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Beyond Whiteness: Revisiting Jews in Ethnic America

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BEYOND WHITENESS

*REVISITING JEWS
IN ETHNIC AMERICA*

Edited by Jonathan Karp

Casden Institute
for the Study of
the Jewish Role
in American Life
Annual Review,
Volume 21



Beyond Whiteness: Revisiting Jews in Ethnic America

The Jewish Role in American Life

**An Annual Review of the Casden Institute for the
Study of the Jewish Role in American Life**

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Study of the Jewish Role in American Life**

Volume 21

Steven J. Ross, *Editor*
Jonathan Karp, *Guest Editor*
Lisa Ansell, *Associate Editor*

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Jewish Role in American Life

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For My Barbara

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Foreword

When did Jews become white? This may sound like an unusual question, but according to scholars American Jews were not widely considered white until the early twentieth century. They were not alone in their peculiar racial and ethnic situation. For many decades, Irish, Italians, Slavs, Latinos, and a whole range of eastern, southern and central European immigrants were not considered white by many of their American compatriots.

The essays in *Beyond Whiteness: Revisiting Jews in Ethnic America* survey a wide variety of Jewish experiences as well as Jewish interactions with other ethnic groups. Although ethnic identity often served as a source of division, the volume's authors show how instances of multi-ethnic cooperation in groups such as the International Workers Order served as a source of strength as myriad ethnics worked together to enhance the lives of all minorities.

The eight essays in this volume cover myriad aspects of ethnic identity both among Jews and between Jews and other ethnic groups. We see how after World War II, the Jews and gentiles of Levittown and Parkchester lived unchallenged and unperturbed in a segregated suburb and city where the issue of "getting along" with a minority race was yet to be a source of concern and turmoil. Other essays examine the ways in which Jews interacted with other ethnic and racial groups who were also seen as outside the accepted ideas of "whiteness": Asians, Mormons and Puerto Ricans. Yet another essay explores the often-problematic situation of Jews of color. How did the experience of Jews of color differ from Jews who were later considered as "white"? "There is no question that Jews of Color experience challenges to their Jewish authenticity," observes Bruce Philips, "because they 'don't look Jewish.'"

Finally, two authors look inward at the ways in which Jews used vehicles of popular culture such as film, television, stand-up comedy, and writings by authors from Alfred Kazin to Arthur Miller to Philip Roth to Larry David to define what it means to be Jewish—and an ethnic—in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I wish to thank the volume's guest editor, Jonathan Karp, for assembling such a fascinating set of essays. I also wish to thank Marilyn Lundberg Melzian for her superb work as the volume's production editor.

Steven J. Ross

Myron and Marian Casden Director

Distinguished Professor of History

Introduction: Two Cheers for Ethnicity

by Jonathan Karp

This volume's title, *Beyond Whiteness: Revisiting Jews in Ethnic America*, highlights two contrasting approaches to minority group relations in the modern US: on the one hand, race and "Whiteness Studies," on the other, ethnicity. Although deriving from the Greek *ethnos*, the latter term is of only recent vintage, first deployed in its now familiar usage in the early 1940s.¹ Likewise, although "race" is a long-familiar term (even if its meaning has repeatedly changed), "racism" is a modern, essentially twentieth-century construction, while "whiteness" as an analytical concept only came in to vogue in the early 1990s.² Ethnicity came to the fore after the Nazi horrors had discredited race as a neutral descriptive term. It differed from race not only in its relative absence of prejudicial baggage but in its implicit linkage of ancestry with distinctive if hybrid group *culture*, a component that race seemed to lack. Whiteness Studies, in contrast, is less interested in culture per se than in ideology. It presupposes that the use of whiteness to describe a body of human beings is a construct rather than an actual fact of nature or a scientifically valid description of group character. It assumes that ascribed whiteness is a social mechanism for creating racialized hierarchies, with roots in Renaissance and Enlightenment outlooks but more systematically harnessed for the purposes of white supremacy in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.³

The fact that Whiteness Studies emerged at a slightly later date than Ethnic Studies suggests that the two may be seen as rival sociological approaches. And indeed, despite their significant overlap, we can contrast them as constituting alternative understandings. The earlier social scientific focus on ethnicity implied that the descendants of immigrant groups in America

persisted in maintaining distinct identities and patterns of behavior for generations after their forebears arrived, even or especially when these features were modified and adapted over time. In contrast, the somewhat later approach defined by Whiteness Studies sees racial hierarchy building as the true organizing principle of American history, one in which ethnicity is reconceived as a strategy deployed to assimilate the descendants of European immigrants under the banner of whiteness while excluding those deemed racial others. African Americans, especially, but to a degree also “non-white Hispanics” and Asians, constitute these marginalized groups stigmatized by racial non-whiteness.

In this sense Whiteness Studies views ethnicity as an epiphenomenon, marking a relatively short-lived phase centered in the mid-twentieth century during which Europeans were pressured to conform to the white/black racial binary and collaborate in the work of perpetuating it. For descendants of Irish, Southern Italian, Slavic, and Jewish immigrants, being an “ethnic” effectively meant being a “white ethnic,” a transitional state of tutelage preceding full admission to the blessed condition of undifferentiated whiteness. That precisely these groups had been targeted by nativists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as alien and “lower breeds” is not without significance. On the contrary, that they were now—by the immediate postwar decade—being incorporated as provisional white Americans fostered the notion that the American Melting Pot (whether in its extreme amalgamationist or its more moderate pluralistic form) remained operative. America was a land of equal opportunity for all those deemed sufficiently or effectively white.⁴

Beyond Whiteness seeks to modify but not to refute the Whiteness Studies model. As a collection of essays by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary scholars, it can hardly be said to advance any one approach, let alone argument. And not all of its contributors would agree that “ethnicity” deserves to make a comeback—certainly not in its classic formulation of the immediate post-War era. Still, by returning the focus to “Jews in ethnic America,” the contributions all make the case that ethnicity has constituted an important phase in the American Jewish experience and might even retain relevance going forward.

Chapters 1 and 2, by Elissa Sampson and Robert Zecker, respectively, focus on one of the earliest models of multiethnic and interracial cooperation, that facilitated by the International Workers Order (IWO), an umbrella organization for workers of different national minorities that was founded in 1930 by leftist pro-Soviet Jews. Despite its ideological blinders (though inspired by its doctrinal commitments), the IWO took great pains to foster collaboration

between workers speaking different languages and stemming from different backgrounds but also across racial lines. In Chapter 3 Jeffrey Gurock shifts the ground and perspective from the prewar ethnic working class to the post-war move into middle class suburbia. He does so by examining two different types of post-World War II American Jewish residential settings, the suburban model epitomized by Levittown, New York and the more urban, though less studied, enclave of “white ethnics” in the Northeast Bronx neighborhood of Parkchester. Gurock’s findings are instructive if counterintuitive. While neither setting fostered the kind of thoroughgoing interethnic amalgamation that students of whiteness formation might have expected, a greater degree of assimilation occurred in the more urban than the suburban locale. At the same time, however, even in the case of Parkchester, where Jewish ethnic distinctiveness was not self-consciously fostered, it nevertheless stubbornly persisted. For despite the relative comity prevailing between the white Jews and Irish Catholics residentially congregated there, the two groups effectively lived “separately together.”

In Chapter 4 Jonathan Karp argues that the black/white binary inhibits a more nuanced and spectral understanding of group status and interrelations. He makes the case specifically for the utility of comparing Jewish and Asian American experiences in the modern US and argues that despite their own racial stigmatization post-World War II, the history of Asian Americans bears comparison with that of American Jews, particularly in terms of educational achievement and upward mobility. Similarly, in Chapter 5 Julian Levinson shows that both Jews and Mormons can be described as “ethnoreligious” groups, “in which ancestral heritage may be seen as coterminous with a sacred tradition.” Indeed, their *ethnoreligious* character may provide a key to understanding just why American Jews still retain their distinctive identity. Despite alarmist projections of rising intermarriage and declining synagogue affiliation, Jews have not ceased to exhibit distinctive educational, occupational, and voting patterns, among other markers of group cohesiveness. Even when not displayed in standardly or stereotypically religious terms, Jewishness has always strongly attached itself to a metaphorical notion of peoplehood, a kind of permeable tribalism, which is likewise a feature held in common with Mormons.

Yet tribalism has its own vocabulary. The very word “Jew” can resonate with a harsh particularity, off-putting not only to some non-Jews. In Chapter 6 Hana Wirth-Nesher, like Levinson a literary scholar, explores some of the ethnic dimensions of “the J-Word” in American Jewish literature from the

mid-twentieth century to today. In a tour that begins with Hortense Calisher and ends with Philip Roth, Wirth-Nesher shows how American Jewish writers have variously critiqued the constructed meanings around the word “Jew” while also painfully acknowledging the futility of seeking to escape from it.

Indeed, however illuminating inter-ethnic comparisons are, Jewishness demonstrates an historically *sui generis* character, at least when it comes to unfathomable longevity of Jew hatred. One way of coping with this inherited trauma is through humor. Alternately black, self-abasing, ironic, or absurdist, Jewish humor has continued to thrive in twenty-first century America, long after prognosticators of assimilation would have predicted its dissolution. In Chapter 7 Jarrod Tanny’s discussion of Jewish comedy in modern America offers two important insights: first, that humor is one of those important “folkways,” ranging from food traditions to speech patterns to Israel Day parades, that continue to mark out a Jewish ethnic distinctiveness; and second, that recent Jewish humor has served as a means of linking Jews to other minorities, especially marginalized ones of color, in a way that complicates the simplistic identification of Jews and their acquired/desired whiteness.

Finally, in Chapter 8, sociologist Bruce Phillips turns the preceding narratives upside down (or is it right side up?) through his analysis of the Jews of Color phenomenon—the increasing salience of Jews of mixed ethnic parentage for whom the old criteria of descent and blood do not readily apply. On the contrary, as Phillips shows in recounting their at times painful stories, Jews of Color have too often been met with misunderstanding, suspicion and even hostility from other Jews who operate on the basis of older categories of Jewish self-definition, including whiteness. The growing consciousness of Jews of Color may indeed point to a future when both race *and* ethnicity become decreasingly relevant in structuring Jewish American identity.

“Ethnic America” has the ring of a bygone era, albeit one that could be recalled nostalgically only by those prone to romanticizing the past. Its various champions, the disciples of Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne who coined the notion of ethnic pluralism, or later social scientists like Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who believed that ethnic inclusivity would eventually triumph over racism, were certainly blinkered in their failure to recognize that Blacks were not just another in a long line American sub-groups gradually ascending the ladder of inclusion.⁵

Yet the fact that these social commentators failed to recognize how deep and stubborn the roots of American racism are should not entirely count against them. The impulse to subsume Blacks into the ethnic model was premature

if not naïve, yet it was not fundamentally wrong. After all, in the 1970s and 1980s many Black leaders themselves sought to make “Afro-American” and then “African American” into the standard group label. And what lay behind this effort if not the insistence that Blacks should enjoy parity with every and any other ethnic group in America? In ethnic America to be a hyphenated American (even sans hyphen) was to be a fully-fledged American in a “nation of immigrants.” And if African Americans were involuntary and coerced immigrants, the equality long denied them could, it was believed, be advanced through a public recognition of their own hybrid ethnic status as both Africans and Americans, akin to Irish and Americans, Italians and Americans, Asians and Americans.⁶

For that matter, it is somewhat paradoxical or ironic that it was Jews who seemed to have resisted the label “Jewish Americans,” preferring instead to be called simply American Jews. The stubborn insistence on remaining different, even in the process of “fitting in,” demonstrates how challenging it is to definitively characterize group identity even in ethnic America.

Notes

1. Werner Sollors, ed., *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), x. Although the literature on ethnicity is massive and stretches well beyond the American context, one introductory work particularly stands out: Steve Fenton's *Ethnicity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010). For a recent discussion of Jews and American ethnicity, see Eli Lederhendler, ed., *Ethnicity and Beyond: Theories and Dilemmas of Jewish Group Demarcation*, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* XXV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
2. Primary credit for inaugurating the field goes to the independent scholar Theodore Allen, who published a series of pamphlets in the early 1970s which provided some of the theoretical framework of what later became Whiteness Studies. See Jeffrey Perry's fascinating introduction in the 2006 republication of Allen's 1975 "Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race," accessed September 10, 1923, https://www.jeffreybperry.net/attachments/allen_class_struggle.pdf.
3. For an overview and critical assessment, see Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (June 2002): 154–73. Worth singling out among the many works that prefigured Whiteness Studies is Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).
4. Interestingly, by the 1970s, if not sooner, Asian Americans began to achieve a status as a racial group with certain of the approved characteristics of "white ethnics." See Jonathan Karp's essay, "Overrepresented Minorities: Comparing the Jewish and Asian American Experiences" in this volume.
5. Nathan Glazer later admitted as much in his veritable *mea culpa*, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
6. During the 1980s the Reverend Jesse Jackson led a concerted and sensationally successful campaign to supplant black with African American, commenting in a December 1988 interview: "Every ethnic group has a reference to some land base, some historical cultural base. African-Americans have hit that level of cultural maturity. There are Armenian-Americans and Jewish-Americans and Arab-Americans and Italian-Americans; and with a degree of accepted and reasonable pride, they connect their heritage to their mother country and where they are now." Quoted in Ben L. Martin, "From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming," *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (Spring, 1991): 83–107, at 83.

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Yiddish Leftists as Early Inter-Ethniks

by *Elissa Sampson*

I NTRODUCTION

An older cousin recently joined me at dinnertime. When the conversation turned to food and desserts, I asked him: “Do you like *mandelbrot*?” He answered “Of course I do, I’m Jewish.” Indeed, many in my generation see a New York Jewish identity often expressed in food and other preferences as decidedly ethnic, suggesting that this category remains useful. Yet understandings of ethnicity and similar naturalized identities are shifting rapidly. The category has arguably become less salient for younger Jews and perhaps for those whose elders were once thought “unmeltable ethnics.” Moreover, the recognition that the concept ethnicity has tended to elide processes of racialization leaves it analytically suspect.

Given recent debates on ethnicity versus race, it is useful to review an earlier phase in the career of United States immigrant ethnicity. The prewar model of ethnicity expressed in America by immigrant pro-Soviet Jews known as *Di Linke* (the Left) at once allowed for work with other ethnic groups and offered a Yiddishist home in a political/cultural formation that eschewed Jewish nationalism. If part of the debate on what we call ethnicity is whether it undermines working class solidarity, this essay documents a perhaps unusual case from the first half of the twentieth century of an organizing strategy based on ethnic affiliation and shared class struggle.

Thus, after immigration to the US had been halted, Yiddish speaking immigrants founded a fraternal benefits order (not a typical communist proposition) and then invited non-Jewish groups into what would become a uniquely inter-ethnic and inter-racial fraternal order. Fraternalism was part of the IWO’s critique of capitalism: its “builders” took no commissions when they signed up

lodge members for benefits protecting precarious workers. With this move, the pro-Soviet Jewish left worked to promote mutual aid and inter-ethnic solidarity and to fight antisemitism, racism, and anti-immigrant actions. In doing so, they voted against melting pot ideology in favor of immigrant cultural competence and generational transmission.

THE AGE OF IMMIGRATION MEETS THE AGE OF MASS INDUSTRIALIZATION

How did Leftist, pro-Soviet Jewish immigrants articulate ethnicity in America in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution? The key thing to be aware of in studying this process is the rapid mass immigration of a third of East Europe's Jews to North America within a few decades, ending officially in 1924 with the passage of the Johnson-Reed national quotas act. The antagonistic Congressional Dillingham Hearings (1907–1910) viewed the rapid urban influx of the “New Immigrants” (Southern Italians and East European Jews) as a threat to America's identity. The Commission's over forty published volumes, most famously *Folkmar's Dictionary of Race*, demonstrated that its categorization of national was related to its interest in race.

Immigrant industrial workers with their associated visible differences were at the forefront of debates on what it meant to be American, and Jews were in the Commission's cross-hairs. Three quarters of East European Jewish immigrants were urban, poor, Yiddish speakers working in the garment trade, living in highly concentrated areas often called ghettos. The Lower East Side in those years was the densest place on planet Earth; Jews were visibly, geographically, and economically concentrated in what became the world's largest Jewish city. Its proximity to the ghettoized areas of Chinatown and Little Italy was not accidental, and its political and cultural evolution were tied to those areas.

These same dense, miserable working and living conditions stimulated a flourishing of Yiddish culture as well as its radicalization. As young women were incorporated into the work force, profound shifts in gender roles affected familial life as well as labor organizing. While Yiddish theater and publishing blossomed, tragedies such as the Triangle Fire of 1911, when 146 garment workers perished due to locked fire doors, were understood as predictable outcomes baked into a system of labor in which Jewish and Italian young female immigrant lives were less valued than the goods they produced.¹ The Uprising

of the 20,000, the first US women-led strike, was a 1909 shirtwaist strike by ostensibly unorganizable young women workers, headed by immigrant firebrand Clara Lemlich.² A precursor to the events at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory (strikers protested its safety conditions while demanding higher wages), the call for the strike issued at Cooper Union was issued by Lemlich in Yiddish and then immediately translated into Italian. Lemlich later became a founding figure for *Di Linke*, busy organizing Jewish homemakers and working with African American women on food and rent issues during the Depression. Sparked by exploitation and disasters such as the Fire, socialist politics famously flourished in the wake of mass immigration, ushering in the election of immigrant Socialist Congressman Meyer London from 1915 to 1919. Although it took twenty years, labor unions benefitted from achieving a critical mass of organized workers. So did the usually less political *landsmanshaftn* (hometown benefit societies) and fraternal societies which served as critical safety nets and reinforced immigrant ties. Within immigrant Jewish leftist circles, these new conditions further stimulated existing debates about the categorization of Jewish workers: their distinctive answers to the Jewish Question looked to combine Jewish socialism with more particularistic or universalistic visions of Jewish labor and life in addressing how best to change existing conditions and shape futurity, not least in regard to antisemitism.

By way of contrast, already established “German Jews,” that is Jews of German or Central European descent, were adamantly opposed to anything that smacked of race, nation, or ethnicity rather than religion to explain Jewish difference. For Jews who came from German-speaking areas, relegating difference to the religious confessional sphere allowed for American acculturation marked by endogamy. This earlier approach which prioritized religion as that which was distinctive, was stretched to avoid other formulations of Jewish commonality: East European Jews were referred to as “co-religionists.” Labor tensions erupted where German Jews were employers in the men’s garment trades, as in the 1910 Protocols of Labor negotiated by Meyer London with German Jewish manufacturers represented by attorneys Louis Brandeis and Louis Marshall. These distinctions did not necessarily play well with poorer East European Jewish workers whose identity remained far more marked and racialized. For secular Yiddish speakers, the setting for Jewish as “ethnic” was associated with the influx from mass immigration as distinct from religious identity per se.

East European Jewish immigrants enthusiastically greeted the overthrow of the Tzar in early 1917. Once Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution followed

later that year, the ruptures concerning Socialism and Communism became larger in Jewish leftist circles and in the American left generally. A decade of splits (1920–1930) consumed the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF) as well as the Socialist *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen’s Circle), a labor fraternal benefits society that offered insurance, ran a publishing house, and organized Yiddish culture schools and summer camps. One of those splits eventuated in the creation of the International Workers Order (IWO), including its Jewish Section, later known as the Jewish People’s Fraternal Organization (JPFO), and popularly known as *Di Linke*.

DI LINKE IN THE INTERNATIONAL WORKERS ORDER (IWO)

Di Linke’s original five thousand Yiddish speaking members, after breaking off from the Workmen’s Circle, founded the pro-Soviet International Workers Order (IWO) in 1930. They subsequently invited other groups—initially leftist immigrant Slovak, Russian and Hungarian fraternal benefits organizations—to join its IWO fraternal umbrella as separate sections, at which point the Jewish component became the IWO’s Jewish (later its Jewish American) Section. Although the IWO’s leadership typically belonged to the CPUSA, few of its members did. By the time it was renamed the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order (JPFO) in 1944, its Jewish section remained the IWO’s largest section and had grown to encompass almost fifty thousand members with three hundred lodges in over sixty communities. Next to B’nai B’rith, the JPFO was one of the largest lodge-based Jewish fraternal organizations.

At its height in 1947, the inter-ethnic, inter-racial IWO had sixteen separate sections with approximately 200,000 fraternal members; but by December, 1953, it was defunct, shut down by New York State during the Cold War.³ During the Depression and after, many joined IWO lodges to obtain low-cost, non-discriminatory health and death benefit insurance coverage, and participate in cultural and political activities explicitly allied with opposing Jim Crow and antisemitism.⁴ The Great Depression underscored the need for medical care, housing and jobs for precarious immigrants, African Americans, and coal miners.

The IWO’s English language 1930 recruitment brochure was explicit about the organization’s Jewish origins:

Its basic group consists of Jewish workers, many of whom split away from the Workmen's Circle and the Independent Workmen's Circle. The Order, however, will not confine itself to the works of one particular nationality. Plans are on foot to have a number of other language fraternal organizations, Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian, etc., join the International Workers' Order. Every block of language branches joining the Order will have its culture commission which will conduct the work in the mother tongue of its members. At the same time the Order will be an organization bringing together the workers of various languages and thus introducing in life that which is indicated in its name, the International Workers Order.⁵

The IWO's sixteen sections eventually encompassed Jewish, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Garibaldi (Italian), Polonia Society (Polish), Romanian, Cervantes (Hispanic), Hellenic (Greek), Finnish, Carpatho-Russian (Rusyn), American-Russian, Slovak, and Croatian national affiliates, as well as interracial "general" lodges for its English section members. (The African American Douglass-Lincoln lodges were belatedly created in 1950 as a new national section although the National Organizing Committee for Work Among Negroes was added as a section by 1944.) Evolving notions of ethnicity were in play in this novel formation.

At the very same time that it opened up its organization, *Di Linke* continued to claim the sole mantle of secular Yiddishism, a movement which started in late nineteenth century Europe. Although "Yiddishland" lacked a national homeland, Yiddish as a language cut across the map of Europe. *Di Linke's* emphasis on fostering an all-encompassing *Yidische Kultur* was consistent with its overall focus on harnessing *Kultur-Arbet* (Cultural Work) for overtly political ends. For the Jewish section/JPFO, this included its edgy ARTEF theater group, Modicut marionettes, and superb Yiddish musical choirs and mandolin orchestras. Its publishing house became one of the largest Yiddish presses, publishing high-quality Yiddish classics as well as modern writers from Europe including the Soviet Union. Its extensive children's Yiddish afterschool *Shule* system was reinforced in the summer by Camp Kinderland, which celebrates its centenary in 2023. While the Yiddish writers Sholem Aleichem and Dovid Bergelson were pivotal figures for *Di Linke*, they also insisted on the importance of inserting mainstream American Jewish figures such as financier Haim Solomon and Nobel Prize winner Albert Michelson into a stream of American history from which they saw Jews as being excluded.

Yet *Di Linke's* stress on alignment with Soviet policy meant that ideological aspects of an earlier universalism as well as of Jewish particularism often became subservient to defending and promoting the best interests of the USSR, or at the least, presenting it sympathetically to a Jewish public. That tension is palpable in the pages of *Di Morgn Freiheit* which started its life in 1922 as a New York Yiddish communist-affiliated newspaper published by former Bundists Mosseye Olgin and Shakhne Epstein in opposition to the socialist *Forverts* edited by Abraham Cahan. Its Yiddish *Shule* school journals and other publications often featured ads for local Jewish businesses—including kosher caterers, thus inadvertently illustrating the contradictions accompanying the American harnessing by immigrants of the language that they tasked with producing a Jewish child advocating for class struggle. *Di Linke's* answer to the Jewish Question was tied to the Comintern's doctrine of vanguardism with Stalin; in 1939 it supported the division of Poland between Nazi Germany and the USSR.

WHAT'S A SECTION? LANGUAGE, NATIONAL, ETHNIC

The IWO's sections from 1930–1953 were variously referred to as language sections, national sections, or less frequently as ethnic sections, but these highly connected terms for its distinct groups were not necessarily used interchangeably. Again, its immigrant groups saw themselves as stranded and stigmatized after the gates to immigration shut in 1924 with the Johnson-Reed Act. Almost all of the IWO's sections worked to actively publish in native languages, stressing linguistic competence and cultural work, but none on as large a scale as the Jewish Section/JPFO. While English was the IWO's lingua franca, for its Jewish founders the very ability to speak Yiddish was so naturalized as a Jewish identity that it served as the ideological basis for secularists who helped shape the organization's forays into theater, news media, and literature. Yiddish secularism—as a term, identity, and ideology—only makes sense if the language is understood as roughly congruent with a culture and a people, a folk, an ethnos.

National, in IWO parlance, meant a nation as in a folk or group, but not necessarily one connected to a nation-state found on a European map. Linguistic and ethnic affinities as well as self-identification were in play: Carpatho-Rusyn may well indicate Lemko lodges, and Ukrainian indicates Ruthenian and Western Ukrainian. While Soviet policy at best treated Jews as

an anomalous group vis a vis the criteria employed for national status in the USSR, the IWO clearly viewed Jews as a nation whose language and distinctive history should be promoted as such. Although the use of national as a term in the IWO strengthened during the war years, in following the CPUSA's integrationist platform of "Negro and White Unity," initially the IWO avoided its use for African Americans who were described as a racially oppressed folk or people rather than as an "oppressed nation." As a result, the IWO struggled with the need to establish a separate national Douglass-Lincoln section for Blacks;⁶ its English language section had integrated general lodges.

All of the above brings us to the term "ethnic," which indicated an acknowledgment of genuine marked difference in origins often signaled by the display of the folkloric in the performance of the arts. The archives show that the IWO both struggled with ethnicity and yet deeply embraced it, including in its use of hyphenated identities as modifiers to explain just what sort of American its members were. Overall, the IWO passionately argued for the entrance of its groups—including African Americans—into a hybrid American pantheon, in a non-assimilationist ethnicity marked with a Smithsonian Folkways performative flavor.

THE INTER-ETHNIC TIES THAT BIND

The Jewish Section became the Jewish American Section of the International Workers Order in the mid-1930s and an equivalent move happened in most sections. Although the IWO's leadership operated within a CPUSA orbit, it exhibited considerable agency in handling its ethnic societal formations in ways that were not particularly of interest to the Party, which by contrast typically pushed immigrant members to learn English and Americanize. Distinctive to the IWO were its formulations of the close ties between antisemitism, Jim Crow and anti-immigrant sentiment: a unified fight against them was central to becoming American as well as defining what a better America should be.

Conversely, nativism was portrayed as anti-American as were racism and antisemitism: despicable ploys, cynically and willingly embraced by American fascists and racists to enhance their power to divide groups under capitalism. IWO Vice President and Garibaldi Society leader Congressman Vito Marcantonio, pushed for federal "anti-discrimination" legislation in which advocating for anti-lynching bills protesting Jim Crow and advocating

for “Negro Rights” was closely tied to the fight against antisemitism. Yet in the 1930s the circumstances of racial oppression in America were still understood to be far more serious than antisemitism. The popular anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit,” made famous by Billie Holiday, was immediately written up in the IWO’s March 1939 magazine *Fraternal Outlook*; the poem and its lyrics were written by Lewis Allen (Abel Meeropol), a CPUSA member who later adopted the Rosenberg children and sent them to IWO camps. Later, in the aftermath of the war, Jews were seen as the paradigmatic case of racial genocide referenced as such by African Americans in the IWO in making their own compelling case in the UN petition “We Charge Genocide.”⁷

IWO slogans included “There’s No Jim Crow in the IWO,” along with “Immigrants All! Americans All!” The IWO held its various sections to these standards, and while some lodges adopted them with more alacrity and interest, they all agreed to them. Typically, sections participated in joint campaigns as well as worked within their communities to address these issues. Occasionally lodges were disciplined if they ignored these central concerns. But the IWO’s social glue was also based on joint activities such as inter-ethnic and inter-racial sports, picnics and dances as well as more ideologically pointed events. A January 1941 *Fraternal Outlook* article describing the first meeting of the Young Fraternalists, explained that real divisions are not racial or national, but class-based:

We will continue to build our Young Fraternalists and the Order as the model which disproves all these falsehoods about the superiority or inferiority of one or another nationality. Let all see that division among people is not based on what nationality they are, or, whether they are Negro or white, but on their position as the privileged or underprivileged.⁸

To promote solidarity, non-exclusive forms of ethnic identity were to be boosted in contrast to “chauvinistic” aspects of nationality.

HOLIDAYS AND RITUALS, SHARED ETHNIC SPACE

The IWO treated May Day as a national holiday. Union Square and other locations overflowed with IWO members, marching in their sections with floats, music, sometimes wearing ethnic costumes and sometimes in union

formations. JPFO writer Chaver Paver's beloved children's Yiddish book *Lobzik*—whose star is a leftist mutt—is replete with May Day “yuntif” holiday descriptions and children's activities for those who lived in the Bronx leftist coops on Allerton Avenue. Other holidays were celebrated as educational ritual programs designed by JPFO Educational Director Itche Goldberg which included secular observances of Pesach as well as the commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. From its very beginnings, Camp Kinderland held weekly “White Salutes” featuring Soviet style gymnastics along with music and the recitation of short pieces in Yiddish. Many of the groups similarly had summer camps or programs for children, and sometimes for adults. Again, most societies had a strong emphasis on literature, language, cultural programs, dance, drama, chorus, and orchestras (especially mandolin for Jews and Ukrainians), in addition to “workers’ education.”

Mother's Day (*Dia de las Madres*) was not seen as contradictory with CPUSA ideology by the Cervantes Society (Sección Hispana). Neither was the Queen's Coronation with a “*corte de honor de nuestra reina*,” and its accompanying *Reinado de Simpatia* (Reign of Sympathy). That more fraternal ritual was wanted can be seen in a report containing an explicit discussion of why introducing Masonic or Odd Fellow rites with a Hispanic flavor would assist in shifting its perception as merely an insurance society. The report also noted issues with the pronounced aspirational differences seen in organizing poorer New York Puerto Ricans as opposed to Mexicans in California.⁹ As historian Gerald Meyer noted: “Cervantes was the only IWO branch that was organized on linguistic affinity and not nationality,” which made such differences among Spanish speakers all the more salient.¹⁰ Cervantes was also inter-racial since most of its members were Caribbean-born Puerto Ricans.

Concert flyers including for Jewish hootenannies, fund-raisers, exhibits for Negro History Week as well as its derivative Jewish History Week, journals, poetry volumes, choruses, songs and books for Yiddish schools and camps, Jewish Music Alliance activities, war bond drives, art exhibits, literary press books and magazines (*Almanakh*) along with a constant stream of material promoting the fight against antisemitism, anti-lynching, and anti-poll tax campaigns, show the broad range of cultural/political activities engaged in by JPFO members. A similar albeit smaller list can be made for each of the sections with distinct differences seen not only in the folkloric but in the political and cultural spheres of where ethnicity is on display and in dealings with religious communities.

A Junior Youth Conference write-up in the November 1941 issue of *Fraternal Outlook* magazine shows how folk performance was promoted within and among the IWO's sections.

FOLK DANCES, songs and similar activities have helped to bridge the cultural and language chasm that exists in many instances between parents and children. They help to strengthen the unity and morale of parents and children and greatly add to the respect, understanding and unity of all Americans.

BEFORE THEIR VERY EYES the audience saw children of Negro, Russian and Jewish origin performing their folk dances and merging into movement symbolizing the unity of our people.¹¹

While the initial stress is on ethnic cultural continuity and expression, the second paragraph points to the embodied cooperation of children achieving the Order's desired unity through choreographed movement with disparate IWO peers.

By the late 1930s, the IWO had already started to feature public cross-cultural, ethnic folk pageants and heritage unity events displayed within American contexts.¹² During the war, unity came to mean working within their larger communities to weaken support for fascist regimes as well as across communities to simultaneously bolster support for the US and the USSR. Without missing a beat, an ad for an overtly political World War II-themed pageant in the October 1941 edition of *Fraternal Outlook* advertised the "National Folk Festival of The International Workers Order, Russian, Jewish, Finnish, Ukrainian, Slovak, Hungarian, Croatian, And Other, Reflecting The Democratic Cultures of The Peoples Fighting Fascism. Colorful Pageantry from All States. 200 Voice Choruses Dance & Musical Groups."

SOCIETY LIFE

For the IWO's various sections, shared advocacy in the name of ethnic pride to counter America's animus against Jews, African Americans, and immigrants was critical. That advocacy required cooperation in shaping forms of equivalence. Additionally, IWO societies who agreed to create a "truly International Fraternal Order, composed of all of the sections of the American working class," negotiated a balance between centralization and autonomy. There were

initial tensions for non-Jewish Hungarians and Slovaks about joining with Jews, but the IWO's Hungarian section soon also had explicitly Jewish members. The May 1935 5th Anniversary book, which contains short histories of its previously independent ethnic fraternal benefit associations, shows that some questioned whether non-Jewish ethnic groups should join with Jews to be part of a larger mutual benefits society.

"A History of Our Hungarian Section" starts by describing a decade of internecine fights between Hungarians allied with the Socialist Party and the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) and eventual alignment with the Russian Revolution. The account of how the pro-Soviet Hungarian Workingmen's Sick Benefit and Educational Federation (MBOSZ) came to join the IWO in 1932 reports that "There were a few who openly declared that 'The MBOSZ was sold to the Jews.' This was immediately answered by the sharpest fight against these manifest anti-Semitic sectarian tendencies."¹³

"The Growth of the Slovak Section" article similarly notes that the IWO was ". . . meant to unify with Jews and Magyars, against both of whom the Slovaks were filled with prejudices. The nationalistic leaders for decades were hammering into their heads that the cause of the misery are the Jews and Magyars. We had members with such prejudices in our branches. Then, our organization alone had more funds than all the other three together, and many suspicious members stated openly that the Jews do not want us but our money."¹⁴

It's possible that in inviting these groups, the newly formed Yiddish speaking IWO was trying to fight the conditions that created antisemitism as well as broaden its insurance pool with fellow immigrant workers in creating a US fraternal "Internationale" that provided affordable comprehensive health care and other insurance. Despite these apparent initial tensions, one suspects that the IWO's Jews were also trying to underscore the ideological point that *goyim* weren't inherently antisemitic; rather, feudalism and capitalism made them such. The IWO thus offered a way of showing that not only Jewish garment workers could be transformed but that ethnic non-Jewish miners and steel workers could be as well.

Some of what the various sections created in common can be seen in the IWO's junior sports. While an extensive English language national lodge manual from 1936 simply notes that "Sports is a well-known American pastime," providing no other advice on the subject, by the late 1930s IWO publications explode with youth and junior sports such as baseball, boxing and basketball.¹⁵ Often these mainly male youth teams played with local leagues or with other

IWO societies in “championships.” The same 1936 manual emphasizes the importance of insurance benefits for the young, but also takes note that “youth activities promoted in the Youth Branches are: Athletics, dramatics, education, social life.” Once again there is a telling lack of detail although later, the manual helpfully notes: “Efforts should be made to organize musical trios, quartettes, or mandolin orchestras.”

The IWO and its sections organized for continuity of identity and shared political struggle. By the late 1930s, organized youth activity was expanding within groups, amply seen in the newly-founded Jewish Young Fraternalists’ focus on education, chorus and dramatics. Simultaneously, IWO choruses, music, parades, dances, picnics, and organized sports rapidly became part of its broader inter-ethnic, inter-racial social glue for a younger American-born generation. At the IWO’s 1940 5th Convention, delegates from all over the country were invited to a jazz fund-raiser dance at Harlem’s famous Savoy Ballroom.

THE WOMAN QUESTION AND THE NEGRO QUESTION

One of the IWO / JPFO’s strengths was its ability to see the less traditional sectors of women and African Americans as potential constituencies whose concerns became increasingly pertinent to its own politics. By 1935, the IWO’s Women’s Division had already absorbed the Progressive Women’s Council (previously the United Council of Working Class Women) which Lemlich Shavelson helped found in 1929; the Council worked across ethnic, racial and geographic boundaries to organize meat and rent boycotts and other actions. These commitments in turn affected some IWO executive committees and positions, further pushing an organization already committed to “Negro Work” and armed forces integration campaigns. Women in IWO leadership roles who were active in the CPUSA included Vice President Louise Thompson Patterson, June Croll Gordon, Rose Nelson Raynes, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson, who organized primarily Jewish and/or African American women for the IWO and JPFO.

While some organizing cut across groups, most recruiting was internal to particular sections or sectors, including that done by Louise Thompson Patterson in African American communities, especially in so-called “concentration lodges” in Harlem and Chicago’s South Side. Thompson Patterson was also put in charge of the integrated English-speaking general lodges and

Section, which meant that she also worked with children of immigrants as well as new recruits. Tensions as to the Section's importance and that of English were visible by 1940:

The building of the English Section is significant in ways other than its numerical growth. It is the link which forges fraternal unity between native and foreign-born, Negro and white, Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant. It also bridges the gap between our Order and the organization of the broad masses of the people of the United States, an almost insurmountable task as long as the Order was made up only of foreign-born people.¹⁶

Nonetheless, when the late 1930s saw the formation of the IWO City Women's Committees, the Jewish Section's Women's Committees, which were run by Lemlich Shavelson, worked on Yiddish newsletters, rent strikes, food prices, civil rights and education, and recruiting homemakers as candidates for membership. June Gordon, an immigrant labor leader and organizer whose English was stronger than her Yiddish, was also a founder of its Women's Division, which officially became the JPFO's Emma Lazarus Division at the same July 1944 convention where the JPFO was renamed. Gordon served on the JPFO's Executive Board and was married to Eugene Gordon, a well-known African American leftist journalist. A 1947 Division education pamphlet addressed the "problems of rearing a Jewish child in a democracy that allows the worm of anti-Semitism and race discrimination to bore within and break the hearts if not the lives of our children."¹⁷ The power of Gordon's words on Jews and race is apparent in a 1945 memo:

The Fair Employment Practices Committee does not concern the Negro people alone.

The opponents of F. E. P. C. speak of it in terms of a gift to the Negro people at the expense of the white. Well, we are white; but we are Jews and we also suffer the effects of this policy of discrimination.

We are here to join with all those who, cherishing our country's principles, wish to put a stop to the sickness of racism that threatens them. Without fair employment practices it will be just as impossible to rout anti-Semitism as it is to put an end to anti-Negro and anti-Catholic prejudices. The need of the moment is Government action to outlaw discrimination and make fair employment practices the law of the land. . . .

In the name of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order with its 50,000 members and its women's organization, the Emma Lazarus Division, we call upon you to vote for the continuation of the F. E. P. C. . . .¹⁸

The "Emmas" remained deeply committed to fighting for civil rights with African American groups as an explicitly Jewish women's organization which outlived the JPFO: the Emma Lazarus Federation (ELF) legally split off just prior to the confiscation of the IWO's records and resources by New York State during the Cold War.

CONTRIBUTING TO AMERICA'S PANTHEON

By the mid-1930s, the Popular Front strengthened the IWO's hand in promoting ethnic contributions: "Declaring that Communism is 'Twentieth Century Americanism,' the CPUSA deemphasized Marxist-Leninist language and promoted a leftist populism linking the CPUSA's program to the American Revolutionary heritage."¹⁹ Consistent with this strategy, the IWO highlighted ethnic group contributions in regard to the arts, sciences and the American Revolution.²⁰

However, the IWO did so by stressing difference as defining and strengthening America. At its most lyrical and compelling, we see the IWO's emphasis on ethnicity in popular music performance such as the famous "Ballad for Americans." Paul Robeson (an IWO member) and composer Earl Robinson had the IWO's All (American) People's Chorus perform the cantata in 1941 with Robeson as narrator. The spoiler alert that indeed the narrator is an American is heard when he reels off: "Well I'm just . . . Irish, Negro, Jewish, Italian. French and English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Scotch, Hungarian, Litvak, Swedish, Finnish, Canadian, Greek and Turk, and Czech and double Czech American."²¹ Prior to that performance, Robinson had worked with the chorus for over three years in multiple performances of the Ballad. Robeson, a multi-lingual performer, musician, lawyer, athlete, civil rights activist, and internationalist, often performed for the IWO including in "The Negro in American Life," a pageant he helped stage in April 1941. He was later defended by IWO vets among others when he was attacked at a Peekskill concert in 1949.

All of which brings us back to Comintern theorist Georgi Dimitrov's Popular Front advice not to cede folk heroes to the Right. Thus, the IWO's

version of Americanism allowed for a tamed but celebratory ethnicity and pride, accompanied by a wide embrace of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, which included annual IWO trips to Valley Forge. (The CPUSA arguably embraced these presidential figures to shift the perception that its membership was an immigrant and somewhat Jewish affair.) The IWO's approach can offer food for humor as well as thought: the JPFO, in claiming leftist Albert Einstein as well as American Revolutionary financier Haym Solomon, added Sephardic Jews such as New Amsterdam guardsman Asser Levy, Admiral Uriah Levy, impresario David Belasco, and Justice Benjamin Cardozo to the list. The Italian Garibaldi Society joined with the Sons of Italy, whose support of Mussolini and anti-Jewish laws the Garibaldis opposed, in promoting Columbus along with other figures. The Polonia Society proudly laid claim to the aristocratic Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski. Grafted onto this impulse of promoting known, identifiable figures regardless of political persuasion, are African American heritage references to Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver.

Conversely, 1930s IWO materials that object to Italian colonialism in Ethiopia and proudly tout IWO support for African American fighters in Spain, strike a very different tone, one affected by leftist black nationalism. For Jesus Colon, head of the Cervantes Society, the cultural politics of supporting Albizu Campos in tackling US colonialism took race into account: Afro-Puerto Ricans such as himself were decidedly part of Puerto Rico's New York diaspora, with El Barrio represented by Garibaldi Society Congressman Vito Marcantonio.

Less surprising is the deep claim made by the JPFO to Sephardic luminary Emma Lazarus, given her posthumous association with the Statue of Liberty; a book was published in her honor and a Women's Division in her name was born. In an impulse very much at odds with today's identity politics, this part of the Old Left shared mainstream aspirations and promoted the inclusion of ethnically identifiable heroes or groups into an existing American pantheon. Thus, in a 1944 JPFO publication, historian Philip Foner connected Jews to Pilgrims, and to democracy and dissent:²²

The Jewish Pilgrim Fathers had much in common with those hardy pioneers who had landed at Plymouth Rock three and a half decades earlier. Like them they were fundamentally dissenters rebelling against persecutions and discriminations. They came to this country to escape the wave of persecution instituted against the Jews of Brazil after the Portuguese recapture of that territory from the Dutch.

The Jews who arrived in New Amsterdam were soon to set a precedent that most American Jews have followed ever since, namely, the bold assertion of the right of all men—regardless of race, color and creed—to enjoy the full fruits of democracy.

During the Popular Front and war years, the IWO was able to tap into an increasing sense of urgency that new immigrants and African Americans be seen as fully American. Frank Sinatra's March 21, 1945 speech "Thoughts of an American," delivered to the World Youth Rally in New York City, was rapidly printed up in a pamphlet published by the IWO for its "I Am an American Day."²³ "Look, the next time you hear anyone say there's no room in this country for foreigners, tell him you've got a big piece of news for him: Tell him that EVERY-BODY in the United States is a foreigner."

The civil rights work that the IWO undertook may sound more mainstream in retrospect than it appeared then: the organizations it supported (the National Negro Congress, International Labor Defense and the Civil Rights Congress), and causes it took up (Scottsboro, Ingram) are now seen as a known part of black history rather than its radical fringe. By the end of the war, IWO Vice President Thompson Patterson was asking for a national section and the creation of more African American community spaces. Her career and writing document the IWO's increasing commitment to integration and civil rights, if not to black nationalism. It is also true that during the postwar period, most particularly in Detroit, that stance was sometimes contested by IWO ethnic sections.

A JEWISH HOME FRONT

While Yiddish language transmission through the arts and literature remained critical, the needed shift to English and bilingualism was meant to accommodate a new American-born generation that included war veterans. As George Starr's 1944 Sixth Convention report shows, the genocide of the war years strengthened the JPFO's sense of Jewish identity and focus on transmitting to American Jews a secular, cultural, ethnic identity with pride.²⁴

The terrible fate our fellow-Jews met at the hands of Hitler and the pernicious anti-Semitism of Hitler's American followers, the native fascists, shook [American Jews] into a realization of their Jewishness.

. . . it is imperative for the American Jews to maintain their Jewish identity, and that the nurturing of a Jewish consciousness will in turn strengthen the overall American democratic tradition. . . .

We find that for the first time American-born Jews are thinking of the role of Jewish culture in their lives. The whole problem of what constitutes a Jewish cultural program in our lodges has now come to the fore.

Even as it welcomed an American-born generation, the JPFO leadership's pursuit of a Jewish unity agenda also prompted a wartime recalibration of its relationship to the IWO and CPUSA. In doing so, it had finally agreed with the CPUSA's message that English needed to be accommodated. Nonetheless, the increased autonomy deemed necessary for wartime support contributed to its recommitment to the propagation of Jewish culture in the wake of Nazi genocide. For some, in engaging with an America that the JPFO's educational director, Itche Goldberg, described as a "scorched melting pot," ethnicity was one complex piece of a non-assimilationist strategy. Yet while the IWO was aware that American antisemitism, racism and poverty were all too real, its files show no reckoning with the Soviet Union's brutal repression of Jewish or Ukrainian culture, and the continuation of Russian imperial national discrimination. The Soviet Union was touted as a workers' society where antisemitism and racism were illegal.

