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# Popular Representations of Jewish Identity on Primetime Television: The Case of The O.C.

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**Popular Representations of Jewish  
Identity on Primetime Television:  
The Case of *The O.C.***

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# Introduction

*The O.C.* is arguably the most popular primetime soap opera to date to feature a self-consciously Jewish person as the central character. In this thesis, I argue that *The O.C.* constructs Jewish humor as compatible with normative Whiteness, and thereby participates in a discourse that represents a new stage in the development of Jewish identity in the United States. In *The O.C.*, Jewishness no longer characterizes “Other”; instead, it has morphed into merely another version of Whiteness, albeit a version that explicitly celebrates certain forms of Jewish culture and incorporates, in a “positive” way, certain popular stereotypes.

I refer to this Jewishness as a “difference that does not make a difference,” and link it to patterns of White identity formation identified in the growing literature of Whiteness Studies. The literature demonstrates that both White and Jewish identities are social constructions that have changed over time. Formerly antagonistic, White and Jewish identities have become quite compatible. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, many people would have perceived the Jewish-Christian family in *The O.C.* as a “mixed race” abomination. That this kind of family is no longer racially marked is one indication of how White and Jewish identities have merged over time.

It is worth noting, however, that Jewishness is not completely assimilated into Whiteness in *The O.C.* It is still independent, but it is not “raced” as it would have been in earlier times, and thereby participates in the racially unmarked status of all normative Whiteness in the United States. Although Jewishness continues to be marked in *The O.C.*, it is marked as a style and not a race.

My thesis relies on close readings of episodes 113 and 123 of *The O.C.*, titled “The Best Chrismukkah Ever” and “The Nana,” that illustrate the discourses of Jewish and White identities produced and reproduced in the show.

The analysis begins by placing *The O.C.* in a historical and cultural context. I review scholarly literature on how Jewish identity has evolved within America and the complexities of its dualistic nature as White insider and ethnic outsider. In particular, I examine the evolution of the kind of Jewish “culture” or “style” that is reflected in and produced by *The O.C.*, particularly Jewish comedy.

The literature on Jewish comedy shows how a style developed within a racially “in-between” immigrant group can change as that group’s racial status changes. The literature suggests that in the early twentieth century, Jewish humor reflected the anxieties and uncertainties surrounding Jewish assimilation into the White American “melting pot,” contributing to the evolution of certain stereotypes of Jews as “Other,” such as the gawky *schlemiel* and the overbearing Jewish mother. The literature notes that over the course of the twentieth century, these comic figures entered mainstream media representations, both in the cinema and on television, further impacting not only Jewish self representation but also the perceptions of other racial and cultural groups about what

it meant to be Jewish. As J. Hoberman writes, “popular culture plays a leading role in defining what being Jewish is for many American Jews” (Hoberman and Shandler, “Not the Last Word” 274).

Following the review of the literature on Jewish comedy, I present a discussion of the theory and method I drew on in my close reading of “The Best Chrismukkah Ever” and “The Nana” episodes. Relying on the literature of Whiteness Studies and the methodological categories of cultural studies, I map out the theoretical concepts of identity formation I used to identify discourses about Jewish identity and to specify how they circulate through the media and in popular culture, noting how television operates as an apparatus to reproduce these discourses through established, familiar, easily consumable generic codes. In the last section of this thesis, I present the results of my analysis, my conclusions, and some suggestions for further research. Here, I argue that Jewish identity on television today, at least as exemplified by *The O.C.*, is a “difference that does not make a difference.” The Jewishness of *The O.C.*, I argue, while culturally marked, is perfectly compatible with normative discourses of Whiteness. In discussing the implications of this finding, I link the Jewish identity produced in *The O.C.* to trends in the media and broader culture. Specifically, I argue that *The O.C.* illustrates the operation of “the growing global marketplace for the consumption of difference,” identified by Stuart Hall and others as a central component of advanced capitalist culture. I will speculate about the future of Jewish and White identity, given the assumption that the media will continue to operate as a mechanism for the production of differences within Whiteness.

## **A Chrismukkah Story**

“So what’s it gonna be, huh?” Seth Cohen asks dramatically, his gaze settling off screen. “You want your menorah or a candy cane? Hm? Christmas or Hanukkah?”

He pauses. The target of his badgering is revealed: the young, blonde WASP heartthrob Ryan Atwood, an orphaned teen from the wrong side of the tracks—Los Angeles suburb Chino—who is taken in by the well-to-do Cohen family of Newport Beach, California. He attempts to stutter an uncertain reply, but before things become too awkward, Seth interrupts.

“Don’t worry about it, buddy,” Seth reassures Ryan, “because in this house, you don’t have to choose. Allow me to introduce you to a little something I like to call ... Chrismukkah!” He grins triumphantly.

“Chrismukkah?” echoes Ryan.

“That’s right, it’s a new holiday, Ryan, and it’s sweepin’ the nation ...”

“Hey, fellas, we got the tree!” a voice exclaims off-screen.

“... or at least the living room,” finishes Seth.

“Hey guys, a little help!”

At this point the camera shifts to the comely Sandy Cohen and his willowy WASP wife Kirsten, both of whom are hauling a large Christmas tree into their ornately decorated, comfortable, traditional American living room. Seth watches and encourages as Ryan assists the Cohens in setting up the tree.

“We didn’t really know how to raise Seth,” Kirsten confides to Ryan.

“Yeah, so I raised myself,” Seth interrupts proudly, “and in doing so I created the greatest super-holiday known to mankind, drawing on the best that Christianity ...”

The camera focuses on Kirsten.

“... and Judaism ...”

The camera travels to Sandy, who smiles charmingly at the boys.

“... have to offer.”

“And you call it Chrismukkah?” Ryan asks incredulously.

“Just hearing you say it makes me feel all festive,” Seth says, gasping, holding his breath melodramatically. “Allow me to elaborate. You see, from my father here, a poor struggling Jew growing up in the Bronx, well, Christmas—it meant Chinese food and a movie.” He moves to Kirsten and puts an arm around her affectionately. “And for my mom over here, WASPy McWASP, well, it meant a tree, it meant stockings, and all the trimmings ... isn’t that right?”

“We’re very proud,” Sandy answers.

Kirsten bristles. “I am not a WASP.”

“Sure you’re not,” he quips good-naturedly. “Other highlights include eight days of presents, followed by one day of many presents. So what d’you think?”

Ryan hesitates. “Uh, sounds great for you guys.”

“For you, too!” protests Sandy.

Seth declares, “Hey, dip a toe in the Chrismukkah pool; there’s room for all of us!”

\*\*\*



In this scene, Seth refers to a “Chrismukkah pool,” a holiday that melds together all traditions, gentile and Jewish alike, and affords all the ability to participate regardless of upbringing or religious conviction. The inventive holiday deemphasizes difference, making Jewish and Christian traditions—or ones that combine the two—practices that are all-encompassing sanctuaries. Seth’s emphasis is on the “eight days of presents, followed by one day of many presents.” He does not address how, logistically, he manages to combine two religions that contain very different sets of beliefs.

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Danny’s jokes are bad. As a guest at the Cohens’ house, he is a travesty. Seth recognized it at school, but the gentile high school students seemed to find Danny hilarious. However, when Seth introduces Danny to Sandy and Danny tells him to take a shower, Sandy is dumbfounded by the forced pun. Ushering Seth into the kitchen, Sandy addresses him in a hushed, urgent tone.

“Whoa, that kid is not funny.”

“Thank you!” replies Seth gratefully. “I know.”

“He makes Ryan look funny.”

“He makes Marissa look funny.”

“Gentiles,” Sandy explains tersely. “I love your mother more than words ... but not funny. Get yourself some funnier friends.

\*\*\*

In this episode, “The Rivals,” Sandy Cohen insinuates that Danny lacks an acceptable sense of humor due to his gentile identity. Conversely, the Cohen men embrace humor as the cornerstone of their Jewish identity. Moreover, they imply that people who do not have a sense of humor are inadequate, perhaps even inferior.

Humor has been a central institution of Jewish culture in the United States and elsewhere. In *The Schlemiel as Metaphor*, Sanford Pinsker refers to “children fortunate enough to grow up in homes where ‘jokes’ were as much a part of daily living as kosher food and religious observances” (x). In the Cohen home, it might seem that humor is *more* intrinsic to Jewish identity than religious beliefs or historically rooted traditions.

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This discussion of the role of humor in Jewish culture raises an even larger question, and that is: What does it mean to be Jewish? In this thesis, the question is: In what sense are Seth and Sandy “Jewish?” Is Jewishness a religion adoptable through conversion, a celebrated heritage, or a different “race” or “ethnicity?” In *Jewish Identity*, editors David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz ponder this larger question, asking: “Can a single or unifying identity be attributed to Jewish culture? Is there a Jewish self, or only many persons that are Jewish? What are the implications—metaphysical, social, political, and moral—for any attribution or identification as Jewish?” (3).

David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel open their book *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, another text that examines Jewish identity, with the question: “How are the identities of such groups to be defined and understood in a world that has undermined all traditional identities, in which terms like

religion, ethnicity, and culture are constantly being torn apart and refashioned?” (1). Overall, identity is generally accepted as a multifaceted synthesis of how individuals view themselves and how the outside world perceives them. Yet, the way the world perceives a person is dictated by identity discourses already circulating in society. In this study, we will focus specifically on whether and how Jewishness is “raced” in the discourses circulating through television.

In the past, Jews have been acutely aware of their minority status and group identity, but *The O.C.* arrived at a moment when Jews, having been integrated into the White “melting pot,” are often not included in the multicultural fold. Since 1940, for example, the U.S. census has not differentiated between “White” and “Jewish.”

Furthermore, as Sara R. Horowitz writes, “Real and imagined Jewish economic successes in America contribute to the perception of Jews as a privileged rather than oppressed minority, not only ‘white’ but ‘elite’ ... Jews are victimized by their own positive stereotypes” (123). Such discussion places American Jews in a complicated position. It makes them not just White, but ultra-White, and many argue that Jews themselves have embraced this ultra-White identity. George Lipsitz opens his work, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, by stating “that white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity” (vii). Thus, the argument follows that Jews took on this Whiteness and became increasingly acculturated, but in doing so sacrificed their distinctive cultural identity for acceptance and success. Lawrence J. Epstein explains, “Their parents or grandparents who had struggled so hard, whose sense of *Yiddishkeit*

was undiminished by the opulence of the Golden Land, were reminders of the emotional world they were leaving. They were, in a vital sense, abandoning their heritage even as America embraced them” (197).

On the popular primetime soap *The O.C.*, the comic, celebrated underdogs of the idyllic Newport Beach setting are Jews who prosper in spite of their pasty white skin, bushy eyebrows, and “Jew ‘fros” – all characteristics that the self-deprecating, witty, teen protagonist Seth frequently references. Playing Other to the bronzed Californians, the Cohens smartly mock the vapid characters that inhabit their world. Like past representations, the show utilizes characteristically “Jewish” humor as a device to criticize the “elite.” They may not be “insiders,” but *The O.C.* glorifies the Cohens’ differences and affords them affluence and acceptance. As Libby Slate writes in her commentary on the show, “Being an outsider isn’t always a bad thing.” As Jews have attained majority status as White, they have also become marked as socially conscious and witty, an identity that is arguably superior to that of the short-sighted, melodramatic gentiles.

Commenting about Sandy Cohen, *The O.C.*’s creator and writer Josh Schwartz said, “For Sandy it just felt like one more thing to add ... But it felt like it was a natural thing for his character, coming from his background and how it would make him sort of feel a little bit even more out of place in Newport, and for Seth, as well” (qtd. in Engelberg). Being Jewish is a character trait of Sandy’s, but not a barrier to obtaining the “resources, power, and opportunity” of Whiteness to which Lipsitz refers (*The Possessive Investment* vii); he is different under this umbrella of acceptance, but he is still accepted.

*The O.C.* is the first primetime soap to focus on Jewish religious traditions and make them central to episodic plots. Geeky protagonist Seth Cohen enthusiastically embraces his half-Jewish, half-WASP identity, going so far as to contrive the inventive holiday “Chrismukkah,” an invention that has gained such prominence in contemporary consumer culture that Warner Brothers and Ron Gompertz went to court over who gets the right to market and profit from Chrismukkah cards, T-shirts, and mugs (Grove).

*The O.C.*’s presentation of Jewish tradition—including Passover and Hanukkah rituals—as easily accessible and open to all produces a complicated discourse that emphasizes the permeability and flexibility of Jewish identity. In many ways, Kirsten and Sandy’s perfect union (which proves notably argument-free) reproduces the “love conquers all [including religion and tradition]” discourse. Because the Old World is obsolete, the couple, with their new hybrid identity, can face the petty problems of the day together. They can also face their conservative parents, the super-WASP Newport business tycoon Caleb Nichol (Kirsten’s father) and the socially conscious, morally righteous grandmother from the Bronx, Sophie Cohen (Sandy’s mother). In their wealthy, monocultural (albeit fundamentally hybrid) society, Sandy and Kirsten revel in what David Roediger would identify as their shared, normative, White identity. Perhaps national trends are to blame and the show is merely reflecting these; today’s capitalistic, secular society is choosing to emphasize characteristics other than religion. Or perhaps Jewishness is less “different” from Christianity now than ever before.

It’s not about the ritual. It’s about who can sell the most Chrismukkah mugs.

# Chapter 1

## A History of Jewish Identity and Representations in Mass Media

Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that racial identities are social constructions. Race is not a fixed category; rather, it is “an unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (371). According to Omi and Winant, racial identity is strongly linked to the “evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled” (372).

The non-fixed nature of racial identity is particularly relevant in a discussion of the changing nature of Jewish racial identity in America, as the recent works of several scholars of race have so clearly documented. These scholars have shown some of the ways in which Jewish identity and the definition of what it means to be Jewish have changed in the United States over the past two centuries, partly due to Jews’ changing perceptions of themselves, and partly due to what was going on around them. Though Jews did not entirely determine how others perceived them, as Karen Brodtkin explains in *How the Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, they also fashioned racial identities “for themselves,” even though they did so “in response to ethnoracial assignments” (103).

This section will examine explanations that address how Jewish identity changed in the wake of immigration to the United States. These explanations generally hold that Jews were “changing the cultural context as much as the context was changing them” (Sorin 251). These changes included shifts in Jews’ position within U.S. hierarchies of race. According to Brodtkin, “In the last hundred years, Jews in the United States have been shuttled from one side of the American racial binary to the other” (175). She asserts that Jews were forced to give up their cultural identity, as well as the identification as “racial Other,” in order to enter the White American melting pot and assimilate into normative Whiteness.

However, others argue that there is still a sense of Jewish identity present in America today that stands outside of normative Whiteness. Paul Gilroy, for example, makes the argument that Jews retain a “diaspora consciousness” that constitutes a meaningful identity; this is why “Jewish” is still a conscious and present identity in America. Diaspora consciousness refers to an identity which focuses on “the social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration defined by a strong sense of the dangers involved in forgetting the location of origin and the process of dispersal” (Gilroy 318).

We shall revisit the discussion of Jewish identity consciousness in a later chapter. First, this chapter will begin with a brief overview of the history of Jews in America in order to provide a context for my discussion of Jewish racial identity formation.

## **The History of Jewish Immigration**

David Biale argues that throughout history, Jews have been categorized as an oppressed minority. He writes, "... millennia of exile had accustomed them to view themselves as a perennial minority, always vulnerable to the whims of an often hostile majority" (17). Charles E. Silberman cites as an example the Jews in fifteenth century Europe, which labeled them as the vulgar, ill-mannered, brash antipode to the proper, civilized Christian. Silberman writes, "When Europeans began debating whether or not to admit Jews as citizens, the question was not whether Jews were crude, boorish, and morally and culturally inferior; everyone, friend and foe alike, agreed that they were" (32).

According to Howard Sachar, Jewish immigration to America began during the fifteen and sixteenth centuries with the Sephardic Jews, a group seeking to escape oppression (12). Founded in part as a bastion of freedom for groups fleeing religious persecution, colonial America welcomed the Sephardic Jews as the first of many waves of Jewish immigrants lasting into the twentieth century. Gerald Sorin notes that during the early days of his presidency, George Washington even sent a letter to the Sephardic Jews of Rhode Island expressing his desire for equality and tolerance for all citizens of the newly founded nation (16). Sorin says that in 1776, the two thousand Jews living in America were "the freest in the world," (16) and over the next forty years they would be granted full voting privileges. According to Silberman, these Jews for the most part assimilated with gentiles. Though they practiced Orthodoxy in the confines of the synagogue, in the outside world they behaved and dressed like other Americans (41).



