestinian feelings meant to combat the types of projections *New Eyes* normalizes. Similar to the female lead in *New Eyes*, *Miral*'s protagonist likewise stands in for the portrait of survivance in spite of systematic oppression and state violence, however much from an opposed perspective. The two could be easily compared as Israeli and Palestinian positions brought to the heartstrings of audiences through the sympathetic female hero. And yet, it may be significant here to return to Butler's claim that reproducing a discourse of two-sidedness offers insufficient explanation not only for the political history of the conflict but also the resources for a critique of undue expressions of power. That said, the bias toward “sides” so central to these female-centered productions is up for question. Rather than be complicit with the film's simplistic depictions of sides, it is my concern to mine the particular relationships

between gender, in/visibility and im/materiality that renders women as nation building agents.

Previously, I discussed Josephson's invisibilization of the other in her personification of Palestinian bus-bomber terrorist in the context of Butler and Levinas' understanding of facelessness as political vulnerability. Josephson's conscious or unconscious refusal to try on the terrorist's face as one of the many she wears throughout the play provides an interesting comparison to the movie poster for *Miral* posted on imdb.com.<sup>294</sup> Wearing her schoolgirl uniform and sitting squarely toward the viewer, the very pretty and petite looking Miral appears "benched" in the moment the camera catches her unsmiling right at us. Above her image, just under the letters of her name handwritten in red (the protest color seen most in pro-Palestinian student groups across the US and internationally), is the similarly kid-scripted handwriting in black, "Is this the face of a terrorist?" While the visual cues condition a "no" to the question, more leading than hypothetical in its rhetorical positioning, the reliance on a childlike, girlish innocence is interesting here if only in its figuration of young femininity as the justification for political sovereignty. As Miral's story garners new interest and attention through an attractive feminine face, the facelessness of Palestinian masculinity that Josephson incites is literally and figuratively turned on its head. But is she not a terrorist because she is a schoolgirl who merely falls in love with and becomes an ad hoc assistant to a head PLO organizer? Not a terrorist because such people are not so pretty? Or not a "terrorist" because, from a contemporary freedom fighter's perspective, no such label suffices?

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<sup>294</sup> Poster accessible at: <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1604958976/tt1366409>

I saw the movie poster only after having watched the film, and found it particularly troublesome as it seemed to dumb down the importance of the movie's central messages. It reduced the rationale of a Palestinian perspective to the fact of a face too pretty to be too fanatically political. Indian actress and model, Freida Pinto, who plays Miral is well known for her success as a sexy screen star in Indian cinema especially and big Hollywood films inspired by Bollywood like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Trishna* (2011). That hers is the face of an Indian woman and not a Palestinian at all may or may not factor in to the poster's main provocation. More significant to think about might be the salability of such an acceptably beautiful face (read acceptably exoticized Other) for a left-leaning English-speaking market interested in 'global' concerns.

In contrast to the exotic beauty of Pinto and the equally stunning Hollywood exotics co-starring as Hind (Hiam Abbass) and Nadya (Yasmine Elmasri), Lisa (Stella Schnabel, director's daughter) is the light-skinned Jewish girlfriend of Miral's cousin and the sexually excessive twist on the typical *sabra* stereotype. Miral first encounters Lisa at a beach party in a smaller town where she's been staying. The first time out of bed in two weeks, Miral is still depressed after a twenty-four hour detainment that included an aggressive beating and heavy fine for an attempt to smuggle photocopies of illicit information to her activist boyfriend, Hani. When Miral's cousin points out Lisa in the crowd, the viewer follows Miral's eyes and the camera moves to Lisa in a tight mini dress (as compared to Miral's more conservative dress with covered shoulders), club dancing with a predictably excessive amount of hip gyrations. When cousin asks if Miral

wants to meet her, she lashes back at her cousin, “But she’s Jewish.” When he replies simply in the affirmative, Miral insists that she doesn’t like dancing. Lisa leaves the dance floor to greet Miral, who is acting as rude as she can in refusal of any pleasantries. Lisa tries a few times, encouraging the two to go for a swim together, to which Miral replies that she doesn’t have a swimsuit. When Lisa insists that it doesn’t matter, they can go in the nude, Miral responds with immediate disdain. The moment is significant in its conflation of homo-sociality, same-sex female desire, and the (equally queer) possibility of friendship or alliance between Jewish and Palestinian Muslim women. Lisa’s loose attitude toward her own bared body and Miral’s, presumably as much about her sexual desire as her embrace of political difference, competes here with Miral’s more rigid modesty, and its rejection of a layered queer possibility.

With Lisa on a seemingly more carefree offensive and Miral on a more discriminating defensive, the clashing first moments between Lisa and Miral interrupt the strong bonds between women established in the rest of the film. Such clashes also personify the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives through these distinct stances on femininity and the body especially. Even though both characters are fairly secularized in their depictions throughout the film, Miral’s resistance to Lisa’s casual air invokes a full-fledged disapproval of all things Jewish. Though dancing and skinny dipping would seem to be as religiously off-rules to both traditions as any other forays into such ‘friendly’ behaviors, Lisa’s Jewishness is as lax and loose as secularized sabra stereotypes.

Later, the two grow closer as Miral’s anger after detainment dissipates and Miral’s own aversion to Lisa’s Jewishness pales in comparison to her aunt whose secret

mission (meant to be funny for Miral's sake) is to make Lisa as uncomfortable as possible so that she will leave her son. In one particularly revealing scene when Miral visits Lisa's home, the two sit on the floor, leaning against a living room couch, as the camera closes in on a more intimate frame of their faces in profile. The two speak in soft voices to one another, and the camera makes a new tenderness between women palpable, if unremarked upon. Miral asks Lisa why she loves her cousin, and Lisa answers that he is smart, he loves her, and "he kisses like an angel." After a pause that feels like romantic anticipation between the two women, Miral smiles shyly and asks how angels kiss. That Lisa kisses her and Miral is caught off guard just split seconds before Lisa's father in full IDF uniform walks into the room only adds to the compound ways in which Jewishness is represented as doubly 'offensive.'<sup>295</sup> But in contrast to her militant father who even Lisa finds intolerant and thus entirely intolerable, the portrait of Israeli femininity looks more sympathetic to a Palestinian paradigm than the IDF ex-soldiers described earlier. The case of asthma, which Lisa explains afforded her a medical exemption from mandatory service, is the difference, it would seem, between her image as an ally or enemy. The fleeting kiss that is never mentioned again likewise throws her allegiances in question. Furthermore, as Lisa takes on the part of (her own) boyfriend in

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<sup>295</sup> Lisa's father interrogates Miral in his own living room and the boundaries between land and house are nonexistent. "Where are you from?" he asks. "Jerusalem," she answers nervously. When he asks her what kind of name is Miral, she answers that it is a flower that grows on the side of the road. "You've probably seen millions of them. It's a Persian name, but I'm Palestinian" she say, to which he adds, "You mean Israeli" The message is clear: you are in my house as you are also in my country. "No, I mean Palestinian," she answers back to which he insists that Lisa speak with him in private and marches out of the room. Miral asks to be taken home immediately, overriding the romantic moments between the two just moments before.

their brief role-play, her poetic promise of kissing like the Palestinian male ‘angel’ adopts his physicality in ways that Josephson certainly never does.