The advent of the Cold War and increased Soviet repression were accompanied by the unraveling of channeled, enthusiastic high-quality "folk" performances. That formula was already becoming obsolete in 1948 when the IWO organized its first and last Ukrainian National Folk Festival featuring dances, music and embroidery.²⁵ The sense that the IWO's cultures could thrive best in the Soviet Union's orbit dissipated as knowledge of Soviet repression became commonplace. Khrushchev's 1956 revelations about the cult of Stalin (which were first reported in the Yiddish press in Warsaw) sounded a posthumous death knell, years after New York State closed down the IWO as a fraternal benefits society in December 1953.

There was no evasion of Jewish identity in creating an immigrant Yiddish fraternal organization which invited other groups to join an inter-ethnic and inter-racial organization. The IWO's founders saw themselves as profoundly and naturally Jewish: allyship was integral to this worldview. Their Americanization as immigrants was mediated through adherence to a beloved immigrant fraternal organization that promoted Yiddish culture and offered

solidarity with others. We can learn from the failures and successes of that tightrope dance even as we mourn its misplaced allegiances.

What can the JPFO IWO model of ethnicity teach us? That you don't need to choose between cultural depth and deeply working with others, and that such allyship can be valuable for its theoretical insights as well as practical support. While certainly not perfect, the IWO's formula worked for its erstwhile members. These groups worked both with and against the ethnic grain in a pro-Soviet framework that provided political support for cultural and political activities predicated on diverse groups obtaining affordable insurance.

RACE, RACIALIZATION AND THE ETHNO-RACIAL IN ETHNICITY TODAY

Karen Brodtkin, Eric L. Goldstein, David R. Roediger²⁶ and others have outlined the tensions between the category of post-war white ethnicity and the realities of racialization in describing how a slippery category that elides race, is built upon it. A far harsher price was necessarily paid by the descendants of enslaved Africans who stayed at the bottom of a ladder racial hierarchy: governmental policies decimated their red-lined urban communities while excluding them from programs encouraging suburbanization as homeowners. Nonetheless, the acceptance of previously racialized Jews and other "ethno-racial" groups as white came at a price in terms of the maintenance of distinctive urban communal and individual spaces and identities (see Gabriella Modan).²⁷

Is ethnicity visible today? Most observers of New York City politics would say yes, although they would distinguish it from race. The Triangle Fire Coalition's ultimately successful effort to establish a permanent memorial to the predominantly Jewish and Italian young women who perished shows how older divides tied to ethnicity have been largely surmounted for the purpose of commemoration, if not in addressing other aspects of futurity. The Fire's newer feminist or unionist heirs, often evince the different configurations of ethnicity and race apparent in contemporary activist cultural politics.

As to the questions raised in this volume, I would answer that in addition to needing to recalibrate the term "ethnic," given its entanglement with race and racialization, we are also obliged to look at its staying power and utility as a formulation when we start seeing major shifts in Jewish identity. Contemporary

Jewish ethnicity, a category which is important to an older generation for whom immigrant antecedents are apparent, appears less salient for those who are younger. Some strategies of American Jewish identity appear jettisoned, much like the term “the Jewish Question.” What’s clear is that there has been a shift in naturalized, marked identities, outside of the religious world.

One difference is that Jewish endogamy has become a far less important criterion for those who are not conventionally religious. We in the academy often see students who have a marked pride and genuine curiosity about their Jewish ancestry, however defined. Some are also searching for community. This search is affected by identitarian quests but may be quite unaccompanied by a sense of ethnicity, let alone any particular knowledge of Jewish life other than that seen in popular representations. The result is an ability to mix and blend a variety of familial as well as racial/cultural/political/religious identities.

For most of my students, I’d venture that the salient question is simply whether they self-identity as Jewish, regardless of how that is defined. Which brings us back to the question of whether “ethnic” has also been overly encumbered by cultural and generational associations concerning what American Jews have in common, since neither Modan’s rye bread nor my cousin’s *mandelbrot* remain a staple element of a shifting Jewish repertoire.

Notes

1. See Paula Hyman on the contested successful effort that presented those who perished as workers, rather than as female members of specific immigrant communities. Paula Hyman, "Beyond Place and Ethnicity: The Uses of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," in *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, ed. Jeffrey Shandler, Hasia R. Diner, and Beth S. Wenger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
2. Clara Lemlich (Shavelson), who headed the JPFO's Women's Committees, was a leader of the thirteen-week 1909 "Uprising of the 20,000," the first mass garment trade strike led by ostensibly unorganizable Jewish and Italian young immigrant women. The strikers had unsuccessfully picketed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company; they were beaten, jailed, and literally bailed out by the primarily upper-class Protestant women who formed the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Two-thirds of the picketed shops settled with the strikers.
3. The IWO's confiscated organizational files Records #5276 are held at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Henceforth, Kheel.
4. See Robert M. Zecker, *A Road to Peace and Freedom: The International Workers Order and the Struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights, 1930-1954* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018).
5. National Executive Committee, *A New Workers' Stronghold, What is the International Workers' Order, and Why Every Worker Should Join It* (New York: International Workers' Order, 1930): 16. Kheel, Box 49, Folder 2.
6. Jennifer Young, "Fighting Anti-Semitism and Jim Crow: 'Negro-Jewish Unity' in the International Workers Order," *AJS Perspectives* (2014), <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/the-peoples-issue/fighting-anti-semitism-and-jim-crow-negro-jewish-unity-in-the-international-workers-order/>.
7. The petition "We Charge Genocide" (1951) directly called for the United Nation's (UN) intervention against the violence experienced by Americans of African descent. It was presented to the UN by two lawyers, its author William Patterson (Civil Rights Congress) and IWO member Paul Robeson. It was signed by former IWO Vice President Louise Thompson Patterson and Albert Kahn (the then head of the JPFO) among others. Its introduction: "The Hitler crimes, of awful magnitude, beginning as they did against the heroic Jewish people, finally drenched the world in blood, and left a record of maimed and tortured bodies and devastated areas such as mankind had never seen before."
8. "Accent on Youth," *Fraternal Outlook* (New York: International Workers' Order, January 1941): 7. Kheel. Helen Vrabel, head of the Slovak Society who also headed the IWO's Youth Division, is quoted regarding the Young Fraternalist first meeting. Henceforth, *Fraternal Outlook*.

9. "Cervantes Society Report 1940–1944" (1944): 14. Box 9, Folder 8, Kheel. Also see "IWO 6th Annual Convention Report" (1944): 181. Kheel. Box 3, Folder 4: "... the section will utilize the different historic and cultural traditions of the various groups from different Spanish-speaking countries. This will give life to the lodges. It will enable the lodges of Mexican-Americans, or of Puerto Ricans, to become centers of attraction for their respective peoples."
10. Gerald Meyer, email message to author, September 18, 2021.
11. *Fraternal Outlook* (November 1941): 31. Kheel.
12. See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Theorizing Heritage," *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 3 (1995): 367–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/924627>.
13. Joseph Feher, "A History of Our Hungarian Section," *May 1935, 5th Anniversary Book* (New York: International Workers' Order): 65. Kheel, Box 48, Folder 13.
14. Joseph F Schiffel, "The Growth of the Slovak Section," *May 1935, 5th Anniversary Book*, 70.
15. National Committee IWO, "Chapter VI, Guide to Educational, Cultural and Social Activities. Public Buildings, Dramatics, Music and Choruses, Sports, Dances, House Parties, Sport, Theatre Parties, Concerts," in *Manual of the International Workers Order* (New York: International Workers' Order, 1936): 45, 52. Kheel, Box 49, Folder 1.
16. Louise Thompson, "With Our Lodges," *Fraternal Outlook Special Anniversary Issue* (June–July 1940): 52. Kheel, Box 48, Folder 15. Vice-President Thompson (Patterson) was then the IWO's National Secretary and head of its English Section.
17. "Call for the Constitutional Convention of the Emma Lazarus Division, Women's Organization of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, IWO, Saturday and Sunday, November 15–16, 1947." Kheel, Box 28, 25-B-1-A, Folder 4, Pamphlet.
18. Letter from June Gordon, July 9, 1945 on FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Committee). Kheel, 525A6B_1, Box 28, 25-B-1-A, Folder 2.
19. See Eric S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 93.
20. There's more than a good dose of paternalistic Herderian philosophy that informs this view in which each folk has its unique genius that defines its contribution.
21. Lisa Barg, "Paul Robeson's Ballad for Americans: Race and the Cultural Politics of 'People's Music,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2 (2008): 42. Barg notes that "Both the choice and ordering of identities also highlights a symptomatic ambiguity between the categories of race and ethnicity (and in the case of "Jewish," religion as well)."
22. Philip Foner, "The Jew in America's Struggle for Democracy," in *Our People, The Jew in America*, ed. Itche Goldberg, Jesse Mintus, and George Starr (New York: Cooperative Book League, Jewish American Section, I.W.O., 1944), 9–10. Kheel.
23. Frank Sinatra, "Excerpts from an address to World Youth Rally on March 21, 1945, New York City." Printed courtesy of the American Youth for a Free World; reprinted

IWO. Pamphlet, Kheel, Box 17, Folder 05. ID no: 5276b17f05_06. Sinatra discusses Nazi views of Italians, Jews and African Americans and goes on to say:

Now this is our job . . . your job and my job and the job of the generations growing up . . . to stamp out prejudices that are separating one group of United States citizens from another. . . .

It's up to all of us to lay aside our unfounded prejudices and make the most of this wonderful country—this country that's been built by many people, many creeds, nationalities and races.

24. George Starr, Resolution on the English-speaking Lodges of the Jewish-American Section, Protocol of the Sixth National Convention of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order of the I.W.O. (formerly Jewish-American Section): Copy 1, 81, 83, 88. 1944. Kheel, Box 27, Folder 2. ID No. 5276b27af02_02.
25. *First Ukrainian National Folk Festival* (New York: Ukrainian American Fraternal Union, IWO, Ukrainian American League, Inc., 1948). Kheel, Box 49, Folder 7. ID No. 5276b49f07_01.
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From the Classroom to the Soapbox: Multiethnic Workers Schools and Leftist Parties

by *Robert M. Zecker*

Werner Sombart famously sought to explain why there was no socialism in America.¹ Famously, but erroneously, for even as Sombart wrote, the Socialist Party and anarchists contended for the hearts and minds of America's workers. For decades scholars have resurrected the vibrant socialist institutions of the first half of the twentieth century. These ran the gamut from anarchism to the Socialist and Communist Parties, progressive organizations such as the network of workers schools and the fraternal mutual-benefit society known as the International Workers Order (IWO), as well as New York's American Labor Party (ALP) that for nearly two decades elected councilmen, state legislators, even several congressmen, and offered a social democratic third way.

One of the explanations offered by Sombart and accepted by his academic followers for the absence of American socialism was the polyglot nature of the country's workforce, whose multi-ethnoracial kaleidoscope supposedly rendered it incapable of organizing. Even this explanation has been called into question, for as Eric Foner comments, "Despite the popularity of what might be called the 'ethnic' interpretation of the weakness of American socialism, it is by no means clear that cultural divisions were an insuperable barrier to class consciousness or political socialism."² Indeed, socialist organizers very quickly recognized these ethno-racial silos had to be breached, and avidly engaged in interethnic organizing and cooperation to make sure there *would* be socialism in multilingual America.

East European Jewish immigrants developed one of the most vibrant leftist communities, but other migrants also had radical resources upon which they could draw. Jennifer Guglielmo, Fraser Ottanelli, Nunzio Pernicone, Kenyon Zimmer, and Gerald Meyer have demonstrated Italian migrants were no strangers to militant strikes and rural uprisings in their homeland, radicalism that was transplanted to the US context.³ Many Spanish-speaking migrants, too, were no strangers to militancy, with Mexicans well-versed in the writings of Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon in the transnational journal *Regeneración* and other organs advocating revolution against Mexican President Porfirio Diaz and the US corporations despoiling their land. Puerto Rican activists similarly transplanted the struggle for independence to the barrios of New York, Brooklyn and elsewhere.⁴ And while Slavic migrants arguably did not have as developed a homeland radical milieu as Italians or Jews, Victor Greene has demonstrated Polish and other Slavic coal miners quickly evolved a combative militancy in the face of the raw deal on offer from corporate America.⁵

While the interethnic cooperation of Jews with other ethnic socialists is sometimes acknowledged, some scholars whose central focus is the Jewish Left have implied that when Jewish activists reached out to Italian or other ethnic workers, it was to tutor these workers in a working-class militancy with which they were not familiar. Conversely, this chapter argues that red grassroots of socialism ran deep in many immigrant communities. To be sure, depending on the location, the ethno-racial composition of the coalitions in which Jewish immigrants participated varied. Certainly, too, Italians, Slavs, Latinos and others came from milieus far different from the Bundist backgrounds of Jewish leftists, which often made it difficult to cooperate. But in the radical traditions of all groups—Jewish, Italian, Slavic, Latino and others—were resources the Left could draw upon to create a better world.

The battles between the various factions of the United States' socialist Left were fierce and long-lasting. While the sectarian contests between adherents of anarchism, the Socialist Party, Communist Party (CP), ALP, left-wing deviationists and many other Marxist factions were important and are explored in many other works, they are not the subject of this chapter. Instead, I hope to show the interethnic nature of the socialist Left, broadly defined, in which Jews and others participated. At various times, Communists and other Marxists had difficulty balancing their universalist appeals to all workers with the demands of immigrants for cultural autonomy. In the 1920s, the CP urged an assimilationist line on Jewish, Slavic, and other ethnic factions, only to

rediscover the virtues of pluralistic proletarianism during the Popular Front. But by looking at the workers schools, fraternal organizations, and political parties of the socialist milieu, this chapter suggests that these actors consistently engaged in much more of an interethnic collaboration than is sometimes acknowledged.

ANARCHISM: “SEND THE BILL TO THE MAYOR”

Donna Gabaccia has demonstrated Sicilian migrants came from regions that were hotbeds of rural militancy and direct action.⁶ In the new world they gravitated to radical milieus, often to anarchist clubs where they built schools and reading rooms, as well as syndicalist unions, organizations that had some old world analogues. In anarchist spaces in Paterson, New Jersey; Brooklyn; New York, and San Francisco, they joined a transnational milieu encompassing Spanish, Cuban, Yiddish-speaking Jewish, German, and other militant workers. While Zimmer notes linguistic difficulties and Jewish anarchists' rootedness in *yiddishkayt* sometimes made it difficult to reach out to other groups, despite their anti-statist philosophy, he nevertheless paints a portrait of a lively interethnic mingling in syndicalist clubs, reading rooms, and unions. As early as 1893, Italian anarchist Francesco Saverio Merlino was heading a gathering of German, Jewish, Italian, French and native-born American anarchists in producing the newspaper *Solidarity*. The paper proved ephemeral, but within a few years Jewish anarchists gravitated to East Harlem's large Bresci Circle, named for Gaetano Bresci who in 1900 traveled back to Italy from Paterson to assassinate King Umberto (dubbed *Re Bomba* for decorating a general who had directed artillery fire at Milanese demonstrators, killing four hundred). As the name implies, the Bresci Circle had a large Italian membership, but Spanish and Jewish attendees met there, too. Brooklyn's Club Avanti likewise had Spanish, Italian, and Jewish members.⁷

Club Avanti and other *circoli* were microcosms of polyglot Brooklyn. Guglielmo notes many Sicilian anarchists “built coalitions with Spanish-speaking and Jewish groups in the neighborhood.” At Club Avanti comrades “supported education, sponsored lectures on peace, religion, and sexual and family questions, on women's emancipation, nationalism, imperialism, major immigrant strikes, the Mexican Revolution, the problem of political prisoners in Italy, and, more generally, current events.”⁸

Such contacts were not without friction. Zimmer argues Yiddish anarchists organizing New York's garment workers "remained aloof" from Italian syndicalists. Certainly, ideological compatibility is no inoculation from personal antagonism, and cultural and linguistic differences likely made solidarity difficult to achieve. Still, Jewish anarchists forged alliances beyond their immediate communities. The Jewish Pioneers of Liberty already in 1888 participated with native-born anarchists in the Alarm Club and Parsons Debating Club, named for the recently martyred Albert Parsons, executed following the Haymarket Square bombing. Emma Goldman, too, worked with comrades of many other backgrounds, including native-born radicals, on her lecture tours and on her magazine *Mother Earth*.⁹

Prominent anarchist figures were often the glue that held the multiethnic movement together. Italian Communists continued to correspond with Goldman following her deportation from the United States, and as late as 1926 hoped to organize a speaking tour for her when she returned to the country (Goldman did not make it back into America, settling the following year in Canada instead).¹⁰ Other interethnic radical networks were more enduring. The Spanish anarchist Pedro Esteves published his multilingual newspaper *La Questione Sociale* in New York and Paterson, but reached out to Russian-Jewish, Italian, Cuban, and other anarchists across the country. The Slovenian anarchist Franz Widmar, another Paterson resident, and Lucy Parsons, Mexican and African American widow of Albert, were among Esteves' important contacts.¹¹ Esteves and his romantic partner, Italian-born Maria Roda, toured the country, both making speeches in support of labor battles by Mexican, Cuban, Spanish, Puerto Rican, Jewish, Italian, and other workers in textile mills, mines, on the docks, and in cigar factories. In support of the cigar rollers' struggle, Esteves and Roda temporarily relocated to Tampa, where one of the demands of striking Jewish, Cuban, Italian, and Spanish workers was that companies provide shops with *lectores*—readers—fluent in multiple languages so they could expound on Marx, Kropotkin, Zola, and other radical texts to improve the workers' minds while they rolled cigars.¹² This tradition resonated, too, with Jewish radicals. The socialist Charles Erb remembered he first learned of Marx from *lectores* reading to Spanish-speaking rollers in a Detroit cigar factory; Samuel Gompers similarly had been employed as a Yiddish-speaking *Leser*.¹³

Worker "self-education centers" following the tenets of executed Barcelona anarchist Francisco Ferrer, whose murder by the Spanish state was decried by the *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*, quickly became multiethnic spaces for

counter-cultural pedagogy and direct action. The Francisco Ferrer Center established on the Lower East Side in early 1911 and relocated to East Harlem the following year operated as “a multiethnic radical venture” with evening classes and lectures as well as a “Modern School” to instill Ferrer’s antiauthoritarian ideas in youngsters. By 1914, an International Anarchist Communist Federation united Russian, Spanish, and Italian anarchists, although Zimmer says, “only one small Jewish group, Brownsville’s Friends of Art and Education,” affiliated with it. Nevertheless, he notes “a high level of Jewish participation” persisted in the Ferrer Center. Sometimes the best form of instruction was direct action, as in the economic panic of 1914, when,

a group of English-speaking Jewish, Latvian, and Italian anarchists connected to the center organized a mass movement of the city’s unemployed. Its leading figures included [Alexander] Berkman, Marie Ganz, Italian anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca, Irish-American anarchist Charles Plunkett, and twenty-one-year-old Galician Jew Frank Tannenbaum. The anarchists urged laid-off workers to go to uptown restaurants, order food, and “tell them to send the bill to the mayor.”¹⁴

Whether the workers had cannoli or blintzes went unrecorded.

On the West Coast, East European Jewish anarchists operated in an even more polyglot radical milieu. As in Tampa and Paterson, in San Francisco a pan-Latin movement developed among Italian, French, and Spanish-speaking radicals. But in the Pacific city these anarchists also over time worked with comrades of Asian, Russian, and Jewish backgrounds. Meetings in San Francisco linked these radicals to anti-colonial fights in Asia and elsewhere.¹⁵ Even in the late nineteenth century some Jewish radicals combated colonialism and worked within the multiethnic, even multiracial, left. In the 1880s Polish Jewish immigrant Sigismund Danielewicz worked in the International Workingmen’s Association, where he strenuously fought the Chinese-exclusionist tendencies that regrettably infected the association. The multilingual polymath served the IWA as its Italian-language recording secretary—suggesting again at least some Jewish radicals engaged in the class struggle with radicals of other ethnic backgrounds. Danielewicz also spent time in Hawaii working in the labor struggle. By 1889 Danielewicz was back in San Francisco where he edited the Bay Area anarchist newspaper, *The Beacon*. Although he knew Yiddish (and at least Italian as well), this newspaper was in English; Zimmer argued the small size of San Francisco’s Jewish

community precluded the kind of broad-based Yiddish-speaking radical community that existed in New York. Danielewicz, instead, worked with the Bay Area's native-born, English-speaking radicals.¹⁶

Small as it may have been, the Bay Area's radical Yiddish-speaking community seems to have grown in the following decades, when it learned to cooperate with other radical ethnic communities. Zimmer notes by the mid-1920s there was a "Radical Branch of the Workmen's Circle," out of which also grew an "Anarchist Branch" of the Circle, which "affiliated with the Jewish Anarchist Federation." Contact with non-Jewish anarchists occurred, as when a May Day picnic near San Francisco saw "Italian, Jewish, French and some German speaking comrades."¹⁷

Such interethnic cooperation seems to have been the norm among an internationally minded, anti-statist group of radicals, the revolutionaries whom Michael Miller Topp calls "Those Without a Country."¹⁸ Italian anarchist Emidio Recchioni fled his country for London after a failed attempt to kill King Umberto. After Bresci successfully completed the job, Recchioni opened "the delicatessen King Bomba," which thereafter fund-raised for anarchist newspapers in America and hosted meetings of London's polyglot anarchists into the 1920s.¹⁹ Indeed, Italian- and Yiddish-speaking anarchists cooperated, alongside others "in North America, Argentina, England, France, and Egypt, . . . Brazil, Uruguay, Peru, the Balkans, Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, Malta, Tunisia, Algeria, and Australia." So worrisome in 1906 was the anarchist community in Port Sudan, Egypt, that the Italian ambassador dubbed the city "the African Paterson."²⁰

In the actual existing Paterson, a hive of Italian-Jewish anarchist cooperation developed. Jews, Italians, and Germans, many employed in the silk mills, co-founded a branch of the Industrial Workers of the World. Paterson's *Grupe Frayhayt* endured from the 1890s to the 1910s and belonged to the Anarchist Federation of New York as well as the Workmen's Circle. In 1915 the *Grupe Frayhayt's* former secretary collaborated with Jewish and Italian anarchists in founding one of Paterson's most enduring radical institutions, the Francisco Ferrer Association and Ferrer Modern School. Education was central to the anarchists' goal of creating a new society, and the classes of the Ferrer School countered the capitalist tutelage of public schools for an interethnic group of pupils. This is not to say cooperation in the Silk City was always seamless. *La Questione Sociale* editor Ludovico Caminita charged Saul Yanovsky of "the so-called anarchist" *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* with being more interested in his journalistic salary than consistently advocating anarchism.²¹ When observing the

squabbles of the Left, one sometimes is reminded of Freud's concept of "the narcissism of small differences."²²

"DON'T BE A BOSS' TOOL! LEARN TO FIGHT AT THE WORKERS' SCHOOL!"

Elsewhere on the Left, the importance of education in overcoming capitalism was recognized as well. And in the workers schools of the CP, as in the anarchists' Francisco Ferrer Schools, leftists from many ethno-racial backgrounds mingled in the classrooms. The CP's flagship New York Workers School was under the directorship of East Harlem dentist-pharmacist Abraham Markoff, but from its founding in 1923, courses and instructors reflected the ethno-racial diversity of the workers whom the school hoped to reach. German immigrant Max Bedacht frequently taught at the school, as did native-born, "old stock" radicals such as CP chairman Earl Browder and *Daily Worker* editor Clarence Hathaway.²³ Already by 1926, Mike Gold (later author of the autobiographical *Jews Without Money*), teaching a "Proletarian Writers Workshop," was on the faculty with African American Communist Hubert Harrison, but also Mossaiye Olgin, Robert Dunn, Ludwig Lore and others. The school, too, had already opened annexes in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem, and Yonkers, as well as several New Jersey cities. Lithuanian-born Anton Bimba insisted that the school was "A great educational necessity," but the school itself offered its teaching as an antidote to hidebound capitalist schools: "Stagnation versus vitality! Evasions and lies versus truth seeking! The old order versus the new!"²⁴

Even those at some distance from the school looked to it for guidance. An Italian comrade from New Haven, Connecticut, asked Bertram Wolfe of the school for help in publishing his "big novel in Italian" of Italian American working-class life. He added his manuscript ran to 466 typewritten pages and followed the Party's line and philosophy. Wolfe directed him to write to the National Agitprop Department of the CP. It's unclear if either the Party or the workers school helped publish this novel. In the following decade, however, the school's bookshop sold literature in English, Spanish, and Italian, as well as Marxist classics.²⁵

By the 1930s workers schools extended into other parts of New York, as well as throughout the country, and the schools sought to broaden their appeal to the diverse working class. In 1934 Markoff wrote in the *Daily Worker* that in

addition to the course in Marxism-Leninism he taught, the Harlem Workers School also offered “story telling based on the history of the Negro People” as well as classes in Spanish.²⁶ In Los Angeles, too, courses were offered in Spanish as well as English, perhaps not surprisingly as Communist organizers had been arguing since at least 1926 of the need for a workers’ newspaper in Spanish similar to the *Daily Worker* to reach Mexican migrants in their own language.²⁷ Perhaps to further this goal, by 1934 the Los Angeles Workers School listed a course in Spanish taught by Comrade Goldbaum. But instructors at the school were also Irish (Comrade Quin taught a course in Workers’ Literature) and Armenian (Comrade Tashjian taught the Fundamentals of Communism as well as Workers’ Health), and Loren Miller’s course in “Race and Colonial Problems” suggests the West Coast school hoped to attract Asian and Latin American pupils.²⁸ Indeed, the Los Angeles Workers School boasted its one hundred students were “Japanese, Mexican and native, both Negro and white.” The ethnic breakdown of the European-descended students was not reported, but the notice added, “Such enthusiasm is being shown for the school that plans for a larger school are being made right now.”²⁹

The San Francisco Workers School also had a polyglot staff, and similarly offered courses it hoped would be attractive to the Bay Area’s multiethnic, multiracial population. Along with Russian-born Sam Darcy, West Coast CP organizer, Langston Hughes and Lincoln Steffens served on the school’s advisory board, indicating African American, Jewish and “old stock” whites often worked together in Depression-era Party institutions. Courses were taught by instructors from a range of backgrounds, including Ida Rothstein’s course on “The History of the Three Internationals” and Comrade McKee teaching English composition and Leo Gallagher offering “Self Defense in Courts.” Not ignored was the multiracial nature of the working class and the special problems racialized minorities faced. Carl Hama in 1934 taught “National Minorities in California,” a course addressing the “history and distribution and class composition of the Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, and Filipino and Negro minority groups” and “the special oppressions these groups face and methods of combating them.” At a time when “mainstream” politicians consistently advocated Asian exclusion, even preventing colonized Filipino migrant workers from attaining permanent US residency or citizenship, the CP’s schools were some of the few venues fighting these inequities.³⁰

In the depths of the Depression the demand for revolutionary classrooms was great. The San Francisco school warned workers away from “Pseudo Marxist and ‘Liberal’ Schools,” and boasted it was “the only school

in San Francisco which authoritatively bases its education on the theory of Marxism-Leninism.” Likewise, when a New York Workers School contingent marched in 1934’s May Day parade, they succinctly chanted, “Don’t be a boss’ tool! Learn to fight at the Workers’ School!”³¹ But the Party was to some extent only building on earlier initiatives of various ethnic groups. Already in the early 1920s radicals such as the members of the Slovak Workers Society, which in the early 1930s was to affiliate with the Party-led IWO, had established a network of workers schools. These schools catered to the many working-class families without the English-language skills to attend the workers schools run by the Party. Larger cities such as New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago featured several Slovak Workers Schools, but even smaller places such as East Akron, Youngstown, and Bellaire, Ohio, had schools. As with enrollees in non-ethnically defined workers schools, radical Slovaks appreciated the liberatory possibility of art, with theater, choral groups and film and painting classes on offer at the Chicago school. Attendance at this school was praised as “a rare opportunity to learn and have a bit of fun, too.” A writer to the newspaper *Rovnost’ ludu* (Equality for the People) enthused, “We don’t even have to explain the meaning of our school, we’re only organizing the workers, who are eager for education, . . . when I had to, I’d spend my last red cent as a sacrifice for your school, even more, because school is everything to us.”³² In the Depression’s first year another writer more succinctly demanded, “Away with bosses’ propaganda!”³³

“A SCHOOL FOR YOU AND YOU—YES, PERHAPS YOU!”

With the coming of the Popular Front and World War II, the Party tempered its Bolshevik stridency, and its schools became more capacious politically, but also ethnically and racially. In Chicago the Abraham Lincoln School publicized itself as “A People’s School for a People’s War and a People’s Peace.” Polish American Communist Conrad Komorowski served as the school’s extension and trade union director, and taught a course in “A Century of the Common Man,” which was described as “A study of the ‘People’s Revolution’ in various countries during the past century and a half as outlined by Vice President Wallace. . . .” African American Communist William Patterson served as the school’s assistant director and in 1943 taught, among other subjects, “India, Africa and the Colonial World in the Global War.” The course description

rhetorically asked, “Does India fall within the provisions of the Atlantic Charter? What is its role in the global war against fascism and fascist ideas? What is the correct attitude of the anti-fascist forces toward Africa, Puerto Rico, and other colonial peoples?”³⁴

The Party had consistently championed anti-colonial struggles, so perhaps it is not surprising to find such courses at the Lincoln School. Other offerings, however, reached out to Chicago’s diverse ethnic communities. “Yugoslavia and the Balkan States,” “Italy’s Future,” “Jewish History and Culture,” “Irish History and Culture,” and “Czechoslovakia in the Storm of Ages” were offered. The last course was taught by Czech exile Vojta Benes. In heavily Slavic Chicago, with substantial Czech and Slovak communities in the Pilsen neighborhood (home to the Communist Party’s Slovak-language newspaper), such a course likely had great appeal. But as Mike Amezcua has noted, Chicago was already by 1940 home to a large Mexican community. Perhaps to reach out to this community, and in line with the Party’s anti-racist and anti-colonial stance, Komorowski also taught “Latin American History and Culture,” while C. Chai-I Cheng in 1944 offered “China and the Peace in the Far East.” Those more interested in the arts than the Allies could take “Problems of the Individual Writer” with Irish American novelist Jack Conroy.³⁵

The leftist Polish newspaper *Głos Ludowy* (The People’s Voice) in 1944 noted the Lincoln School, “a people’s university,” as the paper called it, enrolled more than four thousand black, white and Hispanic men and women for courses in “The People’s War; Structure of Fascism; Propaganda Analysis; Spanish; Basic English; Russian; French; Economics; Philosophy; History; Psychology; Art; Music; Writing for Short Story; Newspaper and Radio; Public Speaking; Labor Problems; History and Culture of Racial and National Groups; Refresher Courses.” Polish history and language courses were introduced during the war, too, again, likely of some appeal in the heavily Polish city.³⁶

Scholars such as Thomas Philpott, Arnold Hirsch, and Thomas Sugrue have rightly highlighted the virulence with which white ethnics attacked African Americans seeking to integrate their neighborhoods in Chicago and Detroit during the 1940s and even earlier. However, another road was possible and was in fact pursued in leftist venues such as Chicago’s workers school, which promised “Education for victory” on race as well as other matters. A Chicago course in “The National Groups and the War” in 1942 delivered “a brief presentation of the Marxist-Leninist analysis of the national and colonial question, with special emphasis on the Negro question in the United States.” Most Party workers schools foregrounded “the Negro Question,” so far so

usual. But the course description then went on to state that “The bulk of the course will deal with a concrete analysis of the problems faced by the Polish, Slavic, German and other national groups in America in working out the full-est participation in the struggle to guarantee American independence, and the freedom of their brothers in Europe from Hitlerism.” Perhaps to ensure the oppression of non-Europeans was not collapsed into false equivalencies, the very next course in the catalogue was “The National and Colonial Question,” which promised “special attention . . . to the national struggles of the Latin American, Chinese and Indian peoples,” as well as focusing on “the Negro liberation movement in the United States” and “the need of unity of Negro and white people for the achievement of these demands.” A course on “Latin America and the Far East” taught by the former editor of *China Today* likewise sought to provide “the student with valuable knowledge of our Latin American and Far Eastern Allies,” including, presciently, “the war against fascism and the colonial world” in places such as Korea, Formosa, Indo-China and India. In linking the subjugation of and discrimination against Poles and other Slavs to questions of anti-colonialism and the fight against venomous racism, the Chicago school was unusual, but white ethnics in search of a counterhegemonic pedagogy found a welcome home on Randolph Street. Such schools, combining practical skills with liberationist education in subjugated people’s history and culture, as well as lessons in interracial harmony, were welcomed by progressive students from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds.³⁷

In wartime Boston, a new “People’s School for Social Studies,” the Samuel Adams School, touted its courses in “The Negro in American Life,” “The Jewish People,” “Understanding China,” and “America Looks at Italy,” among others. “New in Boston,” its flyer proclaimed, “a School for you and you—yes, perhaps YOU!”³⁸ How wide was the welcome to ethnics on Boston’s Left might be judged by a “grand costume ball and stage show—a carnival of fun and frolic,” sponsored by the Massachusetts Committee for Russian Relief in which Samuel Adams staff and students participated along with “Ukrainian, Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Armenian, Russian and Jewish groups.” Senia Rusakoff’s Russian Ensemble with the Russian Relief Folk Dancers, as well as the Jewish Folk Chorus, performed. “Prizes for outstanding costumes” as well as “Russian delicacies and beverages” were promised.³⁹

During the war the California Labor School similarly offered an “All-Peoples History of San Francisco” taught by African American Communist Matt Crawford and others. The course was a look at “The common man’s contributions to the building of San Francisco and of the West.” Highlighted

were “elements omitted from traditional history showing Chinese, Filipinos, French, Hindu, Italians, Japanese, Koreans, Latin Americans, Mexicans, Negroes, Russians, Scandinavians, Spanish-Americans and others in their true place in the development of America. Special emphasis will be placed on the Negro people as the largest local minority.” Another course offered was “The Jew in the World of Today,” while Muriel Rukeyser taught a poetry workshop, as well as “Poetry and the People.” A course in “National Liberation Movements” in 1946 addressed “the nature of imperialism and the fight of the colonial peoples against imperialist oppression in the modern epoch.” Attention was paid to “Palestine, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Korea and the African continent.” However, the course description also promised “the position of the Jews in Poland and the rest of Europe and the United States will be considered.” Foreign-language courses such as Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Yiddish, Hebrew and “English for Indonesians” likewise suggest the diversity of the California Labor School’s student body.⁴⁰

“STUDY AS YOU FIGHT!”

In New York, the Workers School was perhaps the most ambitious of the lot, with offerings reflecting the diversity of the working class the Party hoped to enrol in the Popular Front, win-the-war coalition. Irish American “rebel girl” Elizabeth Gurley Flynn co-taught “Women in the People’s War.” As always, the workers schools paid particular attention to the struggle for African American equality, offering courses in “The Negro People and the War” and “The History of the American Negro People,” the latter taught by Elizabeth Lawson. As part of its newfound celebration of progressive icons of Americanism, ostensibly in line with the Party’s self-proclaimed “Americanism updated for the twentieth century,” Louis Budenz, not as yet an anti-Communist informer for the House Un-American Activities Committee, co-taught a class in “Giants of American Democracy,” examining the careers of Jefferson, Washington, Tom Paine, Madison, Jackson, Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. It is unclear how Jackson’s pro-slavery career was squared with Douglass. That the transition away from the 1930s’ strident bolshevism to Popular Front ecumenicalism was incomplete is also suggested by a 1943 “special program of courses” offered to members of the Young Communist League (YCL), which included among the leaders of “the mighty movements of the people through the ages,” Jefferson,

Douglass and Lincoln, but also Lenin and Stalin. The school urged YCL members, "Study as you fight!"⁴¹

The embrace of "Negro history" was a constant of the school, and Jackson was soon dropped from the Popular Front pantheon. But the school also reached out to white ethnic comrades, listing courses in "The Jewish People and the War" taught by Paul Novick, editor of the Communist newspaper *Morgen Freiheit*, and "The Italian People and the War," taught by Mary Testa, editor of the Party's Italian-language *L'Unita del Popolo*. Novick's course looked at, among other topics, "the historical evolution of anti-Semitism as an instrument of reaction and fascism," and "what the war means to the Jewish people." Testa's course reached out to the various strata of New York Italian Americans and was "designed to familiarize students active in Italian communities, trade unions and mass organizations with the specific problems of the Italian people in the struggle for national liberation."⁴² The school also, however, offered curricula addressing "the rise of fascism and the colonial question" and "Colonial questions facing the United States." In a course on "The National Question," the school addressed the "Relation of Puerto Rican independence to the United Nations and the Atlantic Charter. Importance of Puerto Rican independence to American Negro people and to Latin America." In a city that saw a rapid rise in Puerto Rican settlement in neighborhoods such as East Harlem, the Party's school provided lessons of appeal to these workers. The school's pedagogy stressed, too, that self-determination as enunciated by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in 1941 would have to extend to places such as Manila, San Juan, and New Delhi.⁴³

The school also sponsored forums and lecture series on timely issues, and here the ethnic diversity of the CP was also often on display. In 1942, Communist New York City Councilman Peter Cacchione of Brooklyn and his legislative aide, Simon Gerson, conducted a five-part lecture series, "Government Affairs in War Time (Campaign Issues and Methods in the November Elections)." That the Italian American Cacchione was the Party's first elected city councilman (African American Benjamin Davis would later join Pete on the council) indicates, too, that the CP's electoral coalition was broader than the Party's many Jewish members. Following Cacchione's untimely death in November 1947, New York's Workers School, which in 1944 had been rechristened the Jefferson School for Social Science, instituted "the Peter V. Cacchione Lectures: A series of public lectures on fundamental issues in New York City government, presented each winter term in cooperation with the Cacchione Memorial Committee."⁴⁴

Summer camps such as Camp Kinderland had combined recreation and retreat from crowded city streets with educational offerings for decades,⁴⁵ and the Jefferson School continued in this progressive tradition. In the 1940s, the Jefferson School Camp at Arrowhead Lodge in Ellenville, New York, offered recreational amenities such as swimming, tennis, boating, hiking, baseball, bicycling and square dancing, as well as “social dancing to the music of the Foner Swingsters,” Jack, Moe, and Phil, who otherwise taught courses such as American history and labor history at the Jeff. The real attraction, though, may have been the vast array of courses offered throughout the summer in the sylvan setting. “Jewish Folk Music” was taught by Ruth Rubin, and “the Jewish Question” met with Frederick Ewen. But some of the other options were “China Today” with Chu Teng; “Modern Art and Artists” with Gwendolyn Bennett; “The Poetry of Latin America” taught by the Latvian Jewish Albert Prago, a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade; and “The Negro in America,” taught by Jefferson School Director of Faculty and Curriculum Doxey Wilkerson. In July there was even a course in “Life and Culture of India” taught by Syed Sibtay Hasan, a Marxist scholar who would return to Pakistan following the partition of British India. The vast array of courses to supplement social dancing and swimming suggests the diversity of the Jeff’s students and faculty.⁴⁶

In the 1950s, the Jefferson School was under increasing assault from professional red-baiters, earlier having been placed on the Attorney General’s List of Subversive Organizations.⁴⁷ The school did not, however, back down in offering courses addressing marginalized ethnic communities. “Puerto Rico and U.S. Imperialism” was a frequent offering, taught by, among others, Jesús Colón, president of the IWO’s Cervantes Society. “The Science of Society, an Introduction to Marxism,” was also taught in Spanish by African American Communist Theodore Bassett. Economics courses were also offered in Spanish. But in 1952, Morris Schappes taught “The Jewish Question” down the hall from William Vila’s class on “The Puerto Rican Question” and Colón’s “The Puerto Rican National Minority.” As late as 1955, the school’s penultimate year, “Jewish History” was offered alongside “Negro History” and Colón’s course on Puerto Rican history. Perhaps the twinning of these heritages made sense to Jefferson students, as the IWO’s Cervantes Society had already conducted its own training classes for Spanish-speaking trade unionists and other leaders, but also noted they had translated and disseminated Sol Vail’s *This*

is Treason!, an IWO booklet condemning anti-Semitism. And in 1948 the Cervantes Society leadership greeted visitors from the new nation of Israel at a *Young Jewish Fraternalist* banquet, equating anti-Hispanic discrimination with the scourge of anti-Semitism.⁴⁸

Latina activists were often front and center at the Jefferson, as when Helen Vasquez gave a speech, "Puerto Rican Women in the Fight for Peace and Democracy," at a 1952 school Conference on Women and the Fight for Peace. Vasquez condemned the Korean War, but also decried the poverty colonial status had imposed on her island home and denounced the leadership of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), "in cahoots with the jobbers and bosses," for keeping Puerto Ricans and Blacks in the worst jobs in sweat shops. This suggests all was not always irenic in the multiethnic ILGWU that Daniel Katz describes. In contrast, Vasquez lauded the IWO for allowing Hispanic women to exercise leadership roles. The interracial audience embraced her anti-imperialist speech.⁴⁹

Until its demise the Jefferson School sought to broaden its horizons. In February 1953 an "All-School Self-Critical Conference" met to hash out ways to improve the school. The conference report only briefly listed the school's positives, among them "its modest success in making the school a center for Negro-white unity, and its serious attention to the Puerto Rican question." But the report criticized "a serious deficiency in our program," namely "its weakness in the field of national groups." The report said "Courses on the Irish-American and Italian-American questions should be introduced as quickly as possible. The offerings in the fields of the Negro question, the Puerto Rican question and the Jewish question should be expanded. Attention should be given to the Mexican-American and the American Indian questions." Even in the face of red-baiting, the school continued to try to make its offerings relevant to and reflective of America's diverse working class.⁵⁰

This is not to say there were no tensions within the Left. Some Jewish Communists complained there was insufficient Jewish content at the Jefferson School. As a result, in 1945 the Party established the School of Jewish Studies, which for a few years combined *yiddishkayt* with Marxist pedagogy. The Left often had to negotiate the tensions between a universalistic appeal to worker solidarity and ethnic particularism.⁵¹

WE WERE FRAMED AND NO ONE WAS SPARED: CHICAGO'S INTERNATIONAL WORKERS ORDER BOWLING LEAGUE

Education often occurred in informal settings, as at Arrowhead Lodge for summer courses, and in the Midwest these spaces were interethnic, too. Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School sponsored a summer camp in Madison, Wisconsin, where comrades were urged to "loaf and learn."⁵² In Chicago, too, the IWO employed Fred Fine as Midwest Director of Youth Activities. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants who hailed from the city's Wicker Park neighborhood, Fine later recalled the Communist milieu of the IWO was "just something I was born into." But that milieu was a multiethnic sphere. Fine's headquarters was at 2457 West Chicago Avenue, colloquially known as the "People's Auditorium," but actually the Ukrainian Labor Hall, a magnificent art deco structure erected in 1927. In 1934 Fine also "conducted two-week training courses for youth leaders of the Pioneers, the youth section of the IWO, at Nature Friends Camp in Portage, Indiana." At the camp members of Chicago branches of the IWO's Slovak Workers Society were in charge of the cooking and provision of food. Almost fifty years later, Fine would face significant pushback from the city's East European community when African American Mayor Harold Washington appointed him the city's commissioner of cultural affairs. Alderman Roman Pucinski charged "Fine's appointment will anger those of East European ancestry whose homelands are now part of the Communist bloc." The uproar among the city's Poles, Ukrainians, and others failed to note there once were thriving leftist centers of Slavic and Jewish activism, and cooperation on the North Side at venues such as the Ukrainian People's Auditorium and the Chopin Cultural Center. Such voices had been silenced during the red-baiting 1950s.⁵³

Such quotidian spaces of interethnic, even interracial solidarity had once flourished. Chicago's IWO in the 1940s and 1950s sponsored a bowling league interested in more than strikes and spares. The league's bulletins give plenty of gossip on Polish, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak, Lithuanian, Italian, Jewish, and other members, news of the participation of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order in the league, as well as reports of who had last week's high game. But they also speak of members being active in Henry Wallace's Progressive Party campaign for president; peace and anti-nuclear activism; defense of the CP's Smith Act defendants, as well as participation in Save the IWO conferences at the Hull House settlement, with Ukrainian and Jewish IWO leaders slated to speak; attendance at Paul Robeson concerts; support for striking miners; opportunities to attend an IWO Training School at Camp Kinderland, and integrating recreational facilities such as bowling alleys.⁵⁴ While the quixotic activism of

bowlers might seem trivial, the weekly bulletins reveal the by-now buried red grassroots of some Slavic, Jewish, and other leftists in gatherings at progressive institutions such as the Ukrainian People's Auditorium. Counter to the dominant narrative, not all Poles, Slovaks or Lithuanians exhibited anti-black animus or signed on to the Cold War demonization of the Soviet Union. Lillian and John Donalek, who into the 1990s gave eulogies to old friends from the former Slovak Workers Society who had continued their activism for decades after the Red Scare buried the IWO and its bowling league, likely welcomed the appointment of their old comrade as cultural commissioner by Mayor Washington. As Carlo Ginzburg has written of a different context, microhistories of "lost people" can prove illuminating of the complexity of social life. Visiting the IWO Bowling League, People's Auditorium and Chopin Cultural Center resurrects an interethnic, even interracial leftist milieu, where play and praxis mingled, sites that call into question the received wisdom regarding "conservative" white ethnics.⁵⁵