Silberman writes that between 1820 and 1840, the Sephardic Jews were joined by the Ashkenazi Jews (Jews from areas linked to German culture) who were escaping severe anti-Semitism in Central Europe and a trade slump in Germany (42). Sorin writes that despite initial tensions between the two groups—the German Jews were viewed as less educated and more traditional than the Sephardic Jews—the Ashkenazi acculturated rapidly to both Sephardic and other European customs. The “liberal spirit of the United States, the desire to reformulate a Jewish ritual in the idiom of the times, and a desire to Americanize the synagogue with a more decorous English language service” led to the adoption of Reform Judaism in America in the 1840s (Sorin 29). Reform, a more liberal sect of Judaism, became the dominant belief system among American Jews of the time. Silberman says that like the Sephardic Jews, the Ashkenazi Jewry scattered across the country and was thus forced to acculturate. Though immigrant life was difficult, Ashkenazi Jews proved impressively upwardly mobile as peddlers and shopkeepers. Moreover, the intermarriage rate was relatively high (20%) and the Civil War instilled in them a sense of American identity that overshadowed allegiance to their country of origin (44). Silberman also attributes the Jews’ success to the notion that the traditionally Jewish ideals of individual happiness and success aligned well with the American Dream. According to Sorin’s analysis, by around 1880, “German Jews had become significantly acculturated” (33).

Though they were not as strictly observant with religious rituals and practices, the German Jews still maintained a strong Jewish identity, according to Sorin. He writes:

... their emphasis on the social justice dimensions of prophetic Judaism, their extraordinary philanthropic activity, and their consistent concern for the welfare of Jews overseas strongly suggest that many of these nineteenth century Jewish Americans continued to perceive themselves as an organic part of the Jewish people. (4)

By Sorin's account, a strong secular Jewish identity was emerging in the late nineteenth century. He also attributes this growing secularized identity to the prospering Jewish community of the time, which included Jewish hospitals, synagogues, and organizations.

Sorin goes on to note the changing dynamic toward the end of the century owing to the immigration of Eastern European Jews to the United States. Whereas only 3% of the world's Jewry lived in America before 1880, the number climbed to 23% by 1920 (Sorin 34). Over 73% of these immigrants came from the Russian Empire starting in the late nineteenth century to escape severe anti-Semitism. According to Sorin, Jews in this area had been confined to provinces in European Russia and Poland known as the Pale of Settlement, and those that left their small town settlements (*shtetlkh*) were usually beaten. When hundreds of pogroms broke out throughout southern Russia, emigration to America increased dramatically. Epstein describes the situation: "... the increasingly violent pogroms were characterized by the murders of individuals or whole families, numerous sexual assaults, the looting of property, and the burning of houses and land" (7).

Sorin writes that unlike German Jews, Eastern European Jews were reluctant to acculturate, instead forming urban ethnic enclaves strongly infused with *yiddishkeit* tradition—ghettos that strongly mirrored the *shtetl* lifestyle that they left in Europe (63).

This *yiddishkeit* tradition “emphasized education, religion, belief in a common destiny, moral superiority, a love for Yiddish language and culture, and a strong sense of community; the religious and secular were inextricably intertwined” (Sorin 42). The isolationist lifestyle, Sorin explains, produced severe tensions between German and Eastern European Jews. German Jews who had prospered now found themselves the targets of discrimination by gentiles who were redefining their conceptions of Jewishness as foreign and exotic. In New York, uptown German Jews were horrified by the Lower East Side crime rate in the community where Eastern European Jews had settled; they believed this statistic reflected poorly on all Jews. In response, German Jews poured money into Americanization programs and strongly encouraged immigrants to “Americanize as well as disperse” (Sorin 57).

The popular culture of the period reflected these tensions within the Jewish community, as well as Jews’ increasing move toward assimilation. Epstein describes how Yiddish plays authored around 1905 construed a Jewish-American culture: “This sentimental communal experience was vital in reassuring the Jews that their arduous trip across the Atlantic had not deprived them of their heritage” (14). Epstein explains that while Yiddish films seldom gained notoriety outside the Jewish community, Jewish vaudeville stars became quite esteemed among both Jewish and gentile audiences. For example, Jewish comedian George Burns and gentile comedian Gracie Allen became icons of the period. According to Epstein, their relationship “mirrored the developing relationship between Jewish comedians and the established American comedic forms”

(27). Indeed, Epstein labels Jewish comedians' rise to visibility in this period as having been a vital part of Jews' acceptance into mainstream American society.

Hoberman and Shandler describe how from 1907 to 1910, New York nickelodeons, many of which were located in the Jewish Quarter and Lower East Side, gained in popularity ("Nickelodeon Nation" 15). Many believed that this was a bad thing because some films perpetuated certain stereotypical representations that unnecessarily exaggerated differences between Jews and gentiles, producing a "Jew as immigrant outsider" discourse. For example, the 1907 vaudeville-derived, black-and-white, silent film *Cohen's Fire Sale* shows a Jewish hat seller who starts a fire to collect insurance. In the article "Jews Who Spit in Their Own Faces," Ephraim Koplan criticizes the film:

We might therefore expect that these temples of art [owned by Jews] would offer at least some small number of authentically Jewish pictures to satisfy the patriotic feelings of the patrons. But not only don't they do this; they grab every insulting picture that portrays Jews as devils, swindlers, and imposters. (33)

In 1908, Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* created a representation and idea new to audiences. The title itself was highly influential and self-explanatory. Vincent Brook writes that the play "first articulated, in popular form, the ideology upon which America's grand narrative of assimilation was built" (22). The story focuses on the marriage between a Russian-born Jew and a Russian-born Christian. Championing the romantic ideal that love conquers all, the play ends as the sun sets on the Statue of Liberty, the symbol of the melting pot. Like many Americans, President Theodore

Roosevelt applauded the theme. According to Sachar's book, after the performance Roosevelt supposedly rose to his feet in his theater box and shouted his approval (379).

The theme was one that would resurface many times in popular culture throughout the twentieth century. D.W. Griffith's 1910 film *Romance of a Jewess*, for example, shows a young Jewess refusing her father's arranged marriage to marry her lover, a gentile farmer. Hoberman writes that the film "anticipated the assimilationist mood of the American films that would follow World War I" (*Bridge of Light* 28).

However, it is also important to recognize—as Biale has in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*—that there have always been holes in the "melting pot" theory. Biale shows that not every American has been eligible for this melting pot. First, Biale points out that Zangwill's protagonist's last name is Sephardic, supporting "the well-established trope in nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish letters in which the Sephardim constitute an assimilable Jewish aristocracy as opposed to the uncouth Ashkenazic" ("The Melting Pot and Beyond" 20). Most importantly, though, the "melting pot" could only include Americans who could "pass as white." Biale writes, "Jews can pass as whites, blacks cannot. Only certain races ... are candidates for 'melting'" ("The Melting Pot and Beyond" 23). The rationale behind the formation of this black and white binary is explained by Brodtkin: The "bipolar view of American populace" has its origins in "an economy and culture built upon slavery and expropriation" (177). Thus Jews, previously seen as "ethnic Others," could over the course of two centuries be transformed into Whites, while Blacks and others had no hope for such a transformation. Michael Rogin writes, "As anti-Semitism racialized Jews in

Europe ... European immigrants to the United States were coming under the banner of a new racial invention: whiteness” (12).

### **Whiteness, the Old/New World Conflict, and the Construction of Blackface**

David Roediger’s *Working Toward Whiteness* provides a comprehensive historical look at how “new” southern and eastern European immigrants were subsumed into the White race. Jews had formerly been persecuted as Other, but when they arrived in America, Roediger argues that they were viewed as an “in between race”—somewhere in the middle of the white/nonwhite spectrum. He writes, “Unions that discriminated but opened to new immigrants more readily than to African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans reinforced the ‘in between’ positions of southern and eastern Europeans” (91). He argues that the structure was “a line (or a ladder) with African Americans at the far back (or very bottom) and that their experiences in jobs, schools, unions, and elsewhere quickly confirmed this view” (121).

Roediger, as well as James Baldwin, explain that to be considered White, Jews and other European immigrants needed to shed their cultural identity to be accepted into the melting pot, as well as distinguish themselves from the “other Other” in order to gain credibility. Roediger, in fact, relies on James Baldwin’s essay on the process of Whitening: “Baldwin pairs the embrace of whiteness with the immigrants’ loss of contact with land and community ... Joining in acts of racism against people of color made immigrants whites over time” (103). Roediger invents the term “white on arrival” to

describe Jews' arrival and instant acceptance into the privileges of Whiteness. Brodtkin's arguments echo those of Roediger and Baldwin. She writes:

When immigrants learn that the way to be American is to claim white patriarchal constructions of womanhood and manhood and a middle-class or bourgeois outlook for themselves, they are adapting patterns and practices that were here long before they were. These are the patterns and practices by which the United States has continually redefined itself as a nation of whites. (178)

She describes fluidity and assimilation as terms that "have meant assimilation into the practices and meanings of whiteness, of the dominant cultures and values, of creating oneself as worthy by contrast with blackness" (178).

Rogin's *Blackface White Noise* examines how Blackface performances by Jewish entertainers became a way of destabilizing their fixed "European ethnic as outsider" identity. Appropriating Blackness, Rogin argues, allowed Jews to shed their identity as racialized, ethnic Other. The most famous mainstream media representation of this process is in the 1927 Oscar winning film, *The Jazz Singer*. It was also the first film of the sound era, featuring the synchronized image and voice of Al Jolson singing in Blackface to a Jewish mother.

*The Jazz Singer* tells the story of a young man named Jakie Rabinowitz. The son of a Jewish cantor, Jakie leaves home, anglicizes his name to Jack Robin, and pursues a career in jazz and ragtime music. Rogin emphasizes that in the film, the Jewish adoption of burnt cork "frees the jazz singer from his ancestral, Old World identity to make music for the American stage" (58). Enjoying the White privilege that America offers him, Jack

has, by the end of the movie, successfully Americanized himself and is married to a young WASP woman—again, a privilege afforded to Whites. As Rogin points out, “*The Jazz Singer* facilitates the union not of white and black but of gentile and Jew” (79). Finally, though he never loses the affection of his mother, he alienates his father, a delusional, hopeless figure who values tradition and clings to a past that no longer exists. Hoberman writes, “And as the Mother gained in stature, so the Patriarch declined, becoming ... a figure of pathos rather than authority” (*Bridge of Light* 116).

The film depicts a common conflict of the period. Sorin says that in their quest to provide their children with better lives, Old World immigrants often found themselves at odds with their Americanized offspring. He writes, “The question of religious observance became the heart of the conflict between the pious immigrants and their children, as secular America increasingly beckoned to the young” (81). The fractured relationship between Jakie and his father reflects this. In *An Empire of Their Own*, an examination of the Jewish moguls’ role in Hollywood’s founding, Neal Gabler writes:

What *The Jazz Singer* really examines is the relationship between these two lives and the difficulty of ever reconciling them—of becoming “at one.” As the film characterizes them—Judaism identified with the desiccation and doom of the past; show business identified with the energy and excitement of the future—one wouldn’t really *want* to reconcile them. Jack Warner [of “Warner Brothers” fame] never did. But *The Jazz Singer* acknowledges something that many of the Hollywood Jews themselves would acknowledge (though only privately, for fear it might seem to compromise their loyalty to America): Judaism somehow



fructifies show business. It was one of the sources of their success in the movie industry and one of their advantages over the gentiles. (144)

Sorin writes that Yiddish productions often explored the urgent question of assimilation, which was: “How to be both an American and a Jew?” (83). Usually, as in *The Jazz Singer*, films answered the question through the process of de-Jewing the younger generation to allow for easy assimilation and presenting the elder generation as hopelessly outdated. Hoberman and Shandler write, “The quintessence of immigrant culture, American Yiddish film demonstrates the distinctive cultural creativity of a community intensely negotiating the disparities between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Worlds” (“The Media That ‘Speak Your Language’” 105). For example, *Uncle Moses* shows a wealthy sweatshop owner who falls in love with the young ingénue, Mascha. She feels obligated to marry him, but the Old/New World disconnect is apparent in their relationship. The character of Uncle Moses reflects an outdated mindset of Old World economics and arranged marriages. With him, Mascha is portrayed as a victim, yearning instead to be a part of the rapidly changing, dynamic, American environment. A 1928 film, *Abie’s Irish Rose*, portrays the same tension. Like *The Melting Pot*, the film solves the problem by representing the younger generation as more like gentiles than Old World Jews. For this generation, intermarriage was represented positively as the path to assimilation, and “true love transcended religious or ethnic difference,” writes Hoberman (*Bridge of Light* 117). Epstein points out that a similar film, Eddie Cantor’s *Whoopee!*, features a Jewish Cantor in love with a gentile nurse. It is a relationship that, according to Epstein, “reflected a widespread belief that in the melting pot that was America, love was more important than

ancient religious tradition” (94). He acknowledges that while some members of the American Jewish community were troubled by this plotline, Jewish comedians were not; they “saw themselves as Americans” and “did not want to endanger their assimilationist success by reverting to a traditional pattern of Jewish life” (95). Epstein describes how many of these comedians were courting and marrying gentile women, concluding, “The lures of Gentile America were powerful indeed” (95). Another interesting discourse of difference of *Whoopie!* identified by Epstein involves the relationship between a Native American man and a white woman. The couple is only able to be together after finding out that the man is actually white, having been adopted by Native Americans. Epstein writes that this “clearly raises the question of what exactly the melting pot is willing to melt” (95). In the movies, then, Jewish assimilation was represented as a process of growing closer to gentiles and more distant from Blacks and Native Americans.

According to the “love conquers all” discourse, in film Jews had to shed overtly ethnic characteristics to achieve happiness and assimilation. Sorin writes that films like these “generally projected positive images of Jews, but mostly by ‘dejudaizing’ them; that is, by removing any hint of difference between them and gentiles other than privately held religious beliefs” (165). In the movies in the first half of the twentieth century, the overtly Jewish characters of the Old World were represented as filled with inner turmoil about their rapidly changing environment, whereas the younger ones were represented as freed from traditional restraints and free to assimilate into America’s melting pot.

Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass discuss the blatant “contrast between the comic and grotesque and first-generation Jew and Irish with their handsome and

‘respectable’ Americanized offspring” (37). This contrast formed many storylines that perpetuated the “love conquers all” discourse, and this followed real trends toward intermarriage with gentiles in early twentieth century Jewish life. Author of *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* Steven M. Cohen clearly sees intermarriage as a step away from older forms of Jewish identity and insularity. He writes that the Jew/gentile union can be attributed to “increasing secularity and intergroup tolerance” (123).

Brook points out that Jewish success was achieved “through not the flaunting but rather the shedding of cultural specificity, a process not only contrary to the principles on which identity politics is based but also, perhaps irreversible” (84). In works examining this shedding process, however, authors such as Riv-Ellen Prell, Esther Romeyn, and Jack Kugelmass identify how the projection of unwanted idiosyncratic characteristics on to character types contributed to the evolution of certain stereotypes that became a permanent part of American culture.

In the next section, I will examine one of the most enduring legacies of first generation Jewish immigrants given to American culture, and specifically to *The O.C.*: the gift of Jewish humor.

### **The Role of Jewish Humor in the Formation of Jewish-American Identity**

According to Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass, Jewish humor played a significant role in the assimilation of Jews in America. As part of the founding of the Spertus Museum, curators Romeyn and Kugelmass embarked on a comprehensive study of “the special affinity to humor” of the Jewish people and the role it played in Jewish-

American identity (1). The well-recognized link between Jews and humor, they say, was founded with the Eastern European migration, as well as with the considerable contribution Jews made to the American entertainment industry—an industry which aided in “providing talented and ambitious Jews a route out of the ghetto” (2). Epstein asserts that the term “assimilation” is perhaps better termed “acculturation,” for in addition to Jews becoming Americanized, American culture borrowed many Jewish characteristics, particularly in the arena of comedy. In his study, Epstein identifies many elements of traditional American humor that originated in Yiddish culture.