In the context of the homo(erotic)sociality explored in the rest of the dissertation, it is worth noting that the amorous encounter between Lisa and Miral serves entirely different ends than the filmic domestication of the queer as discussed between *Black Swan*'s warring leads in Chapter 4. The eroticism of same-sex intimacy between straight women suggests a self-other conflation reminiscent of the bed scene between *Black Swan*'s ego doubles, Nina (Natalie Portman) and Lily (Mila Kunis). But as Lisa kisses Miral, a certain hope for reconciliation is restored as Miral might possibly like it, and the prospect of peace between ‘sides’ is momentarily resolved, if a little magical in its thinking. That political reconciliation is incited through this female-female kiss offers an interesting spin on more typical portrayals of peace talks. Contending with political efforts that may be more typically dominated by male voices and personifications, this instance of women relating to women in war and conflict works as an important counterpoint. However well intentioned in its inkling of hope, the film still conflates female bodies, sexual desire, and the queer-ish eros of Jewish/Muslim cohabitation in ways that rely on fears of unleashed femininity.

The scene domesticates queerness in the sense that it sensationalizes lesbian desire as a fleeting, failed attempt at character and plot resolution. That said, the sexiness in this instance is less a raunchy ploy to serve Hollywood's masculinist interests (as in *Black Swan*) than a less-than-subtle nod toward the liberatory promise of Israeli/Palestinian affectations that could sustain through such side-story sparks. If

heterosexual desire is brought into question through these lesbian-esque encounters in both films, it is the use of amorphous female pleasure through uncertain sexuality that opens the avenues in both films for a sort of self-reconciliation of and for its female characters. But even if a kiss between hot hetero girls could seem to unsettle the system and structures that suppress her, in both instances, such a prospect comes with a heavy death toll that leaves its ending undone; in *Black Swan* through the jump of its maniacal Jewish protagonist off her balletic perch and in *Miral* for much denser numbers in defense of civil rights.

### **Dancing Divestment and the Staging of Global Desire**

Before talking in depth with Bay Area choreographer Nina Haft about her “travelogue” concert dance piece *T:HERE*, I saw this same same-sex possibility of a Palestinian/Israeli peace ideal personified in a duet between women. The piece made collaboratively her company dancers, Palestinian co-director, Ziad Abbas and Bay Area debkah dancers after returning from a trip to the Middle East in 2010, came together for me in this particular duet. Like the dancerly manifestation of the kiss between Miral and Lisa, the partnering initially suggested to me a similar self/other resolve in its fleeting moments of female-female intimacy. In the duet, two dancers from Haft’s contemporary modern dance company shadow, circle, share weight, fall, help each other up, manipulating one another’s actions and moving in ways reminiscent of release technique in set partner phrasing styled with the flow and fluidity of contact improvisation. Against the backdrop of a large screen with projected images amassed from the personal cameras

of those in the cast, the two women weave in and around one another in ways that made for me certain representational and reconciliatory meaning. Set in front of a split screen photograph of a news-styled cityscape under siege and its overt suggestion of two smoke-filled worlds at war, the dancers turn to the floor in mirrored unison and flank the vertical line down the screen with an expressive lock of their gazes. The moment seemed to me the embodied prospect of connection across distance otherwise deemed impossible despite the reality of proximal closeness. Within the context of the broader piece, which brought together Palestinian debkah dancing with various choreographic configurations more familiar to a western postmodern milieu, this possibility of a coming together seemed fitting for the work, if a little fictive in its thinking.

I was wrong. Though Haft and I spoke of the duet in its movement detail, the split screen image I had ‘understood’ with so much conviction did not ring a bell in Haft’s recollection of the slides selected for the piece, and the choreography was not intended to be reflective of any peaceful or co-habitational negotiation. In Haft’s words, the intimacy evident in the duet had everything to do with the degree of familiarity between the two dancers; a chemistry that dancers who partner often in performance can easily understand. While she was more than open to my reading of that moment, acknowledging the rich potential of various viewpoints as part of a productive feedback process, there was something revealed in this particular gap between choreographic intent and my mis/reading of the duet that felt uniquely Jewish. My desire to look for choreographic resolve relied on a logic of reconciliation that could conclude or otherwise make coherent the incomprehensibility of unyielding conflict in the region. But this interpretation

marked an unquestioned Jewish desire of mine, indicative of a larger dilemma of performing US Jewishness in relation to Middle East politics. I offer this realization of my own viewership as critical to the lenses of Diaspora thinking outlined in this chapter.

Haft's intention was never to represent two sides coming together, in fact. She confessed in a conversation over coffee about the project that, despite the lack of support for Jewish choreographers who risk challenging Israel, she is not in favor of a two-state solution that my initial impression appeared to anticipate. Though she did not name the duet as one of *T:HERE's* sections that has caused confusion over meaning before, Haft shared a handful of comments and reactions that divulged nearly opposed audience interpretations. From even the most progressive of her Bay Area Jewish colleagues, Haft recalled a certain disappointment with her explicit support of Palestine and disregard for an equated Israeli experience. My initial framing of the two bodies as sensual meditation on sameness over difference suggested a related and arguably 'Jewish' (read in this context as post-assimilationist, urban US) narrative logic of cross-cultural tolerance - and its affective roles for women - which I had clearly imposed on the work.

As if to say that Jewish choreographers in support of Palestine could only approach the subject through acknowledgement of both Israeli and Palestinian experiences, and through women as sympathetic symbols, I had inadvertently fallen into the traps Butler outlines of a "two sides" discourse and gendered them female. My interpretive naturalization of Jewishness with obligatory Israeli allegiances, however much Haft's objective aimed to foreground its critique, extended a rote Jewish=Israel understanding of global Diaspora and its 'defensive desires' into the realm of Jewish

concert dance. Haft's incorporation of Palestinian dances and collaborative directors follows suit with a justice movement gaining momentum internationally. And yet, the fact of her Jewishness and her career-long investment in making 'Jewish dance' blinded even my double Jewish and dance 'insider' eyes from the prospect that she might actually privilege a Palestinian agenda and, in doing so, not find it necessary to dance in defense of Israel at all.

I knew that Haft has presented choreography in any number of San Francisco/bay area venues over the last ten years, and that the area is widely known for its support of diverse cultural performance perspectives and socially progressive politics. I asked her if she felt 'safer' doing pro-Palestinian work as a Jewish choreographer there than she might in other spaces. Haft affirmed my assumption that the SF/Bay Area dance going audience offered opportunity for more radical choreographic politics of all kinds than other cities. Despite a significant number of cultural organizations working in support of Palestine, Haft did confess that dance colleagues found *T:HERE* difficult to digest, but purportedly for other reasons.

A central dance critique of the work revolved around its overt literalisms in regards to its movement aesthetic, Haft said. Friends familiar with her earlier works found *T:HERE* too explicit in its gestural indication or nonverbal 'acting out' of narrative events. The experimental choreography MFA student in me knew just what she meant, as I too had noticed my own initial annoyance with the illustrative vocabulary meant to mime prescribed meanings as if in replacement of words (a no-no in grad school for which I was also criticized). Haft volunteered her own critique of one such moment, early

in the dance, as cast members enter from the wings. Pointing, looking, peering, expressing reaction at having just landed in a new place, a cast of twelve ape their own earnest expedition and arrival in the Middle East as conspicuous travelers who will recount their journey to the audience from the beginning. They hold one another's shoulders in surprise and clump up in-group anticipation as photo slides cue audiences in to the types of scenes they saw from their own camera lenses.