For example, at a time when the National Basketball Association was still virtually all-white, the Chicagans in 1949 cheered an interethnic, even interracial IWO basketball league in New York, in which Jewish, Hispanic, Yugoslav, Ukrainian, and Black teams competed.⁵⁶ And at home, a campaign to integrate sports was one of the bowling league's most determined fights. As Ryan Pettengill notes, bowling was one of the most popular sports among working-class people, but the American Bowling Congress (ABC) maintained a strictly race-segregated structure of sanctioned tournaments.⁵⁷ The IWO Bowling League beginning in 1948 joined the United Automobile Workers (UAW) in its "Fair Play for Bowling" drive battling against Jim Crow in the alleys. Five years earlier, the UAW had sponsored a tournament at Detroit's Paradise Bowl "for our colored Brothers only," regretting segregated bowling "is definitely a condition over which we have no control." But by 1947 the union orchestrated a move for integrated bowling, and in March 1948 the IWO Bowling League decided to skip "Ben Dudak's tournament" because of the whites-only policy. Instead, newsletter editor Lillian Donalek wrote, "What say we enter . . . in the All-American Bowling Tournament under the auspices of the UAW-CIO Chicago Committee on Fair Play in Bowling." Donalek concluded, "Your team or *anyone* can enter." A team of Slovak IWO bowlers, the "FDR's," participated in the All-American Bowling Tournament.⁵⁸

The following year she reported application blanks for "the UAW-CIO All-American Bowling Tournament" were available. The interracial tournament was to be held at the Ebony Bowl, 6227 Cottage Grove Avenue, on the

African American South Side. “The main difference between this tournament and the American Bowling Congress is that it is open to *ALL WOMEN* and *ALL MEN*,” Donalek wrote. But Donalek also pressed the UAW and its “fair play” committee for “taking the easy way out” by locating its tournament in a Black neighborhood instead of, as in the previous year, “at Bensinger’s Randolph Street alleys, which are open to the ‘pure white’ only.” Donalek likened this to “having a picket line at the back door of a struck plant when the entrance is at the front!” The UAW’s committee replied they had tried to get Bensinger’s alleys, but they had been unavailable. The UAW, though, asked the IWO bowlers to sign their “Resolution of Amendment to the Constitution of the American Bowling Congress,” ending the “Jim Crow” rule. This the IWO bowlers presumably did, as seven months later they were cheering the Congress of Industrial Organizations as its general counsel, Arthur Goldberg, pressed Illinois and Cook County to prosecute the ABC for violating Illinois’ civil rights statutes.⁵⁹

Within its own league, the IWO bowlers worked for integration. North Siders traveled to the IWO’s African American Du Sable Community Center at 4859 S. Wabash Avenue to establish integrated leagues in the city’s Southeast and Southwest. The initial meetings establishing these leagues were held at Du Sable.⁶⁰ Such cooperation went beyond bowling, as IWO Vice President Louise Thompson Patterson recounted to an interviewer in 1951. This African American woman established Black lodges, first in Harlem and then in Chicago, where she and her husband, William, relocated to help run the Du Sable Center as well as the Abraham Lincoln School. In both places Thompson Patterson recalled donations of time, money, and furniture by Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish IWO members helped get the Black lodges off the ground. “This was proof to me and to other Negro members of the International Workers Order,” she recounted, “that these people weren’t only talking about unity, they were practicing it.” Perhaps Thompson Patterson was thinking of people such as Lillian Donalek of Chicago’s IWO Bowling League.⁶¹

In 1951, too, with the IWO under threat of liquidation by the New York State Insurance Department and courts, Irish, Ukrainian, and Polish members sent affidavits to the court defending the Order. These affidavits noted purposive frolicking such as educational activities their lodges held in conjunction with Jewish and “Negro” lodges on occasions such as Negro History Week. The Chicagoans were not alone in practicing interracial, activist pedagogy.⁶²

“IF LIFE WERE AS THE MOVIES SHOW IT”:**ALP AND COMMUNIST ELECTORAL COALITIONS**

In its attention to radical education and grassroots activism, leftists did not neglect the quixotic task of running social democrats or Communists for elected office. Third-party political campaigns, too, occurred in interethnic, even interracial coalitions. This was apparent when the Jefferson School hosted a forum on “Independent Political Action and a Third Party.” By 1955 leftists in New York and elsewhere had been seeking a way out of the “lesser-of-two-evils” quagmire for at least twenty years. Forum invitee Michael Quill, president of the Transport Workers Union, the *Daily Worker* noted, “insist[ed] that the labor movement stop being a mere appendage of the Democratic Party but assert itself independently and hold out the prospect of a third party.” The Irish immigrant unionist, who regrettably could not attend the forum but whose remarks were read to the audience, knew whereof he spoke: he had been elected in 1937 to the New York City Council by the American Labor Party, created the previous year by a coalition of socialists and others seeking an alternative to the local Tammany-controlled Democratic Party. Quill worked with other ALP officials, including Councilman B. Charney Vladeck, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia (first elected as a Republican, but receiving crucial cross-endorsement by the ALP that provided the electoral margin in his re-election runs in 1937 and 1941), and East Harlem Congressman Vito Marcantonio to support President Roosevelt’s national New Deal, but also similarly progressive measures on the state and municipal level.⁶³

The third participant at the Jefferson School’s 1955 forum was also no stranger to third-party campaigns. Irish American newspaperman John McManus, founder and publisher of the *National Guardian*, had run in 1950 and 1954 as ALP candidate for New York governor. In 1954 his running mate for lieutenant governor was actor Karen Morley, who had starred in, among other films, the 1934 story of a cash-free rural utopia begun by the unemployed, *Our Daily Bread*. “If Life Were as the Movies Show it,” the Iowa-born, “old stock” Morley’s campaign brochure mused, before urging voters to elect the progressive slate that would work for them. In 1954 the ALP ticket was rounded out by an African American candidate for state comptroller and a Jewish candidate for state attorney general. Sadly, there was no Hollywood ending for Morley. Not only did her ticket lose, she was blacklisted and her movie career ended.⁶⁴

Beyond ticket balancing, from its beginnings the ALP reached out to a varied constituency. Already by April 1937, the newsletter of Brooklyn Heights’ First Assembly District Club of the American Labor Party, the *American Labor*

Post, contained, alongside an item backing “Roosevelt’s Supreme Court Plan,” articles in Spanish as well as “An Appeal to Arabic-Speaking People of the First A.D.” by Ralph Shaker, written in Arabic. Social democrats cast their net widely when recruiting for their movements.⁶⁵

Such a diverse coalition may have been reflective of New York’s ethnic brokerage, but the interethnic cooperation also reflected the trade-union antecedents of many of the ALP’s founders. Luigi Antonini for a time was chairman of New York’s ALP but served even longer—decades even—as vice president of the ILGWU. Antonini and others such as Salvatore Ninfo won the right to create Italian-language locals for the union. Indeed, its largest local, Local 89, was an Italian-language branch. This expanded on the recognition of early ILGWU activists, such as Rose Schneiderman and Clara Lemlich, that they had to reach beyond their East European Yiddish-speaking milieu if the union were to succeed. Consequently, the union made sure meetings were conducted in English, Yiddish, and Italian, and that Italian-speaking organizers were recruited from among that immigrant community’s organic intellectuals.⁶⁶ Other unions such as the Sheet Metal Workers as early as 1916 printed union election ballots in English, German, Yiddish, and Italian.⁶⁷ For ALP members rooted in the multiethnic union movement, it may have seemed natural to reach out to Spanish and Arab speakers, as needed.

In the political sphere, Antonini and Ninfo and others likewise practiced interethnic fraternalism. Antonini gave a heartfelt, Italian eulogy to former Bundist B. Charney Vladeck when the councilman passed away in 1938. “In the heart of Vladeck, the Italian workers in general and our Local 89 in particular always occupied a special place,” Antonini said. “He was always for us and with us. Recently, his contribution to the peace of the races even found praise in the Italian newspapers. He was a counselor and an intelligent teacher of the working people.”⁶⁸

The ILGWU’s Ninfo, too, in 1937 won election to city council on the ALP line. The success of the ALP was predicated on coalition-building with the CP across ethnic lines. In 1937, New York City instituted ranked-choice voting for city council. Voters could mark their first, second or even third choice for office. If no one received more than 50% of first-choice votes, second-choice votes were added to contenders’ tallies. In 1937, Ninfo was elected to the council from the Bronx when he was given 14,378 second-choice votes by those who first favored Communist candidate Isidore Begun.⁶⁹ Ranked-choice voting also worked in favor of the Communists, as in 1941 Peter Cacchione was elected to represent Brooklyn. While the CP had a large number of Jewish

members, far more than Italian Americans, as Rudolph Vecoli notes,⁷⁰ it is somewhat ironic the first Communist elected to office in New York was an Italian. Still, Cacchione would be re-elected in 1943 and 1945, with substantial Jewish electoral support, according to Gerson, his legislative aide and an officer in the New York state CP. This may have been because Cacchione stridently denounced antisemitism, including from the New York Police, on the council floor as well as in his *Daily Worker* column. Of course, he did quite well electorally in working-class Italian precincts, too. In Pete's campaigns, Gerson noted, "There would be leaflets and mailings with literature in English, Yiddish, Italian and Spanish."⁷¹ Cacchione was joined on the council in 1943 by African American Communist Ben Davis. When Cacchione died in late 1947, the CP lobbied to have Gerson fill out the unexpired portion of his term. By this point, however, ranked-choice voting had been ended, and the Red Scare was ratcheting up, so although Gerson battled, with ALP backing, to win Pete's old seat, he never served.⁷² However, Gerson worked with activists from various backgrounds, backing ALP candidates, including Ninfo, Quill, and Stanley Isaacs, who all won seats on the city council.

The ALP's multiethnic coalition held firm. In 1945 the ALP issued a pamphlet addressed to ILGWU members. "We Urge We Urge We Urge" the pamphlet stressed, namely, that Jewish and Italian garment workers resist Antonini and David Dubinsky's jump to the new Liberal Party, which was backing Jonah Goldstein, Republican candidate for mayor. Rather, the ALP urged garment workers to vote for the Democrat, William O'Dwyer, as well as Italian immigrant Vincent Impellitteri for city council president. Garment workers in Brooklyn were told to vote for the Communist incumbent, Cacchione. The ALP also endorsed the African American incumbent, Davis, and Irish immigrant union leader Quill in the Bronx, as well as candidates Charles Rubenstein, Joseph Sharkey, and Eugene Connolly. "Remember the sweatshop!" the pamphlet writer urged.⁷³

The ALP's support of O'Dwyer quickly evaporated following the election as the mayor reverted to his corrupt Tammany ways. In 1949 the ALP endorsed Congressman Marcantonio's run for mayor. With strong Puerto Rican support, the East Harlem congressman garnered more than 356,000 votes, 15% of the total, quite respectable for a third-party candidate, and actually an increase over the ALP tally in 1945, but nowhere near victorious.⁷⁴ In his East Harlem congressional district, however, from 1934 to 1950 "Mare" was much more successful, pulling together a multiethnic coalition of Jewish, Italian, other "white ethnic," Black and Latino supporters. In 1938, legendary ILGWU

organizer Clara Lemlich Shavelson ran for state Assembly on the CP line but endorsed Marcantonio for re-election and even shared speaker podiums with him “in working-class districts across New York.”⁷⁵

The polyglot nature of “Marc’s” backing might be gleaned from a 1940 letter from the IWO’s New York Education Director, Max Horwitz, detailing a schedule of campaign events the IWO was arranging for him. Russian and Ukrainian lodges were addressed by the congressman on October 25. The following day the Order’s Italian section was meeting at the New Vernon Theater, with Marcantonio the featured speaker, followed by addresses by Irving Rosen and a Mr. Musicato. Three days later a “Negro meeting” of the IWO was addressed by Marcantonio, Max Yergan, and Hope Stevens. A meeting of the Jewish Section, with an address by Rosen as well as a large Yiddish cultural program, and a meeting of the Spanish section, representing East Harlem’s growing Puerto Rican and Cuban communities, followed. At the latter, the focus was the district’s health needs, and Horwitz promised Marcantonio “we will present you as the foremost fighter for a hospital in the territory.”⁷⁶

Two years later, the FBI noted, Marcantonio participated at a “Victory Mass Meeting” in Harlem, sponsored by the National Negro Congress, the Jewish Peoples Committee, and Spanish Lodges 4792 and 4832 of the IWO. Marcantonio, Cacchione, Adam Clayton Powell, and Bernard Barkany, national secretary of the Jewish Peoples Committee, were featured speakers. “They adhered closely to the Communist Party line on the subjects of Marcantonio’s and Cacchione’s measures against discrimination,” the FBI noted, while “Barkany demanded that George Sokolsky be arrested as a Japanese agent because he attacked Marcantonio as a ‘Red’ in his newspaper column.” The multi-ethnic crowd at Harlem’s Park Palace may have been less alarmed about this than the FBI agent. And in 1948, when Marcantonio was so popular he won the Democratic and Republican as well as ALP lines, the *Morning Freiheit* ran a glowing article, “Manhattan District Carries Out Wonderful Meeting with Albert Kahn.” As an FBI report noted, “This article told of a meeting of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order of the IWO. The article concluded by stating that the members were called upon to support the election of V.M., a member of the IWO.” The IWO, as well as Marc’s ALP, continued to fight for the material and cultural needs of its comrades across ethnic and racial lines.⁷⁷

In 1948, the ALP joined the nationwide Progressive Party crusade seeking to elect Henry Wallace president. Leo Krzycki, Polish American president of the American Slav Congress (ASC), was one of the co-chairs at the Philadelphia convention nominating Wallace, along with Paul Robeson and

others. The ASC's journal, *The Slavic American*, cheered the multiethnic, even multiracial assemblage of delegates backing Wallace.

These were the true representatives of the country which was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"—all men, not only the Anglo-Saxons, not only the descendants of those who had come on the Mayflower, but also the Negro people, the Slavic Americans, the Jews, the Puerto Ricans, the Italians and the Chinese. They were in Philadelphia in large numbers and high spirits to give meaning and substance to these great principles which the bipartisan reactionaries repeat like parrots every Fourth of July, but which they trample upon each day of the year.

The Slavic American cheered the Progressive Party platform, "a program that strikes at Jimcrow segregation, anti-Semitism and discrimination."⁷⁸

Marcantonio's protégés similarly foregrounded their support for interethnic progressivism. In East Harlem, Manuel Medina ran on the ALP line for a seat in the state Assembly. The Puerto Rican-born Medina touted his eight years' service as Marcantonio's secretary, "during which time he has served faithfully the people of our community in relation to their problems of Relief, Housing, Health, Citizenship, Education and Employment, as well as handling Veterans' Problems and Discrimination." His campaign brochures stressed "Medina has served all the people: Puerto Rican, Negro, Italian, Jewish, Irish, West Indians." In addition, Medina pledged he would "follow the fighting traditions of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the principles for which HENRY A. WALLACE stands today, the principles defended by Vito Marcantonio, Ben Davis and Paul Robeson."⁷⁹

With the rising Red Scare, the ALP's fortunes quickly faded. In 1952, Irish American Vincent Hallinan ran for president, with Charlotta Bass, African American publisher of the *California Eagle*, as his running mate. In New York, the indefatigable Gerson ran for Congress, supporting Hallinan, but on something called the People's Rights ticket. Ben Davis, like Gerson recently freed from prison after his Smith Act conviction was overturned, ran for Assembly on the Freedom Party ticket. An African American Communist went to bat for Gerson and Davis in a radio address over WQXR, also urging clemency for the Rosenbergs and a vote for Hallinan and Bass. None of those causes was successful, but Gerson was still teaching and speaking on the need for a viable third party in Jefferson School classrooms three years later. As in Chicago, the grassroots activism of New York's ALP confounds the dominant narrative of the rise of conservative white ethnics.⁸⁰

Marcantonio continued as chairman of the New York state ALP even after his 1950 defeat for re-election to Congress. In 1953, the ALP sponsored a Peace Festival and Rally on Randalls Island, a program featuring Puerto Rican and Jewish performers, including Pete Seeger, celebrating the ALP and Marcantonio, "A lone voice in opposition to the sending of our armed forces to Korea." The program also noted the multiethnic makeup of the ALP's leadership, with Marcantonio joined by African American Ewan Guinier and Jewish American Morris Golden in the party's New York County leadership, and African American Captain Hugh Mulzac sharing the Queens County leadership with Herbert Shingler, Saul Kamen, and Lois Allen. Ads for interracial resorts, a rarity in 1953 even in the North, appeared in the Festival program book.⁸¹

With similar commitment to cross-cultural unity, the CP also united people from various backgrounds—albeit, like the ALP, with limited electoral success. German immigrant Max Bedacht was the Party's 1934 candidate for New York's Senate seat.⁸² Elizabeth Gurley Flynn ran for Congress from the Bronx, where her campaign distributed flyers in Italian to reach the workers of Belmont and other neighborhoods. But in her runs, Flynn also urged voters to elect CP candidate Israel Amter governor of New York and hailed the success of Councilman Cacchione. In 1940, the CP twinned her run for an at-large congressional seat with the campaign of Frank Herron, Polish-American Communist from Buffalo, for New York's second at-large seat. That year, Amter was the Party's candidate for Senate.⁸³

Across the river, New Jersey Communists fielded equally polyglot tickets. In 1940, a Party booklet, "The Jewish People Today," urged New Jersey voters to choose Manuel Cantor governor and Mary Ellen Dooner senator. Communists ran in several congressional and legislative districts, including Irish American Larry Mahan for Essex County's congressional seat and Severio Capalbo for the state Senate from Frank "I Am the Law" Hague's Hudson County. Assembly candidates included Yetta Rakoff (Hudson), Vladimir Laconich (Middlesex), and Paul Siegel (Union). "Defeat the Siamese Twins, the Candidates of the Hague and Vanderbilt So-Called 'Clean Government' Machines!" a CP ad in the booklet urged. Six years later, Mahan, who boasted he was descended from Irish emigrants who fled the 1840s Potato Famine, was the CP's candidate for governor.⁸⁴

Red-baiting wiped away most of the workers schools, as well as the electoral coalitions in which the Communist and American Labor Parties worked. It is not surprising movements foregrounding class worked across ethnic and racial lines in forging campaigns for economic justice, racial equality, and a saner, more peaceful foreign policy. In our current, alarmingly authoritarian, racist times, perhaps we can learn some lessons from these multiethnic, interracial coalitions as we set about the work of making sure another world is possible.

Notes

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2. Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?," *History Workshop* 17 (Spring 1984): 57–80; quotation on 67.
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4. Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire and Revolution in the Borderlands* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022); Jesús Colón, "Bitter Harvest—Why Puerto Ricans Leave Home," *Fraternal Outlook*, February 1948, 18–19, Hunter College, Jesús Colón Papers, Box 9, Folder 12.
5. Victor Greene, *The Slavic Community on Strike* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1968).
6. Donna Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Gabaccia, Iacovetta, and Ottanelli, "Laboring Across National Borders."
7. Zimmer, *Immigrants against the State*, 40–41. Pernicone and Ottanelli, *Assassins against the Old Order*.
8. Jennifer Guglielmo, "Donne Ribelli: Recovering the History of Italian Women's Radicalism in the United States," in *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*, ed. Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 121.
9. Zimmer, *Immigrants against the State*, 41.
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Parkchester: A Suburb in a City and the Challenge to Ethnicity, 1940–circa 1970

by Jeffrey S. Gurock

On June 22, 1944, just sixteen days after D-Day where American troops courageously charged across the beaches of Normandy, a grateful United States Congress passed a most far-reaching piece of legislation rewarding the country's troops. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, provided that those who had served honorably in the military could turn to the government for a range of benefits to assist them in not only recovering from the traumas of European and Asian battlefields, but in substantially improving their forthcoming post-war lives. Among the most significant emoluments was the making available of low-cost mortgages, facilitating sixteen million soldiers, sailors and airmen owning their own private homes. This government mandate played a critical role in the creation of suburbs. Indeed, it was said that when real estate folks examined the legislation, "they look[ed] at one another in happy amazement, and the dry, rasping noise they made rubbing their hands together could have been heard as far as Twi Twai"—an island off the Philippines known to GIs who fought in the Pacific Theatre. A new unparalleled building boom was soon underway which would "serve the American dream-house market."

Single-family housing starts jumped from 114,000 the year the bill was passed to 1,692,000 six years later, constituting "an all-time high." The largest and best-known development was Levittown, situated in Long Island, begun in 1946, that ultimately became home to 17,400 dwellings for 82,000 residents. These homes were functional for growing baby-boomer families. Friendly

critics were known to call Levittown “Fertility Valley.” With their little kids in tow, families could spend leisure times in the sixty community parks. As the youngsters grew older, nine swimming pools were available to them as well as the ten baseball diamonds, perfect for Little League games. A new way of life was born for a new generation of white, young Americans who had grown up in cramped, contested city environs and who now made efforts to get along with their neighbors in a bucolic setting. “The middle-class suburb family with the new house and the long-term fixed rate mortgage” issued through the Veterans Administration “became a symbol and perhaps a stereotype of the American way of life.”¹

Levittown was, however, off-limits to African Americans. In an oft-quoted explanation of the development’s policies, William Levitt opined: “we can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem, but we cannot combine the two.” In the 1950s, the Levitt family built a smaller version of their development in Pennsylvania and with the same open-and-closed door policies. Concomitantly and subsequently, suburban communities sprung up all over the United States with comparable enticements for whites while staying restricted against blacks.²

In this chapter, I will present two models of post-war Jewish ethnicity that emerged outside of the strict urban framework. The first is the suburban model, typified by Levittown, which despite its seemingly generic character, did provide a framework for the preservation of Jewish ethnicity, marked by residential clustering and limited fraternization with non-Jews. The second model is less well-known. It is the case of Parkchester, NY, located in the north-eastern section of the Bronx. As we will see, the case of Parkchester, although ostensibly more urban than Levittown (indeed, technically a part of New York City), exhibited far more assimilatory patterns for Jews.

LEVITTOWN AND SUBURBIA

For some Jews, moving to suburbia afforded them an opportunity to fulfill a very different “American” dream. They could now dissociate totally from their ancestral pasts. The three basic elements for assimilation were now coming together. To begin with, they long harbored the goal of leaving all aspects of their Jewishness—be it a religious or modern secular identity—behind. Secondly, they were fully Americanized, in education and occupation, in

speech, in culinary choices, in affinity for general culture, including its leisure time activities, and even in their surnames. Most importantly, they were living in a post-war era where overt antisemitism was becoming unfashionable, permitting them to generally fit in with their gentile neighbors. Their only complaint—that they kept to themselves—was that elite gentile institutions like country clubs had members who frowned upon interaction with such aspiring Jews.

Author Herman Wouk, saddened critic of what he prophesized suburbia would mean for the future of American Jewish life, recoiled against the attitude of a fictional but emblematic Jew named Abramson whom he depicted as, “pleasantly vanishing down a broad highway at the wheel of a high-powered station wagon, with the golf clubs piled in the back.” Tragically for Wouk, “when his amnesia clears, he will be Mr. Adamson and his wife and children with him, and all will be well. But the Jewish question will be over in the United States.” In his view, “antisemitism will not kill off the Jews.” Rather, as he evoked a suburban lifestyle, he lamented that there will be “five million Adamsons in the United States, driving cars, watching television, leading honest lives and exhibiting no trace of a terrible and magnificent origin.”³

However, the arch assimilationists—as he characterized Abramson *qua* Adamson—turned out to be the exceptions. Most Jews opted for a significant commitment to ethnic persistence even as they wanted to “conform to the expectations of . . . neighbors as neighbors rather than as Jews.” It was said that suburbia was “a setting so intent of sociability that it brooks no strangers. No one can be in it and not of it.”⁴

A key and defining decision of where these Jews stood took place when they appeared as prospective buyers at real estate sales offices. They would be shown a model home diorama and a large map showing the various culs-de-sac around which houses would be built. They could choose to settle in whatever sub-division seemed attractive to them. Although there was much uniformity to the look of sections of the massive suburban expanse, it is not known how many buyers asked the agents about the ethnicity or religion of their possible neighbors. But seemingly, most Christians were not concerned about the background of their possible neighbors. They queried only whether their fellow newcomers could afford to buy in.

That unconcerned gentile mind-set encouraged Jews to drift away from their ethnic pasts. However, Jews were different. While there were examples of places where, “Jewish families were scattered at random,” and not in adjacent houses, in most suburban communities “Jews tended to cluster together.”

Only a minority “moved into suburbs that contained few if any Jews.” These aggregations could not, however, be defined fully as a Jewish neighborhood even if the leading sociologist of suburbia would write in 1956, “generally the Jew lives in what are called Jewish neighborhoods—or now Jewish suburbs. His friends are almost certain to be Jewish and his wife likes to have the children play with other Jewish children whenever possible.”⁵ For in the new locales, unlike the city-based past, there would be no Jewish stores. Suburban Jews bought their foods at the A and P, chose their clothes from the same haberdashers as their neighbors, and dined at restaurants like Howard Johnsons, or more upscale local bistros, and not at the previously ubiquitous Jewish delicatessen. As one historian has put it: “outside the protective womb of the urban Jewish subculture, Judaism could no longer be absorbed, like sunshine from the surrounding atmosphere.”⁶

But those who chose to live together were in no way staunch self-segregationists and might well be annoyed if gentiles moved away when they moved in. While they relished being among their own kind—a spare evening would find Jews congregating together within informal gatherings—many parents believed that “it was good for the children to learn to live with others.” After all, as they grew up, “they have to learn to deal with non-Jews in life.” One sociologist has suggested that “in contrast to their parents who in many cases sought . . . segregation, they *feared* it.”⁷

The challenge for their families was to strike the proper balances between being part of, and respected within, the larger community while retaining a connectedness to their ancestral background. That meant that their youngsters attended the local public schools. The possibility of enrolling children in quality and well-funded schools had been one of the motivations for relocation. Indeed, Jews were known to be great supporters of maximizing dollars for educational institutions. In general, when it came to a community raising monies for essential institutions like a hospital or a public library or a new fire station, Jews were often the first in line to lend their support and dollars. In one study of a suburban midwestern community, it was found that nine out of ten Jews involved themselves in “non-sectarian, voluntary associations”—also referred to as “instrumental groups”—while only 75% of gentiles were so motivated.⁸

At the same time, and as important in being part of their locale, their children’s participation in after-school and weekend activities with their gentile chums—be it Little League or a dance group, etc.—was encouraged. But how close and enduring should these next generation relationships be? In other

words, how friendly might their sons become with the sisters of their gentile teammates? While statistics show intermarriage in the 1940s–1950s was still very low—as of 1958 the figure nationally was around 7%—the fear of exogamy troubled many families. It was hypothesized that “intermarriage [was] likely to become even more serious in the years ahead . . . wherever and whenever Jews live in communities that are not exclusively Jewish.” Nonetheless, parents were generally sure to put a positive spin on ongoing relationships with non-Jewish youngsters. They were certain not to evoke nasty memories of Christians troubling Jews on mean urban streets as their reason for special feelings toward fellow Jews.⁹

The older generation held in the back of their minds their negative youthful experiences of tensions with nearby Christian neighbors. Nevertheless, these Jews’ subconscious fear of “too much” closeness with non-Jews contributed much to low levels of intermarriage. On the other hand, this type of standoffish thinking did not make sense to their children. One 1950s’ parent understood the dilemma of how to promote Jewishness devoid of negativity toward those among whom they now resided this way: In the city, he observed, “the odds are in your favor. Out here you stack the deck” through “linkage to the social organization of the synagogue.” If nothing else, it was widely believed that within this new social mix, “the community needs a place for our children” and for themselves that is decidedly Jewish.¹⁰

So disposed, the synagogue became the primary touchstone institution for identification. Previously, within urban locales, houses of worship were frequented only by the devout minority. For others, shuls were the places that Jews promenaded by as they met and greeted their friends and relatives while they strolled—dressed in their holiday best—along the wide thoroughfares of avenues like on New York’s iconic Grand Concourse in the Bronx or Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn. The neighborhood scene was the incubator and preserver of Jewishness. Now, however, the synagogue had more to do than just serve as a place to worship for the few; it had to be a social center for the many.

Ironically, the origins of the efflorescence of the so-called Synagogue Center in suburbia dates to before the war while Jews still lived overwhelmingly in the cities. Its originator was Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan who recognized that the old-style shuls had no cachet for the next generation. But perhaps, an institution that was open seven days a week which promoted modern Jewish education and a plethora of ancillary elements, ranging from a gymnasium to a swimming pool, to an art studio to a music room, would attract youngsters who

came to play and hopefully stay to learn and to pray. By design, the Synagogue Center would be far more committed to religious values and observance than the long-existing Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association. It was renamed in more contemporary times as a Jewish Community Center (JCC), even if the sanctuary building now would be just part of the multi-faceted social and cultural construct. More importantly, it would be an alternative to the non-sectarian local Neighborhood House that brought Jewish and gentile youngsters together for comparable sports and other after school and weekend activities. The Synagogue Center would be an antidote to the assimilatory Neighborhood House and even the JCC which although a *Jewish* institution, admitted Gentiles to its membership. Moreover, the branding of an institution that promoted degrees of separateness as a *Synagogue* Center would not be likely to offend non-Jewish neighbors. The early post-war period was an era where belonging to "the church or synagogue of your choice" was an important national social and political value. It was one of the ways for this patriotic minority group, during the Cold War, to line up with their fellow citizens as members of an indivisible nation under the Almighty in this country's struggle against godless Communism.¹¹

Keen to actualize Kaplan's formula for persistence were cohorts of his students who he influenced at the Jewish Theological Seminary that trumpeted their multi-faceted institutions. They came to suburbia not only armed with their teacher's game plan but also had an attractive message for that minority in the community who wanted more out the synagogue experience than just social bonding with other Jews. Those who "leaned towards the Orthodox," as one suburban New Jersey rabbi put it, were warmed when in 1950 the Conservative movement brought Jewish tradition right into their driveway. Then, its Rabbinical Assembly affirmed the religious right of Jews to drive to synagogue on Jewish holy days. That ruling enabled those congregants who cared to not feel guilty if the cul de sac street that they had chosen to be near fellow Jews was situated miles away from the Temple. Meanwhile, the movement's year-round 8 p.m. Friday night service fit the occupational profile of dads who worked in the city and then commuted back home for a Sabbath meal before going to the synagogue. And when they worshipped proudly in the town's commodious sanctuary, with their wives and children sitting next to them, they could feel connected not only to their people but what they felt was the best of their ancestral faith.¹²

At the same time, young American Orthodox rabbis from Yeshiva University did their level best to promote their version of Jewish traditionalism

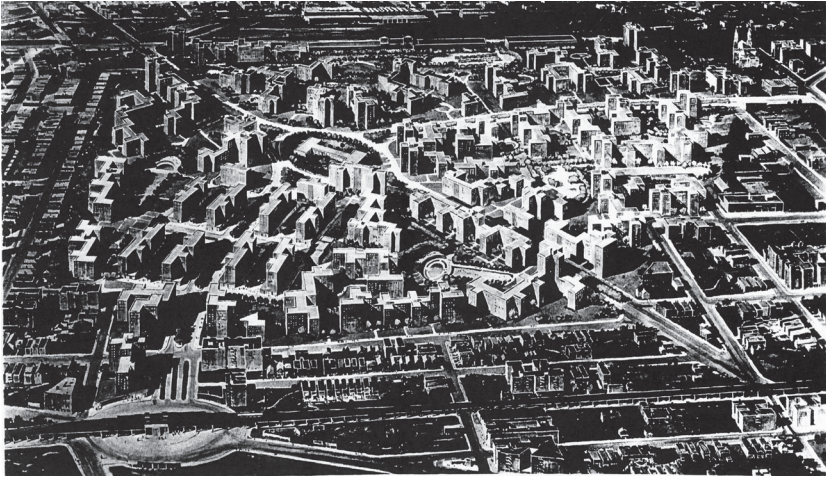
when suburbanites met to determine which of the denomination's leaders and programs they might follow. They could offer comparable week-long social activities but would not budge on validating the Sabbath driving option. In most encounters, the representatives of the Jewish Theological Seminary won out. In the end suburbia during the first quarter century after World War II became the venue for the heyday of Conservative Judaism.¹³

PARKCHESTER: DRIFT TOWARD ASSIMILATION IN THE CITY

While assimilation-bound Jews in suburbia strove to fulfill their "American dream" of dissociation, most of their co-religionists expressed an affinity for ethnicity in an organized way. But remarkably, back in this country's largest city of New York and in the borough of the Bronx—renowned for its prior, robust Jewish neighborhoods where connectedness had once radiated up from the streets—a planned community was created, beginning in 1940, where breaking away from ancestral pasts was facilitated and simplified. In mid-century New York, many of the Jews who desired to reside in a newly built urban enclave had the strong opportunity to just drift away. Moreover, synagogue leaders did not move aggressively to mitigate disaffection. And, in contrast to suburbia, no alternative form of Jewish institutional life like a JCC was developed. The story of Parkchester suggests that the assimilatory challenges to early post-war Jewish identity, in an increasingly tolerant American society, generally associated with out-of-town venues, existed in the city as well. This social history of Jews in a specific neighborhood dovetail with what has been written about the cultural and intellectual history of the decline in ethnicity among articulate Jewish writers and thinker in an early post-war urban setting.¹⁴

Parkchester, a building initiative consisting of 171 buildings over 127 acres of previously undeveloped land situated in the north-east corner of the Bronx, was the brainchild of a team of executives of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (MLIC). These business leaders projected themselves, and were widely praised, as a "prime example of private enterprise productivity devoted to public service." Their often-articulated goal was to create an environment where "moderate income families could live in an urban community in a suburban atmosphere." Their "intended community" would be nothing less than an "independent community" off the city grid, "a new middle class enclave well removed from the uncertainties of old inner city neighborhoods

many of the residents left.” In sum, an anticipatory alternative to suburban migration was tendered.¹⁵



Parkchester, aerial view. Courtesy the Bronx Historical Society.

As of 1942, the MLIC’s leadership had to have been gratified by a complimentary letter an early resident sent to their resident manager. This missive reflected many of the feelings of the thousands of New Yorkers, and even folks from out of town, who wanted to be part of this creative enterprise. The letter writer argued that suburban life was not a modern Shangri La:

It has always been our idea to eventually settle down in a small town, away from the clamor and rush of city life. However, without losing any of the benefits of city life, we have found our small town. Except that I don’t have to get up at 5:30 to start the furnace or spend all day Sunday painting the porch or mowing the lawn or shoveling snow from the walks during the winter.

These were all common complaints of suburbanites. “We hope to settle down here for the next 25 years.”

If this writer was blessed with children or grandchildren, they would have been gratified to find that community had so many people like themselves with many youngsters around who could play in the well-constructed playground areas. That same year of 1942, the management reported that “the largest group of children in Parkchester is the baby carriage group. War has stopped the *automobile*, not the baby carriage”—a veiled suggestion that their development had advantages over out of city locales which required cars.

“In Parkchester it just goes rolling along.” When looking for what they needed for their boys and girls, they were only blocks away from R. H. Macy’s of Parkchester. It was the giant department store’s first branch—a suburban-like mall outside of Manhattan but surely still in the metropolis. Seemingly, contented apartment dwellers had come close to having it all while staying in the city as the neighborhood soon bore the moniker “Storkchester,” a Bronx version of Levittown’s “Fertility Valley.”¹⁶

These sentiments and reports were precisely the sort of feelings about the place in the East Bronx that the home office wished to engender within their more than 40,000 residents who felt fortunate enough to secure an apartment in the complex. The competition for space was intense and the waiting list massive. Left unsaid but clearly the case, Parkchesterites were also abundantly pleased that the quick and cheap subways brought them daily to and from work, sparing them from a major drawback of suburban life; the burden of long commutation ills that confronted breadwinners. The Interborough Rapid Transit Line was available if they wanted to spend an evening in the “city” (i.e., Manhattan) to take in a show, concert or sporting event. Such entertainment venues had to be built in suburbia.¹⁷

The MLIC carefully selected the type of people they wanted in their complex very carefully and went so far as to send white-gloved social workers to interview prospective tenants in their own homes to ascertain whether they possessed what today we might call the right “family values.” But as progressive social planners they were keen not to discriminate based on religion or white ethnicity. Most critically, and uniquely, the 12,000 families who were selected to reside in Parkchester were distributed randomly within the community. Unlike suburbia where potential homeowners could *choose* where and with whom they desired to live, in this Bronx neighborhood, the management *made the decision* for its renters. It is not certain that the MLIC intentionally mixed up groups or whether they were only background blind. Nonetheless, because of the way the MLIC filled up their apartments, without regard for religion and national origin, this Bronx community was more ethnically diversified than suburban locales. One local newspaper reported early on that the “Akuskas, the Abbotts, the Breslaus, the Devores, the Gershowitzes and the McCahans” (i.e., Greeks, Jews, Irish, Germans and others) were all very content residing with one another, “upset[ting] New York’s old pattern of neighborhoods dominated by people of similar national backgrounds.” It could be said that these Jews and gentiles were all “chosen people,” contributing to a “get along” atmosphere.¹⁸

But there was a dark face to the efforts of the MLIC's master builders and social planners. Tolerance did not extend to race. In a city, and in an era, where many of Gotham's neighborhoods were segregated, the company followed suit. Clearly when in 1939, even before construction began and the "planned community" of Parkchester was described as an "*integrated residential colony*," integration meant houses, parks, stores and playgrounds all available on behalf of its multi-religious and white ethnic clientele. But this desired neighborhood of choice was off-limits to African Americans, just as Levittown did not sell houses to Blacks. In the most telling statement about MLIC's racist policies, in 1943 board president Frederick Ecker asserted: "Negroes and whites don't mix. Perhaps they will in a hundred years, but they don't now. If we brought them into the development, it would be for the detriment of the city too, because it would depress the surrounding property." For Ecker, much like for William Levitt, given the choice of solving a housing problem or a race problem, he opted to build his whites-only community. Such were the signs of the times in the pre-civil rights era. Parkchester would remain segregated until the end of the 1960s.¹⁹

Meanwhile, for the privileged white ethnics who flocked to the development, an architectural deficiency in the construction plan—at least in the estimations of annoyed residents—contributed to an increase in intergroup propinquity. Parkchester's buildings were fire-proof and possessed very thick walls which led to very bothersome apartment overheating during summertime. In the 1940s and 1950s, air-conditioning was not available in almost all residential areas, Parkchester included. A few stores had cooling units on their premises that may have led customers to tarry indoors while they slowly made their selections. It likewise made sense to sit through a double feature at the neighborhood movie houses, which also were air-conditioned. Some fortunate families repaired during July and August to bungalow colonies in the mountains while those who stayed back in the neighborhood were sure to sit out late into the night in Metropolitan Oval, a beautiful community centerpiece with its flowers, trees and spouting fountains. By day, many residents were members of the blue-collar, Castle Hill Beach Club, which was an urban "summer sanctuary" even if it had no beach, located only a short bus ride away. However, after hours of respite it was back to the apartments that were hot as blazes.

To increase cross ventilation beyond the ever-present ceiling and floor fans and without any directives from management, neighbors determined building-by-building to keep their apartment doors open around the clock.



Parkchester's Metropolitan Oval. Courtesy the Bronx Historical Society.

Without any grand statements about cooperation, they simply assisted each other in making life more comfortable for those on their floor during heat waves. This open-door behavior spawned civility in building after building on an ongoing basis as floor residents of different backgrounds got to know one another as more than mere neighbors. In some instances, folks living on the same floor became trusting enough of each other that they set up intercoms with receivers in more than one apartment, making it possible for one parent or a single baby-sitter to keep track of multiple sets of children.²⁰

One Irish-American memoirist recalled an atmosphere of conviviality that obtained among the nine families that lived on the second floor of their building. Relationships among the four Irish-American families, the one Italian family and the four Jewish families began with their common open-door search for breezes during the summer. These good vibrations continued throughout the year. John McInerney recalled pointedly that one New Years' Eve they made sure to stop at each of their floor neighbors to wish them felicitations for the upcoming year before going off to a black-tie party on the town.²¹

Participation in the patriotic campaigns on the home front during World War II and community-wide activism addressing early post-war domestic concerns gave Parkchester residents more formal and structured opportunities to cooperate and to work together, also spawning that inter-ethnic "get along" atmosphere. For example, in the winter of 1942 a United Victory Committee

of Parkchester was organized to activate “every organization and church in the vicinity” to show “their full support of the United Nations war program.” Although Parkchester’s two synagogues were not mentioned, its leaders were gratified to be invited to join the “churches” and members were encouraged to attend the committee’s dances and rallies that raised funds for the Allies. In similar spirit, local Catholic, Protestant and Jewish clergy joined hands with a score of political leaders in a community-wide prayer service that the Parkchester Citizens Council organized outside of Macy’s to mourn FDR on a Sunday after the president’s death in April 1945.²²

Meanwhile, without management prodding, neighborhood residents of all backgrounds, especially women, worked together and enlisted their youngsters to collect wastepaper. The neighborhood was praised as “being in the lead” when a ten-ton trailer “filled to capacity . . . delivered a load to a nearby paper mill.” Collections grew as parents and children made “rounds” every day except Sunday to rouse their neighbors to cooperate. In March 1944, the Red Cross was assisted by “a detachment of nine volunteers calling themselves the ‘Flying Squadron’” who canvassed the community for donations.²³

Immediately after the war, a United Women’s Committee of Parkchester, defined as a “consumer group,” and with leaders drawn from all local ethnic and religious groups, had their say about continuing ceiling prices on commodities. It was a government policy that often contributed to the continuation of the black market. The group told the *New York Times* that it wanted the paper to print the actual retail price of commodities to alert consumers about gouging by unethical storekeepers.²⁴

In gauging the tenor of life on Parkchester’s streets in the late 1940s through the 1960s, it clearly contrasted fundamentally from what New York neighborhoods had been like just a few years earlier. In many of Gotham’s neighborhoods during the 1930s Jews, Italians, Germans, and the Irish lived in close proximity to one another but did not share common goals or outlooks. Tensions over jobs with the Irish, in particular, who believed that during the Great Depression, Jews were taking over neighborhoods as they secured scarce jobs at their expense, and fundamental differences over interventionism as opposed to isolationism in U.S. foreign policy as the world war approached were stoked by anti-Semitic groups like Father Charles Coughlin’s Christian Front that exacerbated negative feelings. In some places, especially when the Irish confronted the Jews, well-defined no-mans-land boundaries separated antagonistic youngsters and their parents. But now, as all newcomers came together to Parkchester, such volatile expressions were rarely heard.²⁵

The agreeable spirit that made that community so different also set it apart from other places in post-war Gotham where “postwar mobility did not necessarily initiate the immediate erosion of . . . ethnic communities.” Put differently, in other places, Italian, Irish and Jewish families availed themselves of new housing opportunities without fundamentally compromising the largely self-imposed residential and social segregation that had sustained ethnic neighborhoods in the first half of the century. But in their Parkchester apartment village, an ethos of “getting along with others” obtained. From its very start, residents were “terribly eager to be ‘nice,’ even if they [were] not so already—to live the amiable, conformist existence of the suburbs, to know their neighbors for a change.” If anything, as economic conditions improved within a robust American economy after the war the senses around all dinner tables was that they “they have moved up in the world by finding such a grand place to live.”²⁶

Accordingly, all the predicates were in place for Jews who desired to fulfill their “American dream” of unobtrusively surrendering their ethnic identities. They could drift away toward complete assimilation. They could be seen day-by-day—marching down the development’s main streets—along with their neighbors to the subway that conveyed them to their blue-collar or white-collar civil service jobs in Manhattan where they might work in the next office or within the same police station or fire house with Christians. They were contented that the MLIC had selected them to reside in a new urban initiative with other fortunate apartment dwellers where reportedly an “in-group feeling” of “back-fence friendliness”—another suburb-like metaphor—obtained. They also may have been aware that the way Parkchester was designed downplayed religious institutional life. The several churches and the two synagogues were situated—as prescribed with the architectural masterplan—within an outside ring beyond the community’s borders. Part of the rationale for such placement—at least as it applied to the churches—was the MLIC’s desire to preclude the wrong breed of people: those African Americans who were barred from the development from attending services within Parkchester.²⁷

Recreationally, Jews could take part within a larger community that included “forty social and athletic groups, a symphony orchestra [and] two self-supporting newspapers” that the MLIC encouraged and sponsored. And there was no elite county club scene within the Bronx that could deny Jewish participation. The Castle Hill Beach Pool was open to all—that is, all whites who could afford the cheap membership dues. Like Parkchester itself, this “summer sanctuary” was off-limits to racial minorities. The numbers and

percentages of such arch-assimilationists are not available, but evidently, the opportunities for dissociation were there. Those who wanted to shed Jewish ties would not have had it any other way.²⁸

However, most Jewish Parkchesterites wanted to retain degrees of adherence to their ethnic identities even though they knew from their first day in the East Bronx development that they were not living in a Jewish building within a Jewish neighborhood. The majority had chosen, and had passed the white-glove test, to reside in a diverse neighborhood. If they looked for signs of Jewishness on the streets of Parkchester—much like suburbia—there were no businesses with Hebrew or Yiddish names on the storefronts in the development where they could shop and congregate with other Jews. The informality of ethnic relationships that obtained in butcher shops or delicacy stores that had been so much a part of prior New York Jewish neighborhood experiences did not exist within Parkchester. These Jewish specialty shops were situated outside the ring of the community.²⁹

Religious leaders of the two congregations prayed that they could rely on their formal institutions to capture the allegiances of their fellow Jews for consistent involvement. As early as 1942, the first financial secretary of the Young Israel of Parkchester (YIP)—the Orthodox shul—picked up on an endemic tentativeness that was hampering his group's growth. When he contacted members who had not been attending meetings—many more Jewish residents did not affiliate at all—he emphasized the need in Parkchester for a “militant Jewish group.” For him, militancy did not mean fighting against their neighbors. Rather, he specified the need for people “dedicated to their faith in true community spirit.” He and other founders wanted a “social center in Parkchester in a refined Jewish environment . . . where young men and women, boys and girls, and small children can find a source of recreation and relaxation as well as spiritual and cultural development.” He specified that “we need a model synagogue, a Talmud Torah, a social center, a club house for the men and a meeting place for the women. Our young boys and girls want dances, handicraft, ping pong, etc.” Rhetorically, many of the elements in the Synagogue Center program were hypothesized. However, while the congregation did establish a Talmud Torah, and over the years sponsored a variety of youth programs and adult education classes and lectures over the years, all activities took place within the one sanctuary building.³⁰

The YIP's leadership counterparts at Temple Emanuel also desired a robust Jewish community, but there too no concerted effort led this Conservative congregation to emulate what their movement was so committed to achieving

in suburbia. Moreover, there was never a movement afoot to organize a less than religious but ethnic Jewish Community Center in Parkchester even while the MLIC sponsored every conceivable athletic and American cultural activity one could imagine in order to bring Jewish and gentiles kids together. The vaunted Recreational Department was the quintessential Neighborhood House, a promoter of friendships and conduit to assimilation within the younger set.