In their work, Romeyn and Kugelmass observe that the centrality of humor in early Jewish-American culture could be a burden as well as an asset. While popular in mainstream entertainment, Jews were usually limited to playing comedic types in the first half of the twentieth century. Their jokes were typically self-derisive, making allusions to their own “physical appearance, convoluted language, and questionable business ethics” (8). Unfortunately, this self-abnegation often fed gentile stereotypes.

Though Romeyn and Kugelmass reject the notion that there is a “‘classic’ Jewish joke” through which one may access “a window to some eternal Jewish spirit,” they do recognize some elements of a typically Jewish humor: Jewish jokes are often philosophical, intellectual, self-deprecating, and often relate to dialect or Jewish stereotypes (7). Sigmund Freud also identifies self-deprecation as an intrinsic element of Jewish humor. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he writes, “Incidentally, I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character (112). He elaborates:

The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes ... have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics. The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too; but they know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with creates the subjective determinant (usually so hard to arrive at) of the joke-work. (111)

Daniel Gordis identifies another common element of Jewish humor: its habit of decentering “high” or “elite” culture. He writes of the tradition that “insists that Jews have to be prophets, outcasts, harsh critics of prevailing social mores” (177). Jewish comedians such as the Marx brothers, Jerry Seinfeld, and Woody Allen exert their “claims of cultural ownership by inflecting the high with their own ‘low’ perspective” (Romeyn and Kugelmass 10). The last of these examples, Woody Allen, creates characters that employ these characteristics through the recognizable character type of the *schlemiel*. The *schlemiel* is a neurotic and lovable loser, always questioning and criticizing high culture. Other character types use the same method in different ways. Epstein points out, for example, that the aforementioned Marx brothers did not directly criticize high culture, but still decentered it by mocking it or ignoring it altogether (xvi). Other comic types—the fool, the social critic, or the observer—“played off central

aspects of Jewish humor and, in the end, played the same roles in society” (Epstein xvii). After all, humor offers a relatively safe way to attack the powerful and centers the narrator. Romeyn and Kugelmass write that the comedians “continually impose their own logic upon society, making what is marginal – the immigrant – central” (48).

Humor, according to Romeyn and Kugelmass, morphed into a “coded language” that Jews might use to “mark, perform, and sometimes flaunt Jewish difference” (2). They examine a double consciousness of humor; when a comedian labels himself as Other, he also acquires a sense of self. This has positive and negative repercussions. His jokes might propagate stereotypes, but might also make differences seem “more like harmless quirks than loathsome habits” (Romeyn and Kugelmass 9). This double consciousness, as noted by Romeyn and Kugelmass, appears strongly with comedians mocking their outdated “Old World.” By emphasizing how younger generations recognize the outdated nature of their parents’ traditions, Jewish entertainers established credibility with their audiences. Self-critical humor was not necessarily indicative of self-hatred; it was also an affirmation of identity, working to invert stereotypes by turning them to positive identifications. As Epstein writes, “The laughter gave the Jewish comedian, and by extension, American Jews, acknowledgement, acceptance, and approval” (296). It gave them acceptance and power, as well as an identity for the secular American Jew (Epstein xi).

Jewish humor was highlighted and consequently rose to identifiable prominence during the waves of Jewish immigration that occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Romeyn and Kugelmass write that the migration from the Old World

resulted in a new manifestation of Jewish humor which “played upon the cultural incongruity, status reversals, and generational conflicts experienced by Jewish immigrants” (22). Made popular by nineteenth century Lower East Side saloon Yiddish vaudeville acts, many Jewish caricatures became popular, including the *schlemiel* husband and his dominant, overpowering wife with her “exaggerated mannerisms, ill-fitting clothing, and convoluted speech patterns” (Romeyn and Kugelmass 23), to eventually become part of U.S. popular culture as a whole. In line with this insight, in this thesis I argue that *The O.C.* incorporates the two most identifiable comic characters from earlier periods of Jewish immigration, the *schlemiel* and the Jewish mother.

### **The Advent of the Schlemiel**

One of the comic types I examine in *The O.C.* is that of the *schlemiel*. The word *schlemiel* is defined as a “pitiful, unlucky, or socially maladjusted person” (Epstein 302).

Pinsker traces the origins of the stereotype to folk culture, but writes that it gained prominence in European literature as a metaphor for the oppressed Jewry. Pinsker says that since the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, humor has been “a weapon in Jewry’s endless struggle for survival” (9). The *schlemiel* specifically is entertaining in that he is almost always “blissfully unaware of his folly” (Pinsker 14). Ruth Wisse explains in *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* that, often the target of ridicule, the *schlemiel* uses his innocence as a shield against corruption. Moreover, he was “free to criticize in a way that those with vested interests in social realities could not” (Pinsker 13). He is consequently celebrated as a hero for his resilience.

In mainstream cinema, Charlie Chaplin was identified as the quintessential immigrant Jewish *schlemiel*—despite the fact that he was born in London and was not Jewish. Hoberman explains that the error came to be when a director mistakenly heard Chaplin’s last name as “Chapman” (“The First ‘Jewish’ Superstar” 36). From then on, Chaplin was seen by audiences as Jewish—proof that discourses of a distinct comic Jewish “type” were already circulating. Hoberman explains that Chaplin never denied being Jewish; instead he merely conformed to the “ethnic ‘type’ already familiar to audiences as a Jew” (“The First ‘Jewish’ Superstar” 40).

Audiences’ immediate identification of Chaplin as Jewish begs the question: What about Chaplin made him appear “Jewish”? Albert Goldman identifies Chaplin’s comedy as “an abstract of Jewish humor, the only difference being that Yiddish tags were removed so as to achieve a ‘universal’ effect” (qtd. in Hoberman, “The First ‘Jewish’ Superstar” 39). Goldman says that Chaplin’s characteristics—vulnerable, witty, dandy; overall, a lovable fool infatuated with WASP women—fit perfectly with those of the *schlemiel*. Wisse describes the *schlemiel* as always “out of step with the actual march of events” (3). In Chaplin’s 1915 film *His Regeneration*, we see a literal example of this. Chaplin’s character plays an inconsequential role in terms of the overall plot. His few scenes are packed with his bumbling antics that merely serve as comic relief to garner laughs from the audience. The *schlemiel* is the antithesis of the “traditional Western hero” which Wisse describes as a “man of dignity, true-to-self, physical courage, romantic polish, masculine beauty, the old-fashioned virtues” (77). Yet, as Romeyn and



Kugelmass conclude, the comic Jew still emerged as a “paragon of virtue – the schlemiel as hero” (2).

The *schlemiel* is also often identified as effeminate, which coincides with the assertion that Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini make in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*. Examining stereotypes of the effeminate Jewish male, Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini write, “The popular notion that Jews embodied non-normative sexual and gender categories is long-standing” (1). In a 1997 study, Boyarin writes of having found evidence of a “‘soft’ Jewish masculinity” in the Talmud, which served as an oppositional identity to the “‘hard,’ martial Roman-ness” (2). Boyarin writes that by the mid-nineteenth century, “anti-Semitic stereotypes of a weak and passive Jewish masculinity were given new direction when they were grafted onto emerging discourses of race and sexuality,” and that “indelible evidence of the racial difference of all Jews” was marked by a lack of masculinity (2). In the second half of the twentieth century, the *schlemiel* as antihero would become popular in cinema with films such as *The Graduate*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, and Woody Allen’s movies. However, the *schlemiel* was still noted in these films for his difference to the prototypical Christian male—a difference that “signs the difference of Jews as a group from ... Europeans, Aryans, Christians” (Boyarin 2).

### **The Overbearing Jewish Mother**

Another popular stereotype is that of the Jewish mother, with her thick accent, affinity for Yiddish expressions, and intrusive, overbearing demeanor. The Jewish

mother, however, was not always depicted in this light. “In vaudeville,” observes Epstein, “the Jewish mother was the very soul of warmth, kindness, and love. She came to symbolize the love that was missing in so many lives of those in the audience” (36).

Scholars have suggested that the Jewish mother became overbearing when she began to stand as a barrier to assimilation. Riv-Ellen Prell observes that as children and husbands became more assimilated and Americanized, they became concerned that the Jewish mothers would hold them back. Even though not all Jewish men succeeded, “in their successes or failures, their productive role, reflecting the values of the period, was the sign of their Americanization” (Prell 169). Brodtkin writes that because men were worried that women might prevent their assimilation, the women “became the prime scapegoats for men’s and women’s ambivalence about whiteness. Jewish mother and Jewish American princess stereotypes, as well as homophobia, served as public projects of that ambivalence and anxiety about whiteness itself” (184). Prell elaborates on this further, saying that the mother “became a vessel into which Jews initially poured their concerns about their arrival in the middle class in the context of postwar prosperity and the growing integration of Jews into the suburbs” (144). They observed their Otherness through each other; as Prell writes, “Jews continued to be one another’s mirrors for the pain of their difference from the nation” (176).

In her negative manifestation, the Jewish mother was unable to be satisfied; she “demanded loyalty to herself and the impossible New World expectations” (Prell 143). Her English was rife with malapropisms, and Yiddish became not only a humor device to

mock older generations' ineptness but also a device to highlight the younger generation's bilingual perceptiveness.

Prell identifies Jack Carter as one comedian who played on the incongruity of Old and New Worlds. According to Prell, he used his mother as a character type to garner laughter, depicting her as “unwilling to let her ‘boy’ go to another woman” (147). In general, the demanding mother craved attention and became extremely nervous by the thought of her son going out into the world “as ‘normal’” (Prell 163). Consequently, she emphasized difference and hindered the men from assimilating.

### **Jews' Entry into the Middle Class and Jewish-American Identity in Post-World War II Representations**

Silberman writes that despite the isolationist practices and the “vulgarity” of Eastern European Jews, they proved strikingly upwardly mobile. This upward mobility, which continued for decades, eventually came to shape contemporary discourses about what it means to be Jewish. Roediger boldly asserts that events of the twentieth century, along with the new emerging identities of Jews, led to the ghetto becoming “unequivocally ... black” and “the eastern and southern Europeans far more securely a part of the master race” (244).

By the mid-1920s, the majority of Jews had entered the middle class (Silberman 130). Many contemporary theories offer explanations of how Jews were able to climb out of the working class so quickly. In *Jews and America Today*, Lenni Brenner speculates that the Talmudic emphasis on education and learning contributed to their mobility (28). The literacy rate of Jewish immigrants, for example, was 74%—high

compared to a 64% rate for Polish immigrants and a 46% rate for Southern Italians. Other factors included the prominence of the Yiddish press, and the fact that many workers and shopkeepers were educated in political and Marxist economic theory and approached their work in this theoretical context (Brenner 28). By the early 1930s, only one third of Jews were employed in manual work. Two thirds of all Jewish immigrants between 1899 and 1910 qualified as skilled workers (Brodkin 62). Others identify the strong sense of community as a source of support that helped Jews excel. Whereas most immigrants came from countries where they enjoyed majority status, Jews were accustomed to being the minority. They were also accustomed to a relatively low standard of living. Although living conditions in Jewish ghettos may have been poor by American standards, compared to life in the Old World they were very good. Finally, Jewish immigrants generally arrived in America with a good deal of optimism; it was a place where they could “begin to entertain notions of a better life for their sons and daughters” (Sorin 67). However, during this period, Roediger explains that immigrants lived “‘in between’ the stark racial binaries structuring U.S. life and law in the years from 1890 to 1945,” and consequently felt anxiety surrounding the unfixed nature of their racial identity and social status (8).

Gabler describes how this anxiety surfaced in the movie industry. With the exception of the Warners, the Jewish Hollywood moguls avoided addressing Judaism in their films, instead embarking on what Gabler calls an “endless search for gentility” (150). He writes of the backlash against Judaism from moguls such as Harry Cohn:

Other Hollywood Jews effaced their Judaism as a means of being accepted. Cohn more than effaced it; he exhibited active contempt toward it, as if it were something repellent. Not that this was totally unheard of. There were a great many Jews who resented being branded as outsiders or being regarded as “soft,” and they reacted against their Judaism aggressively the way Cohn did. For them it wasn’t enough to deny their faith; they had to demonstrate their superiority over it, and this often took the form of a kind of Jewish anti-Semitism. (168)

Pauline Kael discusses the internal conflict Jews face when placed in artificial, consumerist-driven Hollywood. Kael remarks that when faced with lavish, vulgar glitz, the Jew will cling to the bagel, a “solid heavy food” that “seemed like reality” (qtd. in Hoberman and Shandler, “Hollywood’s Jewish Question” 71). In this manner, Jews in Hollywood tried to downplay the particularities of the Jewish identities bequeathed to them by their immigrant parents.

### **Post World War II Jewish Cinema**

Prell argues that in the years following World War II, anti-Semitism—though more discreet—still permeated the American landscape. While Jews were offered more opportunities for middle class life, Prell writes that “seizing these opportunities did not end their journey to become middle-class Americans who would become indistinguishable from other white, middle-class Americans” (159). In many ways, Jews were still excluded, particularly in social circles. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis points out that even when Louis B. Mayer was the highest paid executive in the United States,

Jews were being “excluded from social inner sanctums enjoyed by middle-level WASP realtors and used-car dealers” (119) in the years before, during, and after World War II. Epstein writes that in the wake of Nazi Germany’s rise to power, “Hitler and American pro-Nazi attacks of Jewish financiers were an attractive explanation to some displaced farmers and poverty-stricken Americans” (106).

In this hostile climate, hiding pointed markers of Jewishness was probably a good idea. Consequently, by 1935 most Jewish comedians had retreated from the screen. Silberman observes that like the moguls, many Jewish actors chose to deemphasize their Jewishness during this time in the wake of the war, anglicizing their names during the 1940s and 1950s (59). For example, movie star Danny Kaye even bleached his hair to “erase” his Jewish identity (Romeyn and Kugelmass 49). Henry Popkin observes that, as would be seen in the 1950s sitcom *The Goldbergs*, it was a time when Americans wanted to “depict life without discordant, heterogeneous elements” (141). Jews would maintain their Jewishness, but subtly so, in ways evident to other Jews but invisible to gentiles, notes Silberman (61). Romeyn and Kugelmass write, “Jewish humor became a secret language, a silent wink to other Jews, communicated through personae, gestures, and allusions in speech which went largely unnoticed by the non-Jewish public” (49).

In the wake of the abandonment of “overt Jewishness,” Jews began not only producing work for the mainstream, but also consuming it. For example, Prell notes that many of the nation’s most popular comedians, then and now, were and are Jewish (145). She also notes that during this time, Jews began consuming “materials well beyond the border of their own community and read *Life*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Seventeen*, *Time*,

*Newsweek*, and other magazines precisely because they shared the interests of the American middle class” (144). As Jews assimilated into America as White mainstream, there became no need for a separate niche market.

Needless to say, Jewish directors continued to be reluctant to address issues of anti-Semitism explicitly in their own films. Gabler explains that their stake in Hollywood was prefaced by the reality that “Hollywood was itself a means of avoiding Judaism, not celebrating it. Most of the moguls had no stake in and no attachment to so-called Jewish projects, and those projects that were attempted often got lost in ambivalence and unresolved feelings about Judaism” (300).

The issue was, however, approached in the cinema by gentile directors during the 1940s. Directed by gentile Adolf Zukor, the award-winning anti-anti-Semitic film *A Gentleman's Agreement* stars Gregory Peck as a gentile journalist who poses as a Jew to write a feature story on anti-Semitism. This film makes visible, through the eyes of the journalist, the subtle but apparent lack of societal acceptance that Jews faced in that period. Screenwriter Ring Lardner Jr. argues that the film is actually not all that radical, since it just teaches its gentile audience to “never be mean to a Jew, because he might turn out to be a Gentile” (qtd. in Hoberman and Shandler, “Hollywood’s Jewish Question” 66). Yet, the film ultimately presents a discourse that Jews and gentiles are essentially the same. For example, when the journalist’s secretary discovers he is not Jewish, he insists that her perceptions of him after learning that he is a Christian should be no different than they were before, when she thought him to be Jewish.