If Haft herself acknowledged a certain lack of choreographic sophistication in the overt use of literalisms, she made clear that notable constraints on rehearsal time and stylistic demands of co-directing came to bear on a project that meant ultimately to make space for multiple perspectives and collaborative possibilities.<sup>296</sup> Haft's choreographic oeuvre may generally move within a postmodern concert dance aesthetic more favored by *T:HERE*'s dance critics. That said, Haft spoke of coming to terms with the 'fragmented' nature of the work in its first performance iteration as its own process of clarifying which aspects of the project to prioritize as important. However familiar the critique of literal representation may be for dance readers here, I wonder how such resistance to miming as meaning-making dance may also cover up a discomfort with Haft's Jewish pro-Palestinian politics as well. And, moreover, how the aesthetic discussion of dancery or

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<sup>296</sup> As choreographers who work collaboratively well know, the labor of co-production can often be harder than working as the sole choreographer who is presumably free to make decisions on her own. And yet, that this results here in a concern with choreographic 'sophistication' - resulting somehow in less of it, rather than more of it - is worth noting. Such presumptions about the singular choreographer often take as self-evident the exceptional genius of the individual artist in talk that generally ignores other laboring bodies of the dancers in particular, but also those that assist with production as well as audiences themselves. This is something Haft's collaborative approach inherently and intentionally resists, despite evident difficulties.

choreographic preferences, discussed as if emptied of political valence, actually means to make PC a critique of Haft's privileging of Palestinian debkah dance and the ideological ruptures of its place on even famously counter-culture concert stages.

This not-so-subtle demand on concert dance to resist a one-to-one ratio of movement and its representational meaning only thinly veils a racist, Western-centric imperative of 'art' dance or 'high' dance abstraction not at all new to Jewish concert dance criticism. Somewhere stuck along a spectrum between what's generally considered white or right concert dance and its Other, World Dance, something as amorphous as 'Jewish dance' in the US has battled its own image as either too Jewish (by way of folk or funniness, maybe) or not enough (conversely, unfolk and/or unfunny). That Haft names her latest project in "New Jewish Dance" a Palestinian one rebalances the scale with entirely new critical weight. Not only does she rescore a Jewish dance as not stereotypically Jewish looking (dancers, gestures, love for all things Jewish), she calls upon specifically Jewish resources (namely, herself as a Jewish choreographer with an unpopular point of view) to dance a divestment in Israel as both a Jewish and gentile prerogative.

When viewed in this light, efforts at literal representation privilege legibility over other possible artistic imperatives. The physical theatricality or pantomimed potential of recomposing real-time events from the trip offers points of entrance to the work for audiences both more and less familiar with now-normative postmodern Western concert dance ideals. In its legible efforts at access, *T:HERE* showcases dance's ability to re-do Diaspora as deliberately anti-imperial, and construct a concert dance experience that

means to resist hierarchical aesthetic standards. The extent to which such legibility or access pleases or displeases audiences, however, may not fully account for the transgressive potential of *T:HERE* or concert dance works on related themes. Nor can the productive promise of presencing Palestine in New Jewish Dance rely on this point. On a much smaller production scale than even *New Eyes*, my reading of *T:HERE*'s liberatory promise is disproportionate to its size, and its necessarily limited impact in the artistic community at large. Beyond its particular success for distinct SF concert dance audiences, *T:HERE* poses an interesting set of possibilities and problems attached to deliberately facing Palestine in US Jewish performance. Like Josephson, Haft offers an important performance counterpoint to bigger named and self-declared apolitical Israeli sponsored troupes like Bat Sheva, but by way of an entirely different stance on diaspora and its needs of defense.

A funeral processional witnessed in Ramallah and restaged here with more mythic proportionality wraps around the stage periphery. The heavy gait of speechless, walking figures identifiable as pallbearers and grieving mourners ends as one of the many is lifted up overhead and carried offstage by the community. One dancer is left behind to bear the burden for all it would seem: a mother, a sister, a national body, and a global symbol of paralyzing remorse. The eldest in the cast by many years, she makes near-metaphoric use of her own aging body. Careful with each strained step, exaggerating the shakiness of each leg as she grabs her own thighs to force herself and presumably a whole grieving people along the downstage diagonal. Her falls to the floor are rough with masterful abandon and sound hard against the stage marley and the audience's stoned silence. A

male dancer enters, also eldest among the cast, to assist the former back to her feet and escort her to her side stage exit. Holding both hands with stabilizing certainty, the mature and weathered pair walks in steady unison with slow steps offstage that could seem to continue forever. The power of the duet, much simpler than the last, is its quieted grace and suggestion of shared remorse.

That this message moves through the danced portrait of a Palestinian Mother, embodied by the eldest if also ‘technically’ strongest woman in Haft’s cast, is striking and not surprising in the context of this chapter. Like the other performances discussed here, *T:HERE* returns to the figure of the woman as universal symbol for a grieving humanity but frees the figuration of her image from the markings of militant propaganda. In direct contrast to both the sexualization of the *sabra* soldier and its flip as well as the sensationalistic feminization of intifada innocence and its unthreatening face, Haft’s aching, straining Mother who must only move forward is finally the Palestine “carried inside us all” introduced in the company’s travel blog. And in this possibility lives a Jewish femininity both in conversation with and distance from depictions of Diaspora set before for her. Neither conceding to the cultural amnesia of calendar sex appeal or the right-wing reminder of a home in Israel, Haft’s Jewish woman directs an ensemble of diverse equals that differently embody Diaspora through its redefinition. In visibilizing and materializing the very image of the grieving Palestinian woman, Haft herself appears to become part and parcel of it. Her collaborative choreography makes possible a deliberately redirected understanding of the localities and experiences of a multifaceted *T:HERE* title that finally doesn’t include Israel. The Jewish femininity Haft finally

dances defends a Jewish humanism that can no longer oblige a Zionist cultural imperative.

## **Conclusion**

I have brought together the textual analysis and interpretation of multiple works across genres to theorize spectacles of Jewish femininity in the context of contemporary discourse on Diaspora. The sexy and spoof spreads of masculinist magazines alongside the more expressly sympathetic views prioritizing Israeli/Palestinian experiences offer ways of rethinking the ‘Eros’ of and in reaction to today’s Zionist ethos as a representational reliance on embattled femininity. I respond to a need in scholarship on the subject of Zionist critique and studies of Jewish Diaspora to recognize gender and sexuality. This chapter has meant to contend with visual and material constructions of *sabra* femininity and its reworkings by Jewish women in the US that cannot be severed from competing configurations of an equally complex gendering of a Palestinian threat on one hand and liberatory promise on the other.

While the reliance on a two-sided discourse risks flattening a hierarchical power structure through the false imagination of a horizontal one, the chapter aims to reveal how at least a divisive split in support of or in opposition to Jewish statehood is steeped in the sympathetic feminization of its defensive desires either way. Furthermore, such argumentation returns to conceptualizations of muscular Judaism that helped engender the early erotic Zionist promise as a male-identified ideal. Rather than reverse this masculinist muscularity through a focus on women, this study has meant to show just

how layered the entanglement of the Jewish question with the Woman one really still is. As effeminate *schlemiel* jokes make the American man in ways that willing Israeli women help perpetuate in Jewish and gentile mags alike, more sympathetic stances toward the roles of women as national bodies claim universal rights to land from Jewish platforms that cannot agree. The implications for the Jewish woman and her heroic cultural imperatives are at best blurred by an embattled Jewish self-image still tied to war. What finally can be said about the gendered state of statehood other than its continued reliance on righting itself through this revised effeminate body? And how do these materials relate to the occupation of earlier chapters on US Jewish femininity and its interlocking of funniness and sexiness?