Of course, unlike suburban locales which often were virgin territory, Parkchester—though a new urban development—was still situated within what was then the largest Jewish city in the world. Thus, those who were interested could easily find their way to the many social and cultural institutions of long standing that were located just that short subway ride away in Manhattan. There also was a Jewish Community Center in Pelham Parkway, called the Bronx House, situated only a twenty-minute bus ride away. Parkchester remained a *Jewishly underdeveloped* area for the close to thirty years (1940–circa 1970) when that group constituted a substantial presence in the neighborhood.

While the YIP made its limited facilities available to all Jews in the neighborhood, its lay leaders had a grander goal in mind. They wanted to raise up a cohort of children drawn from within their own small circle of committed and observant families whom they hoped would not only sustain the congregation in the decades that would follow, but who might also become leaders of the overall Jewish community of New York. They wanted these youngsters to have more than simply an ethnic identity. They desired them to be exemplars of substantial religious commitment. Known euphemistically within the synagogue as the “whiz kids,” these boys and a few girls rode the subways and the buses to day schools in Manhattan and other localities in the borough where they were exposed to extensive Jewish education.

There was no interest among their Parkchester Jewish neighbors in supporting Jewish parochial schooling even if the curriculums in these American-style schools did not smack of European-style separatism. Almost all other Jewish kids attended the local public schools which their parents heartily supported. On the weekends, the YIP boys were trained to lead the Orthodox services—a source of pride to their elders. (At an Orthodox synagogue, the young women of that era were not given a chance to serve as cantors or Torah leaders.) Suffice it to say, these whiz kids—some of whom eventually did make their Jewish marks beyond the reaches of Parkchester—reached their majorities as dedicated outliers, before the efflorescence in the last half century of day school education, as a popular option in the city and eventually in suburbia

too, where more traditional Jews challenged the denominational hegemony of Conservative Judaism.³¹

Notwithstanding these variegated attitudes and behaviors toward continued Jewish identification in and out of town, ultimately it cannot be ascertained whether, in the end, during the first generation after World War II, suburbia or Parkchester was a greater incubator of assimilation. In other words, did the aggressive Synagogue Center advocates succeed in stemming the tide of dissociation from Jewish belonging while in the Bronx congregations, passivity and—in the case of the YIP—a touch of parochialism undermined identification? What is evident—as far as Parkchester was concerned—was that the worries of intermarriage, a marker of young people moving away from Jewish pasts, did not characterize that group's life in the East Bronx neighborhood. There were limits to the “get-along” spirit in the community, in its buildings and parks, where overt anti-Semitism was uncommon.

The deepest of friendships generally did not obtain between Jews and gentiles, with very few eventually becoming brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. American writer Peter Quinn, who grew up in the East Bronx community in the 1950s–1960s, offers us an Irish perspective on the limits of inter-group camaraderie. He has written that there were no “Irish pogromists” around like those whom Jews feared in other neighborhoods. And he has asserted that he “never heard anti-Semitic professions by teachers or clergy.” Perhaps Vatican II's absolving Jews from the canard of killing Christ quieted expressions of hatred in the Bronx. At the same time, Quinn also noted that while he picked up familiarity with Yiddish street terms like “kibitz” “smuck [*sic*] and mensch,” he had “no Jewish friends” and even more significantly, “no acquaintances with Jewish girls.” In his view, “we lived separately together.” Closer relationships and the possibility of intermarriage would characterize the behavior of Parkchesterites in the generation that followed when these early youngsters and their own children moved to new neighborhoods in the city and suburbia.³²

What is abundantly certain is that when it came to “harmony,” the Jews and gentiles of Levittown and Parkchester lived unchallenged and unperturbed in a segregated city enclave and suburb in a country where the issue of “getting along” with a minority race was yet to be a constant source of concern and turmoil. In the years that followed the forced integration of Parkchester in 1968—as mandated by New York's Human Rights Commission—Parkchester's Christian and Jewish communities would be tested to determine if the “get along” spirit would apply to the new arrivals in their bucolic development.

Although many of the long-standing residents of Parkchester would be drawn but not pushed to new city areas or to suburbia, those who stayed generally accepted their new neighbors. Levittown homeowners did not protest the integration of their enclaves and got along with their minorities. But for decades—almost to the twenty-first century—very few Blacks bought into Levittown.

Notes

1. On the era of post-war suburban construction and the basics of the ecological setting and lifestyle—especially in Levittown, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
2. Jackson, 204, 206, 233–41.
3. For a pungent prophesy of complete assimilation, see Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 251–57, 281–83, noted in Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 147.
4. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*.
5. On the ethos of sociability see Judith R. Kramer and Seymour Leventman, *Children of the Gilded Ghetto: Conflict Resolution of Three Generations of American Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 172–73.
6. On the decision on where to live in a suburban community and concerns about the economics of possible neighbors but not their religion or ethnicity, see Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in New Suburban Community* (New York: Knopf, 1967). Gans found that when contemplating where to live only 9% of potential buyers—part of the Christian majority—were concerned about their neighbors' backgrounds. See pp. 44–45.
7. On the tendency of Jews in many places to aggregate together, see Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 143 and Herbert J. Gans, "American Jewry: Present and Future," *Commentary* (May 1956): 425. On a suburban community where Jews scattered, see Herbert J. Gans, "The Origin and Growth of a Jewish Community in the Suburbs: A Study of the Jews of Park Forest," in *The Jews*, ed. Marshal Sklare (New York: Free Press, 1958). On the change in venue from city to suburb in Jewish consciousness, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 283.
8. On this generation of Jews fears of self-segregation as opposed to their parents' attitudes, see Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 16. On Jews, more than Gentiles, joining community-wide organizations to improve conditions in town, see Benjamin B. Ringer, *The Edge of Friendliness: A Study of Jewish-Gentile Relations* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 200–07. However, on occasion, Jewish residents' desire to have a community spend large sums to improve education led to troubling push-backs from their neighbors who were concerned about tax levies. See on an incident in Wayne, NJ in 1968—albeit with an overheated title—Rodney Stark and Stephen Steinberg, *It Did Happen Here: An Investigation of Anti-Semitism, Wayne, New Jersey, 1967* (Berkeley: Survey Research Center, 1967), 9–10.

9. For statistics on the low level of intermarriage, see *American Jewish Year Book* 60 (1959): 8–9. See also, Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, 244–45.
10. Herbert Gersh, “The New Suburbanites of the 1950s,” *Commentary* (March 1954): 220–21; *American Jewish Year Book* 60 (1959): 8–9; Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, 244–45.
11. For a discussion of the origins and early development of the Synagogue Center concept and its transplantation to suburbia, see Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 123–48, 235–37. See also David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The “Synagogue Center” in American Jewish History* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1999).
12. Morris Freedman, “New Jewish Community in Formation: A Conservative Center Catering to Present-Day Needs,” *Commentary* (January 1955): 43–45; Jack Wertheimer, “The Conservative Synagogue,” in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123–26. See also, “Responsum on Riding to the Synagogue on Shabbat,” *Rabbinical Assembly Proceedings* (1950): 112–18.
13. Victor B. Geller, *Orthodoxy Awakens: The Belkin Years and Yeshiva University* (Jerusalem: Urim Press), 112–15.
14. For a comprehensive intellectual and cultural history of the decline in ethnicity among intellectuals, see the aptly named work, Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).
15. On the mission of the MLIC, see Edgar Beigel, “Parkchester Middle Class Houses,” *New Republic* (September 29, 1941): 400–01, noted in Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Parkchester: A Bronx Tale of Race and Ethnicity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 14. See also on a new community in the city as opposed to suburbia, see “Realty Investor and Planning Expert Debate Future of the ‘Vertical City,’” *New York Times* [hereinafter *NYT*], April 1, 1951, 22, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 23–24.
16. Untitled press release from the Metropolitan Life Insurance Information Service, November 6, 1942, located in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Archives, referenced in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 55. See also, “Macy Branch to Open: 5,000 Attend Preview of New Store in Parkchester,” *NYT*, October 12, 1941, 54, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 57.
17. “Pelham Bay Subway Gets Express Trains,” *NYT*, October 15, 1946, 26, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 56.
18. On the interview process, see Morris Markey, “40,000 Neighbors,” *Saturday Evening Post*, May 18, 1940, 42, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 31. On the different ethnic names of people drawn to Parkchester, see John Stanton, “Town Within a City,” *NYT*, May 11, 1941, SM12, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 27.
19. The nature of MLIC racism and the problems of desegregation at Parkchester are fully described in the chapter that is aptly titled, “Negroes and Whites,” in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 99–136.

20. On the absence of air conditioning and neighbors opening doors during summertime, see Gurock, *Parkchester*, 65–66. On the Castle Hill Beach Club, see Anna Quinlan, “About New York,” *NYT*, September 8, 1962, on-line edition.
21. John B. McInerey, interview #123, conducted by the Bronx Institute Oral History Project, Lehman College, November 1, 1982, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 66.
22. On the activities of the United Victory Committee and the involvement of the YIP, see United Victory Committee of Parkchester to Young Israel of Parkchester (April 16, 1942) and Jack Slove to Members (June 24, 1942). See also flyer dated March 28, 1942, calling on YIP members to attend a Victory Committee dance. All of these documents are housed in the Young Israel of Parkchester Collection (YIP collection) at the Yeshiva University Archive.
23. “Waste-Paper Pile Rises,” *NYT*, December 22, 1943, 12; “100 Trucks Aid Paper Salvaging,” *NYT*, January 2, 1944, 12, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 69.
24. Jane Nickerson, “News of Food,” *NYT*, January 31, 1946, 18, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 72.
25. On the frequent struggles among ethnic groups in New York neighborhoods before World War II, see Ronald H. Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews and Italians of New York City, 1929–1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 161.
26. On the persistence of defined ethnic neighborhoods in postwar New York—but not Parkchester, see Joshua M. Zeitz, *White Ethnic New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 15–17. On Parkchester seen by occupants as a “great place to live” and the development evoking a suburban social-neighborly like lifestyle, see Markey, “40,000 Neighbors,” 44, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 64–65.
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28. On back-fence friendliness, see Markey, “40,000 Neighbors,” 44, noted in Gurock, *Parkchester*, 65. On segregation at the Castle Hill Beach Pool, see Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., “Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Stuyvesant Town Controversy of 1943,” *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 62 (October 1978): 289–310.
29. On the location of Jewish stores outside of Parkchester, see Gurock, *Parkchester*, 62–64.
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Overrepresented Minorities: Comparing the Jewish and Asian American Experiences¹

by Jonathan Karp

Why compare Asians and Jews in America? These two American minority groups seem unlike in many ways. They were geographically centered in different parts of the United States—Asians in Hawaii and the Pacific Coast, Jews in the major cities of the Atlantic seaboard and the Midwest. As immigrants they had highly divergent experiences; Ellis Island was for many Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe a relatively free entry point, whereas Angel Island near San Francisco served to block and retard the entry of many Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, and other Asians. Jews became naturalized just like millions of other immigrants from all parts of Europe; Asian arrivals, in contrast, were deemed from the 1870s “ineligible for citizenship” and precluded from naturalization until laws changed starting in the 1940s. Japanese Americans, including US citizens, were interned in concentration camps at the start of World War II; Jews, however much victimized by antisemitism, were never formally ghettoized in America. So isn’t juxtaposing these two populations a little like comparing apples and oranges?

In what he memorably called a “pomological digression” at the start of his brilliant essay on “Assimilation and Racial Antisemitism: The Iberian and German Models,” the Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi professed puzzlement at “the sacred injunction not to compare ‘apples and pears.’” “Despite their differences they are,” he observed, “after all, both edible fruits that grow on trees and have cores and seeds within, and it is precisely the combination of difference and similarity that makes the comparison viable and possibly even

instructive.”² This also applies, I would argue, to the two groups that I propose to discuss in this chapter. In twenty-first-century America, American Jews and Asian Americans are both “insider-outsiders.” Both groups are perceived as ethnically homogeneous even though they are internally diverse, and both are seen as exemplars of outsider-group upward mobility, “model minorities.” Both have suffered race-based discrimination: Jews more *de facto* than *de jure*, Asians both. Each emerged from the catastrophes of World War II redeemed in the eyes of the white establishment and a symbol of a more ethnically and religiously tolerant postwar America, just as the problem of Black civil rights came to the fore. And in recent decades both groups have been critical of policies of hiring and college admissions based on racial or ethnic quotas, “set asides,” or preferences; they have a common interest in meritocratic criteria for advancement. As opposed to “underrepresented minorities,” Asians and Jews enjoy a disproportionate presence in higher education and certain professions. They are in this sense equally “overrepresented minorities.”

As Yerushalmi further notes, “it is precisely the combination of difference and similarity that makes the comparison viable and possibly even instructive.” Clearly, the histories of Asian Americans and American Jews are hardly identical. On the other hand, two groups whose differences far outweigh their similarities would arguably make for a more problematic comparison. In this sense it is curious that while the academic literature linking Asians and Jews is miniscule, that examining Jews and African Americans is voluminous—despite the fact that the experience of American Jews is entirely different from that of Blacks.³ Jews were never slaves in America; they were not involuntary immigrants; they were not subjected to an effective apartheid regime in large sections of the United States. Economically, Jews came to the United States as petty merchants and peddlers, and later as industrial workers, but were never heavily represented in agriculture, as were Blacks. Jews experienced high levels of upward mobility soon after immigration (whether the so-called German Jews of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, or the East European Jews from 1880 to 1924); in contrast, Blacks were prevented from rising economically due to discrimination and dislocation. Until recently only a relatively small Black middle class existed in America, whereas the Jewish economic profile has since the interwar period marked them as mostly middle class. The case of Asians, as a proscribed but never enslaved “racial” group, places them between that of Jews and Blacks: visibly not white, legally restricted from the 1880s to World War II, but also moving rapidly into a middle-class profile by the 1950s analogously to Jews. In contrast to Blacks and Jews, Asians and Jews are similar but different.

Of course, putative (if illusory) similarity isn't the only reason much ink has been spilled on Blacks and Jews. If not their situational likeness, then certainly their history of sustained and vital encounters is real and important. The sense of kinship between Blacks and Jews is largely a mythologized projection of a common identity. It has been deployed to explain the often genuine feeling of intimacy that is rooted in a twentieth-century history of deep economic, cultural, and political interaction. In the first half of the century, Jews and Blacks regularly encountered each other in relationships of shopkeeper and customer, tenant and landlord, business owner and worker, philanthropic benefactor and beneficiary, bureaucratic functionary, and civil rights activist, etc. The relationship was largely defined by the interaction between a marginalized racial caste (Blacks) and a middleman minority with an extensive history of marginalization (Jews). To an extent unmatched by any other group, Jews acted as a surrogate bourgeoisie for a population that was prevented from evolving its own sizeable and powerful middle class. Both groups benefited from this relationship, even if at times it proved problematic and exploitative. But this is precisely why it generated, as an explanatory device, positive myths of commonality. What is important, however, is that this entwinement was only possible because the two groups were essentially unlike but could draw on images and stories (including religion and the Bible) to simulate likeness.⁴

With Asian Americans, in contrast, Jews enjoyed no such history of sustained and intimate interactions. Indeed, the groups tended not to live in close proximity to each other or work alongside or for one another or even develop strong philanthropic or political links. The histories of Blacks and Jews constantly intersect; that of Asians and Jews run parallel but only rarely meet. Still, as noted, it can be worthwhile and illuminating to trace these rough parallels. This chapter is devoted precisely to outlining some of the major areas of parallel experiences from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. It is intentionally a sketch, an effort to make the case for the heuristic value of such an exercise with the hope that doing so might spark further and deeper research.

By the late eighteenth century, Ashkenazic Jews had already surpassed the early settlement of Sephardim, descendants of Iberian Jews. Yet their numbers remained exceedingly modest until a half century later when, in the two decades preceding the Civil War, the Jewish population possibly tripled, from approximately 50,000 to 150,000. Many of these Jews lived in small and

medium-sized towns, where they occupied important positions in the local commercial economy of peddlers and shopkeepers and more long-distance traders.⁵ In contrast with contemporary Germany, where Jews had a similar small-town orientation during the first half of the nineteenth century, there were no legal restrictions on their residency or rights to settle, marry, and procreate. By and large, Jews seem to have been accepted without serious challenge, and though some states excluded them from holding political office until after the Civil War, it was not unusual for Jews before and especially after the conflict to serve in municipal and even state-wide office. Jews were far less numerous but also significantly less controversial than Irish Catholics whose growing presence led to the creation of political movements singularly dedicated to their exclusion. Even in the South, Jews were accepted as effectively white and welcomed so long as they did not challenge the white supremacist order. While the Jewish demographic character altered dramatically after 1880, with the subsequent four decades seeing the entry of close to three million Eastern European Jews (mostly settling in America's major cities), this did not result in any immediate shift in Jewish immigrants' legal status.⁶

In contrast, we find East Asian immigration contested almost from the start. Whereas the stereotype of the typical Jewish immigrant in the mid-nineteenth century was an industrious peddler or merchant, the Asian bogeyman conjured up by many Americans was that of the coolie, a kind of indentured servant who labors for virtual slave wages in order to eventually purchase his freedom. An industrializing America still divided over slavery and its aftermath deeply feared the importation of a new population of dependent labor. Chinese miners and railroad workers, numbering about 60,000, were chiefly congregated in the Western states in 1870. They were regarded by employers as industrious yet docile employees and by many white laborers as dangerous aliens and unfair competitors. The 1875 Page Act, primarily prohibiting the entry of Chinese women (characterized as predominantly prostitutes), also contained a clause prohibiting male contract laborers, a provision that was reinforced a decade later by the Alien Contract Labor Law.⁷ In between, two other pieces of federal legislation would soon effectively cut off the flow of Chinese migrants to the United States. The first was not a law on immigration per se but rather on naturalization. The 1870 Naturalization Act, the first major revision of naturalization statutes since 1790, maintained the latter's restriction of eligibility to naturalized citizen status to "free whites" but, in light of the recent ratification of Fourteenth Amendment, also made eligible immigrants of African origin. Asians were deemed neither whites nor

Africans. Those Asians not born in the United States were thus labeled—in an infamous construction—“ineligible to citizenship.” The second law passed was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which effectively cut off all new Chinese immigration, though some exceptions were given for students, engineers, and others deemed useful to American business but not threatening to American labor.⁸

The early 1880s stemmed the tide of Chinese immigration to the US. Other immigrants from Japan, Korea, and the Philippines entered the country in small numbers in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, but, along with other Chinese, found a back door to the American continent via Hawaii, which had long been the center of a system of Asian contract labor on its profitable sugar plantations. After formal annexation to the United States, many Asians in Hawaii sought to make their way to California and other parts of the Pacific Northwest. Still, as we will see, Western politicians and labor activists proved determined to contain and eliminate any serious continued form of migration to the United States.

One episode from the Civil War period does present an early and suggestive parallel between Jewish and Asian experiences. The short-lived expulsion of Jews by General Ulysses S. Grant from a large area under his command encompassing parts of Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky in late 1862 marked an early instance of the abrogation of the US citizenship rights of a religious or ethnic minority. The expulsion order, known as General Orders #11, was issued by Grant in December 1862 and resulted in disturbance to many and dislocation of some Jews before it was remanded by Abraham Lincoln a short time later. As a population of stereotyped merchants and traders—some of whom were in fact military sutlers engaged in authorized commerce at army camps but also in some cases smugglers across enemy lines—Jews were stigmatized en masse as both shirkers and war profiteers, if not enemy agents.

As historian Jonathan Sarna, whose 2012 book *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* rescued this nearly forgotten episode from obscurity, explains: “Jews” came to personify wartime profiteering. “They bore disproportionate blame for badly produced uniforms, poorly firing weapons, inedible foodstuffs and substandard merchandise that corrupt contractors supplied to the war effort and sutlers marketed to unsuspecting troops. In the eyes of many Americans (including some in the military), *all* traders, smugglers, sutlers, and wartime profiteers were ‘sharp-nosed’ Jews, whether they were or not. The implication was that Jews preferred to benefit from war rather than fight in

it." Lincoln, who was preparing the Emancipation Proclamation when Grant's order was brought to his attention, reportedly told the distressed Jewish delegate who implored his help, "To condemn a class is, to say the least, to wrong the good with the bad. I do not like to hear a class or nationality condemned on account of a few sinners." Unfortunately, this kind of affirmation of fundamental liberal principles would not be extended to Japanese Americans by President Franklin D. Roosevelt amidst another conflagration some eighty years later. But while the Grant episode clearly had no causal connection to the later internment of Japanese during World War II, it is a phenomenological precedent that tellingly linked Jews and Asians as a stigmatized alien and potential fifth column population subject to extra-constitutional punishment during times of national emergency.⁹

This curious parallel aside, the post-Civil War era still exhibited a wide gap between the treatment of Jews and Asians. However, that gap would gradually narrow as large-scale Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe altered public perceptions of Jews, making them appear less assimilable and more threatening. In this decades-long process of deterioration, it was the treatment of Asians that slowly functioned to compromise the status of Jews, at least in terms of immigration. The 1882 "Chinese Exclusion Act" marked a watershed in American immigration policy, with repercussions, as we shall see, for European immigrants too, including Jews. The 1882 statute not only drastically reduced the immediate influx of Chinese to America but, in the words of historian Roger Daniels, "was the pivot on which all [subsequent] American immigration policy turned, the hinge on which Emma Lazarus's 'Golden Door' began to swing toward a closed position."¹⁰

As one might guess, the direction of this swing depended on racial categorizations and ascriptions. The question of whether and when Jews were viewed as "white" is complex.¹¹ But in matters of US law, Jews were regarded as effectively white or white enough—until, of course, they weren't. How else to explain the significant number of Jewish elected officials, mayors and state representatives, including even members of the US congress, serving localities in the deep South or West Coast? Some Western US nativist organizations—those clamoring for anti-Asian legislation—admitted Jews as members or even chose them as leaders. The Native Sons of Oregon elected Sol Blumauer as its president at the turn of the twentieth century, not only listing his wife Hattie Fleischner as a member but also noting with pride her service to Jewish organizations and charities.¹² These were not isolated curiosities but indicative of the degree of acceptance Jews had widely achieved before World

War I, especially in those areas of the country where most whites felt far more threatened by other racial others—Native Americans, African Americans, or Asian Americans. San Francisco Jewish congressman Julius Kahn (a strong advocate of European immigration) had in 1902 co-sponsored renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and in 1906 championed similar legislation directed against Japanese. According to Kahn, the Japanese laborer can subsist on a cheap diet of rice rather than the expensive beef required of his Caucasian competitor—a common anti-Asian motif—while “the oath of naturalization would be to him but a hollow mockery,” since he “will always remain loyal to the Mikado.”¹³

Kahn’s views were likely not typical of those of most Jews at the time, but they were hardly shocking either. Jewish status was precarious, to be sure. In 1913 Jews’ long-held feeling of local belonging and acceptance in the American South was shattered by the Leo Frank case, in which an Atlanta Jewish factory owner was convicted of the rape and murder of a young girl who worked there—based largely on the testimony of a Black man. Frank’s lynching at the hands of a mob incensed that the Georgia governor had commuted his death sentence proved a wake-up call to Jews who had taken for granted their secure position within the American racial hierarchy.

Nevertheless, as the Frank trial was playing itself out, in the Western states anti-Asian, and particularly anti-Japanese, agitation was mounting. Following the 1907 “Gentlemen’s Agreement” whereby the Japanese government agreed to effectively stop Japanese emigration to the US (a face-saving measure in return for stemming public legislation), California, Washington state, and Oregon passed laws excluding Japanese non-citizens (i.e., immigrants) from land ownership and depriving “white” women of their US citizenship if they married Japanese men. Ironically, the Gentlemen’s Agreement contained a loophole permitting Japanese women in the home country already married to Japanese farmers and businessmen legally resident in the US to join their husbands here. These were, in reality, typically so-called “Picture Brides” whose long-distance marriage was usually a fiction enabling their immigration. By 1923 some 45,000 gained entry as wives.¹⁴

The result, however, was that unlike the dwindling Chinese American population, or the Koreans and Filipinos who had entered the mainland US when Hawaii was annexed in 1898, the Japanese population was the only Asian group to achieve rough gender parity and consequently to experience significant population growth through natural increase. Whereas Jews had immigrated overwhelmingly as married couples and families, with miniscule

levels of return migration, Asian immigrants were primarily male and very often temporary resident workers or “sojourners.”

Nativist groups were incensed not just by Japanese population increase but by Japanese farmers’ growing entrepreneurial domination of certain sectors of the profitable produce industry. “In 1910 they were producing 70 percent of California’s strawberries, 67 percent of its tomatoes, 95 percent of its spring and summer celery, 40 percent of its onions, and 40 percent of its green beans.”¹⁵ To be clear, we are not here speaking of Japanese migrant laborers or sharecropping farmers (and certainly not “coolies” or dependent laborers) but rather of the owners of small but intensively productive farms—a skill which harkened back to the pre-immigrant roots of the displaced farmers in mid-nineteenth-century Japan from which many of the immigrants had originally stemmed. Not only farms, but Japanese also proved successful entrepreneurs of small urban businesses by the 1910s and twenties, including groceries, restaurant, clothing shops, as well as some larger ones like hotels and department stores.¹⁶

American nativism, gaining momentum by the 1890s, enjoyed its heyday in the decade after World War I. The closing of the Western frontier, the immigration of over twenty-five million people in the preceding three decades, the consequent shifting demographic and cultural character of the country, with its now far more urban profile and machine-based politics, the growth of pseudo-scientific racism, and the country’s recoiling at the apparently irresolvable turmoil of European affairs all conspired to push demands for restrictive legislation to the breaking point. One important change is evident when comparing post- and pre-war anti-immigrant demands. Whereas before 1917 the brunt of the attacks on immigration fell on Asians and emanated especially from Western US interests, now the emphasis had spread to encompass populations deriving from Southern and Eastern Europe, i.e., Italians and Jews.¹⁷

No doubt the war itself had played a role in consolidating this shift, already in evidence in preceding years; the Bolshevik Revolution, in particular, spread fears not just of low-wage workers undercutting the earnings of established white workers but of the importation of revolutionaries and other subversives, including criminals. The traditional American reflex against foreign entanglements morphed into a recoiling at the bloody and seemingly pointless conflagration that had enveloped Europe over four years. Fear of a massive wave of refugees fleeing postwar turmoil fueled the fire. The 1920s was a period of enormous social experimentation and liberating cultural mores, but also one of jarring anxiety over the perceived loss of a former pastoral innocence

and homogeneity. Racist ideas enjoyed not just widespread currency but even intellectual respectability. Jews, like Southern Italians, were viewed by respected social scientists like Madison Grant as agents of racial pollution who would contribute to a mongrelization of the old Nordic elite; meanwhile, demotic variations on this idea were noisily echoed by a resurgent Klu Klux Klan. The new ethnic composition of America's cities in which Jews and Catholics featured so conspicuously pointed the way to another, more alien America, a vision that struck terror in the hearts of nostalgic Americans both high and low. Fortunately, a remedy might be at hand: draconian immigration laws could stem if not altogether reverse this dangerous course.¹⁸

But while Jewish historians have tended to treat the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, the first effective measure to dramatically reduce Jewish immigration to the US, as primarily if not exclusively focused on East European Jews and Southern Italians, historians of Asian American immigration have argued that its real impetus derived from anti-Asian sentiment among West Coast politicians and constituencies (the traditional regional base for hostility to Asian rights). Western politicians like the legislation's co-sponsor, Washington Congressman Albert Johnson, they argue, tacked on exclusionary provisions for undesirable Europeans as a sop to East Coast nativists in their effort to build a broad anti-immigration coalition.¹⁹ In any case, when Congress finally agreed on a formula for cutting off immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (quotas based on national origins backdated several decades), it included a stipulation that the legislation would also exclude all immigrants "ineligible to citizenship." This old saw, employed since 1870 specifically to exclude Asians, was now invoked to effectively cut off all those deemed non-whites (with the partial exception of some of African descent), that is, well over half the world's population. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 thus marked the effective end for at least two decades of *both* significant Jewish immigration and virtually all Asian immigration.²⁰ The American immigration history of two groups that until recently had seemed highly disparate, whose statuses had in fact appeared virtually the opposite, now consequentially and tragically converged.

The period 1924 to the outbreak of World War II marked the high-water mark in the US for both anti-Asian and anti-Jewish public sentiment and policy. Even the near closing of the gates for both populations (and in reality, they had been effectively sealed for most Asian groups in the preceding decades) did not dampen negative attitudes. Even before Johnson-Reed, Eastern European Jews had begun to climb out of their temporary sojourn in the garment industry-based proletariat and move into small business ownership and the professions.

The Jewish pursuit of higher education had already resulted in the imposition of quotas (*numerus clausus*) at elite undergraduate institutions as well as medical schools. Informal or unstated restrictions on Jewish entry to certain professions, such as engineering and even stockbrokerage, began to be imposed at this time for the obvious reason that now highly qualified Jews sought entry to them.²¹

An analogous development with regard to Asians took place on the West Coast, but here we see a certain narrowing of anti-Asian activity to focus especially on Japanese. As noted, the Japanese population enjoyed a higher degree of gender parity than other Asian groups; their resulting natural increase meant not just overall population growth but also a net rise in the number of children born on American soil and therefore automatically entitled to US citizenship. This, in turn, made it more difficult to legally restrain their economic advancement through such measures as alien land laws which prevented Asian non-citizens from purchasing land. The growing Japanese role in West Coast agribusiness infuriated nativists and made Anglo farmers more susceptible to anti-Asian propaganda.

A curious intensification of this attitude occurred after the 1937 Japanese invasion of China and the ensuing "Nanking Massacre," an outrage widely followed and denounced in the US press.²² As a result, a certain splitting in popular attitudes to Asians in America began to develop, the nascent and initially almost unconscious distinction between Japanese aggressors and Chinese victims that following Pearl Harbor would widen, with dramatic if antithetical consequences for Japanese and Chinese populations in the US. The US government made a concerted effort to help Anglo-Americans distinguish the physical characteristic of (good) Chinese from (bad) Japanese. The 1943 US tour of Mayling Soong, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, a guest at the White House and personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, culminated in her address to a joint session of Congress in which she emphasized the common aspirations of Americans and Chinese for freedom. Soong charmed the American public (she and her husband became Time magazine's "Man and Wife of the Year" in 1938) and helped significantly to alter public attitudes to Chinese Americans.²³

Unfortunately, the mounting threat to European Jews from the rise of Nazi Germany (and fascist or quasi-fascist movements in East-Central Europe) did not appear to evoke any corresponding public sympathy, at least not initially. The Roosevelt Administration justified its failure to admit more Jews fleeing Europe by asserting that such steps would be unpopular, politically perilous, and ultimately help undermine the broader effort to oppose Nazi aggression. Certainly, there is evidence that public sentiment largely opposed expanding

immigration quotas beyond those established in 1924. A Gallup poll taken in the weeks after the November 1938 Kristallnacht pogroms reported 72 percent of respondents answering no to a question as to whether more Jewish refugees from Germany should be admitted.²⁴ American Jews, though feeling vulnerable, were never truly under threat. Yet their inability to succor their European co-religionists was due in part to obstacles put in their way by the Roosevelt Administration. One historian of the topic, Rafael Medoff, has gone so far as to claim that FDR's failure to rescue more Jews was of a piece with his unambiguous support for the internment of Japanese Americans starting in February 1942. Indeed, early in his political career, FDR had expressed the view that all or most Asians and most Jews were similarly members of alien races who, in the case of Asians, could not be truly assimilated, and in that of Jews, Americanized only in small numbers if thinly dispersed throughout the country. Medoff, whose animus to Roosevelt is well attested, makes at best a partial indictment, but he is certainly right that FDR's personal views were (perhaps unsurprisingly, given his upbringing) prejudiced, certainly toward Asians and to a lesser but real degree to Jews.²⁵

At the same time, the seeming paralysis of American Jews in the face of Roosevelt's intransigence on Jewish refugees has to be measured against the position Jewish leaders and advocacy organizations took with regard to Japanese internment. If some Jews were reluctant to trumpet their own cause out of fear of damaging or even antagonizing FDR, how much more would they hesitate to decry the Administration's policy of Japanese internment? After all, Japan was an Axis power, an ally of Nazi Germany at war with the US. In a penetrating study, historian Ellen Eisenberg shows that American Jewish leaders at best silently acceded to the internment policy, despite their professed liberalism and otherwise vocal commitment to civil rights and constitutional principles. Eisenberg offers an insightful analysis of this anomaly. Jews—especially those concentrated on the West Coast—were prone to and had not infrequently evinced anti-Asian prejudice, a record going back to the late nineteenth century, as we have seen. From the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, anti-Asian sentiment was so virulent that it often exceeded hostility to Black Americans and Hispanics. Jews, who increasingly championed the cause of African Americans during the World War II years, admonishing their fellow Americans that inter-ethnic and multi-racial unity was essential to the war cause, almost never extended this spirit to the plight of Japanese denizens and citizens. Prejudices aside, the reason was clear: support for Japanese, or rather, criticism of Roosevelt Administration's

Japanese internment policy, could be interpreted as disloyal and potentially jeopardize Jewish status at home or efforts to rescue Jews abroad. Nevertheless, prejudices aside, Jews did not on the whole join in the chorus of anti-Japanese rhetoric but instead retained a studied silence on the topic.²⁶

Clearly, the experiences of American Jews and Japanese during the Second World War were widely divergent yet still curiously entwined. Indeed, both Jews and Japanese were desperate for inter-ethnic alliances, yet found them difficult or impossible to forge. Japanese Americans found themselves utterly isolated; no other minority group—including Blacks—expressed institutional sympathy for, let alone solidarity with their plight.²⁷ Other Asians groups, such as Chinese, had no reason to offer support; on the contrary, even more than Jews, Chinese, Koreans and Filipinos saw Japan as the immediate oppressor of their respective native lands and were hardly prepared to criticize the US government for internal policies that, comparatively speaking, cast them—as victims of Japanese imperialism—in a sympathetic light.

The war marked an improvement in the public image of these same Asian groups, victims of a common enemy, accompanied by gradual but real change in their legal status, including eligibility for naturalization. Although a slow process, restrictions dating back to the nineteenth century on naturalization, land ownership, and marriage were relaxed or abandoned in the immediate postwar decade. At the same time, Japan's defeat in 1945, its incorporation into America's global sphere of influence, paved the way for the rehabilitation of the Japanese American population, a process that had begun even before the end of the war as internees were gradually released from the camps and eligible Japanese American citizens (*Nissei*) were mustered into the US armed forces. As early as the late 1940s, Japanese, in particular, as the largest Asian American population with the most problematic recent history, found themselves the objects of social scientific experimentation and research. Could a minority population that had been feared, despised, and dispossessed be transformed into fully fledged or even model Americans?²⁸ Just as Franklin Roosevelt, among others, had fantasized about dispersing Jews in small numbers throughout the US so that they would become inconspicuous and blend in, avoiding their harmful and corrupting concentration in overcrowded urban centers, postwar government planners sought to relocate Japanese away from their former West Coast abode to other regions of the country where prejudices might be less ingrained.

Here too, the social scientific focus on Asians finds a parallel and even a precedent in the case of American Jews. As early as the 1920s, sociologists

working under Robert Ezra Park at the University of Chicago started to examine and compare the effects of urban life on different ethnic groups. Park and his students singled out Jews as especially instructive in this regard. Jews' entrance into modernity through the gates of the "ghetto," as they called their dense urban settlements, had the effect of preserving their ethnic cohesiveness while enabling them access to modern forms of social organization and technology, epitomized by Jewish self-help networks and the vibrant Yiddish press. Far from being hobbled by identity crisis or dual loyalties, the creative tension of having a foot in both old and new worlds, of being admitted but not fully accepted, spurred a spirit of group vitality that Park found to be largely healthy and admirable. Park's famous if unfortunate term "marginal man" sounds pejorative but was to the contrary intended by him to epitomize the ideal type best adapted to the conditions of Western modernity.²⁹ "The emancipated Jew was," wrote Park, "historically and typically the marginal man, the first cosmopolite and citizen of the world." With its focus on immigration, urbanization, and the recasting of melting pot America, Park's Chicago school came to view Jewish immigrants as exemplary. It was not Jews' assimilation that so impressed Park but rather their capacity to develop institutions like the New York Kehillah (founded in 1908) and the vibrant Yiddish press that served to facilitate immigrant adaptation while also subtly transforming the American scene. "In the case of the Jewish group," he observed, "we find spontaneous, intelligent, and highly organized experiments in democratic control which may assume the character of permanent contributions to the organization of the American state." Though not widely publicized or immediately impactful, Park and his disciples had thus championed Jews as a model minority *avant la lettre*.³⁰

While these ideas remained dormant through the Depression and War years, they reemerged in the 1950s when Jewish sociologists like Nathan Glazer and economists like Simon Kuznets identified supposed Jewish ghetto characteristics—enforced occupational specialization in financial and commercial fields and an ascetic lifestyle based on self-denial and delayed gratification—as keys to their success in a post-ghetto, capitalist environment. Glazer wrote a lengthy sociological study in the 1955 *American Jewish Yearbook* in which he sought to show that Jewish success in America had deep roots despite its only recent flowering. "Hard pressed as they were, the Russian Jewish immigrants," claimed Glazer, "were, so to speak, storing up virtues for the future."³¹ More soberly (and writing at greater distance from the post-war era), the economist Simon Kuznets noted that "the economic growth phase of the U.S. economy, once it overcame the drag of the depression of the 1930s and the special task

of World War II, was in the same direction as that of the Jewish occupational structure.” In other words, according to Kuznets, the entire US economy had in recent decades exhibited shifts in its occupational composition—toward professions, education, and bourgeois status—that had already been anticipated by the small Jewish minority.³²

But now a different candidate for the role of exemplary American economic success story came unexpectedly to the fore. In the 1950s the memory of Japan as the deadly enemy of the United States was still fresh in the minds of many Americans. That Japan itself had become a virtual occupied satellite state of the US did not erase either the long history of anti-Asian and anti-Japanese sentiment in American society or the bitter memories of the forced internment of Japanese between 1942 and 1944. Nevertheless, in early 1950s a team of scholars at—where else?—the University of Chicago began to study the Japanese American community that had settled in that city as a result of the forced resettlement policies accompanying wartime internment. The study group included sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists who had been influenced by Park’s theories. The Chicagoans sought to account for the remarkable social and economic advances the Japanese had made in the intervening period. In the eyes of these social scientists, prior to resettlement most of the Japanese had been engaged in menial forms of agricultural labor (a false assumption, as we have seen). Yet, they observed, by the early 1950s their percentages in skilled labor, business and the professions exceeded even those of white Protestants. So too did their high school completion rates and participation in college, even when not graduating.³³

A 1956 article the study’s leaders, William Caudill and George De Vos, presented three overarching points which would become staples of the later model minority discussions. First, the Japanese had been subject to one of the harshest regimes of prejudice and discrimination in American history, rivaling and perhaps exceeding (so they suggested) that of the “American Negro,” underscoring the magnitude of their eventual rise. Their ability to immigrate to the United States had been severely limited by the 1924 cut-off, and Japanese aliens were not eligible for naturalization until the passage of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act. By the second decade of the twentieth century, they had been prevented from owning and for the most part leasing land in California and elsewhere. And even Japanese American birth citizens (the Nisei), like their alien parents (the Issei) had been summarily interned during the war. Beyond the hardship, indignity and humiliation of this unprecedented act, the material losses of property and assets it entailed were incalculable. Yet despite

this history of severe abuse, the researchers were at pains to stress, the Japanese had recovered phoenix-like with astonishing speed.³⁴

The second and third points seek to explain this remarkable feat. Here we see overlap in the sociological theorizing on Japanese and Jews. Just as the Jews drew economic and cultural dynamism from breaking out of their Old and New World ghetto confinement, so too the Japanese benefitted from the forcible uprooting entailed by wartime detention and resettlement. These traumas had the effect of puncturing the insular, closed in, and patriarchal Japanese community and thereby helped unleash forces of generational ambition and entrepreneurial creativity among the young. “The Japanese on the [Pacific] Coast had formed tight, self-contained communities controlled by parental authority and strong social sanctions, from which it was difficult for the Nisei to break free,” observed Caudill and De Vos. In other words, patriarchal family and traditional community comprised, along with residential confinement in “Japan Towns,” the Asian equivalent of the pre-emancipatory Jewish ghetto. Internment, followed by resettlement, however, broke the back of traditional Japanese communal structures as well as transporting the Japanese to new environments such as Chicago where there had been no previous local legacy of anti-Japanese prejudice.³⁵ A considerable portion of the University of Chicago study was devoted to assessing the attitudes of white co-workers, colleagues, and employees toward the Japanese Americans. It turns out the Nisei were appreciated as tenants for paying rents scrupulously on time, respected by customers for their courtesy, and admired by employers for their resistance to unionization and determination to make it on their own.³⁶

Still, these concrete accomplishments and positive impressions reflected only the surface level. Caudill and De Vos were determined to identify the underlying causes behind the Japanese success story. To what extent, specifically, did the Japanese manifest values and cultural practices compatible with those of the American (read: white) middle class? We recall that Park had argued that the Jewish break with the ghetto was only partial; key to his theory was that Jews retained a legacy of social organization and mutual aid that gave them strategic advantages in their process of adjustment American urban life—they became adaptive without succumbing to atomization or anomie. So too in the case of the postwar, resettled Japanese. The authors argued, in fact, that such values as respect for elders, devotion to education, support for community, and personal responsibility inculcated by their Buddhist and Confusion heritage had rendered them compatible without being identical to the middle class of the American host society. Due to this inheritance, “they had achieved more

in the space of four years in Chicago than other ethnic groups who had long been in the city, and who appear far less handicapped by racial and cultural differences.”³⁷

These points would be very much amplified and in part redirected in the subsequent decade as model minority discourse seemed to settle comfortably on the Japanese as its Exhibit A. But whereas Caudill and De Vos had juxtaposed energetic and virtuous Japanese to lethargic white ethnics (Irish, Italians and Poles), the anthropologist William Petersen, writing a decade later, had different axes to grind.³⁸ “By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose,” he asserted in his 1966 *New York Times Magazine* piece, “the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including the native-born whites.”³⁹ After reviewing the now-familiar themes of anti-Japanese persecution and its victims’ determined response in educational, professional, and entrepreneurial achievement, Petersen picks up on the Parkian argument that rootedness in one’s own distinctive minority culture, rather than emulation of the dominant one, is the key to minority group success. “One difficulty, I believe, is that we have accepted too readily the common-sense notion that the minority whose subculture most closely approximates the general American culture is the most likely to adjust successfully.” But in reality, Petersen continues:

[t]he minority most thoroughly imbedded in American culture, with the least meaningful ties to an overseas fatherland, is the American Negro. . . . [A] Negro who knows no other homeland, who is as thoroughly American as any Daughter of the American Revolution, has no refuge when the United States rejects him. Placed at the bottom of this country’s scale, he finds it difficult to salvage his ego by measuring his worth in another currency.⁴⁰

At the same time, he continues, the Japanese emigrant of the nineteenth century, “catapulted out of a homeland undergoing rapid change” during the Meiji Restoration, possessed that “diligence in work, combined with simple frugality,” which exerted “an almost religious imperative similar to what has been called ‘the Protestant ethic’ in Western culture.”⁴¹

The model minority idea necessarily entails a foil. In the 1920s Jews were already being juxtaposed with other white immigrant groups to suggest that for such an enterprising subculture the ghetto could serve as an ironic springboard to Americanization and success. In the late 1940s, the Japanese miracle became a goad to spur on sluggish Italians and Slavs. But by the 1960s the

seeming failure of African Americans to follow the successful paths of white immigrants stood out. As Glazer and Moynihan observed in their influential 1963 *Beyond the Melting Pot*, both Jews and Japanese had suffered systematic discrimination and countless disabilities. Yet both groups harnessed their resources and invested heavily in education. "This overtraining . . . meant that when the barriers came down these groups were ready and waiting. The Negro today is not."⁴²

Such judgments appear noxious to us now, but it is important to remember that in the context of the early 1960s they were the product not only of an unconscious prejudice but of a naïve optimism as well. This was an era when American social scientists were producing models of economic development meant to prescribe the optimal formula for raising entire societies, countries, even continents from a condition of "underdevelopment."⁴³ Why shouldn't formerly oppressed ethnic and racial groups within the United States be analogous to nations emerging from colonized status to independence? Once the shackles had been removed, once legal obstacles to advancement were eliminated, the only remaining blocks must be internal psychological and behavioral ones. The model minority seemed to offer insight into how a group could overcome them. That the legacy of Black oppression in America was in fact incommensurate with that of any other group was a difficult reality for many white liberals of the day to process.⁴⁴

The question still remains as to why it was Japanese rather than Jews who seemed to best fill the model minority role. Part of the answer is obvious: the Japanese constituted a small and discrete minority, whose success appeared, at least for the time being, to be more inspirational than threatening. If the Japanese sometimes acceded to the model minority image it was likely not only because it afforded a sense of justifiable pride but also because the idea of their own success did not (yet) feel like the double-edged sword that many Jews feared in the promotion of their own economic and business accomplishments. Moreover, their story could essentially be compressed into a brief period of a wartime nadir followed immediately by miraculous ascent that undoubtedly heightened the narrative drama. While religion was adduced in part to explain that success, the Japanese were not defined by religion, as were the Jews, albeit problematically. The inherent indeterminacy (or overdeterminacy) of Jewish identity (Religion? Ethnicity? Race?) rendered them perhaps too ambiguous to serve usefully as a model in a discourse that was quickly shifting from scholarship to ideology and public policy. And, of course, the race question was crucial in a period when whiteness was still seen as an objective category rather than

a construct, and where Jews, certainly when compared with Japanese, were now by and large classified as white, and race, once embraced by some Jews as a neutral marker of group identity, had been discredited, at least in their case, by the Nazi genocide.