Another film made around the same time by Adrian Scott, *Crossfire* centers on the murder of a Jewish nightclub owner, a hate crime committed as an act of anti-Semitism. The movie is based on a novel which is the story of a hate crime committed against a homosexual. However, director Edward Dmytryk deemed that the homosexual character was too controversial, and changed it to be the story of an ethnic hate crime. The film, though condemning anti-Semitism, elicited a heated response from the Jewish community because it called too much attention to Jews. America Jewish Community Representative Dick Rothschild publicly declared it “an extremely dangerous” project and tried to persuade the director to change the character to a black man instead of a Jew. Elliot E. Cohen also voiced his concern that such cinematic representation of anti-Semitism, despite the film’s moral and instructive tone, might actually reinforce such opinions (qtd. in Hoberman and Shandler, “Hollywood’s Jewish Question” 68).

The fear of visibility was perfectly served by films like *Crossfire* and *A Gentleman’s Agreement*, both of which portrayed Jewish issues through the eyes of gentiles, not allowing Jews their own voice. Furthermore, even these timid treatments of anti-Semitism were mostly avoided by Jewish directors and Jewish actors. Jewish actors maintained their Jewish humor, but subtly. As Groucho Marx said, “We Marx Brothers never denied our Jewishness. We simply didn’t use it” (qtd. in Hoberman and Shandler, “The Marx Brothers” 159).

The years after World War II witnessed a significant decline in anti-Semitic sentiment. Whereas in 1946 65% of the country’s population reported regularly overhearing disparaging comments about Jews, by 1951 that number dropped to 16%



(Epstein 137). This reflected not only more optimistic attitudes of the era, but also America's consciousness surrounding World War II. American soldiers had fought anti-Semitism in Europe and were consequently more conscious of it (Epstein 137). The publication of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the birth of Israel, and the popularity of Jewish comedians also made overt anti-Semitism unacceptable (Epstein 138). In fact, Epstein attributes the decrease in anti-Semitism partly to work of Jewish-American comedians. He writes, "Without their realizing it, many Americans had, across the decades, been absorbing a Jewish sensibility as they laughed at Jewish comedians" (138).

Moreover, the 1960 film *Exodus* created a new version of the male Jew: the muscle Jew, epitomized by character Ari Ben Canaan, portrayed by Paul Newman. The film embraced Israelis for their difference; this acceptance was shown through the relationship between gentile Cathy and Israeli-born Ben Canaan. Deborah Dash Moore offers an interpretation of the film, saying, "Accessible, heroic, uplifting, Israel on screen promised redemption, a way to be Jewish in America with pride" (215). She identifies Ben Canaan as the muscle Jew, "the prototypical Israeli, the new Jew for a generation of Americans who would watch the Six Day War unfold" (216-17).

Indeed, during the 1950s and 1960s, civil and ethnic pride movements furthered Jewish-American identity consciousness. Brook discusses, for example, how the Six Day War's hyper-masculine Jewish male character created a foil to the feminized underdog male Jewish stereotype (47). At the same time, 1960s films reincarnated familiar Jewish stereotypes from the Jewish mother to the *schlemiel* to the Jewish-American princess. Jews were becoming popular in the cinema. In mainstream films like *The Graduate* and

*The Heartbreak Kid*, the *schlemiel* appeared as the unlikely anti-hero. Mel Brooks and Woody Allen are two directors famous for their production of Jewish characters. Woody Allen specifically used wit as a weapon against “high culture.” Hoberman makes a worthwhile distinction when he notes that though “ethnic Jewish characters” may have lost prominence, “ethnic characterizations did not”; Allen’s mannerisms and values are distinctly Jewish (“Flaunting It” 243). In the Oscar-winning film *Annie Hall*, Allen counters the “love conquers all” discourse with one in which Annie eventually leaves the protagonist—a plot line which mimics Allen’s real-life triangle with Diane Keaton and Warren Beatty (Epstein 203). Epstein writes, “*Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* turn WASP women into more than attractive sexual partners. They become the metaphors for acceptance” (204).

As Brook writes, “Big noses, kinky hair, and nasal New York accents, Carl Reiner’s included, were now ‘in’ – at least, in the movies” (47). Hoberman and Shandler describe the dramatic shift from Jews “coily encoding the presentation of Jewish difference” to proudly flaunting difference (“Stand-Up Jews Introduction” 205). The “melting pot” was no longer the dominant ideology; difference was becoming chic. Frida Kerner Furman writes, “Undoubtedly the loss of confidence in the American way of life, instigated by Vietnam and Watergate, was an important contributing factor to the celebration of particularity” (123). Openly Jewish comedians appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, Jews became increasingly popular in the movies, and finally, openly Jewish characters began appearing on television sitcoms in the 1990s.

## Chapter 2

### Jews on Television

In this chapter, I examine the evolution of Jewish identity discourses on mainstream television shows, from the early years of commercial broadcasting in the 1950s to the era of cable domination in the 1990s. The evidence, gathered from the scholarly literature as well as from the television shows themselves, clearly demonstrates that Jewish identity on television has changed over time from “ethnic Other” to “White.” Understanding these changes sets the stage for my argument that *The O.C.* represents a new stage in the transformation of Jews into Whites, at least in popular representations.

Jewish identity was first portrayed on television in America’s first successful sitcom, *The Goldbergs* (Brook 21). A spin-off of the 1930s radio show *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, the show began airing in 1949 and centered on character Molly Goldberg, a Jewish working-class matriarch portrayed by Gertrude Berg. In reality, according to Donald Weber, Berg had little in common with Molly Goldberg. To gain insight into her character, Berg used to make trips to the Lower East Side of New York to gain insight into the way the “Old World” lived (Weber 116). Weber calls her behavior the “self-

conscious act of expressing what she understood to be the urgent, heartfelt concerns of her Jewish-American, New World citizens” (116).

With a distinctively ethnic flavor, *The Goldbergs* served to “bridge the gap between Depression-era and postwar America,” explains Brook (26). The narrative conflict exists between “novelty and tradition, Jewish and mainstream and American ways, with a willingness to compromise and an abiding faith in familial love providing the ultimate solution” (Brook 26). It was a tension felt by many during this time. Brook explains that like Zangwill’s *Melting Pot* had, *The Goldbergs* solved the problem of assimilation by stressing that love could overcome any type of problems or cultural identity issues.

The show touched its audiences through its authenticity; it “mined ethnic feelings” and joined shows like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, *Hey Jeannie* and *Life With Luigi* during the wave of ethnic sitcoms of the early 1950s. Donald Weber recalls how for two seasons, *The Goldbergs* retained that authenticity with “plots that depict the hopes and dreams of the Jewish community” (121). However, like other ethnic sitcoms of the period, it also appealed to more than merely Jewish audience members; the characters’ trials and tribulations were depicted in a way to which any Depression-era family could relate. According to Romeyn and Kugelmass, the show’s success was due to its “strategy of dual address. The show appealed as much to Jews, who could relish the public representation of their culture, as to non-Jews” (54). Jewish tradition was mostly used as a source of comfort and sanctuary. The characters would try to “find a way to deflect antagonism by relying on ethnic and folk skills” (Epstein 144). Traditions, such as those

celebrated on Yom Kippur and Passover, were depicted in a way that were “less about the holidays” and “more about family relationships or attachments to marks of ethnicity, again especially food” (Epstein 145).

George Lipsitz identifies the popularity of ethnic, working-class family sitcoms between 1949 and 1957 in *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Television sought to transform postwar American values. During the Depression, writes Lipsitz, “wartime scarcities of consumer goods had led workers to internalize discipline and frugality while nurturing networks of mutual support through family, ethnic, and class associations” (*Time Passages* 45). Thus, television came along to promote consumption in the early 1950s; “the medium of the infinitely renewable present turned to past traditions and practices in order to explain and legitimate fundamentally new social regulations in the present” (*Time Passages* 48). Yet there seems to be a paradox. Though society was encouraging citizens to become more consumptive and commodity-based, these television shows were focusing on the working-class, evoking “concrete historical associations and memories in their audiences” (Lipsitz, *Time Passages* 41). *The Goldbergs*, for example, was showing ethnic families during a time when there were distinct “declines in ethnic and class identity” (Lipsitz, *Time Passages* 41).

However, the creators found a way for these urban, ethnic, working-class comedies to promote consumerism. For instance, Lipsitz points out that the character of Molly Goldberg, though anachronistic in the way she applied Old World values to her Americanized setting, was also a credible authority on the past. The creators afforded

Molly Goldberg the ability to “[acknowledge] the critiques of materialism and upward mobility sedimented within the experiences of working-class families,” but also emphasized “how wise choices enabled consumers to have *both* moral and material rewards” (Lipsitz, *Time Passages* 71). According to *The Goldbergs*, the nuclear family could simultaneously be a “consumer unit” and “part of neighborhood, ethnic, and class associations”—the individual person was tied to his or her commodity purchases (Lipsitz, *Time Passages* 71).

However, as the times began to change, so did *The Goldbergs*. Lipsitz refers to director Marc Daniels, who “recalls that a changing society less tied to class and ethnicity demanded different kinds of entertainment” (*Time Passages* 72). Following the comic patterns of the time, character Jake’s dialect slowly morphed into a humorous assortment of malapropisms (Romeyn and Kugelmass 54). The writers made concerted efforts to avoid anything remotely controversial, political, or overtly ethnic; in the words of Berg herself, “I keep things average. I don’t want to lose friends” (qtd. in Weber 122). This attitude reflects television’s emerging philosophy of that period: Avoid losing audience patronage by avoiding anything that could be perceived as slightly controversial.

Indeed, the final season of *The Goldbergs* completes the “de-Jewing” process with the Goldbergs relocating to Haverville, a picturesque version of Eisenhower Era suburbia. The show changed its name to *Molly*. The plotlines similarly changed. Lipsitz observes:

New patterns of social acceptance made children the tutors to their inflexible and backward-looking parents. The new standard of living and opportunity for

upward mobility secured by the Goldbergs for their children only served to push the children into a different world, one that mocked the foreign accents and archaic customs of the family. (40)

Epstein speculates that this change ultimately led to the show's demise. Audiences could accept Jewish identity and culture as long as it remained in the ghetto, but were not ready for "the movement of American Jews outward in American life" (146).

Shows immediately following *The Goldbergs* exhibited much less in the way of blatant Jewish ethnic identity. Debuting in 1950, *Your Show of Shows* was not overtly Jewish, despite its authors being some of the most prominent Jewish comedy writers of the day. The show featured characters who were what Epstein calls "urban, with a Jewish sensibility" (141), and Hoberman and Shandler observe how the scripts often made passing references to and jokes about Jewish culture ("Our *Show of Shows*" 144). The show used an ethnic humor that included what Romeyn and Kugelmass describe as "codes and inflections which often go unnoticed by, or are unintelligible to, outgroup audiences, but radically affect its meaning" (8). This was the same as the humor of the Marx Brothers' films, and also of Groucho Marx's television show.

At the same time, in the next decade, Epstein describes, television was unmistakably beginning to favor nondescript, family-oriented WASP sitcoms, adhering to sponsors' wishes for "Least Objectable Programming." For example, in 1961 when Carl Reiner created *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, he based the storyline on the years he spent working as a writer for *Your Show of Shows*. Originally, Reiner cast himself as a

Jewish writer in the Bronx. However, it was decided that the premise was “too Jewish,” so Dick Van Dyke was cast as a WASP writer in Westchester County (Epstein 147). The only Jewish presence on the show is Buddy Sorrell, portrayed by Morey Amsterdam – a secondary character whose purpose is comic relief, rather than a three-dimensional character whose behavior was central to the show’s plot. Lipsitz refers to shows such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* as “ethnically neutral, middle-class situation comedies” (*Time Passages* 72). The networks were also airing many action/adventure shows, in which “no embarrassing retentions of class-consciousness compromise the sponsors’ messages and no social connections to ethnic history bring up disturbing issues that might make programs susceptible to protests and boycotts” (73).

However, the ethnic working-class sitcom had not permanently disappeared. Brook writes that in 1972, America witnessed a rise in hip, urban shows that represented America’s pluralistic society—shows such as *The Jeffersons*, *What’s Happening!!*, *Good Times*, and *Chico and the Man* (49). At the time, the nation was experiencing a rediscovery and celebration of ethnicity, which was a consequence of the national popularity of *Roots*, the massively popular television mini-series based on the family story of Alex Haley. While Haley’s search was for his roots in Africa and in Southern slave country, the popularity of his narrative led Whites to also go in search of their roots. Lipsitz writes that such shows “held open possibilities for transcending the parochialisms of traditional ethnicity and for challenging the patriarchal assumptions of both extended and nuclear families” (73). Joining the shows of the 1970s that celebrated ethnicity was *Bridget Loves Bernie*, the story of a white WASP woman and her marriage to a Jew. The



plotline reflected the rising Jewish-Christian intermarriage rate of the time, which had climbed from 5% in the 1950s to 32% in 1970 (Brook 49).

Yet despite the growing popularity of American pluralism, the show immediately faced controversy. Jewish leaders demanded that it be taken off the air, one rabbi threatened to boycott it, and the producers reportedly received bomb threats. Jewish critics claimed that it advocated hyper-assimilation, a position that was embraced by Jewish leaders of the past. In the 1970s, many Jewish leaders saw this hyper-assimilationism as a threat to the collective identity of Jews. Even though *Bridget Loves Bernie* was a significant success, it was taken off the air after the first season (Brook 51).

While *Bridget Loves Bernie* reproduced the “love conquers all” discourse previously seen in *The Melting Pot* and *Abie’s Irish Rose*, it also reflected the Jewish transformation to Whiteness that had taken place. Robert J. Mulch of *The Jewish Spectator* wrote that “the union of the ‘identical’ Bernie and Bridget no longer posed a threat for Jews and Catholics, in this view – whatever specificity the religiously and ethnically neutered couple had to lose has already been lost” (qtd. in Brook 51).

What is interesting is that *Rhoda*, produced only two years later, also featured a Jewish-gentile marriage but faced relatively no controversy. The 1974 sitcom starring Valerie Harper as Prell’s “Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage” character type was a spin-off of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. While on *MTM* Rhoda was explicitly Jewish, playing Other to Moore’s WASP character, on *Rhoda* she was only “incidentally” Jewish (Brook 55)—which perhaps explains the lack of controversy. Though *Rhoda* did maintain Jewish character nuances—“a strong sense of family ... self-deprecating humor

... warmth and sensuality”—overall, her Jewishness was merely “set dressing,” claims Brook (55). Another explanation for the lack of controversy in response to Rhoda’s marriage is that Rhoda is a Jewish female marrying a gentile man rather than a Jewish man marrying a gentile woman. After all, Jewish men have typically out-married twice as often as Jewish women (Cohen 122). Moreover, Brook speculates that because *Bridget Loves Bernie* was premised on intermarriage, the theme received more notice than on *Rhoda*, whose protagonist was only “incidentally Jewish” anyway (55).

While no longer attempting to hide the Jewishness of its characters, television would, in the next decades, place more prominence on Jewish cultural identity than on Jewish religious identity or Jewishness as an ethnicity. Frank Rich commented in a 1996 *New York Times* editorial, “When American Jews are portrayed on TV, they’re most likely to embody urban Jewish-American culture rather than Judaism, a la *Seinfeld* – or to uphold traditional caricatures, like *The Nanny*” (qtd. in Romeyn and Kugelmass 82). Inarguably, Jewish-American culture was distinctive and present in 1990s television representations, but seldom explicitly marked.

Enjoying extreme popularity on primetime television, the sitcom *Seinfeld* stars comedian Jerry Seinfeld as an observant, witty, middle-class thirty-something resident of New York’s Upper West Side. Shandler writes that “some American Jews identify the series as a Jewish cultural touchstone, while others see it as a signpost of Jewish demise” (256). *Seinfeld*’s style, location, and sensibility mark him as Jewish, but his Jewishness is seldom explicitly noted in the script. The first element of *Seinfeld* that is markedly “Jewish” is the comedy style of observational humor, a style that also happened to fit in

well with the trajectory of the American economy and social changes. Epstein describes these changes:

The social world of the breakup of marriages and families, the increasing focus on self rather than on community or social issues, the rise of ethnicity as superseding an overarching American identity, and the quickened images of life presented by television (and by many illegal drugs) all added to an enormous increase in the discontinuities of life. The center didn't hold, and the amazing array of stimuli confused many people. They found it easier to focus on the small matters of life.

(240)

The irony employed in observational humor allots credibility to the comedian who stands outside real world events to provide commentary on them.