Even if on opposing ends of a for or against position on Israeli nationalism, both Josephson and Haft make performance a means of materializing and visualizing female perspectives on Jewish representational politics outside Jewess stereotypes as *sabra* sex appeal or unsexy US jokeress. They present their work as critical interruptions of dominant discourse on the Middle East that would tend to overlook the real roles of women in a war pitting good guys against bad. Both artists return to the power of universal female symbols of feeling and affect that compete with flatter images of masculinist fantasy aligned with militant *sabra* identity. Still, it would be too simplistic to view the calendar mags and tent pole dances of the sexy soldier as purely fantastic or fictive reversals of the ‘real’ these other embodied performers bring to life. Rather, the focus on women and sexualization of this chapter has meant to trouble the binary relationship entailed in such a return to ‘sides’ of any kind. It thus anchors the discussion

in the multiplicity of approaches to the Jewish and Woman question as they construct and are constructed by the Israeli national project. Viewed from a choreographic perspective or one that values the doings of performer agency, Jewish women discussed here deploy (their own) bodies in defense of competing national desires and, in doing so, use new eyes and politics of place to stage Diaspora differently. The emphasis of this chapter shifts from heteromasculinist projections of American magazines (Jewish and non-Jewish) to the representational aims of and between women on all sides of (national, ethnic, racial) conflict. So too do the self-conscious assimilatory and feminist ‘posts’ of a contemporary US Jewish moment outlined in previous chapters shift beyond sexy ruse and the logic of racial passing to foreground an affect and drama of war without room or perhaps even need for funniness.

## CONCLUSION

### A Dance Theorist's Search for *Love On Mars* and Other Post-ing Remarks

Throughout the Introduction and five dissertation chapters, I have sought to pose and repose an incessant “Jewish” and “Woman” question of representation via critical attention to today’s Sexy Jewess spectacle across a spectrum of performance formats. In order to do so, I have paired choreographic analysis of individual performances by more and less known social agents with a theoretical interpolation of contemporary American Jewry in the US. Spotlighting the performance work of particular Jewish women, I take up Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s call to attend to ‘actual Jews’ in the (print-based) textual study of Jews and Jewishness.<sup>297</sup> Adding also to what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called a ‘corporeal turn’ in Jewish Studies, I have emphasized the work of the body to do and undo malleable constructions of race, class, gender and sexuality. So as to highlight the subversive potential of Sexy Jewess bodily doings, I have anchored my discussion in the agentic aspects of performance works across a range of spectacle contexts. And yet, I have wrestled with what riotous religious women, Jewish female porn stars, neo-burlesquers and other un/dancing divas can do to upset larger social discourses of power. At the crux of this effort to foreground the work of women to subvert structures of patriarchal authority is a critical outing of its delimiting conditions that inevitably return to less penetrable boundaries of performing the self from positions-in-excess. Working through these tensions differently, each chapter has offered a new facing on the performance of sexy ruse as race and gender rebellion in various contexts. It has been my

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<sup>297</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. “The Corporeal Turn”, 447.

agenda to distinguish and overlay performances that best materialize the Jewish woman as literal and symbolic figure on the frontlines of contemporary Jewish definition.

This conclusion seeks to capture this research trajectory and the problems it picks up on through a final aesthetic and conceptual re-facing. I offer a self-review of a choreographic work of my own called *Love on Mars*, and a travelogue of this Jewish-themed solo performance as it moved from place to place. Ethnographic inclusion of selected responses elicited by these performances offer partial answers to the question of spectacle Jewish American femininity today. They likewise necessarily complicate my own choreographic intentions with their un/matching audience reception and point to the difficult task of any such auto-ethnography. For this impossibility of ever knowing the impact of one's own work, my attempts to end with introductory reflections on the ethnographic self are thus admittedly awkward. Rather than overlook such concerns, I source that awkwardness here as an embrace of the challenges of self-display from the standpoint of the stage. Noting how that awkwardness itself spirals between laughter and embarrassment, love and shame, what follows opens up space to comment on personal and collective feeling toward a choreographic, corporeal home in Jewish femininity. A methodological reflection on the practiced morphing of the scholar-artist, I conclude here efforts to dance my dissertation as a dealing with, of, and in its dilemmas.

### **Crowd-Sourcing Diaspora and Dance as (Academic Conference) Dealing**

I may need not to have been so surprised to learn that the upcoming 2013 conference on Jewish arts and culture held at UW Madison would be themed simply,

“Diaspora”. The theme is ubiquitous in Jewish studies scholarship, and widely understood as foundational to contemporary Jewish American identity politics and its sustained ties to a home in Israel. That said, immediate resistance to the mere moniker itself made tangible my fear of the field, felt viscerally in a secret way I worried would out my ill-fit in Jewish studies. *Doesn't the mention of the word immediately whine of that old depiction of male-only Jews in ever-wandering effeminate exile? Doesn't its rehearsal now necessarily regress to mob mentality on Israel at Jewish center and its exceptional needs of defense?* Theorists I had admired most throughout the dissertation writing process and its period of personal politicization had been shunned for their unfavorable counter-stances. Until I realized the D-word lived at the crux of my writing on American Jews and that its assumptions of an abstract home in Israel had remained a tension throughout my whole Jewish growing up, there was only initial suspicion. I tried to convince myself that attendees would deliver on deconstructive premises and revisionist schemes akin to the Boyarin brothers, Judith Butler, and Hannah Arendt.<sup>298</sup> The conference call was explicit about its openness to critical and creative interpretation. And yet, I feared the types of rallying devices used too readily at Jewish youth weekends of my own growing up: “Are you a Jewish American or an American Jew?” Uneasy recollection of that choreographic score and its siding of my friends into groups of the former (code for young Zionist) vs. latter (spoiled by assimilation) added more worries.

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<sup>298</sup> See scholarly criticism of Jewish Diaspora discourse and its ties to Jewish statehood by Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), Judith Butler, *Parting Ways*, and Hannah Arendt's *The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman (Random House Digital, 2009).

Still, trusting it was best not to make such assumptions of an academic conference to be so singularly focused, I proposed a performative essay experiment that seemed to risk rioting against the very logic of the conference theme. Diaspora models that reinforced exceptional conditions of Jewish displacement, I would argue, could only fall back on defensive desires for Jewish statehood and its undue expressions of power. The term itself, however much it emphasized a global Jewry through a rhetoric of dispersion and decentralization, seemed to carry with it this baggage that reiterated a lost center. Seen in this light, my dissertation efforts to highlight performance plays with excess Jewishness and Womanness in the US now linked in new ways to a more broadly mapped politics of Jewish identification, brought up in a word. The dangers of Jewish exceptionalism in a global context (Chapter 5) rubbed against my reading of US Jewish performing otherness and seemingly for fun's sake (Chapters 1 through 4). What connected US spectacles of funny femininity that played with vintage ethnic and gender difference and those that debated defense of Jewish difference in relation to statehood? Was there a politics of deliberate performing Jewish difference through parody or self-othering citation that collapsed concerns over visibility in the US and a historical victimization in need of state defense? And how did this relate to the conceptual chasm imposed by choosing between being a Jewish American versus an American Jew?

Prepared as I was for the type of groupthink exercises on Jewish identity that split along fault lines of faithful allegiance to Israel, I found the conference context open to these challenges, if still divided along the same points. The majority of conference goers ignored the conference theme altogether in their investigations of other topics ('a Jewish

thing’, one said, and a way ‘to not engage with politics’, said another). Of the few who mentioned my willingness to expose points of US race and ethnic privilege implied by a Jewish Diaspora framework in Question and Answer periods, all were graduate students in their late twenties and early thirties. More than content, it seemed to me, most among the older crowd wanted to discuss my boldness to attempt what the conference chair called the “Holy Grail” of a theory-practice approach, and my blending of academic prose and dance improvisation specifically. Only in private conversations later on did scholar-artists my parent’s age describe looking toward my generation to find ways of working on these politically divisive issues without leaving Jewishness behind.