Jews might even have felt fortunate not to be saddled with the model minority label. It is at best a mixed blessing, at worst a pernicious stereotype. Since the 1990s the “model minority myth” has been the subject of numerous withering critiques, perhaps none more acute than Frank Wu’s 2002 *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*. As Wu points out, a regular part of the celebratory discourse on Asian model minorities is to characterize Asians as “the New Jews.” He even cites cases of Jewish commentators proudly lauding Asians as their worthy successors, such as Harvard professor and later publisher of the *New Republic* Martin Peretz, who commented “Like the Jews of the post-Sputnik era, the Asians Americans who have made the sudden appearance at Stanford and Yale, UCLA and Michigan should be an exhilarating sight to all Americans.”⁴⁵

Jews have often expressed nervousness about philosemitic portraits presenting them as exemplars of such virtues as intelligence, enterprise, frugality, temperance, and loyalty (to fellow Jews)—because though they might admire such ascriptions they also suspect a hidden agenda on the part of those ascribing them. When members of a given group promote their own purported virtues, as both Jews and Asians have sometimes done, it is a form of public relations and self-defense or apologetics. When individuals outside of the group do so, the gesture might be publicly welcomed but privately feared.⁴⁶ So, too, Wu concedes, “it is a considerable challenge to explain how an apparent tribute can be a dangerous stereotype.” Nonetheless, he insists, “declining the laudatory title of model minority is fundamental to gaining Asian American autonomy.” Wu lists three principal dangers of such ethnic flattery: first, it generalizes grossly about a diverse population of ten million, identifying only success stories and ignoring the many cases that defy the approved image; second, it implies invidious comparisons with others, particularly Blacks, which may in fact be one of its core functions; and third, it pretends that since Asians are objects of praise they cannot be still victims of discrimination and even race hate. On the contrary, the exaggeration of Asian success can also fuel jealousy and resentment.⁴⁷

A similar ambiguity accompanies the thorny issue of affirmative action, a policy area that marks the final domain explored here of shared experience between Jews and Asians. This policy was a direct if unexpected outgrowth

of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, specifically Title VII, which makes it unlawful for an employer to “discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin,” became both a principal rationale justifying group preferences and one of the main proof texts for opposing them. On the face of it, Title VII appears focused exclusively on individuals and explicitly rejects criteria of group identity. Yet efforts to implement this and other Civil Rights legislation had to confront the perception that ingrained prejudice and structural obstacles could not be overcome without so-called compensatory measures. It took essentially until the beginning of the Nixon Administration for the latter interpretation to take root in governmental policy and soon thereafter in the private sector as well.

It did not take much longer for vociferous attacks to arise against what critics labeled racial preferences or “affirmative discrimination.” Among the first and loudest critics were a group of Jewish liberals who believed such preferences violated fundamental American notions of fairness and equality of opportunity. Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Midge Decter, and her husband Norman Podhoretz, were among the leaders of what was later called the neo-conservative movement. While the origins and ideological perspectives of that movement were diverse, opposition to affirmative action was certainly one of its founding principles. Interestingly, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was neither Jewish nor a self-identified “Neo-Con,” was among those who sounded the alarm particularly with regard to the policy’s potential effect on Jews. If “ethnic quotas are to be imposed on American universities,” he warned, “Jews will be almost driven out.”⁴⁸

Indeed, Jews were especially alert to the parallel between remedial group preferences, such as those sought by some Black civil rights groups, bureaucrats and politicians, and the kinds of “quotas” or “*numerus clausus*” imposed on Jewish entrance to universities in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe and later employed by elite private institutions like Harvard and Columbia starting in the 1920s. In fact, it had not been many years prior to the emergence of affirmative action that most of those quotas were ended. Jews had fought to bring down barriers to individual accomplishment and meritocracy for themselves as well as for African Americans; but now it appeared that the great civil rights alliance the two groups had forged was splintering, though affirmative action was only one of the reasons for its apparent demise.

The very first test case on affirmative action in higher education, *DeFunis v. Odegaard* (1974), pitted a Jewish law school applicant, Marco DeFunis,

against the University of Washington, whose law school had denied him admission despite qualifications that exceeded those of many admitted minority students. A lower court determined that the university's admissions procedure violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause and ordered DeFunis admitted. But by the time the university's appeal was heard by the High Court, with DeFunis then entering his final term in law school, the case was vacated as moot before a final judgement on its merits was reached. Nevertheless, as historian Melvin Urofsky concludes, "The split in the civil rights camp could be clearly seen in the amici (friend of the court) briefs, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the NAACP backing the university plan, and the Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the Jewish Rights Council siding with DeFunis."⁴⁹

A similar divide characterized the far better remembered Regents of the *University of California v. Bakke* which was decided by the Supreme Court four years later. While Allen Bakke was not Jewish, if anything this case galvanized Jewish interest groups to an even greater degree than DeFunis. The American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, together with a host of other Jewish and non-Jewish parties, filed a joint amicus brief defining the University's admission policy as a "quota" which is "factually, educationally and psychologically unsound, legally and constitutionally erroneous and profoundly damaging to the fabric of American Society."⁵⁰ That fabric, American Jews firmly believed, was rooted in a merit system abstracted from national origins and group identity; where it was not, where public accommodation was restricted to Protestant elites, Jews had fought tirelessly against it. Theirs had been a struggle from below against the establishment in order to compel America to conform to its colorblind promise. The Civil Rights movement seemed to be a continuation, even a culmination, of this struggle. But now, perversely, the order of things appeared turned upside down. At the same time, Jews clung to a concept of affirmative action that was cognizant of group identity and focused on opening the doors of opportunity wide to discriminated against minorities, so long as the effort confined itself to recruitment rather than restriction. Many Jews believed in an affirmative action that was separable from quotas and that promoted equality of opportunity through the targeting of specific populations without descending into a suspect equality of outcomes.

The most enduring outcome of the Bakke case was the formulation by Justice Lewis Powell of a similar distinction, one which acknowledged race as a legitimate factor in the pursuit of what he described as a compelling government interest in achieving "diversity" while unambiguously rejecting quotas.

Through the many twists and turns since Bakke of affirmative action litigation, Powell's formulation provided a kind of *modus vivendi*, one that took some of the sting out of the perceived threat of what the great Jewish historian Salo Baron feared was the importation to the US of European notions of "ethnic minority rights." American Jews never accommodated themselves to quotas, but along the lines of Powell's nebulous but comforting notion of "diversity," most made a kind of qualified peace with affirmative action.⁵¹

This complicated layering of attitudes on race, rights, pluralism, and quotas likewise characterizes Asian American attitudes to the controversy. For the first decade or so of affirmative action, Asians (or "Orientals") were sometimes identified as among the minority groups or races that might be targeted for recruitment or even quotas. Despite the fact that some Asian groups were already "overrepresented" in sectors of higher education and the professions, they were still, unlike Jews, perceived as a discriminated against minority or even a non-white race. For opponents of affirmative action, this duality would make Asians a highly useful symbol of what they saw as the injustice of preferences.⁵² By this time, Jews were essentially regarded as a special, because highly successful, subgroup of whites. In contrast, Asians, as Wu notes, were the ideal racial minority to critique affirmative action, because unlike whites they could not be characterized as privileged.⁵³ Since 2000, the arguments around affirmative action in higher education have tended to focus on the charge of discrimination against Asian Americans, asserting that elite colleges and universities deploy a disguised quota system to limit the admission of Asian students with higher qualifications than admitted minority students.⁵⁴

The most recent landmark cases, *Students for Fair Admission v. the University of North Carolina* and *President & Fellows of Harvard College* (separate but overlapping cases), essentially overturning Bakke and dismissing Powell's compromise, was fought in the name of discriminated-against Asian American students. Yet while a number of Asian American advocacy organizations provided amicus briefs opposing the admissions policies of Harvard and UNC, the petitioner in the case, Students for Fair Admission, is essentially the organization of one man, a latter-day Jewish neo-conservative named Edward Blum.⁵⁵ It is also worth noting that there were Asian American organizations and groups on both sides of the case, while most of the Jewish organizations previously active in opposing preferences did not file amicus briefs.⁵⁶ Finally, there is a remarkable symmetry between the outlooks and opinions of Asian and Jewish Americans even today, with majorities among both populations expressing support for "affirmative action" but firmly rejecting outright quotas.

Both Jews and Asians are ethnic minorities who have largely succeeded economically, educationally, and professionally. Both are highly overrepresented in terms of higher education, professional achievement, and relative affluence. Both might in fact be termed “overrepresented minorities.”⁵⁷ Yet both consistently support affirmative action or a loosely defined “diversity,” short of quotas for underrepresented minorities.⁵⁸

The strongest resemblance between the experience of Asians and Jews in America occurred in the century after World War I. But recent decades also suggest an emerging gap between them, one that will likely widen in coming years. After the 1965 Immigration Act which finally put an end to national quotas, Asians and Pacific Islanders became one of the largest new immigrant populations, while the Jewish population did not benefit from large influxes. By the 1990s Asians surpassed Jews in the US population. By 2010 individuals identifying as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) numbered approximately seventeen million, as opposed to about 6.7 million Jews in 2013 (6 percent of the total US population as opposed to 2.2 percent). Projections indicate that by 2040 the AAPI population will comprise about 10 percent of the US electorate, while the Jewish proportion will almost certainly stagnate or decline.⁵⁹ Although both groups will likely continue to be “overrepresented” in higher education, the professions, electoral officeholding and the like, this disproportionality could wane among Jews and wax among Asians. If so, then the Asian-Jewish parallel will diminish over time.

Still, beyond what has been presented here, many of its features remain to be explored. Beyond immigration, legal status, disabilities, group insecurities, political lobbying, postwar social mobility, affirmative action, other areas for exploration include self-help and mutual aid organizations, loan societies and banks, ethnic commercial networking and business niches, organized labor, familial structures, folkways and intramural education (e.g., Hebrew and Korean School afterschool and supplemental programs), gender roles, and collective memory.⁶⁰

There is certainly much work to be done. Comparing apples and oranges can be fruitful indeed.

Notes

1. For my teacher Reed Ueda, historian extraordinaire who taught me things I am still learning.
2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Antisemitism: The Iberian and German Models* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1982), reprinted in *The Faith of Fallen Jews: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History*, ed. David N. Myers and Alexander Kaye (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 177–209, at 177–78.
3. The literature on Black-Jewish relations is too vast to summarize here. But an excellent anthology covering many areas of comparison and relationship remains, Maurianne Adams and John Brace, eds., *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks and Jews in the United States* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).
4. This approach is developed extensively in my forthcoming study of Blacks and Jews in the business of American popular music.
5. Hasia Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers who Forged the Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 51–83.
6. For a basic state-by-state survey, Jacob Raider Marcus's multivolume *United States Jewry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989–1993) is still useful.
7. In fact, Chinese coolies were never allowed in the US, although they were among the migrants to Hawaii prior to its incorporation into the United States.
8. Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
9. Jonathan Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (New York: Schocken, 2012), x–xi, 30.
10. Roger Daniels, *The Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2004).
11. See the standard study by Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and the highly nuanced account by Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
12. Ellen M. Eisenberg, *The First to Cry Down Injustice? Western Jews and Japanese Removal during World War II* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 3.
13. Eisenberg, *The First to Cry Down Injustice?*, 7, 21.
14. Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 45.
15. Shelley Lee, 85.
16. Shelley Lee, 71.

17. Daniels, *The Golden Door*. The Immigration Act of 1917 established both the Asian Barred Zone, a vast region from which immigrants would be excluded and provisions to exclude political radicals and adults who could not demonstrate literacy in any language, but singling out for mention "Hebrew or Yiddish." See Michael Lemay and Elliott Robert Barkan, eds., *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 109–10.
18. Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 58–77.
19. Eisenberg, *The First to Cry Down Injustice?*, 13–15.
20. Lemay and Barkan, *U.S. Immigration*, 148–51.
21. Eli E. Cohen, "Economic Status and Occupational Structure," *The American Jewish Year Book* 51 (1950): 57–59; on similar trends in the immediate postwar era, see 65–67.
22. Suping Lu, *They Were in Nanjing: The Nanjing Massacre Witnessed by American and British Nationals* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 4–5.
23. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 255–6.
24. "Immigration to the United States 1933–41," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/immigration-to-the-united-states-1933-41>.
25. Rafael Medoff, *The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and the Holocaust* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 283–96.
26. Eisenberg, *The First to Cry Down Injustice?*, 47–70.
27. Cheryl Greenberg, "Black and Jewish Responses to Japanese Internment," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 3–37.
28. Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
29. Robert E. Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," *The American Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 6 (May 1928): 882.
30. See the stimulating discussion by Chad Alan Goldberg, *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 76–103.
31. Nathan Glazer, "Social Characteristics of American Jews 1654–1954," *American Jewish Year Book* 56 (New York, 1955): 3–41, at 15.
32. Simon Kuznets, *Economic Structure of U.S. Jewry: Recent Trends* (Jerusalem: Institute for Contemporary Jewry, 1972), 18.
33. Wu, *The Color of Success*.
34. William Caudill and George De Vos, "Achievement, Culture and Personality: The Case of the Japanese Americans," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 6 (December 1956): 1102–26.
35. Caudill and De Vos, 1107.

36. Caudill and De Vos, 1104–6.
37. Caudill and De Vos, 1105.
38. Caudill and De Vos, 1111.
39. William Petersen, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966, 20–21, 33, 36, 38, 40–41, 43; William Petersen, *Japanese Americans, Oppression and Success* (New York: Random House, 1971).
40. Petersen, 43.
41. Petersen, 42.
42. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Harvard University Press, 1964), 43.
43. Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960).
44. In 1997 Nathan Glazer published, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) in which he acknowledged he had underestimated the qualitative difference in the status and treatment of Blacks in US history.
45. Quoted in Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 47.
46. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, *Philosemitism in History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9–32. For a brief but perspicacious reflection on the ambivalence felt by many Asian Americans regarding the “model minority” image, see Reed Ueda, “False Modesty: The Curse of Asian American Success,” *The New Republic* (July 3, 1989): 16–17.
47. Wu, *Yellow*, 49.
48. Quoted in Melvin I. Urofsky, *The Affirmative Action Puzzle: A Living History from Reconstruction to Today* (New York: Pantheon, 2020), 212.
49. Urofsky, *The Affirmative Action Puzzle*, 136.
50. Quoted in Leonard Fein, “The War Inside the Jews,” *The New Republic*, October 15, 1977, 16–18, at 16.
51. Salo W. Baron, “Is America Ready for Ethnic Minority Rights?” *Jewish Social Studies* 46 (Summer 1984): 189.
52. Nathan Glazer, *Ethnic Dilemmas, 1954–1982* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 9–10.
53. Wu, *Yellow*, 38.
54. On the ambiguity of Asians in relation to Affirmative Action, see the perceptive remarks of Michael Omi and Dana Y. Tagaki, “Situating Asian Americans in the Political Discourse of Affirmative Action,” in *Race and Representation: Affirmative Action*, ed. Robert Post and Michael Rogin (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 271–80.
55. Blum outlines his views and even ties them to his Jewish “Yiddish speaking” liberal family background in a lengthy interview with Lulu Garcia-Navarro. *New York*

- Times*, July 8, 2023, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/08/us/edward-blum-affirmative-action-race.html>.
56. Further, in recent AA cases, some of the major Jewish organizations previously leading the opposition even to policies that might be described as entailing racial preferences demonstrated support for them. “The American Jewish Affirmative Action About-Face,” *Tablet*, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-american-jewish-affirmative-action-about-face>.
 57. The term may have been first used to describe Asian Americans (but not Jews) by John H. Bunzel and Jeffrey K.D. Au in “The Asian Difference,” in *Racial Preference and Racial Justice*, ed. Russel Nieli (Washington, DC: The Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1991), 455–74.
 58. According to the Pew survey of Asian American views, 53 percent of respondents said Affirmative Action was “a good thing,” while 76 percent believe race and ethnicity should *not* be a factor in admissions. “Asian Americans Hold Mixed Views around Affirmative Action,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2023/06/08/asian-americans-hold-mixed-views-around-affirmative-action/>.
 59. Terry Ao Minnis and Mee Moua, *Fifty Years of the Voting Rights Act: The Asian American Perspective* (Washington, DC: AAJC, 2015), 4–6, accessed July 16, 2023, <https://www.advancingjustice-aajc.org/sites/default/files/2016-09/50-years-of-VRA.pdf>. On Jews, see the Berman Databank summaries of recent Pew Research Center reports. “2020 Jewish Americans in 2020 (Pew Research Center), *Berman Databank*, accessed July 16, 2023, <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/1117>.
 60. Two important recent steps in this direction are Jennifer Lee, *Civility in the City: Blacks, Jews, and Koreans in Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Helen Kiyong Kim and Noah Leavitt, *JewAsian: Race, Religion and Identity for America’s Newest Jews* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

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“A bunch of blond *meshugeners*”: Mormons in the American Jewish Imagination

by *Julian Levinson*

“There are no people in the world who understand the Jews like the Mormons.”

David Ben Gurion

Let me begin (with apologies to John Donne) by saying that no group identity is an island; every identity is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Hence, identities are shaped and expressed in relation to other groups, through avowals of difference and similarity, as well as more subtle processes involving borrowing and reconfiguring conceptual frameworks originally applied to others. In the case of American Jews, these processes are ramified because their group identity can be defined in the context of two separate categories: “ethnicity” and “religion.” That is, Jews can be simultaneously situated alongside groups generally categorized as ethnicities (e.g., African Americans and Asian Americans) *and* groups categorized as religions (e.g., Protestants and Catholics). Given the predominance in the American mind of both of these ways of categorizing people, this duality has led to a significant ambiguity at the heart of American Jewish identity—more so, perhaps, than in other contexts such as the former Soviet Union, where Jewishness has been situated more firmly under the signs of ethnicity and nationality than under the sign of religion, strictly speaking.

To understand this duality within American Jewish identity, I explore in what follows how American Jews have imagined their own identities in

relation to another group that can be said to straddle religion and ethnicity: the Mormons (a.k.a. the Church of Latter-day Saints of Jesus Christ). Mormonism developed out of the welter of new religious denominations among white Americans in the antebellum period and initially hardly seemed like a distinct ethnicity; yet Mormons very quickly developed a sense of themselves as a separate “people,” and in the years since its emergence this sense has deepened. As Paul Reeve argues in *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (2015), this sense of separateness was reinforced by the fact that Mormons were initially viewed by the Protestant white majority as a racially distinct, not-quite-white group.¹ While Mormon leaders vehemently denied this idea (and while the Mormon claim to whiteness can be seen as having triumphed), this early experience of racialization contributed to Mormons’ sense of themselves as a separate “people.” In any case, some have proposed that the greatest creation of Mormonism’s founding prophet Joseph Smith was the *Mormon people*, bound together by feelings of loyalty and a collective memory punctuated by the themes of persecution and heroic struggle.² The sociologist Thomas O’Dea has averred that the Mormons “have come closer to evolving an ethnic identity on this continent than any other group.”³ Interestingly, in addition to their analogous ways of combining religion and peoplehood, Jews and Mormons can be said to share symbolic space in the American psyche on numerous counts. As Lawrence Moore has shown in his 1986 *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, surprising parallels exist between accusations hurled at Mormons since the nineteenth century and those that Jews have confronted during much of their history: Mormons were suspected of trying to build a nation within a nation; of practicing economic isolation and treating their neighbors differently in business relations; and, at least in earlier times, of conspiring secretly with the blessing of their religious leaders to murder “gentiles.”⁴

By exploring how American Jews have thought about Mormons, we come closer to understanding how American Jews have conceptualized the amalgam of religion and ethnicity/peoplehood in their own identities. This inquiry may also shed light on the meaning and functioning of a third category: the “ethnoreligious” group, in which ancestral heritage may be seen as coterminous with a sacred tradition. This connection is especially intriguing in the case of Jews and Mormons since both have been associated with privilege as well as the elusive category of “whiteness.”

To pursue this inquiry, I begin by exploring the role of Ancient Israel in the emergence of Mormon identity. I propose that the intensity of Mormon

identification with Ancient Israel provides a precedent and even a motivation for some Jews to subsequently examine analogies between Mormons and Jews. I then analyze cultural texts by American Jews in which Mormons and Mormonism play some kind of role, texts that I believe show how Mormonism can provide a mechanism for somehow better defining the essence of Jewishness. My method involves a close analysis of a few texts by Jews in which Mormons appear—whether as friend, foe, uncanny *Doppelgänger*, or some combination of all of these. I will indicate how Jewish reflections on Mormons can serve as an index for differing interpretations of Jewishness at various historical moments and under different forms of political and cultural pressure.

JEW AS MODEL FOR MORMON IDENTITY

A notice appeared on May 6, 1856, in the Utah-based, Latter-Day-Saints-affiliated *Deseret News*, claiming that the Wandering Jew of legend had appeared on a street corner in Manhattan. According to the original legend, a faithless Jew had harassed the cross-laden Jesus as he strode along the path to Golgotha; as a consequence, the Jew had been cursed to wander the earth until the Second Coming. The Utah newspaper claimed that this very individual had appeared before an assembled crowd in modern-day New York, sporting a long beard and dressed in "loose pantaloons with a turban on his head."⁵ This orientalized figure was alleged to have read from a "little manuscript Hebrew book" and demonstrated perfect knowledge of Arabic, Phoenician, and Sanskrit, before a "learned Jewish Rabbi" arrived on the scene and invited him to his home. At this point, the man allegedly begged off, claiming that "the Crucified One of Calvary has pronounced the edict, and I must not rest. I must move on—ever on!"⁶ It is impossible to tell whether the article's author set much store by this account (it may have been merely a rumor or, conceivably, a con-man's stunt); but it is evident that the *Deseret News* editors expected their Mormon readers to find the story deeply enthralling. Less than a decade later the same newspaper printed yet another account of a sighting of the Wandering Jew, this time in the village of Harts Corners in New York. A fascination with this mythical figure was widespread throughout the mid-nineteenth-century, but it would appear that the idea of the Wandering Jew wandering through modern-day America struck a particularly resonant chord in the fantasy lives of nineteenth-century Mormons.

An interest in ancient Jews and an investment in their fate was not restricted to Mormons in antebellum America. The first half of the nineteenth century, when Mormonism first emerged, was a period of intense religious ferment within American Protestantism, and as at other such moments, it brought a heightened preoccupation with Jews. Known as the Second Great Awakening, this period witnessed a rise in messianic expectations among various sects. The widespread belief that the conversion of the Jews was a sign of the approaching Kingdom of God contributed to a powerful new movement to convert Jews, spearheaded by the formation of the missionary organization known as the American Society for the Melioration of the Jews.⁷ By 1850, this society had approximately 125 chapters throughout the United States.⁸ Despite limited success, this initiative helped crystalize the image of modern-day Jews as protagonists in the unfolding of salvation.

Aside from this pragmatic interest in Jews as heralds of the millennium, Jews generated fascination in their own right since they were understood to be surviving remnants of the original chosen people of God. The aura surrounding Jews was a result of the high status enjoyed by the Old Testament in the new republic—itsself a legacy of the Calvinist background of the Puritans. In an editorial published in 1829 in Richmond, Virginia, about the fledgling local Jewish community, readers were alerted that, “When we see one of these people, and remember that we have been told by good authority, that he is an exact copy of the Jew who worshipped in the Second Temple two thousand years ago—that his physiognomy and religious opinions—that the usages and customs of his tribe are still the same, we feel that profound respect which antiquity inspires.”⁹ In a newly-formed nation that saw itself as the land of the future, Jews called to mind the origins of Christendom, even as they were frequently seen as integral to its future. The increasing presence of Jews in the New World beginning in the 1820s made them a subject of speculation for Christians, who understood their own destinies to be intertwined, somehow, with Jews.

But Mormons had a deeper and even more complex set of investments in Jews and Judaism than other Christian groups of the time. First established as a formal church in 1830, Mormonism shared with many surrounding sects a belief that a cataclysmic supernatural event would soon deliver the faithful from sin; they also believed that their paramount duty was to *restore* the authentic church of God.¹⁰ Among their main differences from other Christian groups at the time were their determination to reestablish the link to the priestly authority of the New Testament and their belief in God’s ongoing revelation to his true servants. The most important of these servants was their founder Joseph

Smith, whose visions beginning in the 1820s provided the basis for *The Book of Mormon*.¹¹ Delivered through an intermediary angel named Moroni, these revelations contained the "fulness of the everlasting gospel," including narratives about the migration to America at the time of the Babylonian Exile of a branch of the ancient Israelites. A sub-group of this branch were the Nephites, a righteous people to whom Jesus had appeared before they later fell into "unbelief and wickedness." Also among them were the so-called Lamanites, evil foes of the Nephites who were eventually associated with the American Indians. These revelations made it clear to Smith and his followers that far from being a distant outpost, the United States played a leading role in salvific history. In God's plan to redeem humankind, the American continent had figured centrally since a portion of the Judeans relocated there more than two thousand years earlier.

From Smith's inaugural visions to the creation of the Mormon church and their expeditions to Utah in the 1850s, the Latter Day Saints inquired obsessively into the role of the Jews in God's plan, pouring their thoughts into scores of sermons, tracts, commentaries, and books of theology and doctrine.¹² Ancient Israel came to serve as a dominant spiritual paradigm; core biblical motifs associated with Jews, such as chosenness, covenant, Temple, and Zion, figured centrally in Mormon self-identity. The study of Hebrew also became a cornerstone of their educational practices. When the so-called "School of the Prophets" was formed in Kirtland, Ohio (named for the prophets who, according to the Bible, gathered around figures like Samuel and Elijah), they hired Joshua Seixas, scion of the most distinguished Jewish family from the Revolutionary era and an instructor at nearby Oberlin College. Although Seixas himself had converted to Christianity, his Jewish origins convinced Smith and his cohort of the authenticity of his knowledge and inspired them to seek out further Jewish instructors wherever they relocated. To some extent this turn to Ancient Israel was endemic to the logic of the Reformation itself: since Protestants understood their movement as a return to biblical models of faith and religious organization, proximity to biblical Israel became a chief criterion of authenticity.¹³ Since Mormons were turning away from what they saw as upstart rival Christian churches, it made sense that they would return to biblical models associated with Jews.

In yet another twist, according to at least one strain in Mormon theology, the Latter-Day Saints came to see themselves as the literal, biological descendants of Israelites—descendants not merely in the Spirit but in the Flesh. As Joseph Smith writes in his *History of the Church*, "The effect of the Holy Ghost

upon a Gentile is to purge out the old blood and make him actually of the seed of Abraham.”¹⁴ Smith claimed, furthermore, that after the cleansing of Gentile blood, a process that could include spasms and apparent fits, there might be observed in the convert a visible, physical change. Brigham Young repeated this teaching in an 1855 discourse on “the gathering of Israel,” in which he explained that all people on earth have some Israelite blood and that Mormons in particular are direct descendants of Ephraim, the youngest son of Joseph.¹⁵

As for the fundamental Christian premise that believers in Christ have superseded Israel as God’s covenanted people, Mormonism has offered various perspectives, some of which introduce a radically new understanding of Judaism. As Steven Epperson has shown in his extensive work *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel* (1992), two divergent schools of thought emerged: one that mirrored traditional Christian supersessionism, another that viewed the original covenant between God and Israel as unbreakable, lending ongoing theological significance to modern-day Jews *as Jews*. Associated with Joseph Smith and his successor Brigham Young, this latter view is laid down in the Book of Mormon itself, where we find statements such as the following:

Ye need not any longer hiss, nor spurn, nor make game of the Jews, nor any remnant of the house of Israel; for behold, the Lord remembereth his covenant unto them, and he will do unto them according to that which he hath sworn. Therefore, ye need not suppose that ye can turn the right hand of the Lord unto the left, that he may not execute judgement unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the house of Israel. (3 Nephi 29:8–9)

According to this passage, the original covenant with Israel has not been rescinded or revoked. Debate would continue to swirl around the question of whether and how Jews would come to recognize the role of Christ in God’s overall plan.¹⁶ But the important point is that Jews are not to be spurned or “made game of” since they have never lost their position of favor in God’s eyes.

To be sure, all of this concern with Jews meant very little to actual Jews in nineteenth-century America, with the exception of the scattered few who may have settled in Utah. Nevertheless, as Mormons became a fixture in American life, their investments in (and identifications with) Jews became more generally known, attracting the curiosity of at least some Jews. More to the point, as Mormonism developed among its adherents a sense of belonging to *a people*, rather than just a religious denomination, it became apparent to some Jews

that the model of group identity the Mormons espoused overlapped in some ways with their own group identity in America. Here was another group for whom lineage and faith were interwoven, another group that outsiders would consider "a peculiar people" who embraced Americanness while also clinging jealously to a particularistic group identity.

MORMONS IN THE JEWISH MIND

One of the earliest American Jews to encounter live Mormons—and certainly the first to closely examine and write about them—was the painter and photographer Solomon Nunez Carvalho (1815–1897). Born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, Carvalho was the son of one of the founders of the breakaway Reformed Society of Israelites, the first Reform congregation in the United States. As a result, he absorbed from early childhood the idea of America as a place where bold new versions of traditional faiths could and should be developed. When Colonel John Frémont set off in 1853 on a trek across the country to chart a course for the transcontinental railroad, he enlisted Carvalho to document the trip (Carvalho was an early practitioner of the daguerreotype method).¹⁷ Stricken with frostbite and scurvy in Southern Utah in the dead of winter, Carvalho was rescued by Mormon settlers who brought him to recuperate in Salt Lake City. He remained there for three months, during which time he closely observed Mormon customs and daily life and even carried on lengthy dialogues with Brigham Young, Joseph Smith's successor as Mormon leader. These events are described in Carvalho's remarkable book-length account of the trip, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West* (1856). While he expresses deep reservations about the Mormon practice of polygamy or "spiritual marriage" (which he thinks inimical to biblical teachings and morally reprehensible), Carvalho finds the Mormons themselves to be utterly wholesome, and his descriptions of the individuals he encountered are pervaded with unvarnished admiration. He singles out for praise their industriousness, idealism, and genuine piety. "These Mormons are certainly the most earnest religionists I have ever been among," he writes. "They preach morality in their churches and from their stands, and strange as it is true, the people practice it, and religiously believe their salvation depends upon the behests of the religion they have adopted."¹⁸ It is striking that, while Carvalho recognizes the biblical basis of Mormon self-understanding as well as the role of Jesus

in their theology, he characterizes Mormonism as a new religion in its own right: Mormons are not Christians so much as “religionists,” a term that tended to carry positive connotations in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁹ Moreover, he emphasizes the legitimacy of their religious innovations, which he sees as fully consonant with American principles: the Mormons were expressing their “perfect right to imbibe new religious ideas.”²⁰ Carvalho’s positive approach to Mormonism contrasts markedly with the hostility and suspicion of most contemporary Protestants, who tended to view the Mormons as a fanatical sect under the sway of autocratic leaders.

Carvalho does not name himself as a Jew in his text, an omission that may reflect a strategy for maintaining authorial legitimacy. Nevertheless, on occasion he points to continuities between Mormon and Jewish identities. He notices that male Mormons wear “an under-garment with distinctive marks upon it,” adding that this practice is “in imitation of the Jews.”²¹ And when he describes hearing a sermon by the elder Ezra Benson on the restoration of Israel to Jerusalem, he adds that Benson’s words “would have done honor to a speaker of the Hebrew persuasion.”²² The implication is that the Mormon vision of the millennium dovetails with traditional Jewish messianic hopes; indeed, Benson’s sermon evidently appeals to Carvalho’s outlook as somebody “of the Hebrew persuasion.” Finally, there are surprising moments in the text where Carvalho seems to accept the plausibility of Mormon beliefs. While surveying the topography of Salt Lake City, he notes that, “The Temple is in course of building—the foundation is laid—and I was allowed to see the plan projected by a Mr. Angel, who by inspiration has succeeded in producing an exact model of the one used by the Melchizedek Priesthood, in olden times.”²³ Oddly, Carvalho’s text slips from description to confirmation: he neither questions the historical accuracy of the Mormon Temple’s design, nor that the architect has been guided by direct inspiration. While Carvalho never contemplates converting to Mormonism, he appears to be prepared to accept some of their basic premises (i.e., the reality of divine inspiration), all the more so since their conduct and piety strike him as so exemplary.

In the decades after his Utah sojourn, Carvalho played a leading role in numerous Jewish institutions, including the Hebrew Benevolent Society in Los Angeles and the Beth Israel Sephardic synagogue in Baltimore, both of which he helped to found, and the Philadelphia Hebrew Education Society, on whose board he served. This public service on behalf of American Jewry reflects the same faith in American religious pluralism that pervades his writings about the Mormons in Utah. In retrospect, it makes sense that one of the

most enthusiastic outside reports of early Mormonism would be written by an American Jew raised in Charleston's radically innovative Reform community, which saw the principle of freedom of religion as their license to pursue God's truth precisely as they understood it. Carvalho's writings about Mormons reflect not merely admiration but a recognition that both communities were involved in analogous pursuits in mid-nineteenth-century America.

The post World War II era also represented a period of religious transformation. For American Jews various factors contributed to a reconfiguration of Jewishness as primarily a religious category. These factors included the new prominence of religion in Cold War America, an increase in Jewish acculturation, and a general process of "whitening" of various ethnic European groups.²⁴ This transformation has been described by sociologist Nathan Glazer as a movement from *Jewishness* to *Judaism*.²⁵ References to Mormons in Jewish cultural texts become particularly important at this moment, since they illuminate some of the ways American Jews came to conceptualize—and worry over—their own identities in relation to the concepts of "religion" and "peoplehood"—as well as race.

An example is Muriel Rukeyser's five-part poem "Akiba" (1967). Written in the midst of the poet's growing involvement in the feminist and anti-war movements of the late 1960s, this work is Rukeyser's fullest interpretation of the meaning of Jewish history for her own life. In a note accompanying the poem when it was published in *American Judaism* in 1967, Rukeyser explains that her choice of subject came from a family story, handed down by her mother, that they were direct descendants of Rabbi Akiba, who rose from humble origins to become "chief of the sages" before suffering persecution and a violent death at the hands of the Romans. As Akiba faced his death, he was a model of equanimity, embracing martyrdom as a chance to show his devotion to the Lord and to fulfill the precept to love the Lord. Rukeyser's poem links Judaism with a legacy of principled resistance to injustice and political tyranny. It moves through a series of images that recall the Exodus narrative: a split rock, a "red splatter" on the door to "speak to the angel," a journey through the sea. She introduces these biblical images to create a paradigm that unites political and spiritual strivings: the act of "refusing slavery" is one with a process she calls "escaping into faith." She then names a series of modern groups who have all "walked out of slavery." These include "those on the Long March" (the early Chinese Communist party who trekked across China to build a political base in Yemen); "the escaping Negroes" (those who joined the Underground Railroad); the "shivering children of Paris" (those of the Paris Commune of 1870); and "those at flaming Nauvoo"

(the site in Illinois where violent mobs attacked the Latter Day Saints, prompting their move to Salt Lake City).²⁶ This list reveals Rukeyser's sense of fellowship with a diverse set of groups unified in their idealism and perseverance, as well as their experiences of persecution. All of these groups embody the dual principles of "refusing slavery" and "escaping into faith" that provide the deep structure for Rukeyser's spiritual-political vision in the poem.

Rukeyser's inclusion of Mormons seems anomalous; they would have hardly appeared to many of Rukeyser's colleagues on the political left as exponents of progressive political ideals in the 1960s. But Rukeyser is intent on using a broad tent to collect her group of exemplary peoples: idealistic outsiders can be found in unlikely places, she suggests. She finds the Mormon legacy inspiring and, moreover, analogizes it with Jewish experience. Her poem suggests that Akiba's martyrdom is reflected in and recapitulated by the murder of Joseph Smith; the Mormons' heroic devotion to their ideals reflects the Jews' sacred history in the Exodus story and, by implication, serves as a paradigm for Rukeyser's own activism.²⁷

There were others at the same moment, on the other hand, who were determined to set Jews apart from Mormons. Take, for instance, Lenny Bruce's "Jewish versus goyish" routine, which he performed on numerous occasions with slight variations. The routine rests on a distinction between what Bruce calls "dictionary" definitions and his own idiosyncratic definitions. He begins by describing the first approach: "Dig this. *Goy*—'one who is not civilized, one who is not Mormon, one who is not Jewish . . . See *Goy* is used by two groups, the Mormons and the Jews . . . Now a Jew—dictionary style—one who is descended from the ancient tribes of Judea, or who is regarded to have descended from that tribe."²⁸ According to these definitions, there is an overlap between Jews and Mormons: both are set categorically against all others, and both see themselves as God's chosen people, in relation to whom all others count as *goyim*. Insofar as he views all outside groups as "uncivilized," Bruce is hinting at an elitist and pedantic quality shared by at least some Jews and Mormons alike. But Bruce goes on to reject this "dictionary style" and to offer his own new definitions of Jewish and goyish ("Now I neologize"). He then lays out a classification system naming a series of terms (individuals, foods, organizations, etc. . . .) as "Jewish" and another series as "goyish." Suddenly, "Jewish" is liberated from the buttoned-up dictionary definition, transmuted into a flexible category alongside a set of terms with unquestionably hip connotations. For instance, Bruce declares that the African American jazz musicians Count Basie and Ray Charles are "Jewish" (along with darkly colored things like pumpernickel and

black cherry soda), while terms one might expect to be Jewish are not, such as Eddie Cantor and B'nai B'rith, both of whom are said to be goyish (presumably because they are somehow irredeemably square in Bruce's view).

Thus, Bruce recasts the meanings of "goy" and "Jew" in defiance of the maligned dictionary, and as he does so, he wrests "Jewish" away from associations with Mormons and, later in the routine, from whiteness itself. Suddenly Jewishness is in direct opposition to Rukeyser, who evokes Nauvoo as an exemplary instance of resistance. In contrast, Lenny Bruce evokes Mormons only to observe that anyone who would analogize Jews to them doesn't get it (and is probably a square).

An engagement with Jewish and Mormon identities that reflects both of these impulses can be found in Nathan Englander's short story "What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank," originally published in *The New Yorker* in 2011. A Jewish dark humorist, Englander often pillories in his writing one or another contemporary form of Jewish identity, even as his insider knowledge of Orthodoxy suggests a more complex relationship to traditional Judaism than what we find in the work of more thoroughly secularized Jewish writers such as Philip Roth or Grace Paley. In Englander's story, two Jewish women who were best friends at their Orthodox day school in Queens have re-established contact many years later. One has married a secular Jew and moved to Florida, while the other has become Hasidic along with her husband and moved to Israel. The story describes their alcohol-and-marijuana-besotted afternoon meeting at the home of the Floridians, during which they debate Zionism, the meaning of the Holocaust, and assimilation. Their conversation provides a kind of symposium on the prospects of different versions of contemporary Jewish identity. Interestingly, as the Hasidic man (formerly named Mark, now Yerucham) describes his experiences as someone with a publicly marked religious identity, he reflects on a Mormon friend of his in Israel. When he notes how wearisome it is when bystanders monitor his behavior, expressing concern about whether he is breaking his own religious laws, he confesses to a weakness for doing precisely the same thing with his Mormon friend: "So when Jeb's at our house, when he comes by to eat and pours himself a coke, I do that same religious-police thing . . . I say, Hey Jeb, you allowed to have that? You supposed to be drinking a coke or what? I say it every time. Somehow I can't resist."²⁹ Hasidim and Mormons are thus established as analogous, publicly-marked forms of religious stringency. The Hasidic man then turns to the secular Jew and explains that "[This Mormon's] name is Jebediah, for real—do you believe it?"³⁰ The irony is too much for the secular narrator

of the story, who responds sarcastically: “No, Yerucham and Shoshana . . . Jebediah is a very strange name.”³¹ What is lost on Yerucham but suggested to the reader are the ways that Mormon and Hasidic identities function similarly in the public sphere. In both cases, individuals move through the larger circuits of society possessing an identity marked as other through multisyllabic *biblical* names and ritual observances perceived by on-lookers as obscure and eccentric. The easy familiarity between the American Hasid and his Mormon guest (“I say, Hey Jeb”) coupled with the Hasid’s self-proclaimed alienation from secular America reinforce this Hasidic-Mormon alignment in the story. From the skeptical narrator’s point of view at least, both are extremist forms of religious expression that hint at the self-satisfaction of their practitioners.

But elsewhere in the story, Mormons turn out to connect with Jews in another way as well, namely in relation to preoccupations with the history of the Holocaust. Just after relating the story about Jeb the Mormon, the newly secular Deb begins grumbling about the Mormon practice of converting the dead:³² “You heard about the scandal? The Mormons going through the Holocaust list . . . They took these people who died as Jews and started converting them into Mormons.”³³ Once again Englander hints at overlapping concerns linking Mormon and Jewish identities. Having abandoned Orthodoxy, Deb has become, as her husband puts it, “a little obsessed with the Holocaust”,³⁴ her sense of the sacred has evidently been transferred onto Holocaust survivors, whom she views, without exception, as “amazing.” These idealizations can be seen as themselves acts of (imaginative) conversion, willful sanctifications of Jews who suffered in the Holocaust. Englander’s parodic intent becomes evident after the Hasidic visitor relates an anecdote about his father’s life in which the father, a Holocaust survivor, appears as anything but amazing—to Deb’s dismay.

But while Mormons function in the story as a rhetorical cudgel to point up Jewish excesses, the story ends with a twist that lends moral dignity to the Mormon, while critiquing Yerucham, the Hasidic man. The two couples decide to play the so-called “Anne Frank game,” in which they imagine which of their gentile friends would hide them in the event of a second Holocaust. When his wife asks, “[Jebediah] could risk his life and his family’s and everyone’s around him . . . Would he—for real—would he do that for you? . . .” The Hasidic man instantly confirms the Mormon’s trustworthiness: “Yes, Jeb would do that for us. He would hide us. He would risk it all . . . Jeb’s a good man . . . He’d be good for that, a Mormon.”³⁵ But when the Hasidic couple decide to imagine each other as the non-Jew in this situation, the wife discovers

that she doubts her own husband would save her, were they not a couple. The husband's much-vaunted religious seriousness turns out not to include a commitment to moral universalism; his loyalty is to his clan, his self-professed identity, but not to humankind at large. Englander's story thus elevates the Mormon over the American Hasid ("He'd be good for that, a Mormon"). When placed in the hypothetical situation of the "Anne Frank game," the Mormon comes out on top as the true adherent to moral principles, while the Orthodox Jewish man looks morally suspect. The latter has failed to cultivate the sort of universal morality that Jews needed to depend on during the Holocaust. The critique of Orthodoxy in this story is not absolute (Yerucham's wife, Shoshana, comes off unscathed) nor does it reflect the sole attitude toward Orthodoxy in Englander's work in general. What it does reveal is Englander's insistence on humanizing Orthodox Jews, his efforts to use insider knowledge to expand the range of characters populating American Jewish fiction. Interestingly, the story's praise for the Mormon is a similarly surprising twist on an identity that is frequently stereotyped.

Yet another recent text that evokes Mormons while meditating on American Jewish identity is a Jacqueline Osherow's poem "Hearing News from the Temple Mount in Salt Lake City." Raised in an observant Jewish family in Philadelphia, Osherow moved to Salt Lake City in 1989 to teach in the creative writing program at the University of Utah. She has produced a distinguished body of work that includes poems on biblical themes, modern Israel, and the Holocaust, as well as several poems devoted to the glories of Utah's landscapes. In "Hearing News from the Temple Mount in Salt Lake City" from her collection *The Hoopoe's Crown* (2005), she reflects explicitly on the ironies of her situation as a Jewish poet in the heart of Mormon territory (the very site Mormon settlers had fled to found *their* Zion). This poem explores manifestations of Jewishness in multiple geographies, proposing ultimately and in a whimsical spirit that Salt Lake City offers certain surprising benefits.