Thus, the character of Seinfeld himself represents a new character type and comedic figure, albeit one whose style resonates well with traditions of humor in Jewish culture. According to Epstein, that new type is “the young, cute, more than handsome, nonneurotic, clean Jewish male who spoke of personal lives rather than social problems, who made small observations and not large pronouncements” (239). Americans found this type particularly attractive. He is assumed to be rooted in strong Jewish values, and is seen as “a good marriage catch, a good son-in-law, a friendly, funny, nice guy” (Epstein 241). The discourse of the Jewish male was changing, and men like Ben Stiller, Adam Sandler, and Jerry Seinfeld were winning the hearts of audiences around the world.

On *Seinfeld*, the four main characters live in a world that Epstein describes as “cynical and unsentimental,” and “filled with small failures” (245). They comment on

the small aspects of life in a comic manner, but the characters are constantly unable to commit to a significant other or maturity in general. Epstein sees this as a metaphor for the inability to commit to an identity. He writes, “They don’t see value in their parents’ struggle. They don’t see the intellectual or artistic challenges in constructing an identity. They want comfort, not confusion” (246).

Though distinctly Jewish, rarely does Jerry reference his Jewishness. In one of the few episodes in which he does, “The Yada Yada,” it is in the context of a trip to his dentist’s office. His dentist announces that he plans to become Jewish for the jokes. Upset by this declaration, Jerry visits a Catholic priest who asks if he is offended as a Jewish person. Jerry responds that he is not offended as a Jew, but as a comedian. Epstein comments on this point: “The Jewish identity is peripheral, however. It does not define him ... It is as a comedian that he sees life, though with a Jewish comedian’s sensibility: clear-eyed observations about life, a sense of annoyance at having to deal with life’s petty travails, and as someone smaller than others” (246). Albert Goldman remarks how the Jewish male, Seinfeld being the prime example, has risen from underdog in popular culture to fascinating authority on America and American life (qtd. in Hoberman “Flaunting It” 224).

It is no wonder Seinfeld feels small, given the setting in which he operates; Elaine, George, Jerry, and Kramer exist in a cramped, urban space, confined to the middle class. Brook ponders, then, “Have the marginalized traits of U.S. Jews become the mainstream characteristics of all – or at least all urbanized – Americans? If you live in New York or any other big city, as Lenny Bruce joked, are you Jewish?” (109). Brook

argues that according to *Seinfeld*, the answer is yes. He continues, posing the prudent question: “What are the implications of the televisual Judaizing of America, and to what degree is this phenomenon constitutive and/or reflective of changing historical forces?” (109).

Jewish television shows that emerged in the wake of *Seinfeld* include sitcoms like *Mad About You*, *Friends*, and *The Nanny*. *Mad About You*’s Paul Reiser plays the “glib and neurotic” counterpart to his laid-back, WASP wife Helen Hunt (Brook 123). He is a family man, and though not overtly Jewish, “a charming model for American husbands” (Epstein 249). With the exception of one reference to Hanukkah, *Friends* almost entirely erases the Jewishness of its characters. Brook comments that in sitcoms such as *Friends*, “Jewish characters are literally *conceived*, more than *represented*, as Jews ... Even the writers admit to not having given their characters’ Jewishness much thought” (125). Conversely, *The Nanny*’s protagonist epitomizes the Jewish American Princess stereotype. Fran Drescher’s character is a working class nanny employed by a wealthy WASP Broadway producer. Brook marvels at the show’s “ability to confront the Jewish Princess stereotype head on and *get away with it*” (128). A classic example of camp, *The Nanny* celebrates the excess of the Jew. It has, according to Romeyn and Kugelmass, “become a badge of pride, and his (or her) laughter celebrated as a distinctive Jewish voice” (83). Epstein, however, makes the observation that the show could have had the same effect even if Fran had been Italian or WASP (268). Instead, Fran Fine is depicted as “a funny stereotype, a cartoon Jew, an exaggeration, an anti-Semite’s Jew from Hell” (Epstein 268-269).

Finally, we move on to the final phase of sitcoms, identified by Brook as perhaps “post-Jewish.” This wave includes shows *Dharma and Greg* and *Will and Grace*.

The first, *Dharma and Greg*, features one of television’s first Jewish female protagonists. What is more noteworthy is that Dharma is attractive and confident. Her father Larry abandoned Judaism, but according to Brook, his leftist tendencies still point to a “postethnic” agenda. He is the perfect example of the civic-minded secular Jew, and Dharma exhibits similar Jewish sensibilities and values. Brook argues that the main theme of *Dharma and Greg* is that “people can change” – Dharma and Greg are constantly learning from each other (153). Such a discourse in some ways echoes the “love conquers all” discourse seen in early twentieth century films.

Brook also analyzes the popular sitcom *Will and Grace*, which celebrates the friendship of Jewish Grace and homosexual Will, a union that Brook calls a “Jewish alliance with ‘otherness’” (154). Brook notes that in the relationship, Grace seems to harbor an “‘excessive’ attachment to the marginalized ‘other’” (156). He also notes that in some ways, Jews and gays share similar plights: the Jewish male is seen as effeminate, as is the homosexual male; both Jews and gays have faced pressure to hide their true identities; and they are often seen together as having dominated Hollywood (162). However, Brook also notes that the ostracism that Grace and Will face are hardly of equal severity. He observes one scene that attempts to show Grace and Will’s victimization by society, noting that it “seems anachronistic rather than poignant, emphasizing the gap rather than the equivalence between the groups’ plights” (162). Whereas Will is attacked with verbal insults by his homophobic brother, a woman tells Grace, “There’s a woman

where I get my hair done in Westport and she's Jewish, too!" Brook views their positions as unequal; Grace is far less likely to be a victim, and her friendship with Will serves as more of a device for Grace to "multiculturalize" herself. Brook argues that Grace's identity is both Jewish and White. By comparing herself with Will and aligning herself with his plight, Grace is actually pointing out the differences, thereby revealing her mainstream status in comparison to Will.

Grace's position of privilege, relative or not, presents a striking juxtaposition to the Jewish identity discourses that were circulating several decades before. Thus, I argue that the new, less ethnic representations of Jewishness represented by characters like Grace mark a new chapter in popular representations of Jewish identity.

Because of the persistence of a distinctively Jewish style, it is tempting to think of Jewishness as a distinctive and popular identity on television. But televised Jewishness is only stylistically ethnic, and then only in the sense of being witty and self-effacing. Indeed, in most other respects, contemporary televised Jewishness is the same as normative middle-class Whiteness. Furthermore, television has stripped Jewishness of its ethnic content at the very moment when real Jews have enjoyed unprecedented economic success and experienced decreased incidents of anti-Semitism.

The convergence of Jewish and normative White identities, both on television and in real life, poses fundamental problems of racial and ethnic classification. For example, should Jews be left out of discussions of multiculturalism and marginalization? Or are they, as Susannah Heschel argues, a group that is still in cultural, racial and religious

terms, subjected not only to the Christian lens and the problematic, reductionist term “Judeo-Christian,” but also silenced as the racially and culturally subaltern group of Europe?

### **The Question of Marginalization and Contemporary Jewish-American Identity**

When surveying the issue of whether or not Jews are marginalized, perhaps we should begin by asking the simpler question: What constitutes “Jewishness” in early twenty-first century America? Is the group’s marginalization a key component to its identity?

Solomon Poll writes of an Israeli man who, although he does not practice a religion, “has a Jewish heart” (145). Poll speculates, “But is this Jewish heart still ablaze in every Jew? Is it the basis of identity today? And is this Jewish heart strong enough to maintain Jewishness into the twenty-first century?” (145).

Poll continues, outlining the greatest threats to Jewishness: intermarriage, a decline in Jewish birth rate, a decline of Jews in the U.S. population, Jews who do not affiliate as Jewish, a decline in remembrance of the Holocaust, a decline of Jewish involvement, non-theistic opinions, and the decline of Zionism (153). Indeed, with Jews lacking a strong consciousness of marginalization in the United States, some feel that Jewishness faces an inevitable breakdown. Brook writes that U.S. Jews now “revel in (even wrestle with) their widespread acceptance by and self-recognition as the white majority” (17). Any marginalization of Jews is “cushioned by comparative class privilege” (Brook 19). It almost seems that to remain strong, Jewishness would have to



continue to be synonymous with outsider. Brook writes, “Identification with the majority, although welcomed on one level, clashes with Jews’ converse desire to preserve their identity as a minority, an identity further challenged by the reluctance of other ethno-racial minorities to admit Jews into the multicultural fold” (16).

Frida Kerner Furman’s book *Beyond Yiddishkeit: The Struggle for Jewish Identity in a Reform Synagogue* explores the ambiguity surrounding a definitive Jewish identity in her study of a liberal, modern, Reform synagogue, Temple Shalom. She writes that varying tensions “have transformed Jewish identity from a generally ready-made, automatically embraced configurations of meanings in premodern times to a complex, fractured, and often painfully and incompletely constructed one in the present day” (1). In premodern times, Furman explains, identity was simple, a “taken-for-granted matter that gave Jews a world view, images of self, and recipes for conduct” (130). Now, a Jewish identity is not so easily identifiable.

Brenner believes that due to the divisions in Judaism—Judaism has recently divided into three sects that are “as different as chalk from cheese”—it will not survive. He writes, “Not even a miracle from God can save the world’s oldest monolithic faith from its inexorable disintegration. No form of Judaism can successfully compete in the free market of ideas” (282).

The term “Judeo-Christian” is one that has gained prominence in contemporary discourse, both inside and outside of today’s academia. According to Gordis, the word implies that American Jews are “not peripheral, but mainstream” (175). The word insinuates that American values are founded in both Christianity and Judaism and do not

discriminate between the two. Though the similarities have “made the Jewish success story in America possible,” Gordis writes that they also “contribute to a vision of Jewish life that is deeply inauthentic. Strange though it sounds to American Jews, Jewish tradition has always claimed that Jews need to be different in order that they might play a quasi-subversive role in society” (177).

Gordis proposes two solutions to this quandary. The first is to embrace American liberalism, a practice of which he disapproves. He writes, “It is at complete variance from our tradition. It simply doesn’t keep Jews meaningfully Jewish. And it gives Jews nothing to say” (78). The other option is to “withdraw into a self-made Jewish cocoon,” which is also an ineffective solution because “Jewish tradition demands that Jews engage with the non-Jewish world” (78). Thus, he calls for a compromise: “What we need is a model of being willing to be openly Jewish and yet wholly involved in the world outside. Creating that model is the greatest challenge facing those of us who care deeply about American Jewish survival” (80).

A vision for this type of secular Jewish identity has been articulated by many. They were taking part in creation of a new, secular, modern Jewish-American identity. Brodtkin writes that Jews “used their Jewish heritage ... to institutionalize and negotiate the meanings, values, and acceptance variants of American ethnic Jewishness” (104). After all, “part of being Jewish was being familiar with a working-class and anticapitalist outlook on the world and understanding this outlook as being particularly Jewish” (105). Even as Jews ascended the ranks into middle- and upper-classes, they retained this sense of civic commitment. They also remained strongly Democratic. Sorin writes that during

this period, Jewish voters began to “think of themselves as liberals because they were Jews and Jews partly because they were liberals” (177).

Indeed, philanthropy and civic religion have long been tied to the Jewish identity. Civic religion “represents a group effort to express itself as a moral community, independent of traditional religious institutions” (Steinberg 256). Though specific religious traditions might lose prominence as Jewishness continues to find a niche in American society, these liberal convictions will remain. This coincides with the habits of America in general: “Accommodation to American patterns is evident, as well, for moralism, rather than pietism or theology, has been the mark of American religious life in general” (Furman 62). Furman explains how Judaism conformed to this practice in Western Europe:

Reform’s liberal convictions also arose out of the sociological need of many Jews to integrate into the modern liberal culture of Western Europe. The rejection of particularistic and ethnic Jewish traits was an essential requirement of this tradition, for entry into Western society was predicated upon ethnic and national neutrality ... The atomization of the Jew began thus, as religion came to be the single object of distinctiveness among Western European Jews; otherwise, they were to become acculturated citizens of Western European nations ... Acceptance into the host country, this time free America, was contingent upon submersion of ethnic distinctiveness. (122)

However, this also leads to a decline in Jewish identity. Furman also notes that in Temple Shalom, many members were raised in homes where they learned the spirit of

liberalism but not the contents of Judaism. She says, “We may recall that most members, rather uneducated in Jewish matters, experience a feeling of ideological incompetence. People cannot defend intellectually their sense of Jewishness and rely completely on the expertise of clergy” (125).

Thus, as liberal and Jewish become more synonymous with one another, Garry M. Brodsky writes that the two “share the experience of being members of minority groups who are often viewed with suspicion and hostility,” a status which prompts them to “view the world in critical, intellectual terms ... so the consciousness of both the liberal and the postmodern Jew will be informed with an anti-utopian worldliness” (Brodsky 260). Eventually, Brodsky argues, that “much as being a Jew was a way of being a person for the traditional Jew, being a liberal can and is a way of being both a Jew and a person for the postmodern Jew” (261).

Yet despite a decreased awareness among Jews as to the history of their liberal, civic-minded commitment, Epstein points out that this generation of Jews is much freer to express its identity. He writes, “The earlier generations had a much more intimate relationship with their Jewishness; it enveloped and penetrated them. Yet, with all that, they were (often justifiably) reluctant to express their identity in a public forum. This new generation, with far more tenuous Jewish connections, has been freed to express just such an identity” (252). They have comfortably integrated into American life, but continue to struggle with balancing their Jewish and American identities. “It is Adam Sandler,” writes Epstein, “perched precariously between an identity of the past and one of the future who represents this dilemma for the current generation” (252).

## Chapter 3

### Methods: Reading *The O.C.* as a Cultural Text

In this chapter, I will map out the theoretical concepts and methodological procedures that guided my analysis of *The O.C.*

This research relies upon widely accepted ideas in cultural studies about identity formation, signification, and the specific codes and genres of television. In this section, I will lay out these ideas and discuss how they framed my research. A common assumption of contemporary cultural studies is that no identity is “fixed”; instead, identities are thought to be constructed within ideologies and through discourses that circulate in society, and these are constantly changing. Thus, an examination of identity formation naturally begins with a discussion of how ideologies and discourses operate.

Louis Althusser’s work has had a major impact on the way ideology and identity is defined within cultural studies. Althusser described ideology as a set of ideas that works by producing subjects who fit within particular economic, cultural and political systems. Ideology “hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (qtd. in Woodward, *Identity and Difference* 33). Thus, one might say people are “trapped” within ideology. Althusser also writes, “The individual ... participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the ideas which

he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject” (1501). For example, people may “choose” to be religious, but what that will mean to them will be determined by already established practices within society that dictate whether or not someone is religious – for example, attending church or reciting prayers. These ideologies are extremely powerful. As Mike Budd, Steve Craig, and Clay Steinman write in *Consuming Environments*, “their ubiquity as everyday practices makes them difficult to avoid and even more difficult to change” (106). Antonio Gramsci is credited as having been the first to stress ideology’s prominent role in social formations (Mouffe 223). Ideology is a battlefield where principles are contested; in short, ideology forms subjects and then causes them to act.

Omnipresent ideologies are often viewed as inherent, inevitable truths – common sense. Ien Ang explains that ideologies “organize not only the ideas and images people make of reality, they also enable people to form an image of themselves and thus occupy a position in the world” (102). This image of one’s self is one’s identity.

The basic Hegelian notion of self-consciousness is another place where cultural studies, as a field, often begins its discussions of identity. Georg Wilhelm Frederick Hegel writes, “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (630). Mirroring the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic model, we – and our identities – are largely defined by what we are not. Language, he says, is a system of difference, a shared structure of signifieds and signifiers. A signifier is connected to the signified via a sign; the connection is a completely arbitrary social convention. Language builds on comparisons for signification, explains Saussure in “Course in General Linguistics” –

words are defined by what they are not. In “Mythologies,” Roland Barthes elaborates on this idea by extending it to the idea of “myths.” Myths are constructed; signs are emptied of their history, and the link between the signified and the signifier is made to seem completely natural when in fact, just as with linguistic examples, the relationship is arbitrary. This applies to the ways in which people identify, too.