I introduced the presentation as a dancing addendum to my almost completed dissertation on Jewishness, gender and sexuality and the expressive potential of a queer Jewish dance discourse.<sup>299</sup> In reflexive fragments, I presented what I newly realized was my own Diaspora choreography: a layered Jewish ‘going out’ I’d been developing during the years of graduate school as a dance theater piece called *Love on Mars*. In its evening

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<sup>299</sup> Despite being partnered with a female campus rabbi explicitly invited on this two-person panel to answer questions on LGBTQ issues in Jewish thinking, the sense of ‘queer’ my research calls on does not confine itself to sexual preference, but neither does it entirely not do that either. As fleshed out in the Introduction to this dissertation, scholarly and colloquial usages of queer have by now readily muddled up any singular meaning of the term, such that even the era of the post-queer has merely issued in yet more movement en mass to radicalize the concept. Scholarship on queerness has argued over its identitarian politics, as equally tied to sex acts as any number of other resistive efforts at visibility, representation, and alternative possibility. When it comes to scholarship on Jewish queerness, however, a particular conflation of the always already effeminate male shlemiel and the closeted, castrated outcast queer blurries together with more hopeful efforts to foreground LGBTQ agendas, dislodge Jewish studies from its insistence on male subjects, and fill in archival holes. In my own project, I use the term to help theorize the transgressive potential of spectacle Jewish femininity across a spectrum of performance contexts and its twenty first century tendencies toward sexy ruse.

length form, the semiautobiographical journey outer space to an abstract ‘beyond’ unfurls as a rediscovery of my grandmother’s own Jewish journey out of Nazi Germany. The title’s open-ended evocation allows its exact meanings to morph over the course of the performance. Multi-leveled senses of love extend between a girl and her grandmother, a girl and her Jewish identity, and a girl and her queer (political and romantic) desires for a something elseness out there beyond the world and yet unknown. The story-centric performance pokes Yiddish-inflected fun at my Sexy Jewess frontier femme figuration and her search for (self) love while opening up a space to rediscover intimate ties to holocaust history and a new-old home in Jewishness. It thus links the chutzpah of grandmotherly humor and courage to auto-ethnographic material of my own self-reflexive un/Sexy Jewess. Both the performance and the paper presentation of *Love on Mars* engaged a sci-fi back-to-the-future approach that could account for what it might mean to be a Jewish artist who makes Jewish shows in times like these.

At the podium in front of about fifty Jewish studies scholars, I introduced the opening bit of *Love on Mars* as a post-feminist play with sexy ruse,<sup>300</sup> and a post-assimilationist search for Jewish roots in my grandmother’s testimony.<sup>301</sup> I describe my burlesque beginning to the Tin Pan Alley tune, “Hard Hearted Hannah,” enacting lyrics that tell of a “vamp of savanna” and her femme fatale ways. In tap shoes, a tiny dress and a life vest, I offer verbal and gestural apologies between recorded lines that confess of increasingly cruel crimes. Unpacking an armful of potatoes from my suitcase that

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<sup>300</sup> Doing and undoing bawdy bodily displays of sexiness so as to cite Jewishness in-between sexier exotic women on one hand and white women on the other.

<sup>301</sup> Doing and undoing (my own) Jewish otherness through historical narrative and embodied nostalgia

indicate the simpler ways of my Russian-Polish roots, I borrow an innocent old-immigrant charm to insist these cold-blooded acts were entirely accidental. Into the instrumental break between verses I stuff too many verbal confessions of my latest worries, which I tailor for each performance. I tell the crowd of my Jewish Mother who advises that a little time off wouldn't hurt, and sidetrack momentarily to tell of my actual mom who sends me articles on the science of regular rest intervals. The discovery of [www.loveonmars.com](http://www.loveonmars.com) called out as just the thing, I say. The site offered a dating service aimed at (in a nasal, flirty pitch reminiscent of a vintage NY ghetto girl) "adventchah seekuhs" tired of the "saaame ol' tuh-res-tri-ality."<sup>302</sup> Finding it just what I needed, I recite the seriocomic grant proposal to the (fictive) Dorothy and Pearl Rosenblatt Foundation for Interplanetary women's visions abroad. Convincing the committee of the "ah-tis-tic and aki-demic meh-rit" of the Sexy Jewess and her strategic embodiment, I get the grant, pack my luggage of lingerie, flippers and a mailbox and head off on an exotic vacation ... by inflatable boat.

And then, while they laugh, I morph.

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<sup>302</sup> Readers may recall that jokes about Jewish American Princess render her famous for sabotaging sex (by finding it boring) while talking to her mother. In developing this opening bit, I experimented with different ways to incorporate a plastic red phone receiver into the folds of my costume. I'd adhere it to my life vest, tape it inside a huge mailbox, or otherwise pull it out of my luggage, as essential travel item and direct line to my mother.

## **Improvising Jewishness One Morph at a Time**

I had been gifted ‘morphing’ as improvisational dance score from choreographer and professor-mentor Susan Rose for purposes of the larger evening-length work. Not quite modern dance technique, but not quite not, the morphing score makes room for a blending of pedestrian borrowings, literalist gesture, quotations of recognizable social dances, character impersonations, and physical prowess in unending action. The task is to constantly develop one’s movement towards a new bodily iteration that emerges from it, making choices about how long to dwell in a particular mode before morphing along. I now performed that ongoing physical task full of infinite movement development in the conference room over and under the table, in and out of the UW Madison Hillel aisles. I drew attention with my eyes to the physical details of my (Jewish) elbows, knees, ears, chin, etc; in the scope of my research, neither Jewish features nor not Jewish ones either. I felt the crowd uncertain of this change. I talked over the unstopping development of movement repetition and its ongoing variation with sentence run-ons that rub against this morphing with parallel ideas that do not match or explain my body moving un/Jewishly. I pierce the silence with account of Rose’s advice to ditch the accent for my ‘hard-hearted’ Sexy Jewess bit and just to talk in my normal voice because there wasn’t anything new about the nasal thing. It was hard to let go of, I confess. How else to let audiences know that I knew that they knew that I clearly knew I was working with nose at center of the research and such available ‘resources’ were difficult to overlook? They recognize this worrying reference to more familiar Jewish female nose-talk and it gets a knowing laugh.

Even as such nose-conscious confessions are familiar fodder for this crowd, my body is moving in ways that are not.<sup>303</sup> I begin to unfurl in words what I do as I do it. Some version of: *The finger wagging over time becomes a finger pointing that then becomes a finger inviting someone closer which becomes a finger poking and then picking lint and then pulling string... and you have to keep following the logic of the movement towards its next development....*(the unrehearsed theorizations on the practice continue with careful attention to detail and increasing physical difficulty) *and the accumulated effect looks entirely illogical but the practice is in staying exactly attuned to the precise direction of what's happening, so that you have some way to proceed....*(and I say, surprising myself) *when you're on your way somewhere and you don't know where you're going or what you're going to do.*

The line, erupting on the spot as it does, makes meaning of Rose's morphing score in ways I had not anticipated. It is the verbatim text I repeat of my grandmother's story just moments later in my presentation script. I say it when I/she sit and sway as if on the Transiberian railway in 1941, and recall the sight of a Russian family bringing stuffed cabbage and noodle soup in the middle of freezing Harbin, because... *we came here in 1917 and we know how it is when you're on your way somewhere and you don't know where you're going or what you're going to do.* This ability to draw such

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<sup>303</sup> I'm thanked later by a conference attendee for this dissonant arrangement of movement and representational meaning, and praised for the delinking of gestures from explicit meaning that allowed her to enter the familiar (read, Jewish) material differently. I address related responses to 1:1 movement and meaning-making in the dissertation's Introduction and concerns with the literality of meaning in my choreographic tendency toward 'theatricality' and in Chapter 5 via audience un/certain unease with Haft's gestural dance vocabulary in the opening of *T:HERE*.

connections between the dancing task and its resonances with my grandmother's recollections deepened the discovery aspect of this dancing improvisation. It added unplanned dimensions of representational meaning making to the morphing score. In ways that seem altogether tied in with self-reflexive performance, the structure of the score itself makes material and visible a dancer's relationship to what she's doing. It allows one mode of moving to continue unfolding in ways that track its own shifting logic, ever post-ing itself in infinite self-reference and development. The self-tracking device likewise leaves space for improvisatory decision making based on Rose's regular instruction to dancers to consider "what the dance needs now". This embodied reflexivity on the needs of the dance, now, as enacted through the impromptu repetition of my grandmother's own words drew stunning links in that moment of talk and dance.