Osherow begins by evoking a conversation in the elevator in the Catskills in which one Jewish woman says "*Oy / the food here is so terrible*" while the other responds "*and the portions / are so small.*" Osherow calls this line a "variant" on Jacob's line to Pharaoh in Egypt "*few / and evil have been the days / of my life.*"³⁶ This analogy evidences a direct link between the biblical past and the American Jewish present: biblical sensibilities and motifs have endured in the Catskills, where they are now voiced in a Yiddish accent. More to the point, Osherow uses the line as evidence that "we're always / willing to take something / over nothing," which in turns explains "our lunatic attachment / to that

miserable pinpoint / in the desert.” By withholding the name of the desert location, this line hints at the poem’s broader analogy between Jews’ connection to the Land of Israel and the Mormon connection to Salt Lake City. At this point the occasion named in the poem’s title is revealed: the poet has heard news of violence in Israel between Jews and Palestinians, and although it is “none of [her] diaspora- / befuddled business,” she cannot rest easy knowing there are “hordes of people” who wish her dead. Being “Jacob’s offspring,” she wants as many “evil days as [she] can lay [her] hands on”; yet her identification with Jews in Israel leads to a feeling of being under assault.

All of this sets up a turn in the poem that shifts from fears of persecution to a mood of celebration. These lines evoke through their comic tone the world of the Catskills with which she began:

Thank God
 I live in Salt Lake City. Who’s
 going to come looking for me
 here? In this calm Zion,
 where a bunch of blond
meshugeners think *they’re*
 the chosen people of God.
 Good luck to them is all
 I have to say; let them
 get the joy from it that I do.

The comic image here is of Osherow, a Jewish poet, having found an ideal refuge not in Israel but in Salt Lake City. The singular virtue of Salt Lake for a Jew with a persecution complex is that here there is another group claiming chosenness, deflecting possible violence away from the Jew. This point provides the basis for a series of comparisons linking Jews and Mormons. In addition to both peoples’ outrageous claims to having been “chosen,” the poem acknowledges their shared history of persecution, histories that led both peoples to seek refuge in some version of “Zion.” Both also understand themselves their collective histories as modern-day extensions of the biblical Exodus motif, and both embrace origin stories punctuated by angelic interventions (Osherow evokes the angelic voice that interrupted Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac). Most significantly, Mormons and Jews are linked through mutual commitments and self-conceptions that the poem characterizes as *crazy*: the Jews’ “lunatic attachment” is echoed in the Mormons’ description as “*meshugeners*” [crazy people]. Using a Yiddish word to characterize the Mormons generates further humor: who would seem farther from the world of immigrant Yiddish-speakers than

Mormons? Yet, the Yiddish word functions here as a term of endearment, as if Osherow were implicitly accepting the Mormons into the fold of her own quixotic people. Hence she follows this line by wishing the Mormons "good luck" and the same joy she has had from fancying herself as belonging to God's chosen people.

Ultimately, then, the effect of hearing news from the Temple Mount in Salt Lake City is to bring the poet from fears of persecution to a celebration of her life as a Jew (i.e., an emphasis on the "joy" of being Jewish). The "blond meshugeners" who surround her remind her of the idealism and perseverance of the Zionist settlers, while providing camouflage against would-be attackers (their blondness contrasts with the dark hair more commonly associated with Jews). Hence, in their claims to being "the chosen people of God," the Mormons remind Osherow of her own people's self-understanding—and deepens her admiration for the audaciousness, both hers and theirs, required to make such a claim. There is, to be sure, a note of sarcasm in Osherow's line about the joy of being Jewish: chosenness brings undeniable burdens along with its prerogatives. But the main point is that she imagines this condition as one that she shares with her Mormon neighbors, who appear as unlikely allies at the conclusion of the poem.

Perhaps the most imaginatively daring text about the Mormon-Jewish connection—combining an emphasis on their theological as well as sociological dimensions—is Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on American Themes* (1992), which explores these identities in ways that include both denigration and celebration. First performed less than a year after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the play is a postmodernist extravaganza that responds to the AIDS epidemic while also addressing the end of the Cold War, global warming, racial conflict, the history of communism, and the rise of Reaganite conservatism. Along the way several key scenes in the play take place in the Mormon Visitor's Center in New York City. Central characters in *Angels in America* include a married Mormon couple (the male member of which turns out to be gay) and a secular Jewish legal assistant (who becomes the Mormon's lover). We also meet the Jewish historical figures Ethel Rosenberg and Roy Cohn, the defendant and prosecuting attorney of America's defining Cold War trial. A premise underlying the play is that previous historical and political frameworks have all collapsed (as with the post-Cold War uncertainty); and to meet the cascading crises of the late twentieth century, new kinds of narratives, alignments, and commitments must be imagined. An unlikely resource that Kushner turns to in his pastiche of cultural forms and historical

narratives is the history of Mormonism, specifically its foundational account of the visit of the angel Moroni to a new American prophet. Another resource is the tradition of Jewish mysticism, which crops up at unexpected moments throughout the play. Hence, even as many of the Mormon and Jewish characters are morally and existentially unmoored, the traditions they represent turn out to contain fragments out of which the play's new mythology is formed.

Louis the Jew and Joe the Mormon both appear as figures who are utterly unsupported by their respective religious cultures. Louis is estranged from his family; in Paul Cowan's phrase for the alienated modern Jew, he is an "orphan in history." Accordingly, the play opens with the funeral of his grandmother, described by the officiating rabbi as "the last of the Mohicans." Though the assembled mourners are assured that she has passed down the east European Jewish heritage she embodied ("your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl"³⁷), the play seems less than sanguine about the prospects of Jewish cultural transmission in America. Louis tells Prior (his lover) that his grandmother "actually saw Emma Goldman speak . . . [i]n Yiddish," but Louis himself can no longer understand Yiddish, nor can he say the Kaddish when later called upon to do so, nor does he possess the moral courage that might enable him to stand by his lover through his illness. Hoping the rabbi might summon a biblical text to help him come to terms with his moral failures, he is told that Judaism has no room for him: "The Holy Scriptures have nothing to say about such a person . . . You want to confess, better you should find a priest."³⁸ Louis's psychic and spiritual deficiencies are summarized by his characteristically histrionic assertion that "there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there's only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics."³⁹ These denials are, of course, countered by the very title of the play. Indeed, the audience comes to view Louis' cynicism as premature when, at the end of part I, an angel crashes through the ceiling of his former lover, Prior, whom Louis has abandoned. According to the play itself, there *are* angels in America (as Mormonism, for one, had affirmed all along), though the spiritually-bereft secular Jew cannot see them.

Joe's problem is in some ways precisely the reverse of Louis's. If the problem with Judaism is that it has dwindled away, the problem with Mormonism is that it is all-too present—and all-too oppressive. Although Joe has tried desperately to repress his homosexuality and to pass as "one of the elect . . . who love God with an open heart unclouded by secrets and struggles," he can no longer uphold the charade. Initially he experiences this failure as the annihilation of

his selfhood: "Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God's . . . I try to tighten my heart into a knot, a snarl, I try to learn to live dead, just numb, but then I see someone I want, and it's like a hot spike right through my chest."⁴⁰ And whereas the Jew has no family to turn to, Joe's family, at least his mother, is too close: she appears in New York City demanding that he pray to God to remove his sinfulness. Thus, while Kushner's representation of Judaism and Mormonism seems to posit them as opposites, they turn out to function as mirror images of each other, a point emphasized in a split-scene sequence in which Louis the Jew and Joe the Mormon simultaneously abandon their partners. Neither tradition offers support or guidance to the fugitive, psychologically tormented Jew and Mormon who will find solace, albeit temporary, in each other's arms.

But Kushner's play is far from being a lachrymose narrative about the moral bankruptcy of Judaism and Mormonism; nor is it in fact an anti-religion screed (though, to be sure, some have seen it this way).⁴¹ Drawing on the very traditions that have no place for Louis and Joe, the play suggests that these traditions contain symbols that speak directly to the manifold crises of the present. These symbols emerge in the narrative about the appearance of a new American prophet in the person of Prior, who is also a victim of AIDS as well as a Mayflower WASP with a lineage stretching back to before the Norman Conquest. As Prior deteriorates in his bedroom, abandoned by his lover, his distant ancestors visit him from a transcendent realm in order to alert him of an imminent angelic visitation. In the middle of their explanation, they begin unaccountably chanting in Hebrew. Kushner uses a text that reflects a Kabbalistic formula for uniting the Sefirot: ("Adonai, Adonai, / Olam ha-yichud / Zefirot, Zazahot, / Ha-adam, ha-gadol"⁴²). Subsequently, Prior's nurse begins reciting the El Male Rachamim prayer in Hebrew,⁴³ and he discovers a giant book with a burning Aleph, a kabbalistic image evoking the divine power of creation.⁴⁴ The metaphysical realm in *Angels in America* turns out to communicate in the language of Jewish mysticism, and although Prior cannot make sense of it, the play suggests that Judaism (at least its esoteric tradition) harbors sacred truths after all.

When the angel finally arrives to give Prior his prophetic message, the topos shifts from Kabbalah to Mormonism. The angel instructs Prior to search beneath the tiles under his bathroom sink, and there he discovers "an ancient leather suitcase, very dusty."⁴⁵ In order to read the large book inside the suitcase he must wear a pair of bronze spectacles with rocks instead of lenses. All of this, of course, recalls the narrative of Joseph Smith's visions from the 1820s. According to Smith's own account, he unearthed plates from a stone box under

a large rock, and years later he was able to translate the text written on the plates with the help of stones called “interpreters” or “Urim and Thummim.” When Smith looked through these stones, he was allegedly able to translate the text that became the *Book of Mormon*. In the case of Prior’s vision, he appears to have been called not to translate a sacred text, but to have vigorous sexual intercourse with an angel. Kushner has no interest in a new set of doctrines; rather, his play is a carnivalesque celebration of unlikely comminglings and bodily delights—in bold defiance of AIDS. The surprising point in all of this is that Mormonism’s audacious claim that an angel visited Joseph Smith can be repurposed for a play that imagines a movement beyond despair and destruction.

Angels in America’s celebration of new hybrid identities is reflected in Kushner’s own engagement, as a Jewish playwright, with the Mormon origin story of Joseph Smith’s angelic vision. By using the Mormon story alongside images from Kabbalah as well as Jewish cultural history (as in a scene in which Ethel Rosenberg sings a Yiddish lullaby), Kushner suggests that Judaism and Mormonism speak to one another. Indeed, in one climatic scene, Ethel Rosenberg becomes herself a kind of angel, appearing in a vision to Louis and teaching him the Jewish liturgical texts he never properly learned. Both Mormonism and Judaism turn out to be linked to the realm of visions and metaphysical secrets. Hence Mormonism and Judaism both contain stultifying exoteric and empowering esoteric dimensions. Moreover, and of crucial importance for the play, both are traditions that sustain collective memories of struggle and transcendence of victimhood.

CONCLUSION

Scholars have long noted the intensity of Mormonism’s focus on Ancient Israel, a focus that has led to their heightened interest in modern-day Jews. This interest has included solidarity with the State of Israel and an eagerness to pursue Jewish-Mormon theological dialogue. The reflections I have offered here suggest that, to some degree at least, American Jews have also focused on Mormons. The texts I have discussed highlight multiple ways in which Mormons and Mormonism have been incorporated into Jewish expressive culture. In Englander’s story, Mormons are held up as exemplary in their piety while Orthodox Jews come off as morally compromised. In the poems by Rukeyser and Osherow, the commonalities of Mormons and Jews are

emphasized, especially their overcoming of victimhood and single-minded devotion to their ideals. In Kushner's play, Mormons and Jews seem to be engaged in analogous personal struggles, even as the play affirms empowering aspects of both traditions. What unites these two groups, these texts seem to affirm, is that both are groups oriented simultaneously around shared historical experiences and transcendent ideals. These are neither exclusively ethnicities, in the sense of groups defined by common ancestral heritage, nor exclusively religions, insofar as their practitioners become part of a particular people.

This Mormon-Jewish nexus points to the value of regarding Jews as an "ethnoreligious group." The fact that it is possible to convert to Judaism complicates the "ethnic" part of this definition, but it is evident that the role of peoplehood —*am yisrael*—cannot be eliminated from Jewishness; and, on the other hand, it seems clear that efforts to promote strictly religious definitions of Judaism have inevitably collapsed. Leora Batnitzky's provocatively-titled book *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (2011) emphasizes the theoretical labor required to sunder Judaism as a "faith" from Jewishness as an ethnic identity.⁴⁶ And, as the prevalence of countless self-declared secular Jews demonstrates, this project has never been fully successful. An advantage of considering Jews an ethnoreligious group is that it avoids cordoning off two concepts (religion and peoplehood) whose division, as Daniel Boyarin insists in *Judaism: A Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (2018), owes much to Christian, and especially Protestant understandings of salvation and faith and which, after all, would appear to be anomalous in the longue durée of human history.⁴⁷

Another advantage of this term is that it highlights a new set of groups in relation to whom Jews might be fruitfully discussed in the American context. In addition to Mormons, we might include Armenians and Chaldeans (i.e., ethnic Assyrians), both of them ethnic groups who practice distinctive forms of Christianity within ethnically specific church organizations (the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Chaldean Catholic Church). Both of these groups have distinctive linguistic traditions (Armenian and Aramaic), and, like Jews, both have histories of persecution, genocide, geographical dispersion, and settlement in the United States. Both have confronted many of the dilemmas that Jews have faced in the United States—how to preserve a distinctive identity, how to view the question of endogamy, etc. . . . A perusal of Armenian-American author William Saroyan's coming-of-age narratives in and around the Armenian Church in early-twentieth-century Fresno, California, is enough to substantiate the comparison with American-Jewish experience.⁴⁸ But these

connections, along with whatever new Jewish-Mormon configurations may be emerging from our ever-shifting cultural landscape, will have to await future investigations.

Notes

1. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For further discussions of the role of race in contemporary Mormon identity, see Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003); and Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
2. Stephan Thernstrom, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); see also Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*.
3. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 17.
4. See R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 75.
5. Quoted in Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes, *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 108.
6. Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, 108–9.
7. The idea of a widespread conversion of the Jews as an end-time event gained momentum beginning in the period of the Reformation. The New Testament passage that has served as *locus classicus* for these speculations is Romans 11. See Kenneth Austin, *The Jews and the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 25–50.
8. Yaakov S. Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People Missions to the Jews in America, 1880–2000* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 7.
9. Quoted in Gaston Lichtenstein, *History of the Jews of Richmond* (Richmond, VA: Bloch & Newman, 1913), 56.
10. For a useful discussion of the rise of Mormonism alongside Seventh-Day Adventism, see John Howard Smith, *A Dream of the Judgment Day: American Millennialism and Apocalypticism, 1620–1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 212–73.
11. For a useful overview of recent developments in Mormon studies, see Philip L. Barlow, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
12. Steven Epperson, *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1992), 78.
13. Shalom Goldman, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 103.
14. Joseph Smith, Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, selected and arranged by Joseph Fielding Smith, Seventh Printing (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1951), 149.
15. See Seymour Cain, "Judaism and Mormonism: Paradigm and Supersession," *Dialogue* (Salt Lake City, Utah) 25, no. 3, Dialogue Foundation, 57–65.

16. See Truman G. Madsen, "Chosenness: Implications and Extensions in Mormonism and Judaism," in *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, ed. Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward (Vancouver, BC: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), 131–46.
17. See Michael Hoberman, "To prove the correctness and authenticity of my statements": Solomon Nunes Carvalho's revision of the Western travel narrative," *American Jewish History* 102, no. 2 (April 2018): 237–54.
18. Solomon Nune Carvalho, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954), 246.
19. See, for instance, William Wordsworth's poem, "This lawn, a carpet all alive" (1829), which is prefaced by the statement that, "A 'Savant' who is not also a poet in soul and a religionist in heart is a feeble and unhappy creature." William Wordsworth and Andrew J. George, *The Complete Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 428. Here a "religionist" is one with an overall predisposition of devoutness, without necessarily preaching any specific dogmas.
20. Carvalho, *Incidents of Travel*, 247.
21. Carvalho, 246.
22. Carvalho, 50.
23. Carvalho, 248.
24. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
25. Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 2nd ed., rev. with a new intro. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
26. Muriel Rukeyser, "Akiba . . . a Passover Poem by Muriel Rukeyser," *Tikkun*, April 17, 2011, <https://www.tikkun.org/akiba-a-passover-poem-by-muriel-rukeyser/>.
27. For a useful recent discussion of Rukeyser in relation to other Jewish American poets, see Dara Barnat, *Walt Whitman and the Making of Jewish American Poetry* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2023).
28. Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (London, UK: Panther Books, 1975), 31.
29. Nathan Englander, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2012), 22.
30. Englander, 20.
31. Englander, 20.
32. A summary of this practice can be found in Steve Lipman, "Monitoring the Mormons," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, February 8, 2002, <https://www.jta.org/2002/02/08/ny/monitoring-the-mormons>: "According to Mormon doctrine," Lipman writes, "deceased people of any ethnic or religious background are eligible to accept the Mormon faith posthumously via proxy baptisms performed by living members of the church; this has brought 200 million people into the fold. The procedure has included saints (Joan of Arc) and sinners (Adolf Hitler), popes and Protestants, and such prominent Jews as Albert Einstein and David Ben-Gurion—

and nearly 400,000 Jewish Holocaust victims, most notably Anne Frank and her family." While many Jewish names remain on the Mormon rolls, the church has made a good-faith effort to abide by its agreement, says Aaron Breitbart, senior researcher at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles.

33. Englander, *What We Talk about*, 20.
34. Englander, 16.
35. Englander, 30.
36. Jacqueline Osherow, "Hearing News from the Temple Mount in Salt Lake City," in *The Hoopoe's Crown: Poems* (Rochester, New York: BOA Editions, 2005), 83.
37. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on American Themes* (1992), 10.
38. Kushner, 25.
39. Kushner, 92.
40. Kushner, 50, 77.
41. For a summary of responses to *Angels in America* among Mormon audiences, see Ivan M. Lincoln, "Angels in America is no Christmas Play," *Deseret News*, November 25, 1995, <https://www.deseret.com/1995/11/26/19206525/angels-in-america-is-no-christmas-play>.
42. Kushner, *Angels in America*, 88.
43. Kushner, 98.
44. Kushner, 99.
45. Kushner, 162.
46. Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
47. Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (Rutgers University Press, 2018).
48. See William Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940); and *Places Where I've Done Time* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1972).

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Jewish American Writers and the J-Word

by Hana Wirth-Nesher

In 1950 Hortense Calisher published “Old Stock” in *The New Yorker*, which she describes in her memoir as a story “about a young girl at a Jewish summer resort in the Catskills, one in the old farm house style, centered among natives of the region—and her first encounter with antisemitism ‘outside’ inside her own family, and possibly in her Jewish self.”¹ Before publication, an editor warned her that she and the magazine would be getting “a lot of protest mail” on it, “From Anti-Semitic Jews who don’t know they are.”² The young girl’s mother, Mrs. Elkin, is taken aback one day when visiting Miss Onderdonk, an Old Stock native down the road from their lodging, who suddenly complains about the recent influx of Jewish boarders. “I told Elizabeth Smith [owner of the farmhouse where the Elkins are vacationing] she’d rue the day she ever started taking in Jews.”³ Calisher describes the young girl’s reaction to this remark: “the short word soared in an arc across Hester’s vision”⁴ as her mother makes a helpless face in her direction. Realizing that she needs to demonstrate self-respect for her daughter’s sake, she replies, “I thought you knew that we were—Hebrews.’ The word, the ultimate refinement, slid out of her mother’s soft voice as if it were on runners.”⁵ For the first time in her life, Hester feels “the sensation of prayer. Please say it, Mother. “Say Jew” [sic]. Sensing Hester’s distress, the best Mrs. Elkin can do is to lean forward and say “But we are Jewish.” Substituting the adjective for the noun qualifies and mitigates any certainty about this label. What exactly is it modifying? Jewish religion? Jewish ethnicity? Race? Peoplehood?

The matter of whether the word “Jew” is offensive is once again an issue among American Jews and therefore not only of historical interest. In recent years, with the rise of antisemitism along with “woke” sensitivity about identity

tags, it has become a topic for politicians, teachers, and journalists, as well as linguists. “‘Jew’ isn’t a slur. You don’t have to avoid saying it,” ran the headline of a *Washington Post* article three years ago.⁶ To demonstrate the shift from Jew to Jewish, Ben Sales traced the strategies of avoidance in White House Rosh Hashanah greetings during the Trump years. In 2017 New Year wishes were for “Jewish families,” in 2018 “Jewish people,” in 2019 “to those observing Rosh Hashana,” and in 2020, simply to “Jewish brothers and sisters.” Plenty of people, particularly non-Jews, avoid the word “Jew,” according to Sarah Bunin Benor, a linguist who researches American Jewish language. “Many people assume that it’s a slur because they know that Jews are historically a stigmatized group, so they’re concerned about using it because they don’t want to sound offensive.”⁷ Sales points out what he considers to be the most glaring recent avoidance of the “Jew” in the media, coverage of the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. As Americans paid their respects, journalists referred to her as “the first Jewish person to lie in state,” although RBG’s own words about her achievements run counter to today’s unease: “I am a judge born, raised, and proud of being a Jew.” Currently, university students are asking their instructors if they can write the word “Jew” in their papers. While everyone agrees that when Jew is used as a verb, as in “to Jew down,” or as an adjective in “Jew banker,” it is always derogatory. But what about the noun? Has it morphed into the J-Word?⁸

In her recent book *Jew*,⁹ Cynthia Baker traces the evolution of the word from its sparse biblical presence, where it refers to Judeans as opposed to the dominant nomenclature, children of Israel or Hebrews, to post-Holocaust theorizing of the term in academia, primarily among French philosophers. The importance of her study is her precise mapping of how the word Jew in Western Civilization is inextricably bound up with Christian self-definition. In other words, Christianity needs the Jew as Other, as the particularistic, tribal, fleshly, ethnic Other, in contrast to the universalist, spiritual, religious self. Baker demonstrates how this Pauline binary underlies the diverse manifestations of the word Jew over centuries and across languages and nations, with her emphasis on Europe, Zionism, French theory, and Jewish Studies. European references to “Jew” have certainly influenced American writers, with Jewish American writing bearing the imprint of representations of the Jew in English literary history—from Shakespeare’s Shylock, “the dog Jew,” to Dickens’ Fagin and Anglophile T. S. Eliot’s “And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner.” Yet the American context is exceptional in that the roots of Puritan rhetoric can found in the Hebrew Bible.

As Sacvan Bercovitch demonstrated, the New England origins of the American self are derived from the Puritan belief that America was the new Promised Land, and that the Puritans were the new Children of Israel, the new Hebrews.¹⁰ Referring to Jews as ancient Hebrews was commonplace in the nineteenth century, before masses of Eastern European Jews immigrated to America in its last two decades. In his elegiac poem, “The Jewish Cemetery in Newport” (1854), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow does not see the graves of Jews, but rather “these Hebrews,” with their ancient glory, their historical persecution and their demise.

“Gone are the living, but the dead remain,” writes Longfellow at the same time that living Jews did reside in America. “But ah! what once has been shall be no more! The groaning earth in travail and in pain/Brings forth its races, but does not restore,/ And the dead nations never rise again.”¹¹ When Emma Lazarus responds to Longfellow’s paean to the Hebrew dead in “In the Jewish Synagogue in Newport” (1867) positioning herself as an insider within this sacred place, she too mentions no Jews buried there, only “patriarchs,” “slaves of Egypt,” and “exiles by the stream of Babylon.”¹² Inspired by her Sephardic family history and by the German Jewish Enlightenment, Lazarus saw herself as a Hebrew, eschewing the word Jew as did German Reform Jews in America. Several years before Lazarus elegized the patriarchs buried in Newport, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise founded an influential periodical for Reform Jews in the United States, *The Israelite*. All of this changed two decades later when living Jews streamed into New York harbor as they escaped pogroms in Eastern Europe.

Mary Antin’s much celebrated best-selling autobiography appeared in 1917 under the title *The Promised Land: The Autobiography of a Russian Immigrant*. The opening sentence of the first chapter, “Within the Pale,” dramatically contradicts the title: “When I was a little girl, the world was divided into parts: namely, Polotzk, the place where I lived, and a strange land called Russia.”¹³ In short, although the Pale of Settlement was part of the Russian Empire, Mary Antin didn’t actually live in Russia; she lived in the territory reserved for Jews. The entire first half of this autobiography is peppered with references to “Jews,” as she recounts her Old World childhood. Peppered, yet her book was not advertised as the memoir of a Jewish immigrant. Newcomers to America were labelled according to their countries of origin, but by 1899 the Bureau of Immigration realized that Jews did not fit neatly into this system, so they began to label them Hebrews. During the same period, the much celebrated and widely read Jewish immigrant writer Anzia Yezerska, whose

native language, like that of Mary Antin, was Yiddish, inscribed the word “Jew” into her novel *Salome of the Tenants* as processed through the mind and ears of a WASP male. In this fictionalized narrative of her affair with John Dewey, Yeziarska depicts the rapid shift in John Manning’s attitude toward Jews, from Orientalism to aversion. “Even as a boy the tragic history of the Russian Jews had stirred John Manning with heroic longings. . . . Then had come this girl with the naked soul of her race.”¹⁴ Sonia Vrunsky declares “I am a Russian Jewess, a flame—a longing. A soul consumed with hunger for heights beyond reach.”¹⁵ Yeziarska portrays Sonia as Manning’s liberator. “I am a puritan whose fathers were afraid to trust experience,” he confesses. “We are bound by our possessions of property, knowledge and tradition.”¹⁶ For a while Manning believes that he and Sonia represent the desired intermingling of races, what he terms “the oriental mystery and the Anglo-Saxon clarity that will pioneer a new race of men.”¹⁷ However, his infatuation fades quickly when he discovers that she owes money to a pawnbroker. “My name in the hands of that Jew,” he cries. “You must come immediately with me to the Jew’s place.”¹⁸ His reviled association with a Jew through his Oriental wife marks the end of their marriage.

The post-war years, particularly the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish American collective identity, were marked by acute sensitivity when it came to representation of the “Jew” in literature. This self-consciousness expressed itself in two ways which were frequently inseparable: “Jew” as antisemitic slur and “Jew” as assertion of freedom and presence, at times satirically. Calisher’s “Old Stock” dramatizes the former, while at the same time foresees a younger generation that will be less uneasy when faced with Jew as slur. At the story’s end, only young Hester¹⁹ is as yet immune to the disgust attached to the J-word. After silently beseeching her mother to say “Jew,” “she heard the word in her own mind, double-voiced, like the ram’s horn at Yom Kippur, with an ugly present bray, but with a long, urgent echo as time-spanning as Roland’s horn.”²⁰ On one hand, Hester can hear beyond the social and political forces of the present so that what sounds like the cry of a donkey, abrasive and ugly when filtered through antisemitic ears, needs to be heard within a larger time span, back to the glorious ancient source of the shofar. On the other hand, ancient glory in Calisher’s story is derived from *Chanson de Roland*, a Christian medieval romance set at the time of Charlemagne’s crusade against Islam. Calisher relies on her reader’s knowledge of Christian epics, rather than on Judaic sources, when she wants to invoke grandeur. Furthermore, since Mrs. Elkins’ ancestors are Southerners, she also sees herself as Old Stock, recorded in “the History of the Jews of Richmond, 1769–1917.”²¹ Her pedigree accounts for her snobbery

toward her fellow boarders at the farmhouse, Eastern European Brooklyn Jews, until Miss Onderdonk puts her in her place. When she returns to her lodging, Mrs. Elkins joins in the conversation with those she previously snubbed, and her daughter Hester suddenly understands that “Miss Onderdonk sat at their table, too. Wherever any of them sat publicly at table, Miss Onderdonk sat at his side. Only, some of them set a place for her, and some of them did not.”²² How the word Jew sounds to Jewish ears, therefore, will depend on whether they do or do not automatically hear it in Miss Onderdonk’s voice.

Five years earlier, Arthur Miller published his first and only novel, *Focus*. Written between 1942 and 1945, the novel takes place in New York City with events in Europe setting the tone. The main character is a white collar worker named Lawrence Newman who is responsible for screening job applicants at a corporation in mid-town Manhattan. To be more specific, he is instructed to turn away Jewish candidates at their initial interview, a task that requires detecting passers. He takes pride in his ability to detect Jews not only by physical appearance, but also by voice. His troubles begin when his failing eyesight necessitates his wearing glasses that, ironically, make him look like a Jew himself, so that the CEO no longer wants him visible in the glass enclosed front office and he loses his job. His appearance has also raised suspicions among his neighbors, some of whom are active in the white supremacist antisemitic movement, the Christian Front, and who pressure him into proving that he’s one of them by attending a rally downtown. After the speaker, modeled on the popular radio host and ideological leader of the movement Father Coughlin, fires up the crowd by assuring them that “Boston is cleansing herself!” members of the audience begin to shout “The Jews! The Jews!”²³ Within minutes, Newman is spotted, pummeled, and thrown out of the hall, his troublesome glasses bent out of shape.

In *Focus*, Miller insists on the word “Jew” when “Jewish” might have served as an alternative. Newman’s elderly mother’s first response to the sight of him with his glasses is “You almost look like a Jew.”²⁴ The same is true for his neighbors, and for Newman himself as he peers into his bathroom mirror wearing his new glasses—“he was looking at what might very properly be called the face of a Jew. A Jew, in effect, had gotten into his bathroom.”²⁵ Despite their differences in perspective, *Focus* and “Old Stock” both read like parables about the effect of the charged word “Jew” in America during the same historical period, particularly in their similar endings. Mrs. Elkins decides to identify with the ethnic group reviled by WASP America, and Newman, when he reports the violence directed at him at the local precinct, also identifies as a

victimized Jew. On hearing Newman's address, the policeman says, "On that street . . . How many of you people live there?"

"There are the Finkelsteins on the corner . . ."

"Just them and yourself?" the policeman interrupted.

"Yes, just them and myself," Mr. Newman said.²⁶

Neither Mrs. Elkins nor Mr. Newman can bear to hear the word "Jew" applied to themselves, yet both of them respond to antisemitism by identifying as Jews at the end.

Newman is so devastated at being cast as a Jew by his white male peers that he develops an aversion to the very sound of the word. When walking in a crowd on 5th Avenue, "he caught a conversation behind him and slowed down to listen. For the sound 'ew' had come from back there and he must know to what it referred."²⁷ In the penultimate draft of the typescript, Miller elaborated on the revulsion felt by Newman, who recalled that on numerous occasions while walking along Broadway the sound "ew" had struck his ears and chilled his heart, rendering it a "special" and "horrible" sound, one whose inclusion in numerous English words made them seem ugly to him.²⁸ For Newman, the word itself, like the people it signifies, contaminates the English language, and as a homonym for "you" it becomes a stalking accusation. Miller confirmed what could be inferred from the novel itself—that he was provoked into writing *Focus* when confronted with antisemitism during the war years when he worked the night shift in the Shipfitting Department of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. "It was by no means an uncommon remark that we had been maneuvered into this war by powerful Jews who secretly controlled the Federal Government."²⁹

Hypersensitivity to "Jew" after the war also inspired writers to be bold when they invoked it. The same year that Miller drafted *Focus*, Muriel Rukeyser published "Letter to the Front," where she expressed what would become a recurring theme in the post-war years—that the flip side of the Jew's alienation is moral and existential advantage.³⁰

To be a Jew in the twentieth century
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
Wishing to be invisible, you choose
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.³¹

Within the span of five years, during and in the wake of the Holocaust, these three Jewish American writers depict diverse attitudes toward the word "Jew." Calisher depicts how a Jewish American internalized antisemitic

loathing so deeply that she cannot bring herself to mouth the word outside of Jewish space; Miller dramatizes the visceral response of a racist WASP, repelled by even a hint of the word; Rukeyser pledges allegiance to the moral obligation that it demands.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Jewish “ethnic” culture flourished on the page, on the screen, and in the university classroom. Jewish writers began to claim the word that had so often been recorded in Anglo-American literature as a term of disgust, exemplified in Rukeyser’s proud declaration “to be a Jew in the twentieth century is to be offered a gift.” Writers no longer shied away from portraying characters who were boldly, even stridently Jewish, nor did they hesitate to satirize them. For several decades after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, Jewish writers stopped tiptoeing around this provocative term. In 1959, Grace Paley burst on the scene with “The Loudest Voice,” where Jewish immigrant children hijack and lampoon Christmas, where the stereotype of the loud mouthed Jew is celebrated in satire.³² That same year with the publication of “Eli, the Fanatic,” Philip Roth satirized first generation suburban Jews so fixated on social acceptance by their Gentile neighbors that they turn their backs on Hasidic Holocaust survivors seeking refuge in their neighborhood. When the lawyer hired by the Jewish community to oust these religious war orphans switches sides and dons the Hasidic garb of his refugee alter ego, his WASP neighbor phones him with a disturbing warning.

Eli, there’s a Jew at your door.

That’s me.

Nonsense, Eli, I saw him with my own eyes.

That’s me, I saw you too, painting your rocks pink.

Eli, you’re having a nervous breakdown again.³³

Exchanging clothes with a Hasidic Holocaust survivor in an act of empathy and identification that makes him visible as a Jew, Eli causes his neighbors, Jewish and non-Jewish, to conclude that he suffers from a mental disorder that requires immediate hospitalization.

Twenty years later, Bernard Malamud will also mock the discomfort of upwardly mobile Jews in the presence of a “Jew.” Malamud takes a swipe at both T. S. Eliot and Edgar Allen Poe in his extraordinary story, “The Jewbird.” The bold brilliance of this piece is already evident on the first page, when a crow, rather than the raven in Poe’s classic “Annabelle Lee,” alights on the windowsill of a New York apartment. This hungry Yiddish speaking bird named

Schwartz, unlike Eliot's Jew landlord, is homeless and in search of a safe haven from a pogrom. An Eastern European refugee, he begs to be admitted to the home of Harry and Edie Cohen, assimilating American Jews who reject this haunting reminder of their European past. In contrast to Poe's noble raven whose lugubrious refrain "Nevermore" refers to the death of a beloved young maiden, the essence of romantic love, the crow, who eventually tutors the family's son until his schoolwork and violin playing improve, is a stereotyped ghost of annihilated Eastern European Jewry.

As Cohen, with his priestly name, performs a parody of the *kapara* ritual by twirling the crow around his head before flinging him out the window to his death, Edie asks her husband "What have you got against the poor bird?" "Poor bird, my ass," replies Harry. "He's a foxy bastard. He thinks he's a Jew."³⁴ In naming a crow Schwartz, meaning black in Yiddish, Malamud conflates African Americans seeking refuge from Jim Crow oppression with Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe. This equivalence is played out in the title as well, for *Jewbird* when pronounced with an exaggerated Yiddish accent, would be Jewboyd, akin to the antisemitic slur Jewboy, the equivalent of the African American slur, black boy.³⁵ Since Jewish males were demeaned in America with the epithet Jewboy, it isn't surprising that a writer would in turn appropriate this insult for the title of his autobiography.

Alan Kaufman did just that in 2001 in his coming-of-age memoir of growing up in the Bronx, son of a scarred Holocaust survivor mother. In *Jew Boy* Kaufman struggles with the victimization imprinted on his soul. By combining the word Jew, an identity he embraces, with boy, Kaufman indicates that his life story must be understood as a response to how Jews have been perceived and treated historically, as well as where they are on America's racial map. This is made explicit in a chapter entitled "The N-Word," where his teenage friendship with a black student breaks down under the weight of racial tensions. Kaufman vowed never to say the n-word, "I wouldn't allow myself to degenerate into that. After all, I'm a Jew. Son of a Holocaust survivor. Have come to grasp the nature of persecution . . . You've been beaten up, called names. . . . So you don't do that to blacks, even if your father says it . . . You don't say the n-word, ever."³⁶ When Gregory rejects him because "You're white. I'm black. Nothing's gonna change that,"³⁷ Kaufman pleads with him, "Don't look at my color, man, look at me, who I am." Gregory, however, insists that he sees "white, spelled out in big capital letters," causing Alan to lose control, hurl the n-word at him, and feel profound remorse. "He'll never forgive me. I know it . . . He never did."³⁸

The post-war years, therefore, produced a broad spectrum of writing with “Jew” appearing proudly, satirically, stridently, and unapologetically. In 1958 Karl Shapiro published a volume of poetry entitled *Poems of a Jew*, which at that time was clearly a provocation. In 1946, he was appointed the fifth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and between 1950 and 1955 he served as the editor of *Poetry*, the premier magazine in the field. By the time *Poems of a Jew* appeared, Shapiro felt secure not only in choosing this title for his collection, but also in writing a poem entitled “Alphabet” (1954) that begins:

The letters of the Jews as strict as flames
Or little terrible flowers lean
Stubbornly upwards through the perfect ages,
Singing through solid stone the sacred names.³⁹

When the literary and cultural critic Alfred Kazin chronicled his early years as an ambitious son of Eastern European immigrants, he entitled his memoir *A Walker in the City* (1951), with the move from Brownsville to Manhattan symbolizing his journey from a Yiddish world in taste, sound, smell, and viewpoint to a career in English language and culture. Two worlds separated by a long ride on the El. Only toward the end of his account of his longings for the “real city,” does he map the Jew on this New York landscape. “Beyond Brownsville was all ‘the city,’ that other land I could see for a day . . . Beyond was the strange world of Gentiles, all of them with flaxen hair, who hated Jews, especially poor Jews . . . to be a Jew meant that one’s very right to existence was always being brought into question. Jews were Jews; Gentiles were Gentiles. The line between them had been drawn for all time. What had my private walks into the city to do with anything!”⁴⁰ However, when those private strivings eventually led to a successful career as a prominent figure in the growing field of American literary studies, he sent out a bold message with the title of his subsequent memoir, *New York Jew* (1978). The entire first section, dedicated to the 1940s, is marked by a fierce sense of mission to tell the story of European Jews. Moreover, for the man of letters acclaimed for his books and articles on American literature and nurtured on literary modernism, he is enraged by Ezra Pound’s antisemitism. When a friend of his at CBS who monitored foreign news thrusts a transcript of Pound’s Italian Fascist radio broadcasts into his face, Kazin is shocked to read that Pound is not satisfied with sporadic violence against Jews. He would prefer their systematic mass annihilation. “Don’t start a pogrom—an old style killing of small Jews.”⁴¹ Kazin

reacts with anger and pain, repeating the hurtful phrase, “Small Jews. Little Jews . . . I could imagine my father and mother, my sister and myself, our original tenement family of ‘small Jews,’ . . . fuel for the flames.”⁴²

Until the 1990s, Jewish American literature tended to be taught and discussed through the prism of ethnic and minority experience, but over the past two decades ethnic literature has been redefined as the product of color and disadvantage, so that Jewish American authors have been assigned to the category of white privilege.⁴³ Recent developments, however, among them Trumpism, neo-Nazi verbal violence in demonstrations, and antisemitic attacks on Jews, are destabilizing the labels that from the outset have not reflected historical Jewish experience in the United States, and now no longer address current political and social reality.⁴⁴ I would like to conclude by turning to the work of two contemporary American authors who have written powerful and disturbing works that reopen debates around the J-word.

In 2012 Joshua Harmon’s dark comedy *Bad Jews* about the fractious legacy of the Holocaust for grandchildren of survivors was performed in New York city, and by 2015 it had been produced around the world, from South Africa and Canada to Australia and Israel; it was the third most performed play in the United States that season. In 2015, right before its premier in London, Harmon had to delete one of the key lines in the play due to the attacks on the French weekly satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher supermarket in Paris. “Now, when it’s easier to be Jewish than it’s ever been in the history of the world, now when it’s safest, now we should all stop?”⁴⁵ Subsequent antisemitic attacks both in Europe and the US have made this play more provocative than Harmon had anticipated when he wrote it. Not only has a play named *Bad Jews* necessitated security checks at the entry to theaters, it also resulted in a London Underground ban on advertising posters at its stations “because they may cause widespread or serious offence.” *Bad Jews* takes place on the evening of the funeral of a Holocaust survivor, as his three grandchildren quarrel fiercely about who deserves to inherit their only family heirloom, the *chai* Poppy always wore that became a sacred relic because he kept it hidden under his tongue when he was in a concentration camp. Daphna contends that her intention to move to Israel and her engagement to an Israeli qualify her to perpetuate their grandfather’s profound identification as a Jew. When her cousin Liam, who missed the funeral because he was skiing in Aspen, arrives that same evening with his non-Jewish girlfriend Melody, Daphna learns that Liam already possesses the *chai* which he claims his mother gave him at the behest of their grandfather on his deathbed and that he plans to propose to Melody with this heirloom in

place of an engagement ring. Liam's case for inheriting this legacy is paternity; he's the oldest male grandchild and he asserts it was his grandfather's intention to honor patrilineal descent. In the midst of harsh words that soon lead to physical blows, Daphna injures Melody when she yanks the amulet off her neck. At the sight of blood, Melody is convinced that she could be contaminated from rusty metal even though Liam assures her that gold doesn't rust. "It was in someone's *mouth!* I could have an infection. I want to go to the hospital." Before Liam leaves with Melody, he accuses Daphna of fabricating her "good Jew" story about her Israeli ties, and Daphna accuses Liam's mother of stealing the *chai* when her father was no longer coherent. Left alone with Liam's brother Jonah, Daphna blames him for trivializing his Jewish heritage by his insistence on remaining neutral in the conflict between her and Liam. Jonah responds in the play's finale by slowly removing a fresh bandage from his arm where Poppy's concentration camp number is now inscribed onto his body.

So how are we to recognize who are the bad Jews in this play? From Melody's perspective, a golden amulet has been alchemically transformed into metal that can rust and contaminate its wearer simply because it was in a Jewish mouth. That is, Jews by definition are inherently "bad" as defilers of Christians. Is Liam a bad Jew because he entrusted a non-Jew with the relic that represents his family's history of victimization by the Nazis? Is Daphna a bad Jew because she entrusts her Jewish identity to Israeli nationhood? Is Jonah a bad Jew because he believes that Jewish identity depends on passing on a history of victimization which, when taken to an extreme, requires self-inflicted bodily injury as practiced by the Nazis?⁴⁶ Can any of these actions safeguard Jewish identity in America for ethnic Jews? At the time of drafting the play, Harmon wrote a dialogue about the uniquely safe zone inhabited by Jews of his generation, and the challenges to identity resulting from that safety. Ironically, subsequent events have cast a disturbing shadow over marquees with the words "Bad Jews" on them and have even prohibited public advertising of the play.⁴⁷

In *Bad Jews*, Joshua Harmon dramatizes the way that American Jews realize their Jewish identity via the Holocaust and Israel. A few years later, Joshua Cohen will take the latter option to its extreme in his 2022 satirical novel for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, *The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family*. Cohen set his story in the early 1950's when Jews were intent on keeping a low profile, as portrayed in the works of Calisher, Miller, and Philip Roth. In this novel, Ruben Blum, a newly appointed faculty member in the History Department of a college in upstate New York and the first Jew on the faculty, is

expected to escort a candidate invited to give a job talk on a subject unrelated to his own position or research, because, in the words of his department head, “this man is one of your own.”⁴⁸ Although Blum clarifies that he does not have the credentials to accompany this candidate—“Medieval Iberia is out of my expertise”—his department head does not distinguish between professional and ethnic identity: “The man’s field, Rube, is Medieval Iberia and,” he hesitated, “the history of the Jews.”⁴⁹ Blum’s rationale goes unheeded. “I am a Jewish historian, but I am not an historian of the Jews.”⁵⁰

As yet untenured and the college’s token Jew, Blum aims to please. When his senior colleagues ask him to perform Santa Claus at the faculty party since he doesn’t celebrate Christmas, he agrees. When they assume that he can help them with their tax returns, he explains that his expertise in American taxation history does not make him an accountant. When asked to host a job candidate who is “one of your own,” he finds himself escorting Ben-Zion Netanyahu, father of Benjamin, who provides the “negligible episode” in the title based on a historical anecdote relayed to Cohen by Harold Bloom. The Netanyahus in this satire promptly earn the moniker “Yahus,” as they wreak havoc on campus and in Blum’s home. In a parody of the American Western, their unruly behavior so disrupts this small enclave of American respectability that eventually the Sheriff has to restore law and order. “Those fucking people. Excuse me Professor Blum,” complains the Sheriff. Ruben is quick to disassociate himself from them. “Turks . . . what did you expect? . . . just a bunch of crazy Turks. . . .”⁵¹ No Israelis here, that is, no Jews.