Cultural studies also locates “identity” within systems of meanings known as “discourses,” a concept grounded in the work of Michel Foucault. Kathryn Woodward explains this idea:

Discourses, whatever sets of meaning they construct, can only be effective if they recruit subjects. Subjects are thus subjected to the discourse and must themselves take it up as individuals who so position themselves. The positions which we take up and identify with constitute our identities. (39)

Just as is the case with identities constructed within ideologies, identities constructed within discourses are not fixed. The content of an identity is not the “truth” about a person; it is a flexible and ever changing social construction. Indeed, Foucault once argued that the idea of “truth” itself is just a social construction. In *Truth and Power*, Foucault explains that truth is “centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produced it” (1668). Foucault writes, “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general’ politics of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements” (“Truth and Power” 1669).

When subjects are constructed within discourses, they must assume various identities based on already circulating ideas about identity. In *What is an Author?*, Foucault poses the question: “Under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?” (“What is an Author?” 1636). Identity exists within the circle of production, consumption, regulation, and representation. Identity discourses circulate and, according to Woodward, “[create] meanings through symbolic systems of representation about the identity position which we might adopt” (2).

The acquisition of an identity plays an extremely important role in politics, as well as in culture. Woodward writes, “Laying claim to an identity within a political movement or as part of making a political statement is often most emphatically defined by difference, by the marking of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (4). Laying claim to a group identity is even more complex. According to Nathan Rotenstreich, the relationship between group and self “contains in itself a certain equilibrium between the personal aspect and the social; the personal aspect cannot be separated from the social while the social, by being manifest in different individuals, is not necessarily connected with this or that individual” (51).

Though a group identity is made of individuals who are similarly hailed within ideology or similarly situated within discourses, individuals are also active in defining themselves as part of already existing groups. But group identities, like individual identities, are also arbitrary and flexible. For example, as Stuart Schoenfeld writes, “If a



group does not support those social institutions which provide channels of communication about the meaning of shared fate ... it is rather difficult to sustain a debate over the meaning of the future of the group's identity or for there even to be a 'group' which has an identity" (116). So the creation of group identity requires the support of social institutions, and conversely, the withdrawal of such support may contribute to the demise of collective identities. And though groups are only comprised of individuals, individuals must work within the conventions of groups. As Furman writes, "Personal identity is forged and maintained through commitment to social institutions and collective ideas. Hence, far from being voluntarily sociable, human beings are inextricably tied to particularistic collectives" (123).

While identities, as formed within ideologies or discourses, may in reality be flexible and arbitrary, they do not necessarily feel that way to the subjects who are constituted by social factors outside subjects' control. To subjects, these social forces seem "natural." To illustrate this point, Foucault describes a prison colony at Mettray in which the deputies monitor behavior. Through this carceral system, a law emerges and thereby decides and mandates what is "normal" and what is "deviant." This creates an overarching network of power that shapes people's lives, and this power network appears "natural."

Some cultural theorists think of identity, particularly normalized identity, in a negative way, as a source of political problems. In her discussion on gender, for example, Judith Butler calls for an abandonment of identity politics because meaning is never fixed and it is problematic to assume that it is. She argues that identity is

performative, writing that, “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (2501). Gender is merely a “stylization of the body” and thus “must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (2501).

Race is another example of a socially constructed identity within the lexicon of cultural studies. Like other identities, racial categories are not fixed. Rather, as Omi and Winant write, race is “an unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (371). It is an identity strongly linked to “the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled” (372). To examine how identity discourses circulate in the senses described above, scholars often examine relevant cultural texts, broadly defined to include cultural forms such as television programs as well as literary texts, and Discursive or Ideological Analysis are common methodologies for describing and analyzing such texts.

One of the greatest attractions of Discursive or Ideological Analysis of identity is that it locates the process of meaning formation inside cultures rather than individuals. Indeed, much analysis in this style follows Foucault’s assertion that the individual author “must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse” (“What is an Author?” 1636). Authors are produced within discourse, just as other identities are produced within discourse, and thus the author does not single-

handedly produce the truth about a text. Texts are authored within the discursive process, and the author must be “decentered” to realize how this process operates.

Goldberg and Krausz write, “Viable cultures in this sense are necessarily more or less open and elastic, porous at their boundaries, to some degree pragmatic in relation to other cultures, and transforming. What then, one may ask, gives distinction or ‘identity’ to a culture, to Jewishness, say?” (“The Culture of Identity” 5).

The answer for them lies with the nuanced characteristics of Jewish identity discourses, which rely both on what an audience has seen and whether they perceived what they have seen as Jewish (Goldberg and Krausz 5). Jewish identity is therefore determined not only by the perceptions and behaviors of individual Jews, but also on the perceptions of the outside world’s (6).

### **Television as a Cultural Text**

To understand how cultural institutions like television work to produce and reproduce ideologies, Althusser invented the category “ideological state apparatuses,” also known as ISAs. ISAs are institutions, such as schools and churches, which “ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology*” (1485). Ideologies are reproduced through the functioning of these apparatuses. For example, in a school, children are taught how to effectively behave in society (1485).

Today, media operate as some of the most influential ideological state apparatuses. George Gerbner writes:

[Television] ‘makes all the ballads.’ It comes into the home where the child is born. The stories it tells socialize us into the roles of gender, age, class, vocation, and lifestyle and offer models of conformity for rebellion. They weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs. (xi)

Indeed, Shira Gotshalk points out that the present era is “a time when a television show has enough cultural impact that an Orange County supervisor would propose that John Wayne Airport be renamed ‘The O.C. Airport.’”

To understand how television operates as an ISA, it is necessary to break down the apparatus into a system of signs. N.D. Batra writes, “Television deals with signs that have iconic actualities whose meanings require few conventions for interpretation. They are less taxing to the audience and easily accepted ... The greater our familiarity with the conventions of a sign system in a culture, the more quickly we grasp its meaning” (6). As a system of signs, television communicates through a set of conventions and codes, which produce images “deeply familiar in structure and form” (Fiske and Hartley 17). These codes are so embedded that they appear to be common sense. As John Fiske and John Hartley write, “The more closely the signifier reproduces our common experience, our culturally determined intersubjectivity, the more realistic it appears to be” (38). These codes are extremely subtle – so subtle we probably will not realize that we have adopted them. Budd, Craig, and Steinman write, “We learn through practice, through watching television and other experiences, and thus we might not be aware that we have learned” (86). Television is a habit that is difficult to explain intellectually “because it

feels so natural and self-evident” (Ang 84). We are accustomed to certain styles of camera angles and certain types of lighting. Genres – newscasts, soap operas, sitcoms – are quickly and easily identifiable due to their use of certain common sense conventions. For example, one of the codes and conventions common to primetime soap operas, such as *The O.C.*, is their focus on dysfunctional wealthy families. I talk more about how *The O.C.* fits into the conventions of primetime soaps in the next chapter.

In *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, David Morley writes of television’s ability to “mobilize, extend, reinforce, or transform the metaphors of everyday life” (209). In the remainder of this thesis, I use the theoretical and methodological insights discussed above to analyze how *The O.C.* “mobilizes, extends, reinforces, or transforms” what it means to be Jewish in the early twenty-first century. First I look at the signs of Jewishness in the episodes, defined as words, images and practices that are widely identified with Jews. Then I discuss the way *The O.C.* uses and pushes the conventions and codes of primetime television to circulate these discourses about Jewishness. Then, I make an argument that the Jewish identities can be understood within the context of Whiteness Studies, as evidence that Jewish identity in the United States has broken away from its racialized past, in which it was identified with the “Other,” and become just another form of Whiteness, at least on television. Finally, I talk about the relationship between these developments in Jewish representation and what Stuart Hall calls the “growing global market for the consumption of difference,” in order to locate *The O.C.* within a larger trend toward the embrace of “difference” by the culture industries.

## Chapter 4

### Television and the Construction of a White, Post-Jewish Identity: A Close Reading of *The O.C.*

In the remaining sections of this thesis, I interpret *The O.C.* as a text that produces and reproduces symbols and signs of Jewish identity at the turn of the twenty-first century, a period of Jewish assimilation into Whiteness. I ask the following question: How and why are signs of Jewishness deployed in this primetime soap? I will first identify the characters as representations of discourses of Jewish identity. I will then situate the narrative and characters of the show within the deeply assimilationist setting of Los Angeles. Finally, I will discuss the “dual address” of the episodes, arguing that it is designed to play on Jewish identity as a “difference that does not make a difference.”

#### **Seth as Ironic Observer**

In this section, I will identify the myriad elements of *The O.C.* that render it the quintessential primetime soap opera. These elements are *The O.C.*'s generic conventions, and they have been common to primetime soaps, a genre which *Dallas* pioneered. However, I will also argue that *The O.C.* pushes beyond the established generic boundaries of primetime soaps with the character of Seth Cohen. Specifically, the Cohen

character's quirky behavior and outsider status introduces *schlemiel* characteristics into these primetime soap episodes, making them more self-reflexive and self-effacing. The introduction of this witty, cosmopolitan style not only breaks the mold of the traditional primetime soap, but also strategically targets viewers who want to feel superior to and label themselves as being "above" the "low culture" genre. Because *The O.C.* is so witty and self-knowing, "sophisticated" viewers can feel good about watching a primetime soap opera, a form that is usually associated with "low" or mass culture.

The way that recognizable codes determine a show's television genre is not so different from the way that arbitrary characteristics are assigned to identity groups. Authors of texts—who, as previously noted, produce texts within and through discourse—either conform to or defy already established codes and genres. *The O.C.*'s producer, Josh Schwartz, is up front about his practice of mining already-established codes of previous television shows and incorporating historical events in shaping *The O.C.* In an interview with Daniel Robert Epstein published in *UnderGroundOnline*, Schwartz commented, "Certainly, when I was in high school and college, the ladies religiously watched *90210*, *Party of Five*, *Dawson's Creek* ... I understood their popularity and how they're accessible and, I guess, try to infuse [my writing] with the spirit of the kinds of shows that I like to watch."

Conversely, Schwartz's text will undoubtedly affect future discourses, not only of Jewish identity but also of the style and conventions of television shows. As Schwartz told reporter Sandy Cohen in an interview with *ABC News*, "It's crazy. It's weird. And then 'Laguna Beach' became a big deal in its own right. The tent's big enough for

everybody to come hang out, I guess. The show is certainly influenced by a lot of different things and borne out of that, so it's cool if we can do the same things for other shows.” Despite conscious choices to be different from television norms, Schwartz must work within the established codes of television genre, even when deviating from them. In this chapter, I will explore how *The O.C.* meets most primetime soap opera conventions, but departs from them in a few significant respects.

Numerous academics have conducted research examining the soap opera genre. Though daytime soaps exhibit similarities to primetime soaps, the nocturnal version is, according to Batra, “comparatively quick-paced, has lots of outdoor location shooting, dwells upon the star system, centers around wealthy families and is characterized by lust and power” (90). Robert S. Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman offer a similar description, describing the plots as being “filled with infidelity, deception,” and focusing on wealthy families who are “deeply scarred by strife and personal trauma” (156). These factors are very much the same ones that appear to lure viewers to *The O.C.* Gotshalk describes *The O.C.*'s Newport Beach as “an affluent community where everything and everyone appears to be perfect. But simmering just beneath the surface is a brew of shifting loyalties and identities. It’s the story of beautiful people and the secrets, love triangles, and the conflicts that bind them.” Ien Ang also delves into the characteristics of the primetime soap in her comprehensive analysis of the show *Dallas* in *Watching Dallas*. She names some of the factors that audiences identify with primetime soaps: “the huge houses with expensive interiors, luxurious and fast cars and, last but not least, the healthy- and good-looking men and women, white, not too young, not too old”



(55). Ang explains that these symbols “no longer merely indicate something like ‘Americanness,’ but visual pleasure as such” (55). Such familiar signs “imply the promise that the story will be suspenseful and exciting” (56). In the world of *The O.C.*, the Cohen household is the pinnacle of Newport Beach’s opulence thanks to the wealth of Kirsten Cohen. The house itself is grandiose and always well-maintained, the high school students drive extravagant cars, and the main characters never fall ill. In fact, Sophie Cohen, Seth’s grandmother from New York, is one of the only characters to be depicted as ill, and she is a peripheral character and a definite outsider in relation to Newport Beach. Finally, all the main characters featured in the opening credits are White.

Typically, Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman point out that as the characters in a primetime soap face drama within this world, they become very isolated or insular and there is “no larger world around the family worthy of comment” (156). Ang observes that the problems are always limited to the personal; public sphere issues are only important if they cause problems in the personal sphere (Ang 60). Otherwise, “characters never ponder on their position in the world, they never philosophize from a detached point of view on themselves and their relations to others. The conversations the characters have with one another, on the other hand, always express the living through or digesting of a conflict, in the here and now” (Ang 73). This focus on the private sphere is visible in *The O.C.*’s “The Nana” episode. During heated debates addressing the disparity between Sandy and Sophie’s ideas about commitment to the community, Sophie accuses Sandy of abandoning his commitment to social justice and civic engagement

when he opens his restaurant. She tells him, “You’re not helping people, you’re opening restaurants.” However, this disagreement is limited to the impact it has on the Cohens’ personal relationship; never do we see them actually participating in the community or performing social work – or even discussing projects they plan to undertake.

Another convention of the primetime soap involves the community. Ang writes, “Although new characters can enter the community ... as soon as they have made their entrance they are subjected to the laws and the logic of the community” (58). *The O.C.* again conforms to this convention, as Newport Beach has its own set of social mores. In the first season, two outsiders enter the Newport Beach world: Anna moves to Newport Beach from Pittsburgh and Ryan moves into the Cohen house from Chino. Both characters are immediately pressured to conform to the social standards of Newport. Ryan “cleans up” considerably over the course of the first episode; his Whiteness allows him to pose as a member of the elite, though he still faces considerable discrimination when any member of the Newport population discovers he is a native of Chino. There are no potentially redeeming qualities to his difference; he must either conform or face rejection. Similarly, Anna enjoys comic books and other forms of alternative culture which the Newport residents consider deviant. Her only storylines involve her relationship with Seth. When it becomes clear she is not going to conform to Newport society nor win the fight for Seth, she returns to Pittsburgh and leaves the show.

The primetime soap is also a star vehicle that works to “sell” the characters. In Ang’s analysis of *Dallas*, she writes that these soap opera characters are seen as people “existing independently of the narrative situations shown on the serial,” and “the names

of actors and actresses and those of the characters are often used interchangeably or merged” (30). This contributes to the sense of realism the viewer derives from the show, and the feeling that the characters exist or could exist outside of the medium in which they were generated. Several fans of *The O.C.* have written their own online fan fiction stories featuring the same characters (“The O.C.”).

Ang concluded from letters about *Dallas* that viewers tended to express either love or loathing for the primetime soap. Those who hated it typically identified it as overdramatic, while those who loved it marveled at its realism.

She explains this phenomenon in that the show’s undeniably melodramatic character actually functions as metaphor. The show “acquires its very strength from such exaggerated occurrences ... in the world of the soap opera the characters go through all kinds of calamities as though it were the most normal thing in life” (63). The typical soap is melodramatic because a normal representation would be too subtle, and the genre requires dramatizations audiences with which can identify—or reject as unrealistic—immediately and with ease. The genteel characters of *The O.C.* and their plotlines are especially melodramatic. For example, in the episode “The Nana,” actress Melinda Clarke’s character Julie Cooper engages in an illicit affair with her daughter’s ex-boyfriend. She is “an extreme character with extreme storylines,” admits Clarke, but audience members still indulge in her escapades—and many find them realistic (qtd. in Slate). As viewer “OC fanatic” writes, “I REALLY hate Julie but it makes it more interesting with her in it because [sic] there has to be a character you hate.”

A popular reason for “hating” the primetime soap itself, rather than its characters, lies in the notion that it is “low culture.” Ang writes, “In this ideology, some cultural forms—mostly very popular cultural products and practices cast in an American mould—are *tout court* labeled ‘bad mass culture.’ ‘Mass culture’ is a denigrating term, which arouses definitely negative connotations” (94). For example, on the online Internet Movie Database discussion forum for *The O.C.*, user “leighfanclub” articulates her disgust with the show:

This show represents all that is bad about tv. Boring and sophomoric and stilted soap opera acting. But the package its wrapped in, pretty young bodies all glistened up, makes it go down like fast food. You feel awful eating it and even worse later.