Back to podium, I read from my paper. For the rest of the performance, I tell them, I am Ursel, reciting verbally and reworking physically the copied cadences of the one time she recorded her story. How the black boots marched in and told all the girls to stand up, they're going with them. How they didn't take her cause she looked like a ten year old, but instead she was locked up in a cell for three months and taken by day to sit frozen in a government office as a higher up talked sex talk for ten hours a day. How the family finally found papers out of Hamburg. How they made it to Shanghai, known by these stateless refugees as the strangest place at the strangest of times. How she met my grandfather, a cute sax kid from Brooklyn stationed in China after the war. How their letters were sweet, but girls weren't interested in romance, only food, and if she could go out with eight guys in an evening and have 8 dinners, this is really what was successful.

How he met her on the dock in San Francisco and they decided to get married. How the family made bets on how it wouldn't last, and how it lasted for 64 years. And how, *I go to the in-laws and I guess they expected the Ellis Island, you know, the babushka and the black little...I don't look so...refugee.... All the old aunts, the great nephews, all the Schwadron relatives have assembled in Brownsville and they have to meet me....So I'm willing, I don't care...they didn't get invited to an affair, so there are no presents, not even one! but that's fine. And we're all standing there, and from the back of the room, Aunt Sarah takes one looks at me and she says.... "But she don't look Chinese!"*The punch landed with a gong of recognition as the crowd laughed on cue at the gravitas of my German grandmother's being found too Jewish for the Nazis and not Jewish enough for Yiddish New York.<sup>304</sup>

My opening performance of Yiddish-sounding Sexy Jewess jokes together and against the more intimate impression of my grandmother's also funny if difficult story spirals together two strands of funny US Jewish femininity that do not actually intersect.<sup>305</sup> Morphing between these personages offered a mode of embodying a certain post-modernist pastiche in that it privileged a choreographic patchworking of impersonations and reflections. Projecting an image of myself through this morphing, I positioned myself of, if no longer in, the quite varied worlds of these period-specific

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<sup>304</sup> When I have performed the piece for non-Jewish audiences or those less familiar with the tensions between Eastern and Western European Jews and the hugely different periods of immigration, Aunt Sarah's confusion still gets laughs. Her familiarly crass ethnic outsider status is readily replaceable with any number of immigrant joke-subjects.

<sup>305</sup> The category of today's white Jews of Ashkenazi dissent does not account for the distinct trajectories of Western/Eastern European-origin Jews or the cultural histories of these groups in the US.

ghetto girls. These distinct historical markers of Jewish female difference, lodged in and of my spectacle body, aimed to embody and entwine a multi-signifying 'post'-ing capacity to abstract various points of reference through proximal and temporal distance. Evoking earlier epochs as a morphing self-display resonated with performers described in chapters 1 through 3 likewise able to spiral around period-specific dimensions of Jewish difference.

Distinct as their legacies are, it strikes me that in playing both the flirty, funny burlesquer and the Anne Frank-esque autobiographical girl, I perpetuated a kind of blurring of Jewish female archetypes by way of an abstract and ahistorical difference. Like performances I had analyzed, I indexed earlier eras of ethnic otherness more pronounced than now. As along porn and pious 'frontiers' (Chapter 1), neo-burlesque Jewface parody (Chapter 2), and their reliance on a legacy of Golden Era Jewish female funny girls (Chapter 3), mine also reached to reiterate a plethora of Jewish excesses. I wondered to what extent I had added holocaust survivor mythology to other surplus tropes like nose, voice, and bodily bawdiness. What to make of my own post-ing performance of Jewish difference? Does embodiment of my grandmother's holocaust narrative become a means of distancing from these earlier epochs of more othered otherness and thereby secure my position in sameness/whiteness? Does this recollection of holocaust horrors, with or without its comic accents, offer another example of Jewface parody through citations of distance? What are the stakes of this selective (post) memory and its inevitable forgetting in the context of contemporary Jewish race and gender discourse?

Moreover, if my historical 'post'-ness justified a certain time-warping of Jewish female genealogies, my readiness to don 'difference' as a performance choice may doubly produce and result from the post-assimilatory contemporary period I research. My own performance tropes may thus spiral around the appropriative difference/ sameness/ guilt complexes raised throughout the dissertation that self-define through otherness. The spiraling imagery itself, however, inherently acknowledges the unfixity of these positions in difference or sameness. To be sure, 'difference' can never be a 'thing' to be easily engaged or dismissed, now or in any other temporality; indeed it is a socioeconomic condition of social and systematic power. Neither can 'sameness' promise some lasting pleasure or access to majoritarian acceptance. Spectacles of Jewish femininity, including my own, show that such fixed entry into whiteness is as fictive and changing as the construction of whiteness itself. This spiraling motion then is the movement around the historic poles of ethnic otherness and its residue of unwanted excess, and near-mythic gates of white entry and its in/accessibility. The performance of the Jewish female 'post' is this critical spiraling play. It is this choreography of spiraling in/access that makes morphing in-between a mode of self-definition. Shapeshifting as it maneuvers around its multiple forms, a post-ing framework also makes room to morph from meaning to meaning. The post acts as futurist message, enacts a residue of the past, attaching above the scholar-artist's desk a sticky post-it note to self reminding of these doubled desires as winding motions toward an equally provisional notion of the 'beyond'.

## **Be (yond) ing Difference and Playing (Up) the Post**

In the scope and sequence of the dissertation chapters, I have aimed to regard the relationship among Jewishness, sexiness, and whiteness as social and sexual symbols with bodily implications. Beginning with the funny face and its nose-heavy puns, I opened with a focus on Jewish female expressive capacities, expectations, and ‘dancerly’ interruptions. In doing so, I called to denaturalize the conflation of interior and exterior bodily excess so as to expose the workings of stereotypes. I have also meant to offer a mode of revising or recuperating such stereotypes as questionably subversive strategies performers employ to move ‘beyond’ delimiting conditions of difference. I have shown how neither name changes and nose surgeries nor proximal post-ing of the past can finally penetrate boundaries erected by whiteness. The very premise of Jewish whiteness always already connotes the ruse of a passing act, and the spurious nature of whiteness itself. But therein lies the paradox of an emphasis on the agentic potential of the dancer’s doings. As is clear in historical accounts of an assimilatory century, Jewish progression from ethnic difference into sameness reveals a varied account of socioeconomic mobility in which the double performance of self and other otherness has played a major part.<sup>306</sup> My findings on contemporary performers indicate that sexy ruse enacts a particular kind of Jewface minstrelsy in a specific gendered context. Like Jewish female blackface has historically done, contemporary female Jewface works to secure whiteness either through mocking and modifying white femininity (Chapter 2 on Jewish Burlesque) or through passing acts (Chapter 4 on *Black Swan*).