Yet “the Jew” plays a major role in the writing and the reception of *The Netanyahus*. Ben-Zion Netanyahu’s thesis in his scholarly book *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain* is that the motivation for the persecution of the Jews was not suspicion of religious backsliding of *conversos*, or New Christians, who secretly continued to practice Judaism, but rather their racial identity. According to Netanyahu, the Inquisition was fueled by fear of the contamination of pure Spanish blood, *Limpienza de sangre*. In other words, fifteenth-century Spain marked a turning point in which the Jew was redefined by race rather than religion.⁵² Despite the historical anecdote about an Israeli scholar on an American campus that inspired Cohen to write *The Netanyahus*, this novel isn’t about Israelis at all; it’s a satire of contemporary liberal Jewish America’s perception of Israelis, set in a period that serves as an analogue for the present. In the post-war years, Will Herberg argued in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* that Jews were the third religion on America’s map of faith. Within a few years, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan argued in *Beyond the Melting Pot* that

Jews were an ethnic group, hearkening back to Horace Kallen's influential essay, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," that proposed hyphenated American identities by descent.⁵³ Whereas Blum behaves like Herberg's Jew in the hope that he will be accepted into the WASP college community, his colleagues treat him like an ethnic Jew. Moreover, Blum's rebellious teenage daughter Judy is obsessed with fixing her ethnic Jewish nose through plastic surgery, a theme that Philip Roth first satirized in *Goodbye, Columbus* and which Cohen takes to a farcical extreme.⁵⁴ The Netanyahus in this book, therefore, both in Ben-Zion's scholarly thesis and in the family's crass and uncivilized behavior, burst into an arena where American Jews are aiming for religious acceptance and ethnic invisibility, and instead find themselves threatened by stereotypical ethnic Jews, that is, by Israelis.

Joshua Cohen claims that, "This is really a book about the [Donald] Trump years" . . . "It's about a family coming to crash a 'good liberal' . . . this raucous family comes and upends his liberal pieties. That was essentially my condition under Trump." According to Allison Kaplan Sommer who interviewed the author for *Haaretz* immediately after the Pulitzer Prize announcement, his initial thoughts as he began to write the book were as much about the US president as they were about the relationship between Israeli and American Jews.⁵⁵ Yet Cohen chose to portray a traumatized liberal by employing what he called "a perfect structural metaphor," namely how Israeli "raucous" foreign and domestic policies in recent years right up to the current right-wing government and its judicial coup often embarrass liberal Jewish Americans seeking acceptance among their peers. Furthermore, despite the fact that American Jews tend not to equate their Jewish identity with Israeli nationality, non-Jewish readers sometimes do. For example, NPR journalist John Powers, praising what he describes as a brilliant campus novel, had this to say about its main theme: "Their [the Netanyahus] unruliness finds a counterweight in the Blum family's eagerness to be free of the Jews' tortured history. In their quest for the bland, thoughtless comforts of the '50s American dream, they're hoping to fit in, to shed their cultural identity. But, of course, they can't. Even in small-town Corbindale, N.Y., Benzion and his family invade their house with the very Jewishness they've been trying to ignore. You can try all you want to escape your roots, *The Netanyahus* suggests, but they still have a hold on you."⁵⁶ In other words, for Powers, a prominent American non-Jewish cultural journalist, *The Netanyahus* is a book about inescapable "Jewishness," a tale of the return of the repressed "Jew" in the form of Israelis. For Powers this novel is a morality tale: Rubin Blum in the 1950s denies his Jewish identity by insisting

that the Netanyahus are not “one of your own”; indeed, he labels them Turks in order to produce a shared Other for Christians and Jews in America. John Powers’ current take away from this novel is that Israelis are the inescapable inner Jew of ethnic Jewish Americans. Hence, their ethnicity in America, from the point of view of many non-Jewish Americans, is intertwined with Israel and its policies.

No American writer has done more to question and deconstruct the very concept of “Jew” than Philip Roth.⁵⁷ In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Nathan Zuckerman throttles an octogenarian who suspects that his adopted grandson may not be Jewish. “Your sacred genes! What do you see inside your head? Genes with JEW sewed on them? Is that all you see in that lunatic mind, the unstained natural virtue of Jews?”⁵⁸ In all of his works, Roth fiercely attacks essentialist definitions of the Jew, while at the same time he imagines,⁵⁹ over and over again, the powerful historical, social, and psychological forces at play in the lives of Jews. As for the word itself, Roth evacuates “Jew” of any religious or ethnic import in *The Counterlife* when Nathan Zuckerman tries to persuade his brother Henry to abandon his new life as a settler on the West Bank and return to New Jersey. Nothing expresses the ambiguity, unease, and absurdity surrounding the J-word than Zuckerman’s letter to his brother.

Look at the place you now want to call home: a whole country imagining itself, asking itself, “What the hell is this business of being a Jew?” . . . It’s a question that’s always had to be answered: the sound “Jew” was not made like a rock in the world—some human voice said “Djoo,” pointed to somebody, and that was the beginning of what hasn’t stopped since.”

Notes

1. Hortense Calisher, *Herself* (New York: Dell, 1972), 49.
2. Calisher, *Herself*, 49.
3. Hortense Calisher, "Old Stock," in *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers*, ed. Joyce Antler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 151.
4. Calisher, "Old Stock," 152.
5. Calisher, 152.
6. Ben Sales, "'Jew' isn't a slur. You don't have to avoid saying it," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/05/jew-not-slur/>. See also Lawrence Bush, "When is the Word 'Jew' Offensive?," *Jewish Currents*, July 18, 2013, <https://jewishcurrents.org/when-is-the-word-jew-offensive>.
7. Quoted in Sales, "'Jew' isn't a slur."
8. Although the plot of the British Jewish author Andrew Sanger's novel *The J-Word* (Snowbooks, 2009) revolves around contemporary antisemitism, racial politics in the UK is significantly different from American discourse on race where the J-word must be heard in the context of the taboo on the N-word.
9. Cynthia Baker, *Jew* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).
10. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).
11. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44634/the-jewish-cemetery-at-newport>.
12. Emma Lazarus, "In the Jewish Synagogue in Newport," in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 103.
13. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 5.
14. Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 32.
15. Yeziarska, 37.
16. Yeziarska, 37.
17. Yeziarska, 108.
18. Yeziarska, 151.
19. Hester's pride in claiming a word that is socially tainted can refer back to her namesake Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*.
20. Yeziarska, 152.
21. Yeziarska, 152.
22. Yeziarska, 155.
23. Arthur Miller, *Focus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 172.
24. Miller, *Focus*, 33.
25. Miller, 33.

26. Miller, 234.
27. Miller, 201.
28. Earlier draft titled *Some Shall Not Sleep*, p. 212. Arthur Miller Papers, 5.4, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
29. Miller, Arthur, "Face in the Mirror: Anti-Semitism Then and Now," *New York Times Book Review*, October 14, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/14/books/the-face-in-the-mirror-anti-semitism-then-and-now.html?searchResultPosition=1>.
30. See Isaac Rosenfeld's essay for the classic essay making this argument, "The Situation of the Jewish Writer," in *Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader*, ed. Mark Schechner (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 121–24.
31. Muriel Rukeyser, "To Be a Jew in the Twentieth Century," from *Letter to the Front*, in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 538.
32. Grace Paley, "The Loudest Voice," in *The Little Disturbances of Man* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 53–65.
33. Philip Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic," in *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 287.
34. Bernard Malamud, "The Jewbird," in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997), 325. For a more detailed analysis of this story see, Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
35. Richard Wright published his classic autobiography *Black Boy* in 1943.
36. Alan Kaufman, *Jew Boy: A Memoir* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2001), 207.
37. Kaufman, 212.
38. Kaufman, 213.
39. Karl Shapiro, *Poems of a Jew*, reprinted in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, 552.
40. Alfred Kazin, *Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1951), 99.
41. Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 48.
42. Kazin, *New York Jew*, 51.
43. This new direction is exemplified by David Palumbo-Liu's book in which essays on African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latino/a writings describe a "critical multiculturalism" that does not include Jewish American literature. David Palumbo-Liu, *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). For a more extensive discussion of this development in American literary studies, see Dean Franco, *Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish, and African American Writing* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2006) and Wirth-Nesher, the Introduction to *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*.
44. In May 2023, President Biden announced the first national strategy for combating antisemitism.

45. Joshua Harmon, *Bad Jews* (New York: Abrams, 2017), Preface 12, <https://www.overlookpress.com>.
46. Eiram Sicher has argued that in the denouement, Daphna accords Jonah respect because the number on his arm signifies the somatic mark of Jewish survival. Daphna may feel respect, but I maintain that Harmon leaves the audience with three unsatisfactory affirmations of being a Jew, or three models of Bad Jews. Rather than signaling circumcision as a somatic mark of Jewish identity, or inescapable ethnic/racial somatic identity, Jonah's replication of Nazi cruelty, self-inflicted, conveys a particularly perverse identification as a Jew. Eiram Sicher, *Re-envisioning Jewish Identities: Reflections on Contemporary Culture in Israel and the Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 65.
47. My point of departure in this brief discussion of the J-word in American literature is that the cultural and political resonance of the word "Jew" needs to be understood in the context of specific nations and languages, as Baker has shown in her analysis of European practice, including its complicated usage in Yiddish. In terms of Harmon's drama, could a play with the title *Bad Jews* be performed in Germany where the word "Jude" is more than a possible slur. Nazism has turned it into a taboo, a J-word with associations other than those in America. As far back as the nineteenth century, the German Jew Gabriel Reisser founded a newspaper titled *Der Jude* to counter German Jews' preference for Israelite, Hebrews, or Mosaic.
48. Joshua Cohen, *The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2021), 24.
49. Cohen, 23.
50. Cohen, 2.
51. Cohen, 225.
52. Netanyahu's claim has been repudiated and disproven by many historians based on slim evidence, on outdated methodology, on ignorance of three decades of scholarship on the subject, and on his revisionist history that reads the Holocaust and Zionist ideology back into medieval Spain. The veracity of his claim is not relevant for Joshua Cohen's thematic use of his work, but for a concise argument questioning his conclusions see a review by David Berger in *Commentary*, October, 1995.
53. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1960); Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963); Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot: A Study in American Nationality," *Nation*, 1915, reprinted in *Jewish-American Literature*, 206–17.
54. As Sander Gilman has shown in *The Jew's Body*, the antisemitic connotation of "Jew" in Western culture focuses on the fleshly/bodily definition of this identity

- which has often been internalized by Jews themselves, with one of its manifestations being plastic surgery. Consequently, identifying as a “Jew” has often been associated with essentialist identity, and may be another reason for preferring “Jewish.” Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
55. Alison Kaplan Sommer, “‘Everyone Feared a Lawsuit’: Joshua Cohen on Winning a Pulitzer for ‘The Netanyahus,’” *Haaretz*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-05-16/ty-article/.premium/everyone-feared-a-lawsuit-joshua-cohen-on-winning-a-pulitzer-for-the-netanyahus/00000180-e9ee-dc12-a5b1-fdff4dfa0000>.
 56. John Powers, “*The Netanyahus* Turns the Campus Novel into a Sly Fable about History and Identity,” June 30, 2021, podcast, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/30/1011745840/the-netanyahus-turns-the-campus-novel-into-a-sly-fable-about-history-and-identit>.
 57. For the scholarly equivalent of Roth’s refusal to portray Jews as self-evident historical and sociological identities, see Benjamin Schreier, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish American Literature: Ethnic Studies and the Challenge of Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).
 58. Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson* (New York: Vintage, 2022). Kindle.
 59. See Philip Roth, “Imagining Jews,” in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 193–223.

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“I Didn’t Know There Were Epsteins in Puerto Rico”: Jewish Ethnicity in American Comedy

by Jarrod Tanny

Are American Jews, a race, an ethnic group, or a diasporic nation? According to the current American classification system, Jews are none of these things. Ashkenazi Jews of European ancestry, who until quite recently were the overwhelming majority of American Jewry, are considered to be white; they merely happen to practice a different religion. To be sure, there is some foundation to this line of reasoning. Jews have been defined and treated as a white religious community by the state and by most Americans since America’s inception, at a time when the binary white-black color line determined every American’s right to not be enslaved. Yet the history of American Jewry demonstrates that looking to racial classification as the sole determinant of “what is a Jew” belies the many cultural and social nuances of the past and present that have marked the Jews as different and, at times, a category of people who were excluded from the governing ideology of white Christian America. This has ironically been truer in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than earlier times, despite the rise of the Civil Rights and Social Justice movements. Antisemitism has ebbed and flowed since the early 1900s and many of the tropes targeting Jews have echoed those of nineteenth-century European racial antisemitism, rather than discrimination against a community because of its religious practices. The charges of unacceptable Jewish difference that have shaped modern Europe’s treatment of the Jews have periodically surfaced in American culture even if they have not engendered legal discrimination, let alone genocide.

But Jewish ethnic (or racial, as these categories fit imperfectly) difference in America has not merely been defined by the gatekeepers of normative whiteness. Exclusion from white American Christendom worked in tandem with Jewish agency in constructing a group identity that, much like the other post-World War II “pride” communities, celebrates Jewish ethnic difference. American Jews have expressed ethnic particularism in multiple ways. Many Jews define themselves through affiliation with Israel, honoring their ancestral homeland, which was reestablished as a state in the twentieth century, not only because it served as a necessary refuge from antisemitism, but because of a yearning to recover the Jewish ethno-national homeland. American Jews have also built their identity through other channels, such as foodways, literature, and entertainment. Comedy in particular, has provided an effective vehicle for showcasing Jewish distinctiveness and exclusion while simultaneously expressing affinity to other ethnic and racial minorities. These groups, including Italians, Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian Americans, have all found comfort and derived pleasure in being outsiders in a society allegedly founded by and for outsiders. Being placed outside the boundaries of whiteness has allowed racial and ethnic minorities to explore, imagine, and respect their similarities while simultaneously critiquing the system that has excluded them.

This essay will examine the construction of Jewish difference in America—a minority that can lay claim to being an ethnic community past and present—through the lens of popular culture and comedy. An analysis of films, sitcoms, and stand-up comedy since the 1950s illustrates that defining American Jews as white people who merely happen to practice a different religion ignores how Jews continue to see themselves, thereby erasing their history and multifaceted identity.

“Are the Jews white?” This question appeared with a vengeance in public discourse in the 2010s and shows no signs of letting up.¹ For those on the political left, Ashkenazi Jews are unquestionably white, and much of this argument hinges on the fact that non-Orthodox Jews—a visible minority by choice of cultural practices—can in most contexts pass for white.² Jews do not have to fear the often deadly consequences of being pulled over by the cops, nor are they suspected of being in the United States illegally because of their complexion and an inflected English that marks them as alien. Moreover, Jews owned slaves and benefited from American white supremacy in bygone years to a degree that would have been impossible if they were not white. This “complicity” in

white supremacy, so the argument goes, explains the unprecedented social mobility Jews have enjoyed from the nineteenth through the twentieth century, in contrast to most other immigrant communities.³ Even the stain of Christ-killing that had followed the Jews throughout the western diaspora since antiquity carried little weight here because the Constitution guarantees religious freedom. Whatever happened “over there” in Europe is not relevant “over here” because America is different, for Jews at least.

Yet the explosion of white supremacy since the onset of the Trump era has rendered such claims overly simplistic, even if the United States has been “good for the Jews” (as the truism goes) in the long arc of American history. White supremacists have fixated on the Jew as an irredeemable outsider and an existential threat, and they have proclaimed this publicly far beyond the margins of extremism, as the 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally demonstrated. What had allegedly become unacceptable among polite society after the Holocaust—even in Europe—has become normative among white Christian nationalists. Defining the Jew as racial alien is no longer a position confined to David Duke and the neo-Nazis who previously existed outside the boundaries of respectability because those boundaries have largely vanished. Even if contemporary white supremacy does not pose an imminent danger to American Jews, it nevertheless evokes fear of exclusion and persecution.

Indeed, the American racial binary conceals a more complex reality. The very meaning of race was contested and changed over time; it “was at once biological and cultural, inherited and acquired,” according to David R. Roediger.⁴ America’s rapidly changing demography further challenged any neat divisions between black and white due to the mass migration of Irish, Italians, Poles, Jews, and other southern and eastern Europeans between the 1840s and the 1920s. If their race had been of little concern in earlier times it was due in part to their negligible presence and swift dispersion across the nation. But the onset of industrialization meant a need for cheap labor, and millions of impoverished Europeans heeded the call.⁵ For the Jews in particular the eruption of violent antisemitism in tsarist Russia in 1881 increased the urgency of a mass exodus, which only came to a halt with the American government’s imposition of immigration quotas after World War I. Concentrated in the urban industrial centers of the North East, these “other” Europeans were now a conspicuous presence, and in the eyes of the growing nativist movement they were seen as racially alien to America’s purported Anglo-Saxon character.

These eastern Jews (along with Italians, Poles, Ukrainians, and others) were “conditionally white” or “in-betweens” who needed to prove themselves

worthy of belonging to what would later be called, authoritatively, the Caucasian race.⁶ But conditional whiteness frequently engendered the hostile racialization of the Jews during the inter-War era both in the public sphere and behind closed doors. The legal status of the Jews could not prevent Henry Ford from reprinting *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1925 in his newspaper *The Dearborn Independent*, which enjoyed a circulation of 500,000 subscribers. Nor could it prevent American hero Charles Lindbergh from giving his infamous “America First” speech in 1941 in Des Moines, Iowa. Although Lindbergh condemned “the persecution of the Jewish race in Germany” (yet he still referred to them as a “race”), he stated that American Jewish “ownership and influence” in entertainment, media, and government was pushing the United States into an unwanted war. Lindbergh also came dangerously close to implying that Jewish loyalty to their own race superseded their loyalty to America.⁷ The unconstitutionality of religious discrimination also failed to prevent American (and Canadian) universities from finding ways to institute quota systems to keep the alien Jewish people’s presence on college campuses to a minimum. Before World War II, writes Eric Goldstein, “Jews were a racial conundrum, a group that could not be clearly pinned down according to prevailing categories.”⁸

The horrors of the Holocaust opened the eyes of America to the genocidal consequences of treating the Jews as a race, even though few in America at the time wanted to see the organized carnage of Nazism as a “Jewish Holocaust” rather than a universal crime against humanity.⁹ American discourse returned to treating the Jews as a mere religious minority, which can be seen in the classic 1947 film *Gentleman’s Agreement*, where journalist Philip Schuyler Green (played by Gregory Peck) goes undercover “as a Jew” to experience the full brunt of antisemitism. One of the most memorable (and telling) scenes finds Green trying to explain antisemitism to his eleven-year-old son, Tommy:

Tommy: What’s anti-Semitism?

Phil: Oh, that’s where some people don’t like other people just because they’re Jews.

Tommy: Why? Are they bad?

Phil: Some are, sure. Some aren’t. It’s like everybody else.

Tommy: What are Jews, anyway? I mean, exactly.

Phil: You remember last week when you asked me about that big church? I told you there were lots of different churches.

Tommy: Yeah.

Phil: The people who go to that particular church are called Catholics, see? There are people who go to other churches, and they're called Protestants. And then there are others who go to still different ones, and they're called Jews, only they call their kind of churches synagogues or temples.

Tommy: And why don't some people like those?

Phil: Well, that's kind of a tough one to explain, Tom. Some people hate Catholics and some hate Jews.

Tommy: And no one hates us 'cause we're Americans.

Mrs. Green: Ahem.

Phil: Well, no, no. That's, uh, that's another thing again. You can be an American and a Catholic, or an American and a Protestant, or an American and a Jew. Look, Tom, it's like this. One thing's your country, see? Like America, or France, or Germany, or Russia, all the countries. The flag is different, and the uniform is different, and the language is different. . . . But the other thing is religion, like the Jewish, or the Catholic, or the Protestant religions. That hasn't anything to do with the flag, or the uniform, or the airplanes. Got it?¹⁰

That one third of the of the world's Jews had been exterminated because of their race across the ocean in the preceding five years was not relevant. That the east European Jews in inter-war America had been treated as less than white in numerous contexts was forgotten. This film was a disavowal of religious discrimination in a land that had enshrined freedom of worship, a proclamation of the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition's inclusiveness, where the whiteness of the Jews was taken for granted, even if recent history suggested otherwise.

This is the context in which the explosion of Jewish popular culture that began in the 1950s needs to be understood. Perhaps more than anyone else, Lenny Bruce and Philip Roth deserve credit for ushering in this era of unapologetic Jewishness. Although Jewish executives, script writers, and standup comedians dominated Hollywood and the Borscht Belt circuit in previous decades, the culture they produced was largely devoid of explicit Jewishness, certainly the irreverent and subversive declaration of Jewish difference for which Bruce, Woody Allen, Joan Rivers, Sarah Silverman, and Larry David later became famous. These new Jews emerged in tandem with the celebratory multiculturalism of the Civil Rights era and the counterculture of the late 1960s, but their expression of Jewish difference was grounded in the centuries of Jewish

discrimination that America sought to forget, or at least sought to impute to the Old World, because, after all, America was different.

Lenny Bruce claimed otherwise, and in the late 1950s he began to wage war against what he branded the entire rotten edifice of a bigoted, greedy, imperialist America, using his own Jewish identity to take down the establishment. One of Bruce's most subversive comedy routines involved his confrontation with antisemitism. He flaunted his own Jewish heritage as Jewish heresy, bragging of his "personal" guilt for a two-thousand-year-old crime for which, he joked, there should rightfully be a statute of limitations: "Yes we did it. I did it. . . . [And] not only did we kill him, but we're gonna kill him again when he comes back."¹¹ On behalf of the Jewish people, Lenny Bruce took responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus. It was an unprecedented act, for he acknowledged in public with more than a touch of pride the very act that had marked the Jew as eternal criminal, blasphemer, and demon throughout the Middle Ages and well into the modern era. No other comedian had done this in mixed company before Bruce, even though Jews had been mocking Jesus and Christianity behind closed doors for centuries. Bruce's irreverence in a Jewish key proved to be a trendsetter, and in the ensuing decades numerous Jewish comics, writers, and filmmakers exploited Christian theology and misappropriated its symbols in order to entertain through ridicule.

Multiple episodes of Larry David's twenty-first-century hit HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* accuse Christendom through comedy of instigating and perpetuating Jewish oppression. In one episode Larry arrives late to the baptismal ceremony of his sister-in-law's Jewish fiancé and he proceeds to interrupt it when he presumes the minister's ritual dunking of the future Christian in the river to be a homicide in progress. Larry screams, chaos erupts, and the groom almost drowns. But once order is restored, the groom refuses to complete his conversion, claiming he had a divine revelation to not abandon his Judaism. The groom's family hails Larry a hero for having saved a wayward Jew from the clutches of Christian proselytism. The wedding is called off and the scene ends with a mob of equally angry Christians and Jews arguing over Scripture and the superiority of their respective faiths.¹²

In the third season episode, "Mary, Joseph, and Larry," Larry eats an entire batch of cookies his wife Cheryl and her family baked, ignorant of the fact that it was a representation of the Nativity of Christ. Although Larry is deeply apologetic, he manages to make matters worse by insisting that he thought they were animal cookies depicting a zoo, and that the Jesus cookie was "a monkey." With an obvious allusion to the medieval charges of blood libel and

Host desecration, Larry is all but accused of blasphemy, vilified by Cheryl's sister for having "swallowed our Lord and Savior!"¹³ And in the seventh season episode, "The Bare Midriff," Larry loses control while urinating in his devoutly Christian receptionist's bathroom and accidentally sprays a portrait of Jesus hanging near the toilet. Upon seeing the painting, his receptionist believes that Jesus has wept, and it is her calling to hit the road and share her blessed object with the world, even though this "miracle" was the product of a Jew's (accidental) desecration of Christianity.¹⁴

Of course, by the time *Curb* was on TV, the Catholic Church had exonerated the Jews of the crucifixion of Jesus, which, for comedian Lewis Black, was a great disappointment. "I have never felt the need to be macho," quips Black, "because I knew that my people had killed God's only begotten son, and that was all I needed on my résumé. 'I killed your savior, so bring it on.' Talk about the ultimate fighting match."¹⁵ But Bruce produced his sacrilegious comedy before the Vatican's absolution of the Jews, and it resulted in his arrest and trial. Although he was convicted of obscenity because it is unconstitutional to charge someone with blasphemy in the United States, the media, the police, and local church officials made it clear that Bruce had crossed the line in mocking Christendom. After his arrest mid-performance in a Chicago nightclub in December 1962, the captain of the city's vice squad warned the club's owner that "If [Bruce] ever speaks against religion, I'm going to pinch you and everyone in here. Do you understand? . . . [H]e mocks the pope—and I'm speaking as a Catholic—I'm here to tell you your license is in danger."¹⁶ One journalist described the subsequent trial as if it were something out of the Middle Ages: "Eventually, the trial took the form of a Catholic inquisition: with a Catholic judge, a Catholic prosecutor, and an all-Catholic jury, every single one of whom showed up on Ash Wednesday with a black smudge on his forehead."¹⁷ Bruce had deployed Jewish humor to dismantle the edifice that had persecuted Jews for centuries, and the Church struck back, declaring his comedy impermissible.

The comedy of Bruce, David, Black, and others suggests that the construction of Jewishness through humor in the United States is grounded in centuries of religious, not ethnic, persecution. However, to claim this as evidence that in America the Jews are a (racially white) community of faith and not an ethnicity is to miss the point. Jewish identity is (and has always been) a complex and perhaps inseparable fusion of theology and genealogy, the latter manifesting itself as our modern categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality. Much of this comedy highlights the Jewish "racial conundrum," as Eric Goldstein

puts it.¹⁸ In one episode of *Curb*, after Larry, his manager Jeff Greene, and their wives Cheryl and Suzie are ejected from their Jewish country club, Cheryl (the only non-Jew among them) suggests they join a rather WASPish club instead:

Suzie: Alright, look, I don't want to offend you, but there's, like, three fucking Jews in the whole club, Okay, It's not for us. It's WASP, WASP, Republican city.

Cheryl: Okay, you know what? I fit in with you guys all the time. For years, I've been going to your things, so—

Larry: How am I gonna even get by in the interview?

Suzie [pointing at Larry]: This one would stick out like a sore fucking thumb, this Jew-face over here.

Larry: Oh, I'm more of a Jew-face than you? . . . I'm much more Gentilely than you are.¹⁹

The ticket of admission to (white) Gentile society is not merely a matter of demeanor but of physiognomy, and “Jew-face” Larry refuses to accept Suzie's contention that he cannot pass the litmus test. Ethnicity and religion are not discrete modes of identity, even for a secular Jew like Larry David.

Lenny Bruce recognized that exclusion rested on far more than Christ-killing and that such exclusion created a bond between Jews and other (often visible) minorities, which he proclaims in one of his most infamous standup bits, replete with racist terminology that would lead to his public shaming on Twitter and “cancellation” by progressive activists if preached in the 2020s:

Are there any n*ggers here tonight? I know that one n*gger who works here, I see him back there. Oh there's two n*ggers, customers, and, ah, aha! Between those two n*ggers sits one kike—man that God for the kike! Uh two kikes. That's two kikes, and three n*ggers, and one spic. One spic—two, three spics. One mick, one spic, one hick, thick, funky, spunky boogey. And there's another kike. Three kikes, one guinea, one greaseball. Three greaseballs, two guineas. Two guineas, one hunky funky lace-curtain Irish mick. That mick spic hunky funky boogey. Two guineas plus three greaseballs and four boogies makes usually three spics. Minus two Yids spic Polack funky spunky Polacks.²⁰

For Bruce, such racist epithets, which he verbalized with a cadence and rhythm reminiscent of a jazz solo, was intended to debunk racism for its absurdity and to unmask the elite for their ignorance of the minorities who made up the underbelly of America. “We piss away a million dollars on Radio Free

Europe," Bruce maintained, "and don't know anything about the country with- in the country—don't know *anything* about these people."²¹ Lenny Bruce was young, good looking, and hip, and his linguistically agile musings on racial and ethnic minorities—in which he included both groups who in twenty-first-century parlance are divided into "people of color" and "white minorities"—made exclusion from the white Anglo-Saxon establishment hip. And this is why in so much humor since Bruce's time the Jew exhibits an affinity to other minorities, be it in the form of shared values, the appropriation of non-Jewish cultural attributes and their amalgamation with Jewish ones, or the establishment of friendships that transcend religion, class, and skin color.

The hipness of exclusion could be a powerful bond, and it was at the heart of the television series, *Welcome Back, Kotter*, which ran from 1975 to 1979 on ABC. The show followed the escapades of "the Sweathogs," a group of lower class, disobedient remedial students at James Buchanan High in Brooklyn, and their tireless teacher, Gabe Kotter, himself a graduate of Buchanan and a former Sweathog. Its principal characters were Jewish (including Kotter), Italian, black, and the ethnically ambiguous Arnold Horshack, whose family name allegedly means "the cattle are dying."²² But the most peculiar student from a cultural perspective is the improbably named Juan Luis Pedro Filippo de Huevos Epstein, a Puerto Rican Jew, who grew up in a house with nine other Puerto Rican Jews," including his siblings Pedro, Irving, and Sanchez. Although Epstein would be labeled a "Jew of color" today, the pilot episode reveals that Epstein is devoid of Latino blood, being of pure Ashkenazi Jewish descent:

Kotter: Epstein, huh.

Epstein: Juan Luis Pedro Filippo de Huevos Epstein, from San Juan.

Kotter: Your mother's Puerto Rican?

Epstein: No, my father. My mother's name is Biberman.

Kotter: I really didn't know that there were Epsteins in Puerto Rico.

Epstein: Oh, there weren't, until the winter of '38, when a boat carrying a shivering Lou Epstein from Odessa to the Bronx stopped in San Juan. [Epstein adopts a Yiddish accent] "Oy!" my grandfather said, "Look at the palm trees! Feel this heat! Look at this tan! Eh, who needs Miami." From that day on there were Epsteins in San Juan!²³

Whatever Epstein's actual heritage, *Welcome Back, Kotter* illustrates how blacks, Hispanics, Italians, and Jews—culturally distinct communities—created a celebratory subculture of delinquency because they shared an alien-

ation from the ideals and puritanism of white Christian America.

Such is the premise behind Jonathan Kesselman's 2003 film *The Hebrew Hammer*, which follows the exploits of a Jewish private investigator (and hero to the masses) who chooses to become a Jewish superhero after enduring a traumatic childhood surrounded by hostile Christians. *The Hebrew Hammer*, insists Kesselman, is part of an emerging genre of cinema he calls "Jewsploitation," a play on the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, such as the canonical *Shaft*. Kesselman insists that the Hammer is "essentially a black Jew,"²⁴ because his appropriation of black stereotypes transforms him into a tough Jew, a cool inner city righteous ruffian. Blackness is grafted onto the Hammer's Jewish body and demeanor, and both cultures seem to coexist comfortably within him. At first glance, he may be taken for some sort of Hasid, bearded and outfitted in the black and white clothing common on the streets of Brooklyn and Jerusalem, an echo of the bygone shtetls of Russia. But the Hammer has traded in the expected Hasidic frock coat for leather and his bookish glasses for a slick pair of flip-up tinted shades. His hat may be that of a *Yeshiva bokher*, but its feather gives it a pimpish appearance. His traditional Jewish pendant, bearing the word *chai* (life) is oversized and it swings from his neck in unison with his other gaudy accessories. His black-inflected Jewish speech rolls off his tongue with ease. The film's soundtrack further conveys a cultural hybridization only possible in America, with a theme song that is reminiscent of 1970s funk, replete with lyrics venerating Jewish empowerment:

Who's the certified, circumcised dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks?
 He's just trying to do some good, helping brothers in the hood.
 Who's the kike that won't cop out when there are gentiles all about?
Boruch atoh adonai eloheyinu melech ha'olam—can you dig it?
 He's a complicated Jew, but no one understands him but his mother.
 Cause he's a bad muthafu-*sheket bevokashuh*.

Hammer is honored as "the baddest Hebe this side of Tel Aviv," because his refashioned Jewishness shares an affinity with black power.²⁵

The Ashkenazi Jew can take a page out of the black man's book because they share a protracted history of persecution at the hands of a common enemy, making them natural allies who speak the universal language of oppression. When the Hammer is given the task of "saving Hanukkah" from a malevolent Santa Claus who intends to make Christmas the only acceptable winter holiday, he calls upon the Kwanzaa Liberation Front (KLF) for help. The

Hammer and the KLF's leader, Mohammed Ali Paula Abdul Rahim, greet each other as if they were members of the same tribe:

Rahim: The Hebrew Hammer. Jewboy. My main man kike.

The Hammer: Mohammed Ali Paula Abdul Rahim. My main n*gga.

A perplexed man in the corner, sitting behind a desk with a name plate that reads "White Accountant," looks up and says, "you just called him a kike, and you—you just called him a n*gger!" Rahim responds that "it's ok when we calls [*sic*] each other that," because against the backdrop of white Christendom, the Jew and the black man enjoy a special relationship.²⁶

It would be facile (and inaccurate) to argue that comedic tropes of shared persecution demonstrate that the black, Latino, and Jewish experience were one and the same. The repudiation of competitive victimhood does not imply equivalence for those who produce Jewish comedy. Consider Kinky Friedman, a satirical country music performer, prolific mystery writer, and failed gubernatorial candidate from Texas. Through a series of songs in the early 1970s, Friedman tackles racism, antisemitism, and many other politically controversial subjects, centering his hybrid identity of Jew and southerner. The opening track on his first album, *Sold American*, illustrates how the victimhood of one minority can be harnessed to address the continued suffering of another. The track title, "We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You" triggers images of Jim Crow segregation, but the man denied admission in the song is in fact Jewish:

While traveling through the Lone Star State
I lost my lunch before I ate.
It happened in a pull-ahead café, Yahoo!
I felt my bones begin to crunch,
I saw my name on the businessman's lunch,
And the neck who owned the place stepped up to say:
"Hey buddy, are you blind,
Say, partner, can't you read the sign?
We reserve the right to refuse service to you,
Take your business back to Walgreens
Have you tried your local zoo?
You smell just like a communist,
You come on through just like a Jew,
We reserve the right to refuse service to you."

The song contains a number of vignettes highlighting Kinky's exclusion from various sites, a stain that follows him into the afterlife:

Well it's just my luck that God's a Texan,
 One big sonbitchin Anglo-Saxon,
 Some crazy kind of tall Norwegian bore . . .
 We reserve the right to refuse service to you,
 Take your business back to Walgreens,
 Have you tried your local zoo?
 Our quota's filled for this year
 On singing Texas Jews,
 We reserve the right to refuse service to you.

These lyrics are a sophisticated commentary on the ambiguous place of the Jew in the (formerly) segregated South and, to a larger extent, in the national imagination. Much as American Jews in an earlier era were stereotyped as aliens of uncertain origins, the narrator's whiteness is put under the microscope. His exclusion is not a product of skin color, but of impugned cultural traits ("You come on through just like a Jew"), seditious politics ("You smell just like a communist"), and in the case of the hereafter, a quota system based on behavior ("singing Texas Jews"). But the song's title is a deliberate reference to Jim Crow and the black man's racial exclusion. Friedman is problematizing the Jew's place on the color line through the unmentioned African American. Kinky's clever lyrics suggest that exclusion from whiteness is not only a shared marker of identity, but a linguistically fluid space, in which the classification of people is an inherently ambiguous practice, dependent as much on context as on alleged physical and cultural attributes.²⁷

The fluid boundaries of ethnicity and race in America have often served as comedic fodder on *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. *Seinfeld* was groundbreaking television because of the ways in which its creators skillfully saturated the series with Jewishness. Although a mere eleven (out of 180) episodes contain plots that reference Judaism or Judaic ritual, the writers nevertheless ascribed Jewish stereotypes to some of its characters (most notably the cheap, neurotic, effeminate George) without naming them as Jews, and crafted its stories and dialogue around arguments over the minutiae of daily life that not only mimicked Jewish speech patterns but in many respects parodied the Talmud's reputed penchant for endless hair splitting and debates about nothing.²⁸ The show is recognizably Jewish to anyone who is familiar with Jews, i.e., to a New Yorker, but not to someone from Butte, Montana, because, to

paraphrase Lenny Bruce, if you live in New York you're Jewish, "even if you're Catholic," but "if you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish."²⁹

Jerry is the only principal character who is named as a Jew on *Seinfeld* and the series playfully reveals how heritage has little to do with his identity but is on occasion relevant. In the second episode, "The Stakeout," long before Jerry mentions he is Jewish, Elaine comes over to his apartment while he is entertaining his extended family. As his relatives start to leave, his cousin Artie approaches Jerry for an introduction to her:

Artie: Oh, we didn't meet.

Jerry: Oh, I'm sorry. Elaine, this is my cousin Artie Levine. [Jerry pronounces it LevEEN]

Artie: LeVine. [Artie pronounces it as if it rhymes with "wine"]

After Artie leaves, Jerry turns to Elaine and quips, "Yeah, LeVine. And I'm Jerry Cougar Mellencamp."³⁰ This is insider Jewish humor, ridiculing the twentieth-century American Jewish practice of name changing in an effort to pass. But the joke implies that such efforts are superficial at best and ultimately doomed to failure. This brief exchange also alerts Lenny Bruce's proverbial New Yorkers that Jerry Seinfeld is Jewish by descent, a topic that will not come up again for four seasons.

Jerry's next allusion to his Jewishness occurs in the fifth season episode, "The Cigar Store Indian." In this episode, Jerry deeply offends a friend of Elaine's whom he is trying to date, a Native American woman named Winona. A series of mishaps begin when Jerry gifts Elaine a cigar store Indian and proceeds to express a number of Native American stereotypes, oblivious to Winona's heritage. For the rest of the episode Jerry attempts to apologize to her but repeatedly walks into ethnically awkward situations, managing to broaden his accidental offensiveness to include Asians, when he offers to take Winona to dinner. Unfamiliar with the neighborhood, Jerry asks a mailman hunched over a mailbox if he knows where, "the Chinese restaurant is around here."³¹ To Jerry's horror, the mailman turns around, revealing that he is Chinese and he then proceeds to lash out at Jerry for his alleged bigotry: "Why must I know? Because I'm Chinese? You think I know where all the Chinese restaurants are? [The mailman then adopts an outrageous Chinese accent] Oh, ask honorable Chinaman for rocation of lestaurant." And as he prepares to storm away, he mutters to Jerry, "Oh, hello American Joe. Which way to hamburger, hotdog stand?" As with Winona, the mailman sees Jerry as yet another white person

insensitive to the history of American racism. But Jerry is flummoxed and in the following scene he tells George that “I don’t get it. Not allowed to ask a Chinese person where the Chinese restaurant is? I mean, aren’t we all getting a little too sensitive? I mean, somebody asks me which way’s Israel, I don’t fly off the handle.” Although Jerry’s tirade is ostensibly social commentary on the excesses of 1990s political correctness, he grounds his position in his Jewish identity, which has far more to do with an apparent connection to his ethno-national homeland than religious practice.

The fluidity of Jewish identity and the questionable ability to pass for anything else is inferred again in the sixth season episode, “The Chinese Woman.” When Jerry dials the wrong number and someone named “Donna Chang” answers the phone, he asks her out because, “I love Chinese women.” However, their date—at a Chinese restaurant she suggested—proves to be a big disappointment, when Jerry learns upon her arrival that she is in fact white. Donna explains that her family changed their name from “Changstein.” Jerry continues to see her nonetheless but is bemused by Donna’s repeated appropriation of Chinese cultural traits, such as taking an acupuncture class, quoting from Confucius, and, quite absurdly, mispronouncing the word “ridiculous” (“ridicurous”) as per Asian stereotype. Although this plotline seems silly at first, Donna’s probable Jewish heritage—dropping the “stein” ending of the family name to make it more American—can be read as another allusion to the impossibility of Jewish assimilation. That her family’s attempt at Americanization inadvertently “ascribes” a Chinese identity to her, further underscores that American identities are malleable but there are limits to effacing (or replacing) one’s ethnicity.³²

Seinfeld and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* share a similar approach to issues involving social etiquette (racial or otherwise), but Larry David eschews the subtlety of the former with his HBO series, given the greater latitude for “offensive” and politically sensitive content on cable television. In the first episode of the tenth season, Larry exploits his conditional whiteness by publicly embracing Trumpism in order to achieve personal (and at least at first, selfish) objectives. Larry is desperate to break off a friendship and business relationship with television producer Philip Rosenthal (creator of *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Somebody Feed Phil*) who wants to collaborate with Larry on a show about food in Ethiopia. Having run out of excuses, Larry shows up to their lunch meeting wearing a MAGA hat. Rosenthal is visibly uncomfortable and embarrassed as the racially diverse clientele stare at them in disgust. When Larry brings up the Ethiopia project (with feigned enthusiasm) he offhandedly asks Phil whether

"that was one of the 'shithole countries,' I can't remember if that was on the list or not," alluding to Trump's infamous xenophobic remark. Phil quickly concocts an excuse and leaves Larry at the restaurant. For the misanthropic Larry the MAGA hat proves to be a blessing, and he subsequently uses it to secure his space at a sushi bar, slipping it on just as a couple are about to sit down next to him. Larry invites them to sit, but they decide to keep their distance and take a table away from the bar. As they leave, Larry smiles at the sushi chef and says, mimicking Trump's voice, "sad, very sad, sad." Being a Trumpist can also save one's life, which Larry later discovers when he accidentally cuts off a belligerent motorcyclist, who then pulls up to Larry's car and calls him a "little fucker," threatening to rip him "out of the fucking car, you little shit." As Larry slips on his MAGA hat the motorcyclist becomes contrite and quietly suggests that Larry "just be more careful next time, ok?"³³ "Jew-face" Larry, can be "white" and, for that matter, "the right kind of white" when the situation dictates it, but his underlying message to the audience is a harsh critique of the bigotry unleashed during the Trump era.

On other occasions, Larry deploys his Jewish identity to advance his ends, even exploiting the Arab-Israeli conflict, a subject that has never interested him. In an eighth season episode, "The Palestinian Chicken," Larry and Jeff go to eat at a Palestinian restaurant to sample the chicken that is all the rage in town. Although the walls are covered in anti-Zionist posters celebrating the Intifada and Islam, Larry and Jeff do not feel the least bit uncomfortable:

Jeff: Mmm, I've never had chicken like this.

Larry: I don't know what the hell they're doing.

Jeff: I don't know. It's nothing like anything I've ever even tasted.

Larry: What about this place? Look at these posters, huh?

Jeff: Yeah, they do not like the Jews. . . .

Larry: We're probably the only Jews [who] ever walked in here.

Jeff: Ever. What these people should do is send their chicken over to Israel.

Larry: For the peace process.

Jeff: Mm-hmm.

Larry: They'd take down all those settlements in the morning. Believe me.

Larry has no objection to eating the cuisine of his "ethno-national" enemies, and neither does he object to the opportunity of sleeping with them.

Larry: Looks like they're planning the next Intifada at this table, but look at this woman. Could be the next Mrs. David. What do you think about that?

Jeff: If by some chance she's gonna get over her antisemitism, odds are—

Larry: Not with me?

Jeff: Not with you . . . Just my gut feeling.

Larry: You know what it is? You're always attracted to someone who doesn't want you, right? . . . Well, here you have somebody who not only doesn't want you, doesn't even acknowledge your right to exist . . . Wants your destruction! That's a turn-on!

Larry, who is now divorced from Cheryl, ultimately seduces Shara the Palestinian, after he astounds her (and everyone else in the restaurant) by preventing his friend Funkhouser from entering the restaurant wearing a yarmulke:

Shara: You're a Jew, yes?

Larry: Yes, I am a Jew. A big Jew. Big [Larry ostentatiously spreads head hands with his index fingers extended].

Shara: Big Jew and you still told him to take off his Jew cap.

Larry: Yes, I did.

Shara: Thank you, my friend. What's your name?

Larry: Leib . . . Son of Nat . . . My friends call me Larry.

Shara: I like you.

Larry: What's not to like?

Shara: Uh, you're a Jew.

Impressed that Larry—who ups his Jewish street cred by deploying his Yiddish name—is willing to turn against his people ostensibly for the defense and honor of Palestine, Shara tells “Leib Son of Nat” to give her a call.³⁴

Later in the episode, Shara goes to Larry's house, and he is able to live out what appears to be a fantasy of Jewish self-hatred in a sexual encounter with outrageous political overtones:

Shara: Fuck me, you fucking Jew!

Larry: Filthy Jew, Filthy Jew.

Shara: Filthy fucking Jew! You Zionist pig. You occupying fuck. Occupy this.

Larry: Yeah, I'm an occupier. I'm an occupier.

Shara: I'm going to fuck the Jew out of you. Yeah.

Larry: Well, that's not so easy.

Shara: You want to fuck me like Israel fucked my country? Show me what you've got!

Larry: Which reminds me of something Theodor Herzl once said. . . .

Shara: Fuck me you Jew-bastard. Fuck me like Israel fucked my people. Show me the promised land, Leib, Son of Nat.

Larry: Keep my father out of it.

Shara: You circumcised fuck!

Larry's minimalist Jewish identity has little, if anything, to do with Israel, but he is willing to embrace Zionist discourse if it means he can have sex with his putative enemy.³⁵

Larry's "subjugation" of Shara can be read in multiple ways. His exploitation of a Palestinian (and her anti-colonial rhetoric during sex) suggests that American Jews are conquerors and aggressors, much as the Christian West colonized exotic continents, killing and enslaving its inhabitants. Whereas in Europe Ashkenazi Jews were the eternally oppressed, in the United States they have achieved whiteness and are privileged enough to reap its benefits over "people of color."³⁶ This is an American Jewish story of power and by implication complicity in white supremacy. But "The Palestinian Chicken" can be viewed through an alternative lens, one that speaks to the tenacious relevance of Jewish difference with ethnicity rather than religion serving as a (frequently desired) barrier to assimilation: American Jews are a diasporic community whose distant national homeland still shapes their identity in the United States. They are a people whose culture is rooted in kinship and common descent, something they share with Italians, Latinos, South Asians, Chinese, and Palestinians rather than Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians. And although this episode satirizes the insignificance of the Arab-Israeli conflict for Larry, it nevertheless draws him into a situation where he can co-opt the Jewish quest for national self-determination and its attendant baggage to enjoy what he describes as "the best sex I've ever had, anywhere."³⁷ The ongoing war for control over Israel-Palestine by its rival claimant "indigenous" communities impacts their brethren in the American diaspora.