I'm sure it will do well in the ratings. That doesn't say much, my cat watches tv because of the bright flicker. Even he turned away from this retreat.  
9021-O.C. will go down in the annals of tv history as a big 'eh.'

Yet, there are other viewers who claim to recognize *The O.C.* and other primetime soaps as “low culture,” but still indulge in and enjoy the show despite their feelings of “guilt.” This kind of ironic consumption is common because it allows audiences to consume mass culture and still feel culturally superior to the masses. Ang explains that “through a mocking commentary *Dallas* is transformed from a seriously intended melodrama to the reverse: a comedy to be laughed at. Ironizing viewers therefore do not take the text as it presents itself, but invert its preferred meaning through their ironic commentary” (98).

Needless to say, *The O.C.* fits the conventions of the primetime soap almost too perfectly. Undoubtedly some of the pleasure of consuming *The O.C.* lies in the way it reproduces established codes of genre. After all, as Ang states, “What appeals to us in such a television serial is connected with our individual life histories, with the social situation we are in, with the aesthetic and cultural preferences we have developed and so on” (26).

Thus far, I have discussed the way *The O.C.* fits, adapts to, and plays on the conventions of the primetime soap. However, I argue that one character breaks the mold in order to appeal to the ironic viewer, the viewer who considers himself “above” the genre. Richard Asinof describes *The O.C.* as “an intoxicating story of romance, heartbreak, and mixed up families. Father-son, brother-brother, and mother-daughter dynamics abound, as do witty, quick, sarcastic remarks from Seth Cohen.” The former part of Asinof’s description fits that of the primetime soap; the latter does not. Seth is the Seinfeld of *The O.C.* With a sense of humor that is both contextually identifiable and consistently identified by Seth himself, Seth employs the “critique of mass culture” device implemented by Jewish comics ranging from the Marx Brothers to Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld. He differs from his vapid, melodramatic counterparts who are the elites of his fictional community, and his observation-style humor highlights the ridiculousness of the world he inhabits. Unlike his WASP counterparts, when faced with potentially dramatic situations, Seth does not dwell on his problems except as fodder for wisecracks.

The storyline and dialogue of the episode, “The Best Chrismukkah Ever,” illustrate the difference between Seth and other characters. As with most episodes, “The

Best Chrismukkah Ever” is comprised of several subplots. One deals with the love triangle between Seth, Anna from Pittsburgh, and Newport Beach princess Summer Roberts. The second begins with a scene at a shopping mall during which Marissa is caught shoplifting. The last scenario deals with Sandy and Kirsten’s discovery of a business scandal involving Kirsten’s father, the rich, deceitful super-WASP Caleb Nichol. The last two subplots address serious, melodramatic issues, emphasizing the centrality of personal relationships and personal problems to *The O.C.* Both subplots fit Batra’s description: “Lust for power and economic control is the motivating force that impels men and women into action in these prime-time series” (91). Marissa’s shoplifting results in a dramatic confrontation with her parents, Jimmy and Julie. During the scene, dark, slow chord progressions that infer suspense and drama can be heard in the background. The same signature chords are heard during an earlier dramatic conversation between Kirsten and Sandy. Carol Traynor Williams calls music “the infamous ‘syrupy sound’ of soap opera” and Peter Brooks says that “music in modern melodrama supplies the resonance, even the tragic meaning” (qtd. in Williams 79). Yet, in Seth’s pivotal scene, he sits awkwardly on a sofa, comically sandwiched between Anna and Summer while upbeat, Yiddish music plays conspicuously in the background. The juxtaposition is telling. Whereas others’ problems call for audience empathy and identification, Seth’s problems are fodder for audience laughter and distance.

Seth constantly uses humor to address his own problems—personal problems only, of course. When he faces a potentially awkward encounter with Anna and Summer, he jokes, “I’ve got Jesus and Moses on my side, man!” Later, he is asked to decide

between the girls. He answers candidly, “I have no idea. I don’t know. No female has really offered me a choice, per se. I really only know how to handle rejection and ridicule.” Seth, the likable *schlemiel*, ends up rejecting both women because he cannot decide. When they both return their gift packages that he gave them, he comments lightly, “You can never have too many copies of *The Goonies*.” His inability to choose between women might also, as Epstein suggested in his analysis of Jerry Seinfeld mentioned earlier, serve as a metaphor for Seth’s unwillingness to choose an identity.

The establishment of Seth as ironic observer gives Seth and *The O.C.* a unique credibility. As mentioned before, primetime soaps are often seen as trashy, “low culture” texts. Ang describes this, saying that “an individual living in the ideology of mass culture may qualify him or herself as, for example, ‘a person of taste,’ ‘a cultural expert,’ or ‘someone who is not seduced by the cheap tricks of the commercial culture industry’” (102). When a viewer connects with the on-screen scenario, he or she experiences “identification,” whereas “irony creates distance” (Ang 109). While “high culture” viewers might feel distance between themselves and characters like Julie Cooper, Seth’s on-screen distance from such characters creates identification between the viewers and Seth.

Viewer responses posted on the Internet Movie Database discussion board reflect this sentiment among audience members. For example, user “LC03” writes:

If somebody had told me a week ago that I'd become addicted to this show I would've thought they were crazy. Normally, I can't stand these teen dramas; they've just never entertained me. But there's something different about this one

... before I knew it, I was hooked.

It's hard to say exactly what makes this show so good; I guess it's a lot of things. For one thing, if you watch enough episodes to know just what is going on, the characters' "real" qualities will jump out at you. Yeah, most of them are rich and that should make you less interested in their problems. But that's not the case with this group; you can't help but take an interest, and you're always left wanting to see what's going to happen next. Also, I just have to say it, some of the guys on this show are great looking, so that provides plenty of incentive for girls to watch it.

But the thing that really gives this series its charm is Seth Cohen. This character is absolutely hilarious, and you just can't help but love him. Humor isn't something that most of the other dramas like this really try to focus on, so maybe that's why they don't usually appeal to me. But I knew ... that I would laugh in every episode. Even if nobody else in the cast had a single good line, I knew Cohen would make me crack up. The weirdest thing about this is that when I started watching the show, I thought this guy was the most annoying character (I just couldn't stand him), but he just grows on you if you watch a couple episodes. Now, there's no doubt this guy is my favorite character, and the show just wouldn't be the same without him.

All in all, I've just got to say, that as much as I hate to admit it, I'm addicted to this show. I'd recommend it to the most skeptical person out there. If you just give



it a chance, you won't be able to resist its power. I guarantee you'll want to see more of it.

This viewer seems to express embarrassment for liking the show—yet admits that he or she is “addicted.” One of the reasons why this user likes the show is because he or she identifies and approves of the “real” qualities of certain characters. Ang explains, “The more ‘genuine’ a character appears to be, the more he or she is valued” (33). “LC03” also attributes the show’s watchability to Seth’s humor. Seth offers the “out” to the viewer that seeks to transcend the overwrought primetime soap melodrama. He views his co-actors ironically. By bestowing upon him a characteristically Jewish sense of humor, Schwartz affords his audience a character with whom they may identify and use to feel superior to the pretentious WASP characters, as well as feel superior to the genre as a whole. User “oc12311” echoes this: “He [Seth in season one] was just such a misfit, and an outcast, that he was so relatable. And there’s gotta be at least one person on the show that every one can relate to.” The user continues: “This show mixes the traumas of rich, beautiful people, with complex, and often hilarious characters remarkably well.”

Schwartz stated in the *UnderGroundOnline* interview that his intentions matched this result. He said, “I think what we’ve done instead is to do something a little different, something that has a bit more irony and a little bit more self-awareness and maybe is a little more successful because of that” (Epstein, “Josh Schwartz of *The O.C.* Interview”).

Another way in which Schwartz injects ironic awareness into the show is through “meta references.” Gotshalk notes that the *The O.C.* stands out among primetime soaps in the extent of its reliance on “meta” references:

One of the techniques Schwartz has employed to keep the material fresh is to take the show meta, creating self-referential stories within the story. The girls' favorite TV series is *The Valley*, a thinly veiled, self-mocking mirror of the O.C. characters. 'The L.A.' episode is the jewel in the meta crown, in which the characters from both shows get to mingle at a nightclub in Hollywood. The metatextuality was written very consciously but has evolved rather unconsciously.

Josh Schwartz offers his opinion about the "meta-referencing" of *The O.C.* in the interview with Gotshalk:

The audience comes to these things now with a larger context. They're watching these shows having read about them on Page Six, having seen Adam and Rachel [Bilson] in *Us Weekly*. Not everyone gets it or is paying that close attention. For most people, the show has to work with basic storytelling. But if you're a real fan and you get those jokes, it's more fun. (qtd. in Gotshalk)

Both of the show's devices—the hailing of ironic consumers and the use of meta-references—are consistent with the strategy that contemporary advertisers follow for differentiating their products from others with which those products are basically interchangeable. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson describe this strategy:

A significant portion of contemporary advertising assumes an audience of viewers/readers who are alienated from ads. It assumes spectators who are cynical and disbelieving. Each passing round of advertisements contributes to creating audiences who are increasingly media-literate, cynical, and alienated. A

primary force determining the semiotics of advertising today is the advertiser's perception of the alienated spectator. (83)

The references in *The O.C.* to other shows and other episodes are yet another way to capture the attention and respect of the "high culture" viewer. Through the use of "meta," the show is insinuating, "Look! We know we're a television show, subscribing to certain genres and variations of melodrama and extravagance!"

The audience responses to such tactics seem to be mixed, however. User "SethEsquire" enjoys the "meta" references. He writes:

The brilliance of the usage of meta-references in *The O.C.* is that it allows the creators of the show to acknowledge, within the context of the show itself, that this tension exists. In a way, it's a device for blowing off some of the steam that erupts from all the confrontation about the show on the Internet. It also creates all kinds of great opportunities for humor and social commentary.

On the other hand, it appears that not all consumers appreciate the ironic, self-aware view that meta-references provide; they would rather not be reminded that they are playing into the codes of television. User "sunnygirl" writes, "I wish it would start to feel more like a television show and spend a little less time with the 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' stuff." User "dingowalker" echoes the comments of "sunnygirl":

Word. I think that's the difference for me between loving and hating it, and Seth always seems to be over that line lately. Also, I don't really know the terms I'm looking for, but part of my problem with Seth's character this season has been that all the meta has taken him out of the show, a bit? Like he's a Colorform slapped

on the tv screen who is not really part of the action, just a commentator for the viewers. Constantly being reminded ‘Hey! You are watching TV!’ while watching tv makes it a lot harder for me to get into the stories (such as they are).

The problem with this strategy of product differentiation is that there is no discernible end to it. Once viewers become accustomed to the *schlemiel*, producers will need to invent something else to keep them from getting bored again. This is what has happened in advertising, and its affect has been to speed up the circulation of advertising signs.

### **Signs of Jewishness in *The O.C.***

Though this thesis argues that the Cohen family’s Jewishness is a “difference that does not make a difference,” the text also conveys discourses of a distinctly self-aware Jewish identity. Jewishness in the show is merely a certain brand of Whiteness—a style that can be marketed. This section aims to identify elements in the characters and the show that exhibit “Jewishness.”

### **Seth Cohen as *Schlemiel* and Observational Comedian**

In interviews, writer Josh Schwartz has made no secret of the fact that he modeled the character of Seth Cohen after himself. Asinof writes, “In his Ralph Lauren shirt, blue jeans, Converse All-Stars and sunglasses hanging from his shirt, Schwartz projects a boyish earnestness. He seems like a 21st century Woody Allen, with much hipper taste in music and hopefully with better morals.” Schwartz’s choice of dress and humor makes him classifiable to an audience familiar with the identities of past and current *schlemiels*.

Schwartz enters the entertainment industry in the age of the neurotic-but-not-too-neurotic, clean-cut, thin-but-adorable, well groomed Jewish male, and is easily identifiable as such.

A native of Rhode Island, Schwartz claims to have suffered feelings of cultural alienation during his undergraduate experience at the University of Southern California. He said:

I came to USC where all the Newport Beach kids go, and I was pretty much the only Jewish kid in the group of people I hung out with at college. So [creating the show] was a point-of-view I had experienced. I felt the collision of lifestyles of this sort of conservative, political environment and the suburban, cosmopolitan, progressive-type of dichotomy that I thought was really interesting. It was McMansions and gated communities and golf and country clubs by day, but the kids who were the children of this environment partied as if they were from New York City or Los Angeles. (qtd. in Tweti)

Equipped with this “Jewish angst about life and failure and love that he doesn’t mind expressing in public,” as Asinof writes, Schwartz takes on the *schlemiel* character type. “In New England vernacular, Schwartz is ‘wicked’ funny, but also charming and gracious,” continues Asinof. Schwartz’s protagonist displays these same attributes. Seth Cohen is clearly Other in the world of Newport, just as Schwartz claims to have been. Claiming he was one of the only Jewish students at USC, he comments, “You become acutely aware of your identity” (qtd. in Asinof).

Seth is certainly aware of Jewish identity on the show, constantly making comedic reference to his Jewish traits. In “The Goodbye Girl,” Seth comments, “My Jew-fro is frizzing out, I look like Screech.” In “The Escape,” when Summer asks him, “You’re Jewish?” he responds, “Yes. That’s why I feel so comfortable in this desert heat.” Finally, in “The Brothers’ Grim,” Seth compares himself to Summer’s boyfriend Zach: “Unlike Zach who’s anxiety-free with his big smile and natural athleticism... that guy makes me feel very Jewish.” Seth’s approach to his own identity is self-deprecating and in line with that of past *schlemiels*. However, he also fits as Epstein’s “good guy” Jewish anti-hero. User “kinki\_gerlinki” comments on the *OC Fans Forum* message board that “he has like this funny nerdiness appeal.”

For instance, Seth’s “nerdiness” is exhibited in his over-exuberance surrounding the holidays. At the end of the introduction of “The Best Chrismukkah Ever” episode, he announces, “Soon Ryan will learn the magic of Chrismukkah ... worry not, I will convert him.” He holds his heart melodramatically. In nearly every conversation, he excitedly discusses the holidays. This is juxtaposed to the gentiles’ apathy. Marissa suggests to her father that her family skip Christmas. In a later scene, Julie cynically comments, “I hate the holidays,” to which Ryan replies, “Right there with ya.”

Seth’s “nerdiness” is also characterized by his taste in clothes and music. When he prepares “Seth Cohen starter packs” as gifts for his two girlfriends in “The Best Chrismukkah Ever,” Seth includes his favorite albums and movies: selections from Death Cab, Bright Eyes, the Shins, Kavalier and Clay, and a copy of *The Goonies*. These

choices also make him easily discernible as an “indie” music lover, a move that positions indie music to be a sign of Jewish male identity.

In an article entitled "The Yeshiva of Indie Rock," Doree Shafrir explores the notion of Seth Cohen as the "quintessential indie dude." According to Shafrir, Seth Cohen has so permeated the indie-rock zeitgeist that now he is even being referenced by indie rock bands themselves. She compares the indie rock scene to the Jewish identity:

It’s smart, outside the mainstream and usually headed up by skinny, overly literate, dark-haired men (and sometimes women) from blue states...But even some indie rockers who aren’t Jewish—well, they kind of look Jewish. And they fit that sensitive, emotional, skinny-and-dark-haired paradigm. Take Conor Oberst (better known, of course, as Bright Eyes) ...

Many of Judaism’s most dearly held traditions are also prevalent in indie rock. Studying the Talmud—constantly looking for new textual interpretations, and divining meanings out of symbols and allusions—is only slightly more rigorous than the degree to which indie rock devotees debate the meaning of certain bands’ lyrics and other seemingly minute details about their favorite indie rockers ...

Likewise, Jews’ emphasis on education has a parallel in indie rock, where it often seems like the game is to come up with lyrics that are more clever than anyone else’s. Take a band like the Decemberists, whose latest album, *Picaresque*, may leave you scrambling for your Kaplan SAT prep flash cards: any idea what palanquin, pachyderm or falderal means? ...