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<sup>306</sup> See especially Michael Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise* and Lori Harrison Kahan, *White Negress*.

Evidenced in the period performances of vaudeville's race impersonations to today's passing acts in film, it is clear that what it has meant to be a 'White Woman' has shifted such that Jewish female performers have negotiated more and less access.<sup>307</sup> Alongside these shifts have spiraled the defining dilemmas of the 'Jewish Woman' that curiously sustain her marketability for most of an American century, despite and perhaps because of a well-documented Jewish minority access to upward mobility. Despite assimilatory access, the Jewish female performing herself has continued to engage with Jewish and gentile audience expectations of her excesses. Intentionally unblending with white womanhood has been her big-nosed shtick of bawdy body talk and dance. The move from not white to not quite white to guilty white reveals something achievable about Jewish women's whiteness in the US. As I have argued, the study of Jewish women performing Jewishly indicates certain ways that performers construct whiteness and Jewishness as distinct bodily doings best theorized as market strategies. Chapters 1 through 3 outline a big-name history from 1930s Brice and Tucker through 1970s Streisand and Midler, to 2000s Silverman and Angel. These three pairs of out-of-the-closet Jewish women—one sweeter and one coarser in each pair—have found ways to be funny and sexy, but not necessarily white. Celebrity spotlights on the Jewish spectacular subject seems to have sustained her image as social misfit, inappropriate female queer, and sexual deviant. Spiraling in and between discourses on the so-called liberated (read,

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<sup>307</sup> While a detailed historicization of this concept is beyond the scope of this conclusion, the reader may consider the various ways of managing white desires through dance as discussed in this dissertation. Even as Natalie Portman's "white nose" in the discussion of *Black Swan* (Chapter 4) opposes Susannah Perlman's deliberate undoing of dance as post-bawdry shtick in (Chapter 2), both instances reveal how the Jewish woman opts to out her Jewishness or closets it respectively in white swanlike feminine ideals.

white) woman across 'pre', 'proto' and 'post' feminisms, Jewish female spectacle has strategized how to self-present samely or differently, depending on shifting market value.

In my harshest critique, I have accused today's Sexy Jewess spectacles of failing to be quite so funny as more lovable femmes of an earlier Golden Era, discussed in Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4. And yet, the reader and I must agree to know better than to romance the past, placing blaming on these less spectacular agents, subsumed as they are under the un/dancing Silverman and porno/passing/post-feminist schemes. Neither convincing exotics nor fully emerged and guiltless whites, what options are there for the bodily marked but to 'go bad' for girl power as theorized of burlesque and ballet? In humor as in horror badness, it would seem, funniness (ha ha or uh oh) defangs the implicit threat of a fertile temptress who challenges ethnic stability and gender norms alike. As is seen in Chapter 4 on *Black Swan*, un/funny racial passing and un/queer kissing cousins means to make that threat only ambiguously real. In Chapter 5 on Sexy Sabra stereotypes and the shifting US perceptions of Israeli defense, the sabra's lethal sexiness and her exploits in homoerotic hotness may likewise be too dangerous to be taken seriously. This mutes her militarism for Jewish and gentile American men under the patronizing guise of the foreign exotic (who paradoxically read as Whites of the Middle East). Whiteness wins in both these cases, as Portman's passing act and circulating sabra soldier stereotypes placate to hetero-holds on the portrait of white (male) desire.

For my reluctance to join this boys club alone, I know it cannot finally be productive to declare today's performance of Jewish and female 'difference' as

backwards and bad (but not in the intended bawdry way). Such would be complicit with the cultural projects that wish to contain, cover up or otherwise correct the problems of Jewishness and its worser crime, femininity. Instead is a wish for writing and dancing the Jewish woman that resists these limiting holds on her image in favor of formulating more plausibly liberatory positions-in-excess. Aspiring to actively enact Jewish sites of pleasure and expose its points of privilege, I join an effort to make and think performance that morphs its way through these paradoxes of self-spectacle.

### **Dis/Placing Post-Memory in the Jewish New (?)**

In reframing dissertation themes, I have opted to implicate my own choreographic and scholarly tendencies to turn back to Jewish pasts on purpose in pursuit of an uncertain Jewish New, no longer as relevant or reliable in its difference as it once was. And yet, the particular reenactment of difference indexed in the performance of grandmother survivor narratives and its abstract ties to a revisionist diaspora model fits awkwardly within the lenses of parody or racial passing outlined in the dissertation. As I have come to understand, a cultural trope of remembering victimization and concerns over female representation or visibility are not synonymous figments of Jewish imagination. To collapse citations of these different concepts of ‘difference’ may be reductive and unproductive. That said, in viewing my own embodied performance work, I wonder what it might mean to add Holocaust themes to other Jewish and female strategies of self-othering performance.

Scholars of Jewish studies critical of the Holocaust as cultural hinge point have well-noted the “post-memory” of third generation Jews who make artwork on WWII themes they only know through stories. Film scholar Lawrence Baron writes, they (we) are like “the second carbon copy of an original document” that “though the message has become fainter...still can discern its essence if they are willing to expend the effort”.<sup>308</sup> My choreographic efforts – however willingly expended as they were- mixed with unreconcilable questions as to the utility of rehearsing this historical Jewish mark now. Michael Goldberg writes that the lachrymose holocaust narrative is better replaced by an exodus story of continuance and survival. Though I do not share that particular opinion, I certainly understand the “cult of the holocaust” he blames for having “rendered us preoccupied with our victimhood and defense.”<sup>309</sup> Baron’s examples of grandchildren tattooing concentration camp numbers as a fashion statement, or otherwise fetishizing posthumously look problematic, if also plainly odd. But in finding and choreographing a Jewish home in holocaust themes, rather than refuting or refusing them, I risk more than mere reiteration of a generationally specific Jewish gesture. My sense of the work is a much more muddled one meant to question a stance on Jewish exceptionalism more broadly. The same ‘post-memory’ that may well align my concert with third generation Jewish cultural producers thus turns and twists my research questions of (posting) Jewish

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<sup>308</sup> Lawrence Baron, “Imagine the Show in American Third Generation Cinema” in “The Impact of the Holocaust in America,” *The Jewish Role in American Life: An Annual Review*, VI (2008), 103.

<sup>309</sup> Micheal Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

difference further into an ‘abyss’ of Jewish specificity. In its myopia, it may render too much unseeable.

Steven Kepnes reviews Goldberg’s *Why Should the Jewish Survive* in an article titled the same.<sup>310</sup> In his estimation, reading Goldberg’s book gives the frightening sense that American Jews have become so fascinated by the Holocaust’s horror and destruction that, like Lot’s wife, we risk being turned into stone, by staring into the abyss. While I relate to this attempt to unfreeze a cultural fixation enough to view it up close, I hesitate to moralize the memorialization of the past as pure fetishization of trauma. To personify the holocaust fascination as the backwards gaze of the blameful wife of Lot only further reiterates the vexed effeminization I outline throughout the dissertation (here linking biblical female scapegoat to meek manly holocaust victim in need of more virile models). Still, in staging of the sympathetic Jewish female and her funny way of saying horrible things, I wonder how I am complicit in re-fixing this cultural abyss, projected onto the female as it is.

Seen in this light, the trouble with performing post-memory of the holocaust or any other more marked Jewish past, is not the fact that it cannot recall originary experiences as enough scholarship has pointed out. Rather, in re-membering its stories of through the trope of the autobiographical girl, it may risk universalizing Jewish exceptionalism and the logic Butler eschews of justice only relevant ‘just’ to Jews.<sup>311</sup> I wonder to what degree the citation (any) Jewish difference in the post-assimilatory US

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<sup>310</sup> “Why Should Jews Survive?” in *Modern Judaism* 19.1 (1999): 95-102.