The place of Jewish ethnicity in an allegedly multicultural America is further complicated in the 2008 film, *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*, which stars Adam Sandler as an invincible Israeli counter-terrorist commando who, despite his martial accomplishments and constant adulation, decides to abandon his life to follow his dream: to move to America and become a hair stylist. Zohan's parents are not only puzzled by his ambition, but they openly mock

him and ask if he's "a feigeleh"—Yiddish slang for being gay—thereby branding the diaspora Jew as the antithesis of the hyper-masculine Israeli. Zohan chooses to ignore his parents' recriminations and, after faking his own death, absconds to New York City.

Zohan's subsequent struggle to succeed across the Atlantic reveals the thorny relationship between the Jew as immigrant among other immigrants and between homeland and diaspora. In New York, Israelis and Palestinians continue to live as hostile neighbors, as rival business owners on the same block, with mutual accusations and recriminations erupting in the street whenever something goes wrong. But from the perspective of the white Anglo-Saxon power structure there is no difference between Israeli and Arab, and, realizing this, the immigrants ultimately join forces to thwart the plans of a callous urban developer who attempts to remove them from their property to build a shopping mall. In America, Israelis and Arabs share a bond of exclusion, one that is powerful enough to allow Zohan to find love in the arms of Dalia, a Palestinian hair dresser. They wed, and together they fulfill Zohan's dream by opening a beauty salon. The film ends with Zohan's parents coming to America and surprising the couple at their now thriving business. There is a moment of tension as Zohan's father gazes about, assessing what his Israeli son has chosen to do with his life. "So this is where you work? . . . This is your Palestinian wife?" he states, seemingly more as a rebuke than a question. But a moment later the hardened Zionist breaks into a smile and quips, "does she know you're a feigeleh? Congratulations, now cut my hair!"³⁸

The celebration of Jewish-Palestinian unity in *Zohan* is, of course, fantasy. One need only read about the ongoing strife over Israel in the United States to realize that old world legacies do not magically vanish in the new world, simply because "America is different." Yet the film makes an important point: Jews and Arabs, much like the Latinos, African Americans, Italians, and Jews on *Welcome Back, Kotter*, are all "ethnics" who have faced exclusion at times from white Christian America, and skin color is not the only pertinent variable in defining the boundaries of whiteness. For diasporic national minorities, connections to their ancestral homelands remain powerful in America, and they often replicate their foreign values and inter-ethnic discord on American soil. But such discord can be set aside once they acknowledge that the long history of American racism has at times relegated all of them to the category of unwantedness. That the Jews achieved self-determination in their ancestral

homeland long after an American Jewish community took shape is immaterial. Inherited difference and the sacralization of collective memory is the cultural bedrock of all such groups and, during the second half of the twentieth century, American Jews on the whole came to feel an ethnic attachment to Israel. And when the conformist 1950s gave way to an era of ethnic pride among marginalized groups, "ethnicity," writes Werner Sollors, was largely "transformed from a heathenish liability into a sacred asset."³⁹

It may be tempting to argue that the Jewish entertainers who harnessed imagined Jewish difference for the production of comedy were speaking far more to the collective memory of exclusion than the reality of the post-World War Two era, the moment when, as Karen Brodtkin put it, "Jews became White Folks."⁴⁰ But whiteness is neither static nor all-encompassing, and the resurgence of antisemitism since 2016 illustrates that white privilege can be challenged and negated in certain spaces, irrespective of the legal definition of the Jews as a community of faith. Jewish humorists know this and it is why such material resonates with audiences, or at least Jewish ones. Asking whether the Jews are white or not is the wrong question to ask, much as asking whether the Jews are a religion, race, ethnicity, or nation will never yield a conclusive answer. Such categories are hardly scientific and the fluidity of Jewish identity has rendered each of them relevant to varying degrees, depending on time and place. But all this is lost when one focuses exclusively on the white-black color line and people's skin color as the most pertinent marker of otherness. Branding the Jews as white in America today is the flipside of having branded them as an alien race in Europe a century ago. And it is an insult to the Jews who have been denied the right to define themselves on their own terms, because others—from the Enlightenment Philosophes to the nineteenth-century race scientists, to the twenty-first century intersectionalist social justice left—have professed to know better. Humor is one of the channels through which the Jews have pushed back and reclaimed the right to tell their story, to tell their neighbors who they are and what it means to be Jewish in America.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Emma Green, “Are Jews White?” *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2016, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/are-jews-white/509453/>; “Episode 5: Are Jews White?” *The Association for Jewish Studies Podcast*, Season 1, Episode 5, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.associationfor-jewishstudies.org/publications-research/adventures-in-jewish-studies-podcast/are-jews-white-transcript>, 2018; Ari Feldman, “Brandeis U. Press and a Historian Split Over How to Talk About Jews and White Supremacy,” *Forward*, December 20, 2020, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://forward.com/news/460600/jews-white-supremacy-brandeis-black-lives-matter/>. The currently accepted canonical book on the topic is Eric Goldstein’s *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), which explores how Jewish “racial” identity in America evolved over time. Given that the book was published in 2006—a decade before the rise of Trumpism allowed white supremacists to emerge from the woodwork with a blatant antisemitic agenda—it should not be taken as the final word on the subject.
2. See for instance, Nylah Burton, “White Jews: Stop Calling Yourself ‘White-Passing,’” *Forward*, July 2, 2018, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://forward.com/opinion/404482/white-jews-stop-calling-yourself-white-passing/> and my response, “Think Ashkenazi Jews Are White? Ask An Anti-Semite,” *Forward*, July 11, 2018, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://forward.com/opinion/405238/think-ashkenazi-jews-are-white-ask-an-anti-semite/>.
3. See for instance, Feldman, “Brandeis U.”; Lila Corwin Berman, “American Jews Always Believed the U.S. Was Exceptional. We Were Wrong,” *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2018, accessed June 10, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/american-jews-always-believed-the-us-was-exceptional-we-were-wrong/2018/11/01/43be2f62-dd7c-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html.
4. David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 35.
5. Roediger, 41.
6. Roediger, 12, 37. According to Matthew Frye Jacobson, it was only in the mid-twentieth century that the term “Caucasian” became the authoritative inclusive category used to designate the racially ambiguous white peoples of Europe, such as the Celts, Jews, and Italians. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 94.
7. Charles Lindbergh, “Des Moines Iowa Speech,” September 11, 1941, accessed June 10, 2023, <http://www.charleslindbergh.com/americanfirst/speech.asp>.
8. Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 1.

9. On Holocaust memory in the United States, see Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).
10. *Gentleman's Agreement*, directed by Elia Kazan (1947; 20th Century Fox).
11. Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography by Lenny Bruce*, with a new introduction by Eric Bogosian (New York: Fireside, 1992), 155.
12. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, "The Baptism," created by Larry David, aired November 18, 2001, on HBO Network.
13. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, "Mary, Joseph, and Larry," aired November 10, 2002.
14. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, "The Bare Midriff," aired October 18, 2009.
15. Lewis Black, *Me of Little Faith*, ed. Hank Gallo (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 42. Kindle Edition.
16. Cited in Ronald K. L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (Oak Park, IL: Top Five Books, LLC, 2012), 163.
17. Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!!*, from the journalism of Lawrence Schiller (New York: Random House, 1974), 399.
18. Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 1.
19. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, "The 5 Wood," aired February 1, 2004.
20. Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, comp. and ed. John Cohen (New York: Douglas Books, 1970), 11; Lenny Bruce, "Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight," *Lenny Bruce: Let the Buyer Beware*, audio recording, disc 1 (Shout! Factory, 2004).
21. Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, 14.
22. *Welcome Back, Kotter*, "Whodunnit?," created by Gabe Kaplan and Alan Sacks, September 30, 1975, on ABC Network.
23. *Welcome Back, Kotter*, "Welcome Back," September 23, 1975.
24. Quoted in Baz Dreisinger, "The 'Jewsploitation' Craze," *Salon*, December 23, 2003, accessed June 11, 2023, http://www.salon.com/2003/12/23/hebrew_hammer/.
25. *The Hebrew Hammer*, directed by Jonathan Kesselman (2003; ContentFilm and Intrinsic Value Films).
26. *Hebrew Hammer*.
27. Kinky Friedman, "We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You," on *Sold American*, Vanguard, 1973.
28. Jarrod Tanny, "Decoding *Seinfeld's* Jewishness," in *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World*, ed. Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel Finder, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* XXIX (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53–74.
29. Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 5.
30. *Seinfeld*, "The Stake Out," created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, May 31, 1990, on NBC Network.
31. *Seinfeld*, "The Cigar Store Indian," December 9, 1993.
32. *Seinfeld*, "The Chinese Woman," October 13, 1994.

33. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, “Happy New Year,” January 19, 2020.
34. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, “Palestinian Chicken,” July 24, 2011.
35. “Palestinian Chicken.”
36. In current discourse in social activist circles, people from North Africa and the middle east are often considered “people of color.”
37. “Palestinian Chicken.”
38. *You Don’t Mess with the Zohan*, directed by Dennis Dugan (2008; Columbia Pictures et al.).
39. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33.
40. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

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Like Other (Mixed Parentage) Jews, Only More So: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Jews of Color

by Bruce A. Phillips

The focus of most discourse about Jews of Color (henceforth, “JOCs”) foregrounds whiteness and discrimination. Aaron Hahn Tapper and Ari Y. Kelman have asserted that community surveys sponsored by local federations have systematically overlooked or under-investigated race as part of a larger project to reinforce Jewish whiteness.¹ As Karen Brodtkin has argued, “Jews became white folks” in the process of twentieth century suburbanization.² As a result of Jewish whitening, JOCS are regularly interrogated as to their Jewish authenticity, typically with the question, “How are you Jewish?”³ Tobin Belzer surveyed a large sample of self-identified Jews of Color and found that, “A vast majority of survey respondents (80%) agreed they have experienced discrimination in Jewish settings.”⁴ Jewish social science typically treats JOCs either as a specific and unique population or includes them with other “marginalized” Jewish groups (such as LGBTQ Jews). I take a different perspective and argue here that JOCS are better understood as “Jews of mixed parentage,” meaning that they have only one Jewish parent.⁵ Using both quantitative and qualitative data I demonstrate that most Jews of Color can also be understood as the children of interfaith marriage, albeit a special case amplified by racial difference. Their experiences and perspectives about being Jewish are similar to those of mixed ancestry “White [non-Hispanic]” Jews, only more intense because of the added dimension of race.

DEFINITIONS AND DATA

Who is a Jew?

For the quantitative section I use the data sets from the 2013 Pew Research Center “Portrait of Jewish Americans” survey⁶ and the 2020 Pew Research Center “Jewish Americans in 2020” survey⁷ with an important departure from the published reports. I expand the analysis to include “Persons of Jewish Background,” meaning adults with at least one Jewish parent who (a) identified with a religion other than Judaism, (b) identified with Judaism and another religion, or (c) identified with no religion and said they did not consider themselves Jewish. This expanded definition closely corresponds to what Sergio DellaPergola has defined as the “Extended Jewish Population”⁸ and the “population of Jewish parentage.”⁹ I use these terms throughout to clarify that I am using a more expansive definition of who is a Jew. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰ an understanding of American Jewry is incomplete without considering those persons who fall outside the consensus of who is a Jew. The same perspective applies to Jews of Color because the majority of JOCs in both Pew 2013 and Pew 2020 were not classified as Jews, but rather as “Persons of Jewish Background” (henceforth, “PJBs”).

Following the approach followed by the Census, both Pew studies asked about race and Hispanic origin separately:

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban or Argentinian?

What is your race or origin? (Mark all that apply): White, Black or African American, Asian or Asian American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Some other race or origin.

In the two Pew studies, Hispanic origin takes precedence over race. The two Pew data sets coded as “Hispanic” anyone who answered yes to the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin question regardless of how they answered the race question. Respondents who described themselves as Asian or Asian-American, Mixed Race, or Some other race were categorized as Hispanic if they had that origin, or as “Other, non-Hispanic” if they did not. In my analysis of the two Pew surveys, I define “Jews of Color” as all respondents who are NOT white OR of Hispanic origin, following Kelman¹¹ and Belzer.¹² “White” Jews are, to use the Census terminology, “White non-Hispanic.” Interestingly,

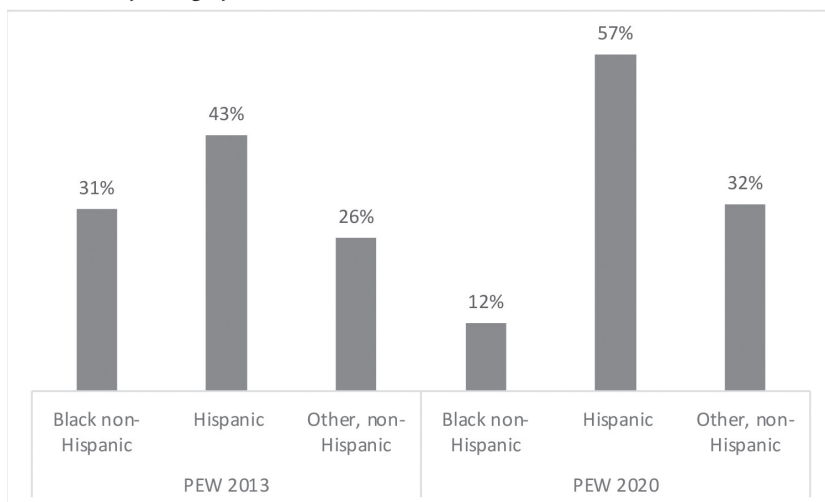
Pew 2013 has more interviews with Jews of Color (451) than Pew 2020 (285), in the Extended Jewish population (Table 1). The biggest difference is the number of Black non-Hispanic respondents (139 in Pew 2013 and just 33 in Pew 2020). Thus, respondents of Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin make up a much larger proportion of the “Jews of Color” in the Extended Jewish population in Pew 2020 than in Pew 2013. Conversely, Black non-Hispanics make up a larger proportion of Jews of Color in Pew 2013 (fig. 1). This compositional difference may be reflected in some of the differences between JOCs in Pew 2013 and Pew 2020.

Table 1: Number of unweighted cases for “race/ethnicity” in the extended Jewish population, Pew 2013 and Pew 2020

Combination of race and Hispanic origin	Pew 2013	Pew 2020
White non-Hispanic	4165	5154
Black non-Hispanic	139	33
Hispanic (all races)	195	162
Other, non-Hispanic	117	90
Don't know/refused	49	81
Total	4665	5520

Source: Author’s analysis of the Pew 2013 and Pew 2022 datasets

Figure 1: Weighted distribution of “Jews of Color” by specific “race/ethnicity” category, Pew 2013 and Pew 2020



The qualitative section draws on interviews from an ongoing study of adults who grew up in interfaith homes who have or had connections to the “Building Jewish Bridges” interfaith outreach program.¹³ As such, the participants are more Jewishly-oriented than the larger population of Jewish adults of mixed parentage. This is a study in progress (only about half the completed interviews have been coded) and is presented as a “proof of concept” that Jews of Color should also be understood in the larger context of Jews of mixed parentage.

Quantitative Perspective: Jews of Color in the Extended Jewish Population

Kelman et al. argue in *Counting Inconsistencies*¹⁴ that local Jewish population surveys undercount Jews of color for a variety of methodological reasons. Another reason for their relative invisibility in Pew 2013 and Pew 2020 (as I show here) is that many of them were categorized as PJBSs and thus did not qualify for inclusion in the “NET” Jewish population in the two Pew reports. As explained above, “Jewish Background” adults (PJBs) are not counted as Jews in the two Pew reports and are thus not profiled as part of the “NET” Jewish population. Again, these are adults with at least one Jewish parent who (a) identified with a religion other than Judaism, or (b) identified with Judaism and another religion, or (c) identified with no religion and said they did not consider themselves Jewish. In the Pew 2013 dataset 28% of the JOCs were classified as PJBs and in the Pew 2020 dataset an even larger proportion (57%) of the JOCs were classified this way (Table 2).

Table 2: Pew Jewish category by race/ethnicity in the extended Jewish population, Pew 2013 Pew 2020

Pew Jewish Category	Pew 2013		Pew 2020	
	White non-Hispanic	Black, Hispanic, other	White non-Hispanic	Black, Hispanic, other
Jews by religion	42	29	53	29
Jews of no religion	44	43	19	15
Jewish background	14	28	29	57
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: author’s analysis of the Pew 2013 and Pew 2020 datasets

The Pew 2020 report shows that Jews of Color account for 8% of the NET Jewish population overall, and 15% of adults under thirty.¹⁵ Expanding the Jewish population definition to include Persons of Jewish Background (PJBs), increases the presence of JOCs to 23% of the Extended Jewish population as compared with 8% of the NET Jewish population (Table 3).

Table 3: Race/ethnicity by Jewish population definition, Pew 2020

Race/ethnicity	Jewish Population Definition		
	NET Jewish population	Jewish Background Population	Extended Jewish Population
White non-Hispanic	92	77	87
Jews of Color	8	23	13
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: author's analysis of the Pew 2020 dataset

Jews of Color have a greater presence in the Extended Jewish Population because of interfaith marriage. Table 4 shows that in all three of the Pew Research Center "Jewish Categories" JOCs are much less likely than white non-Hispanic Jews to have two Jewish parents in both the 2013 and 2020 studies.¹⁶

Table 4: Jewish parentage by Pew Jewish category and race/ethnicity in the extended Jewish population, Pew 2013 Pew 2020 (% with two Jewish parents)

Race/ethnicity	Pew 2013		
	Jews by religion	Jews of no religion	Jewish background
White non-Hispanic	82%	44%	22%
Jews of Color	39%	5%	14%
Race/ethnicity	Pew 2020		
	Jews by religion	Jews of no religion	Jewish background
White non-Hispanic	85%	44%	16%
Jews of Color	37%	5%	10%

Source: author's analysis of the Pew 2013 and Pew 2020 datasets

As noted above, JOCs are more likely than "white" (non-Hispanic) Jews to be classified as PJBs. Looking only at PJBs, however (Table 4), the differences between the two ethno-racial groups are only minimal regarding the type of PJB. The distribution of JOCs over type of PJB closely resembles that of

white non-Hispanic PJBs. The leading PJB sub-category for both white, non-Hispanic Jews and Jews of Color are “Christian Jews,” meaning respondents who identified with both religions and respondents who identified as Christian by religion and Jewish by ethnicity.¹⁷

Table 5: Detailed breakdown of PJB classification, PJB respondents only in Pew 2013 Pew 2020

Detailed PJB classification	Pew 2013	
	White non-Hispanic	Jews of Color
Identifies with a New Age or Eastern religion or has individualized religious identity	15%	19%
Jewish and Christian, or Jewish by ethnicity and Christian by religion	41%	43%
No religion, does not consider self to be Jewish	27%	17%
Christian by religion and does not consider self-Jewish	17%	21%
Total	100%	100%
Detailed PJB classification	Pew 2020	
	White non-Hispanic	Jews of Color
Identifies with a New Age or Eastern religion or has individualized religious identity	9%	11%
Jewish and Christian, or Jewish by ethnicity and Christian by religion	61%	70%
No religion, does not consider self to be Jewish	16%	7%
Christian by religion and does not consider self-Jewish	14%	12%
Total	100%	100%

Source: author's analysis of the Pew 2013 and Pew 2020 datasets

Qualitative Perspective: Jews of Color as Jews of Mixed Parentage

Much of the recent discourse about Jews of Color has focused on lack of inclusion and experiences of rejection. Hahn Tapper et al. have argued that Jewish population surveys have ignored or only inconsistently included Jews

of Color as a purposeful strategy to present Jews as white.¹⁸ I take a broader approach. Since most Jews of Color come from families with only one Jewish parent (“mixed parentage”), I compare their perspectives and experiences with those of white, non-Hispanic (henceforth “white”) Jews who come from similar families.

The qualitative interviews used in this analysis come from a study (in progress) of adults who grew up in interfaith homes. The study participants were recruited from “Building Jewish Bridges,” an interfaith outreach program in northern California run by my co-researcher, Dawn Kepler. The interviews were coded around emerging themes using the NVIVO qualitative data analysis system. I went back through the data to identify a dozen Jews of Color for comparison with white participants. JOCs stressed similar themes and reported comparable experiences as white (non-Hispanic) Jews. For JOCs these experiences are refracted and amplified through the American lens of race.

Authenticity

Participants reported experiencing two types of challenges to their Jewish authenticity. The first applies to persons with a non-Jewish mother who are not *halachically* Jewish.¹⁹ A participant with two white parents related:

Like it’s very common for people to ask me—I’ll say I’m Jewish—they’ll ask me if my mother’s Jewish and I’ll say no. And then they’ll say, well, you’re not really Jewish then. That happens to me all the time . . . And once people find out my mom’s not Jewish, like it’s amazing how many people actually will, you know, then feel the freedom to assert an identity on me, right.

Some study participants, including two Reform rabbis, related that they had been informed by non-Jews that they were not Jewish. Some patrilineal Jews simply converted so as not to have convince others they were Jewish: “I used to feel very compelled and like I needed to confess that my mom wasn’t Jewish. Since my conversion I don’t do that anymore.”

Participants were asked about whether their Jewish authenticity had ever been challenged because they didn’t “look Jewish” or because they have a distinctly non-Jewish surname (Irish or Italian, for example). Not all white Jews of mixed parentage experienced this, but the question did not seem odd to any of them, either. A participant who is unusually tall, very blond and has a French surname explained that they had encountered the “you don’t look

Jewish” response so often that they had developed a strategy to avoid being questioned: “I just start with, ‘I’m Jewish,’ and see where the conversation goes.” Another blond participant explained that not “looking Jewish” could sometimes be an advantage for avoiding potentially unpleasant situations in the larger non-Jewish world:

And I would also say one of the advantages I had growing up is that I don’t necessarily look stereotypically Jewish, and neither does my brother, being blonde-haired and blue-eyed, especially in a place like where I grew up, was very normal, that if I would have looked a lot different, people might have acted a lot differently towards me.

A non-Jewish surname can mark someone whose authenticity can be questioned:

MacNamara is a super, super Irish name. So I would say that most people who aren’t Jewish read Irish in my name. . . . But the Jews know that I’m Jewish by my [Hebrew first] name.

Another respondent was pleased that her distinctly Hebrew first name served to mark her as Jewish in spite of a distinctly non-Jewish surname:

Yeah, for sure I feel like in some ways it’s been really helpful to me because it makes me feel insta-Jewish to have this [Hebrew first] name. Because people have said “Oh, is that your Hebrew name? What is your English name?” I really don’t have one. I don’t have a middle name—this is all I’ve got. It’s very much connected me to Judaism, even the definition of my name has connected to me to Judaism, in and of itself.

A different participant observed that their biblical first and last names made them visible to other Jews, but not necessarily to non-Jews:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I have an interesting name in that it’s a name that I think a lot of Jews will code it as sounding Jewish. But a lot of non-Jews won’t necessarily code it as Jewish.

A participant whose father had a distinctly Jewish surname kept that surname as her middle name when she got married, specifically so she would continue to be recognized as Jewish:

But what I think is interesting, when I got married to —, I changed my middle name, . . . to [father’s Jewish surname], so that I would still have the Jewish name. I didn’t want to just be — —, which

just sounds not Jewish. So it's definitely [first name, father's Jewish surname, husband's non-Jewish surname].

In some situations, a distinctly non-Jewish surname can create obstacles to Jewish authenticity. A participant who had lived in Israel for an extended time recalled being regularly interrogated about the source of their last name:

I'm like, "Well, I come from everywhere. I'm truly American. My family is a melting pot." My last name happens to be Scottish. My ancestry is from Scotland a million years ago it seems like." So, I usually just say, "I'm so American I can't even begin."

Participants with a non-white parent²⁰ faced even further scrutiny because they "don't look Jewish." A participant with an Ashkenazi Jewish mother and an African American father related that this regularly happens to them:

People make assumptions that I'm not Jewish, and if I tell them I'm Jewish, they make assumptions about how I'm Jewish. People assume I'm Ethiopian if I tell them I'm Jewish, or that I converted. Yeah, those are the two assumptions that happen.

Another participant with an Ashkenazi mother and African American father had developed a strategy for heading off questions before they arose: "You know, I think usually if I roll up kind of wearing a yarmulke or like a yarmulke and a tallis, like, and usually I don't get any questions."

A participant with a Japanese-born mother often encountered combined racial and patrilineal challenges because they did not look white: "Ugh, well, I don't want to go there, because then I'm going to have to explain the whole thing and bring my mom's conversion certificate and then they're going to ask and what if they're going to make me convert?" After joining a synagogue with a mixed-race rabbi this participant happily related that "[name of congregation] was the first one where I didn't have to go through that," because the rabbi is mixed-race and they noticed that immediately upon visiting the congregation for the first time; "And I saw Rabbi — —, and I didn't know what she was, but I knew that she wasn't, you know. a hundred percent white, so I was like, 'I like this one. This is it; this is the one we're going to join.'"

Bi-racial JOCs described a heavy emotional toll from these challenges of Jewish authenticity. A participant with a non-Jewish Chinese father did not face the halachic challenge, but reported many incidents of racial questioning:

Oh, well, people didn't know, so they were forever asking me. And so, I always had to say what culture I was, and it was horrible. I hated it . . . You know, white people don't get asked that all the time, so it was all of a sudden like, Oh, God, I do look different, you know, all the time. And people are looking at me because I'm the different one in the room.

A different participant with a Chinese father and Ashkenazi mother described being at a Jewish communal cocktail party event with her Ashkenazi mother where she met someone who knew her mother from Jewish communal circles:

Well, it was frustrating . . . And this woman who I didn't know had come into the tent, and I guess she knew my mom, and she's like, "Oh, how do you know the people here?" And I said, "Oh, that's my mom," and she said, "Oh, that's so interesting," and I said, "What do you mean by interesting?" I'd had a few cocktails. She said, "Oh, I don't know, I just didn't know that was your mom. And is that your sister?" And she points to this Mexican girl that happened to be there too. And I was like, "No, we're not even of the same ethnic background," and she said, "Oh, well, what are you guys?" And I just kind of walked away; I said, "This discussion is so over," I was so upset. . . . And I felt like here we are, we're having cocktails, we're having a nice party, and I get singled out as the person that looks different, and then lumped in with . . . the other person that looks different. It was really bad, and it was very frustrating.

This same JewAsian went on to describe having to remind a good friend that they were Jewish as well as Asian:

Actually, just the other day my friend —, from college, she called me and she's like, "Hey, how was your Easter?" I was like, "I'm Jewish. Remember?" . . . It kind of irritated me a little bit. It's like, we went to college, and we were good friends for five years, and you're going to ask me how is my Easter, what is that?

Yet another participant whose father was Chinese described always being on edge in synagogues.

I really do feel uncomfortable. I never felt uncomfortable with [congregation where they grew up]. But when I'm going into a new place, I tend to feel a little bit on guard, it's like I think that people think that I shouldn't be there. That's what it's about.

This participant struggled with this sense of being an outsider and observed that they felt less self-conscious after becoming a regular part of a synagogue community:

But you can't go in thinking "I wonder if people are wondering why I'm here." And I still have that. I mean, obviously if join [current congregation] and then everyone there knows you're Jewish, it's very different, you know, once you have a community.

An African American informant reported a particularly humiliating experience in an unfamiliar synagogue in a new city when the rabbi assumed they were the child of the synagogue cleaning woman:

So I went to a synagogue, a very big, well-known synagogue. . . . The way I found it was I called a bunch of synagogues and tried to find one that would let me go to the High Holidays for free or for less than having to join the shul or pay full price for tickets. And so I found this one, and I went, and as I was on the receiving line shaking hands at the door the rabbi said to me, Oh my gosh, are you Mary's daughter? You've gotten so big. And I just looked at him with a blank stare. And he said something like, Mary, you know she works really hard for us, we're really happy to have her. And I just looked at him, and I said, Who is Mary? And he's like, Aren't you Mary, our cleaning lady's daughter? And I said, No, I'm not. I'm here to celebrate the High Holidays. He kind of looked a little embarrassed, but didn't say anything, and I left and stayed away from Judaism again for a few years. I just felt really shitty, excuse my language, that when I tried to go for High Holidays that someone made an assumption based on my skin color that I was the cleaning lady's daughter; it was really upsetting. So I left, and again stayed away for a few years.

Connecting with Non-Jewish Relatives

All the participants in the qualitative study, by definition, have non-Jewish relatives and at least a potential connection with the religious and/or cultural heritage of their non-Jewish parent. An important emergent finding from this qualitative study is that family connections create an identity that is simultaneously Jewish and not Jewish. For example:

My heritage has this whole other, you know, Scottish, English, French Canadian mash-up, now plus German, going forward . . . I want to

honor these other people in my life and that's why I connect so well with my aunts who are non-Jewish, my cousins who are non-Jewish. Sometimes I look at them and I think like, wow, there are like these beautiful blonde girls that don't have anything to do with Judaism, those are my people too. Like, those are my blood cousins.

Many of the white participants had little or no connection with their non-Jewish extended family. This came about for different reasons. In some cases, they lived too far away from the non-Jewish side of the family. In other cases, the non-Jewish parent was distant or even alienated from their family of origin. In still other cases, the non-Jewish parent, having committed to raising their child(ren) exclusively Jewish, wanted to minimize contact with Christian relatives. One of the important emergent findings from this study was a desire to be more connected with non-Jewish family. A participant raised exclusively Jewish yearned to connect with the other half of their dual heritage:

You know, like how can my dad deny me this half of my family that I adore? I guess I do feel like just a much lesser, that I feel like a mixture, and that I don't know what it looks like, like the non-Jewish part or whatever, but I just feel like—I feel false if I try to be just Jewish. That doesn't feel right either because I keep thinking about these other family members and how close we are and them not being Jewish, so I just walk this weird line between these two families.

A different participant felt deprived by not learning about the Quaker philosophy practiced by their mother's family:

I sometimes feel bummed out that I didn't get educated in the ways of like Quaker philosophy and stuff that I sort of missed that. Like no one dared, you know, tell me anything about any other part of my heritage. . . . I'm curious about what all this other stuff is and I don't really know what it is and it wasn't really presented to me, so I don't really know, I just know that it's not Jewish.

A Black participant felt similarly deprived for not having experienced Christmas. They had recently sought out their Black family during Christmas as a way to learn more about this common American holiday that was not experienced in their interracial Jewish family of origin. In this regard they were like white participants in trying to become familiar with something they had missed as a child. Interestingly, the emphasis was on Christmas as an American experience, not as a specifically Black experience:

I spent Christmas with my dad's side of the family, like on my own, a couple days ago, like without my dad. Like as an adult, just 'cause I wanted that experience. And that was actually really nice. And I'd never really celebrated Christmas so I learned a lot. It was really cool.

A participant with a Chinese father lamented their lack of knowledge about their father's culture:

And my dad also took no steps to kind of teach me about anything Chinese, so it was fine. I think it came after college. It was like, "You never taught me anything." And he's like, "Well, now you're older. You can teach yourself." I'm like, "That's not the point. You're missing the point." . . . I think that's also why I gravitated towards the Judaism, because there was really nothing else presented to me as a place to, you know—or something to identify with.

Participants who had been exposed to both sides of their cultural and religious heritages generally felt it was an advantage:

Well, I think one of the advantages is that you're exposed to different perspectives. I think it just can give you insight into religion. . . . You're not raised totally surrounded by just one religion and total faith in that religion. I think, you know, it might make you more sort of questioning of religion as an adult, which I see as an advantage because it just gives you a greater sort of critical capacity to think about religion.

Another participant similarly opined that having two heritages made them feel special:

I may have felt like, I think I actually, most of the time, felt really special, like I was even more special because of my two backgrounds. I never thought of it as a negative. I don't remember ever having people at the Baptist church say anything negative or anything like that. So very positive. Yeah.

Other participants experienced dual heritage as a liability. A participant with one Jewish and one Asian parent felt marginal to both groups. Participants with a non-Jewish Asian parent were typically the children or grandchildren of an immigrant and thus only a generation or two away from the country of origin. A participant whose mother was raised within Japanese culture in Hawaii was sent to both Hebrew school and Japanese school, but did not feel fully at home in either setting:

So, I went to Japanese school every week too [in addition to Hebrew school]. We would go to Little Tokyo at least once a week to do Japanese things. I don't know really what that was. But I got to go to the Hello Kitty store. My, what else? I don't know. Just anything that wasn't Jewish, was Japanese. So, I just really wanted to be American. That was like my whole thing was like, "When do I just get to be regular?"

At Japanese school this participant found themselves dangling between cultures in how they were perceived: "Everybody there was Japanese. There were absolutely no white kids at all. I was the only one. And it's funny, 'cause in Japanese school I was the white kid, but in every other school I was the Japanese kid." Another participant with a Vietnamese father also found themselves between racial-social worlds. Their Asian family regarded them as Jewish and not Asian while white people they interacted with saw them as Asian:

I would say, Jews I think accept me as their own, more readily than the Asians do. Even specifically Vietnamese. And it's not that they don't accept me. It's just there's something more, maybe Jews are just generally more like welcoming than other people, or at least the ones I hang out with or am around. And eventually, you know, 'cause I know Jewish culture a little better, that's probably a big part of it. And I am Jewish, but people would often, people who don't know me, or don't know me too well, or people that aren't Jewish or Asian are always, probably be quicker to think of me as being Asian than as being Jewish.

The JewAsian participants had similar experiences as the white participants but experienced them more acutely because of the immigrant experience of the non-Jewish parent. As the white participant said above, their non-Jewish family connection was with distant European backgrounds "a million years ago it seems like." The non-Jewish roots of Jewish-Asian participants, by contrast, were only a generation or two away. White participants might experience their extended family's Christianity as distantly foreign; JewAsian participants experienced their non-Jewish Asian family as literally foreign. The JewAsian participant who regretted not being exposed to Chinese culture sounds a lot like the white participant who wished they had learned about the Quaker religion of their mother's family. Whether they experienced it as an advantage or a liability, both white and JOC participants were acutely conscious of having two distinct cultural and religious heritages.

Because the "one-drop rule" is deeply ingrained in American society, even more than half a century after passage of the Civil Rights Act, two African

American participants that came from Jewishly involved homes also reported being raised Black as well as Jewish:

I think our parents raised me to be really proud of my identity both the black identity and the Jewish identity. . . . I think they were raising me to be like really proud of those things and their introspections. And I was oftentimes also learning about like great black historical figures and sages and great Jewish historical figures that like made changes for the positive in the world. And I think I was like learning those things pretty regularly as well. . . . You know, my dad would always kind of give me biographies of great black heroes that I should read about. I grew up reading about like Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson and Malcolm X and kind of all of these different figures, learned that like being black was hard, but it was something to be proud of.

He [father of participant] would talk about it[being Black] generally from a historical standpoint: Martin Luther King, and Jesse Jackson, and that type of thing. We talked about kind of figureheads a lot, and he did talk to me about being treated differently because I was African American, like I said if I came in third place he'd say, "That's because you're black. You were really the best but they didn't give it to you because you're black." He would say that kind of thing a lot, definitely. Or if I came home with a B he would say, "You need to get an A because you're black, and if you want to go to college you have to work harder than other people," that kind of thing. So, there was definitely a lot of talk about inequities amongst the races.

For both white and JOC participants, American and Christian holidays were occasions for contact with their extended non-Jewish family. White participant often described Christmas as their main contact with their non-Jewish extended family and sometimes with their Jewish family as well:

So everybody in my family celebrates Christmas. Both sides, Jewish and the Irish side both celebrate Christmas.

Thanksgiving is a second family holiday that often brings adults of mixed Jewish parentage together with non-Jewish family. A Latino participant who had lived in Israel and served in the IDF cited Thanksgiving as the one time they got together with the Hispanic side of the family. A Black participant considered Thanksgiving to be a specifically Black holiday experienced with non-Jewish relatives:

Thanksgiving is a big holiday for Black people. Yeah, so Thanksgiving was like the big one for my dad's family. That's where we really like made the effort. Not really the other ones. . . . But, yeah, no, I mean, in theory it's pretty much just not Jewish.

Seeing non-Jewish family largely depended on where the extended family lived. For JewAsian participants most of the Asian relatives lived overseas. As a result, one participant reported being much closer to Jewish family because Asian relatives were too far away to visit.

Religious pressure from Christian relatives

A few white and JOC participants reported experiencing pressure to be Christian from family members. A white participant described their divorced father taking them back to his home community where they would go to church with the father's family. A participant whose Black father had grown up in a Jehovah's Witness family described being proselytized by an aunt:

So, my Aunt is definitely a Jehovah's Witness . . . my aunt came to like stay with me for a couple of weeks after the surgery because I couldn't be on my own. . . . And every day she talked to me about Jehovah, and Jesus, and that type of thing. And I was kind of like a captive audience because I couldn't really tell her to go away because I couldn't do anything for myself.

Reinforcing Black Identity

Participants with a non-Jewish Black parent were hyper-aware of race. One such participant described an experience similar to that of mixed-race young people in general: which box do I check on the Census? The white mother said racial identification was up to the individual. The Black father said there was no choice at all:

I remember going home and asking my parents what box do I check? . . . And my [white] mom gave me a great answer. My mom said, . . . let me explain to you the kinds of identities . . . which basically means, how close you feel connected to a particular identity at any given point in time. And someone who has many identities, you have the right to identify how you want to identify along your different identities depending on your mood and your situation. So some days

you want to identify as black, you're welcome to. And some days you want to identify as other, or as mixed, then you're welcome to, or you are as white, you're welcome to. You can check whatever box you want as long as it is true to yourself. And that's what my mom told me, you know. And then I was like, I'm going to ask my dad. I was like, "Okay, Dad, like, you know, what box should I check?" And my dad said, "You check black. You check the black box." (LAUGHS) You check black only.

CONCLUSION

There is no question that Jews of Color experience challenges to their Jewish authenticity because they "don't look Jewish." The current focus on inclusion and exclusion, however, misses a larger understanding of JOCs as adults of mixed Jewish parentage, sharing experiences and perspectives with white Jews of mixed parentage who also report being challenged for not "looking Jewish." For white Jews, not looking Jewish could mean having blond or red hair or having a clearly non-Jewish (e.g., Italian or Irish) surname. Because Jews of Color are visibly non-white and the default assumption is that Jews are white, JOCs experience challenges to their Jewish authenticity more often than white Jews. Both white Jews and JOCs of mixed Jewish parentage reported an interest in their "other [non-Jewish] side." In this regard there were differences between white Jews and JOCs. For the white participants, their non-Jewish side was largely remote. Their non-Jewish forbears had immigrated a century or more earlier, so that European roots were remote. For JewAsians immigration was recent and they experienced language, cultural, and sometimes geographical boundaries separating them from non-Jewish family. For Black participants, the racial divide looms large. Other Jews make their Black identity salient by questioning their Jewish authenticity on racial grounds while other Black persons (including parents) reinforce their racial identity through blood and racial kinship even as white America reinforces their Black racial identification through experiences of microaggression and even overt racism. For Jews of Color, then, the "Jewish and something else" experiences are amplified because of race, and, in the case of JewAsians, immigration as well.

Race has an indirect influence on all adults of mixed Jewish parentage through the increasing number of multiracial Americans. The official

recognition of “more than one race” in the US Census has legitimized hybrid identification, including being Jewish and something else. As I have argued elsewhere,²¹ the continued growth of the mixed-race population and normalization of a mixed-race identity²² reinforces the legitimacy of a mixed Jewish identity. If Americans can be both white *and* Asian, or white *and* Black, then they can also be Jewish and something else. This is especially true for younger Americans of Jewish parentage who are the most likely to have racially mixed peers.

While JOCs face more challenges to their Jewish authenticity on the basis of race, focusing exclusively on their marginalization provides an incomplete accounting. Jews of Color are predominantly the offspring of interfaith families. As such they are part of a growing mixed-parentage population. While their experiences of exclusion are real and unique to JOCs, they share with mixed-parentage whites a host of experiences and perspectives that come from being of dual heritage. This is as much a part of JOC identity as experiences of discrimination and othering. When there is finally widespread acceptance of JOCs (may it come quickly and in our days) the impact of of dual heritage on Jewish identity will persist for both white Jews and JOCs.

Notes

1. Aaron Hahn Tapper, and Ari Y. Kelman, "Counting on Whiteness: Religion, Race, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Jewish Demography," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 1 (March 2023): 28–48.
2. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
3. The Black-Jewish comedian-blogger-writer, MaNishtana, uses this question in an Eli talk, "What Makes This Jew Different Than All Other Jews? Race, Difference, and Safety in Jewish Spaces," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dZid5Trb5U>.
4. Tobin Belzer, Tory Brundage, Vincent Calvett, Gage Gorsky, Ari Y. Kelman, and Dalya Perez, "Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color," Jews of Color Initiative (San Francisco: 2021), 5.
5. Bruce A. Phillips, "Accounting for Jewish Secularism: Is a New Cultural Identity Emerging?," *Contemporary Jewry* 30, no. 1 (June, 2010): 63–85; Bruce A. Phillips, "New Demographic Perspectives on Studying Inter marriage in the United States," *Contemporary Jewry* 33, no. 1–2 (April–July 2013): 103–19; Bruce A. Phillips, "Inter marriage in the Twenty-First Century: New Perspectives," in *American Jewish Year Book 2017*, ed. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin (Cham: Springer, 2018), 31–119.
6. Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans—Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, October 13, 2013).
7. Pew Research Center, *Jewish Americans in 2020* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021).
8. Sergio DellaPergola, "Measuring Jewish Populations," in *Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2014*, ed. B. J. Grim, T. M. Johnson, V. Skirbekk and G. A. Zurlo (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 97–110.
9. Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population," in *American Jewish Year Book 2015*, ed. by Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 273–364.
10. Bruce A. Phillips, "Peripheral Vision: Exploring the 'US Jewish Penumbra' in Pew 2020," *Contemporary Jewry* (June 26, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-023-09494-x>.
11. Ari Y. Kelman, Aaron Hahn Tapper, Izabel Fonseca, and Aliya Saperstein, "Counting Inconsistencies: An Analysis of American Jewish Population Studies, with a Focus on Jews of Color," in The Jews of Color Field Building Initiative, The Concentration in Education and Jewish Studies at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, and the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice at the University of San Francisco, 2019.
12. Belzer et al., "Beyond the Count."

13. I am conducting the study with Dawn Kepler, director of “Building Jewish Bridges,” an interfaith outreach program in the Bay Area.
14. Kelman et al., “Counting Inconsistencies.”
15. Pew Research Center, *Jewish Americans in 2020*, 37.
16. See Phillips, “Accounting for Jewish Secularism,” and Joel Perlmann, “Secularists and Those of No Religion: It’s the Sociology, Stupid (Not the Theology): Jewish Secularism,” *Contemporary Jewry* 30 (2010): 45–62 for a discussion on the association between mixed ancestry and the increase in the number of Jews of no religion.
17. See Phillips, “Peripheral Vision.”
18. Hahn Tapper et al., “Counting on Whiteness.”
19. According to *halacha* or Jewish Law, Jewish status is conferred only by a Jewish mother.
20. In all the qualitative interviews used here the non-white parent was also the non-Jewish parent.
21. Phillips, “Peripheral Vision.”
22. Pew Research Center, *Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse and Growing in Numbers* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).

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The USC Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life

The American Jewish community has played a vital role in shaping the politics, culture, commerce and multiethnic character of Southern California and the American West. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when entrepreneurs like Isaias Hellman, Levi Strauss and Adolph Sutro first ventured out West, American Jews became a major force in the establishment and development of the budding Western territories. Since 1970, the number of Jews in the West has more than tripled. This dramatic demographic shift has made California—specifically, Los Angeles—home to the second largest Jewish population in the United States. Paralleling this shifting pattern of migration, Jewish voices in the West are today among the most prominent anywhere in the United States. Largely migrating from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the East Coast of the United States, Jews have invigorated the West, where they exert a considerable presence in every sector of the economy—most notably in the media and the arts. With the emergence of Los Angeles as a world capital in entertainment and communications, the Jewish perspective and experience in the region are being amplified further. From artists and activists to scholars and professionals, Jews are significantly influencing the shape of things to come in the West and across the United States. In recognition of these important demographic and societal changes, in 1998 the University of Southern California established a scholarly institute dedicated to studying contemporary Jewish life in America with special emphasis on the western United States. The Casden Institute explores issues related to the interface between the Jewish community and the broader, multifaceted cultures that form the nation—issues of relationship as much as of Jewishness itself. It is also enhancing the educational experience for students at USC and elsewhere by exposing them to the problems—and promise—of life in Los Angeles' ethnically, socially, culturally and economically diverse community. Scholars, students and community leaders examine the ongoing contributions of American Jews in the arts, business, media, literature, education, politics, law and social relations, as well as the relationships between Jewish Americans and other groups, including African Americans,

Latinos, Asian Americans and Arab Americans. The Casden Institute's scholarly orientation and contemporary focus, combined with its location on the West Coast, set it apart from—and makes it an important complement to—the many excellent Jewish Studies programs across the nation that center on Judaism from an historical or religious perspective.

For more information about the USC Casden Institute, visit www.usc.edu/casdeninstitute, e-mail casden@usc.edu, or call (213) 740-3405.