<sup>311</sup> Butler, *Parting Ways*, 4.

overlooks the dangers of defending such a claim to difference when such defenses may inevitably- if inadvertently - naturalize sustained US support for statehood. The guilty pleasures of post-assimilatory US sameness (via rehearsals of otherness) thus spiral around a Middle Eastern context, whether understood as ‘Diaspora’ discourse or embattled US support for Israel.

If my own self-conscious rehearsals of bodily and narrative difference necessarily complicate my sense of if and why to continue developing *Love on Mars*, I found new interest in my grandmother project at the end of the summer of 2012. I performed the piece in the gymnasium of the elementary school my grandmother attended in Hamburg, Germany before her escape. After a workshop with a class of students the same age she was at the time her world erupted with war, it hit me that the Mars I had imagined as the fantastic place of a frontierist Jewish self-imagining felt oddly real. This German ‘return’ that was both my own and never mine to begin with manifested my red-planet fiction in ways I had not expected. In what felt like an absurdist ‘going out’ on par with the exotic travel I take in the choreography’s narrative search for ‘love on mars’, I landed in a world of apologies and cover ups in which I found myself uncomfortably complicit. For my arrival, one schoolteacher told me, short purple curtains were drawn over painted reliefs still adorning the stage walls with Nazi-era Aryan art as they are for special occasions. Somehow I would help like these protective covers of history as Jewish cultural ambassador meant to heal wounds with my bodily presence. But looking out during performance from my clownish garb and comic timing slowed to bilingual translation, I mostly covered up for obsessive glances at the young women downstage left. Was I

imagining it or were those teenage women in hijabs laughing at me instead of with me? Juggling my grandma's libretto and a stage full of twelve year olds added for this show, I tried not to watch them not watching me, as they took breaks from texting only to whisper with one another at the next incredulous thing I did. I blamed myself for wearing such short shorts with my costume. For changing clothes onstage. For reliance on too much English. For my 'experimental' moves. For making a Jewish show, here, now. I would have traded it all in for the attention of those gossipy girls, for the legibility of my meta-monologue that questioned along with them what in the world I was doing there.

And then, an answer of some sort came as I greeted guests with the house lights on. Women my mother's age hovered closely, gesturing to help collect the floor full of strewn letters along with other props: flippers, tap shoes, luggage, chairs, a music stand, a rubber frog, lingerie and a life vest. They came one at a time to tell me secrets of their own growing up in silence about these scary things, apologizing for their sons that refused to come despite their pleas. One, who confessed of a brown uniform in her own grandfather's closet and the horror of her child's friends finding out, thanked me again for "letting laughter begin to heal". A short and sturdy Steffi Wittenberg with cloudy eyes cut through this self-conscious crowd to open an old and yellowed book of young cursive poems written by the girls of my grandmother's class. She pointed a convicted finger on the page, and read the curly piece of wisdom.

9 November 1936  
Gesundheit und heit froher  
Mut sind besser als viel Geld und Gut.  
Zur freudlichen Erinnerung  
an Deine,  
Ursel Lievendag

You see? She asked, showing me proof. This is your Ursel. “Health and joyful courage are better than gold and goods.” Steffi, an outspoken antifascist who had been in my grandmother’s class, was instrumental in my coming there and had arranged with the help of her own biographers and teachers at the school to bring me to Hamburg. She now introduced my performance with her own survival story and recounting of her efforts to track all of the letters written between classmates that year as so many left on the children’s transport. Her interests in my work were those of historical specificity, and the degree to which my retelling accurately accounted for the details of dates and names. It dawned on me that my concern was with the morphing of the storytelling experience through dance theater, with unfixing any singular meanings and with a certain abstraction that Steffi didn’t like. I had illuminated for myself a primary privilege of post-memory – in my Jewish American context- to morph my way through its points of reverence and critique made possible by various registers of proximal, temporal, and geographic distance.

And then, the next day, a secondary redress to the question of what I was doing there came in the form of a local Jewish artist (maybe the only one) who had seen the performance and now stopped me in the street. “Our noses bring us together once again,” he said flirting, meanly. “You know, it’s funny, he said, I use a suitcase in my act too, but for totally different reasons. I stopped carrying that baggage around a long time ago.” He bit his tongue, he told me, so as not to tell me that he thinks I should too. Too many Jews, he said, were profiting off the war, and the only thing to do was move on. I pictured the moment when I first saw him at the theater, finding him sympathetic for his overstated

Jewish nose right away. He stood back while his German girlfriend Stella batted her thick mascaraed eyes at me and leaned seductively close to the stage lip where I sat. I remember finding her strong jaw line impressive and intimidating as it revealed and concealed details of a curious collaborative Yiddish cabaret sister act of her own in its early stages. *A German Jewface, I thought? By goyim enthusiasts?* I'd have to come back. But standing now face to face with my bald male foil, I wondered what a Jewish artist kept in his suitcase if not his family's own history of this city. Rather than ask of the ways he so surely out-posted me, I just smiled lightly and responded vaguely to his invitation to dinner.

### **One More Morph**

Back at the conference, I accepted an invitation to perform as part of a colleague's improvisational score on Queer Jews for a trio of women. The score asked those in attendance to pose questions to the dancers, to which we would respond in intuitive movement and train-of-thought words. This worried me, and I asked my colleague if I had to tell the truth. Assured I could say whatever I wanted, I worried even more. Having just met these particular two collaborators, I feared neither Jewishness nor Queerness was enough to have in common, let alone rely on to make a good dance. For all my theorization of bad dancing, I did not want to participate in it if I could help it. I called my discomfort performance research and tried my best to show up ready for the unrehearsed event. Other dancers in our three-day performance lab read select questions aloud. We rolled over and under each other in a contact improv milieu I was less than

familiar with, catching weight and providing structure for each other to think, listen, speak, suspend, surrender. For the first several minutes, I stayed quiet, letting these other women do the talking, and tried to compensate for an unfamiliar mutedness with attentive physical decision making strategies of my own improv training. After several questions about feelings, memories, and requests for definitions, I found one question finally for me: “Heads or tails?” it simply said. My upper body was fully strewn across the angled back of another Jewish female body below me facing the other direction. My head rested in the cushion of her curvy bottom and the front of my pelvis balanced on the back of her head. I wrapped my arms around her belly stacked perfectly underneath mine, and squealed, “Both!”

I delighted at the prospect and what it might mean for a post-ing scheme and its materialization of the spiraling impulse through the female dance doubling. A deep kind of peace settled with a half smirk at the blurting out of that line. In this tiny free-standing synagogue where we met for this end of conference showing, I relished in movement making new Jewish meaning infinitely morphable through literal layers of fleshy femininity. This call to move on and its increasing psychic holds on my own self-talk loosened its grip for the length of a collective laugh. Finding unexpected solace in the excess curves of other Jewish women, among a crowd of eager and open revisionists, our Sexy Jewess sixty-nine embodied an improvisatory new home and a momentary resolve. In the funny (body) parts of a freer-form Jewish New, it seemed to me in that instance that we settled a score no such celebrity spotlight could or would. For fleeting moments at least, a liberatory Jewish and female expression followed a collective and impromptu

logic all its own. In lingering there for the split seconds it took to register and respond to the next set of negotiations, I found myself posting up against the back of this woman and these newly perfect old synagogue walls fitting pleasurably within their spectacular folds.

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