Indie rock has a classic David vs. Goliath complex, the sense that it's constantly going up against the huge corporate music machine (then again, it usually is). Though indie record labels like Merge, Sub Pop, Kill Rock Stars and Matador have all found success with breakout acts like the Arcade Fire, the Postal Service, Elliott Smith, Belle and Sebastian, and so on, they remain steadfastly independent, refusing to sell out to the faceless conglomerates that dominate the music business. Still, like the immigrant Jewish businessmen and sole proprietors of the early to mid-20th century, indie labels must rely on their founders' entrepreneurial spirit—and chutzpah—to survive in an increasingly cutthroat business.

Moreover, the Cohen men are, in the tradition of Jewish humor, cleverly and good-naturedly self-deprecating. “Seth and Sandy treat being Jewish with a very modern American perspective,” comments Schwartz. “It’s obviously reflected in the fact that they have an interfaith marriage, and they’re self-deprecating about it. I wanted to show all those sides: that they can joke about it but at the same time, they are really respectful of their heritage; they are proud of it, and they are a family” (qtd. in Tweti).

The Cohen men’s incorporation of Yiddish into their humor reflects a Jewish tradition of word play, language, and bilingualism. Epstein writes, “Eastern European culture and the Yiddish language were instrumental in framing the comedic spirit of Jewish comedians” (305). One example of the use of Yiddish on *The O.C.* is in “The Best Chrismukkah Ever” with Seth’s witty expression, “Oy humbug,” that he uses to express his discontent for the holidays. Like the name of his holiday, “Chrismukkah,”



the phrase combines a gentile phrase with a Jewish phrase, only in this case they are phrases of discontent. Epstein explains the word “oy”: “Oy is harder to translate, for its pained expression conjures up a memory of thousands of years of pain. Oy is a cry from the depths of the Jewish soul, a feeling entirely missing in comparable English expressions. All these, and many other words, nurtured the Jewish comedians” (304). The second half of the phrase, “humbug,” references Ebenezer Scrooge’s pessimistic grunt, “Bah humbug” in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*.

### **Nana as Overbearing Jewish Mother**

The other Jewish character type on *The O.C.*, the overbearing Jewish mother, appears in “The Nana” episode. Sandy’s mother, Sophie Cohen, shocks the Cohens during Passover with a surprise visit. Prior to her arrival, Seth describes the Nana to Summer: “The Nana is very judgmental and she’s political and opinionated.”

The relationship between Sophie and Sandy Cohen represents the age-old conflict between Old and New Worlds. Sophie is disappointed with Sandy’s move to Newport Beach and his adoption of the ideals of the Newport community. Conversely, he feels that she is too wrapped up in “causes” to support her family, or even to maintain a realistic world-view.

In an early scene, Sandy insists that Kirsten change the sheets on their bed so his mother won’t notice that they sleep on 700 thread count sheets. He tells her, “She’s a social worker in the Bronx and has been for forty years. Whatever little bit of extra

money she can scrape together she gives it to the ACLU or the Franklin Women's Shelter. She's not out buying fancy sheets."

He continues, "I've left the Public Defender's Office so I can go to the private sector and make a ton of money and open my own restaurant."

Kirsten replies, "I think they call that success."

"No, not according to Sophie Cohen, and frankly, not even Sandy Cohen sometimes. You know why she's coming out here? It's not for a visit. It's not for a holiday. No, she's staging an intervention to put me back on the path to righteousness ... or in my mother's case, self-righteousness."

"I don't think that's true," protests Kirsten.

"No?"

"Your mother just wants you to be happy."

"No!" Sandy says emphatically. "No, she doesn't believe in happy. If you're happy, you're not working hard enough."

This echoes the discourse of the Old World/New World disconnect. Sophie is out of touch with Sandy; her commitments to her community and the underprivileged would prevent her from successfully assimilating into wealthy, capitalist-driven Newport.

Sandy's assertion that Sophie plans to "stage an intervention" indicates that, if given the chance, she would ruin his opportunity to assimilate into Newport and hold him back.

Sophie also perfectly fits Prell's definition of the mother who is "unwilling to let her 'boy' go to another woman" (147) because she is nervous at the thought of her son going into the world and being perceived as normal (163). In reference to Sandy's

business venture, Kirsten, who is an authentic member of Newport society, comments, “I think they call that success.” By using “they,” she implies that anyone who does not see business and wealth as “success” is a type of social deviant.

When Sophie finally does arrive, she scoffs at Sandy’s upscale lifestyle and voices her opinion that he has neglected his obligation to social justice. Sandy accuses her, “You were never home. You were working all the time. You were taking care of other people’s kids or marching for causes or circulating petitions or picketing City Hall. Look, it felt like you had no time for us.” Sophie is ultimately portrayed as hopelessly out of touch, not valuing her own commitment to her family. Her inability to fit into hyper-assimilationist Los Angeles is contrasted by the way that Seth and Sandy are able to assimilate.

### **The O.C. in Assimilationist Los Angeles**

Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence revealing the compatibility of Whiteness and Jewishness involves the location and setting of *The O.C.* The drama is set in the overwhelmingly and normatively White community of Newport Beach, and the show is self-conscious about the White normativity of its setting.

*USA Today* writer Marco R. della Cava examines the reality behind the representation of Orange County on *The O.C.* in his article, "How real is 'The O.C.'?" In it, he quotes retired journalist Jerry Hicks who is currently authoring a book on the history of Orange County. According to Hicks, the place is "a wonderful ethnic mix that

works well together... You watch *The O.C.* and you get the feeling that Orange County must be all white. Far from it."

However, Newport Beach is admittedly a different story. According to a population estimate for 2003 by the U.S. Census Bureau, 78,043 people reside in Newport Beach. Of that number, in 2000 92.2% identify as "White," (4.7% of that percentage identify as "Hispanic or Latino"), compared to 59% in the state of California. In Newport, .5% of the population identify as "Black or African American," .3% as "American Indian and Alaska Native," and 4% as "Asian."

Houses on the Newport Coast, according to della Cava, cost anywhere from two to twenty-five million dollars. *Orange Coast* magazine editor Tina Borgatta suggests that a better name for the show "would be 'The N.B.' [Newport Beach]." Della Cava recounts that Borgatta's magazine, whose readership is mostly comprised of white Newport Beach residents, "chronicles life in the social and financial stratosphere. Articles spotlight top eating and shopping destinations. Ads hawk custom pools, cosmetic surgery and diamond jewelry blinding enough to make Liz Taylor's baubles look discreet."

Given Ang's descriptions of the quintessential characteristics of the primetime soap, it stands to reason that Newport Beach shines as the ideal setting for *The O.C.* As Schwartz describes southern California, "Everybody is so good looking ... it's just a culture of being outside and surfing and water polo ... It's just this whole outdoor culture under the sun" (qtd. in Epstein).

The show represents Newport Beach as predominantly White and also subtly racist. For example, shortly after adopting Ryan into the Cohen household in "The

Gamble,” Sandy tells the pretentious, gossipy women of Newport, “Well, I should be off. Gotta find the next kid to jeopardize the [Newport] community. Maybe a Black kid. Or an Asian kid.” Sandy makes this comment knowing the horrified reaction he will receive from the closed-minded women of Newport. As viewer “lo-skank” comments on an online message board, “I think he was saying that the Newpsies are afraid of anything that is different.” On the other hand, these women do accept Sandy, illustrating that his difference is only something that *he* notices; to the gentiles, he is no different.

Kong Chang posts his own perceptions of Newport Beach:

There's a certain look, attitude, whiteness (as in ethnicity) you have to maintain in Newport Beach. And yes, the rich community is pretty racist, but not publicly racist, mind you. What you see on TV may seem like an exaggeration and not representing the "county", but it does represent the rich snobs and their spoiled children very well.

And indeed, as noted previously, all of the characters featured in the opening credits sequence are white. The only characters noted on the message boards that are non-white are the Asian-American dean of Harbor High and D.J., the lawn boy. While the ethnicity of D.J. is never confirmed on the show, viewer “morning glory” writes, “DJ - I'm sure he has spanish blood.” However, the only function that D.J. seems to serve is to distract Marissa during her break-up with Ryan. Marissa keeps her clandestine relationship with D.J. from her mother, and the show never affords him any voice or motivation. Once his secret tryst with Marissa is over, his character is cut from the show. User “budfox” comments, “The character was never developed so he wasn’t needed, glad he's gone.”

This places Sandy in an interesting predicament, and it seems worthwhile to investigate the presence and status of the Jewish population in Newport Beach—or California as a whole. According to observers like Moses Rischin, only 25% of Los Angeles Jews belong to a synagogue compared to a national average of 40% (Sorin 23). Moreover, Charles S. Liebman notes that in Los Angeles, 30% of Jews are married to non-Jewish partners (77). These figures prompt Gerald Sorin’s discussion of Jewishness within southern California. He writes that California fosters “a more individualistic faith, a more voluntary Jewishness, one less tied to established traditions, institutions, and communities” (237). Thus, what emerges is even a more secular, less “different” Jewish identity.

Ilene Schneider identifies this trend in Orange County. She writes:

While Orange County may not have the geographically cohesive nature of a mature Jewish community in the Northeast or Midwest—or even in Los Angeles or San Francisco—demographers describe it as typical of the new Jewish communities of the West. As compared to other places, Western Jews are less likely to live in Jewish neighborhoods, have primarily Jewish friends, belong to a synagogue or contribute to Jewish charities. They tend to be less observant and less concerned about intermarriage or Israel. In short, they seem less ethnically identified." Of course, this makes tracking the Jewish population more difficult.

Surveys place the tentative figure conservatively around 75,000.

Schneider goes on to note that there are 50 Jewish institutions in Orange County.

However, she continues, "The Jewish Federation of OC reaches at best 20 percent of the

Jewish community and its annual fundraising drive last year raised just over \$2 million, a relatively small figure compared to cities with even smaller Jewish populations. The question remains an open one: Does California represent the Jewish wave of the future?"

Another interesting point to be made by these findings is that regardless of whether Jews choose to remain religiously observant or not, they have the choice of embracing or rejecting their Jewishness. Regardless of these choices, however, real Jews in Orange County as well as Jewish characters on *The O.C.* seem to be accepted inside of Whiteness. In an article for *The Jewish Journal*, writer Keren Engelberg theorizes that "it's doubtful whether being Jewish in Orange County makes real O.C. Jews feel like outsiders." The article also quotes Laguna Beach resident Elsa Goldberg as saying, "I think if Jews feel isolated, they isolate themselves" (qtd. in Engelberg).

Sandy's "Jewish" values may not perfectly align with those of the money-driven, pretentious Newport folks, but they are also different from his son Seth's on the one hand, and from his mother Sophie's on the other. Indeed, each of these characters can be seen as representing stages in the Jewish transition into Whiteness, from Sophie's Old World Jewishness to Seth's *schlemiel*-inflected Whiteness.

And indeed, Sandy admits that his recent money-driven business venture is an accommodation to the Old World as well as the New, defined as success "not according to Sophie Cohen, and frankly not even Sandy Cohen sometimes." Sophie is having none of this accommodation, and she expresses her vehement views about the clash between Jewish ideals and the California terrain during an argument with Sandy.

“And you married a woman whose father represents everything I have fought against my entire life,” Sophie shouts at him.

“I married her for love, not because of her father’s principles,” protests Sandy.

“Oh, what politics? What principles? Oh God, what am I doing here? I hate this state, I hate the sunshine, I hate Schwarzenegger!!”

Yet, as pointed out before, it is important to note that both Sandy and Sophie’s rejection of Newport is their choice, not a decision made by the Newport elite. Sandy Cohen’s position of being able to sympathize with the outsider from a position of power reveals his status of White insider. It is akin to the dynamic between Will and Grace. When they compare levels of ostracism received by society, Grace reveals herself as considerably less marginalized in aligning herself with Will. The same is true of Sandy. Ryan’s status as “poor white trash” from Chino makes him far more prone to being ridiculed and the target of marginalization than Sandy and Seth’s status as Jewish.

Whereas Sandy chose to reject the components of his identity that made him different, D.J. did not get to make that choice. This, as much as anything, is evidence of the normative Whiteness that is the master category of identity inside *The O.C.*

### **The Dual Address of *The O.C.*: A Difference That Does Not Make a Difference**

In many interviews, Josh Schwartz claims that during his undergraduate career at USC, he was “an outsider – Jewish, a bit pasty” (qtd. in Slate). On the other hand, he says, “Creating Jewish characters is just who I am and a natural reflection of my upbringing. I wasn’t really conscious that it would be daring or pushing the envelope to



put Jewish characters on the show. It just felt totally organic and natural to who I was” (qtd. in Tweti). This seems to be a contradiction. If his Jewish identity made him a true outsider and if Jewish truly was synonymous with Other, why did Schwartz not anticipate a great backlash against his depiction of Jewish characters on *The O.C.*?

Matthew F. Jacobson states that “the question is not are they white, nor even how white are they, but how have they been both white and Other?” (241). Sandy and Seth, despite their differences, find their niche within Newport Beach as they fall under the banner of Whiteness. As this study has outlined, Jews, at least on television, have been fully assimilated into the melting pot of “Whiteness” to the point where their difference is truly a difference that does not make a difference.

### **Breaking Hearts: Ryan and Seth**

On the show, there is a difference between the characters of Ryan and Seth. However, viewers do not see it as a difference that matters. Ryan is brooding, soft-spoken, and “masculine”; Seth is cute, witty, and “effeminate.” User “Niki12” observes, “Seth's cute but Ryan's more of a man.” Yet, clearly Seth’s difference has not phased user “ll\_link,” who posts, “Seth is so hot...just thinking about him...\*drooling\*..someone get me a towel!”

It seems that Seth and Sandy still receive rave reviews—as the funny, good-natured outsiders. User “lanjwynllover” writes, “He [Sandy] is my favorite character because he reminds me of my husband, in ways.” Sandy is an example of what Epstein

describes as the new nice-guy Jewish type. He is “a good marriage catch, a good son-in-law, a friendly, funny, nice guy” (241).

### **The Business-Savvy Jew and the Unsuccessful Uber-WASP: Sandy and Caleb**

Unlike Kirsten, her father Caleb Nichol is a WASP character whose principles clash severely with Sandy’s. In “The Girlfriend,” Kirsten suggests to Sandy, “Maybe you guys [you and Caleb] can make peace this weekend.” Sandy responds, “Okay. Oh no, no wait. I can’t. I’m still Jewish ... Just gettin’ it out of my system, I promise.”

Yet, despite this quip, on the whole it seems that Sandy and Caleb’s rift is more a question of a difference in ethics than it is of Caleb questioning Sandy’s Jewishness.

“Sandy the Liberal” is much more threatening to Caleb than “Sandy the Jew.”

In “The Best Chrismukkah Ever,” Sandy makes a discovery that reveals Caleb’s unethical business practices. When Sandy informs Caleb that he wishes to buy Balboa Heights for a dollar, he wryly tells Cal, “Merry Christmas.” Later, while Caleb reluctantly obliges, outwitted by Sandy, he shakes Sandy’s hand and tells him tersely, “Happy Hanukkah, Sandy.” Based on this exchange, it seems that religion is more of a metaphor for their difference than the cause; in reality, their disdain for each other stems from a variation in secular values.

### **The Religious Component**

With *Abie’s Irish Rose*, *The Melting Pot*, and even the 1972 television show *Bridget Loves Bernie*, the plotlines that featured Jewish-gentile marriage prompted a

severe backlash. That *The O.C.* has triggered no negative reactions supports the main argument of this thesis, which is that Jewish identity today is compatible with Whiteness.

This does not mean that all religious differences are eradicated within this new category of Whiteness that includes both gentiles and Jews. Kirsten and Sandy Cohen, for example, hold different religious beliefs; Sandy identifies as Jewish and Kirsten identifies as Christian. In *Deceptive Images: Toward a Redefinition of American Judaism*, Charles S. Liebman states his belief that “any understanding of American Jewish life must begin with questions of Jewish commitment, often mistakenly labeled as Jewish identity” (6). According to Liebman, Jewish commitment depends on religious behaviors. It is important, he says, to evaluate religious aspect of Jews because “it is so critical to defining the essence of being Jewish” (7).

However, *The O.C.* never addresses these differences. Sandy seems to follow the trend of Los Angeles Jews; he is hardly devout with his religious practices. But *The O.C.* handles these religious differences in two ways. First, it makes these differences cultural—for example, located in different senses of humor rather than matters of religious observation. Second, it reproduces the discourse of “love conquers all” from the days of *Abie’s Irish Rose* and *The Melting Pot*. As seen in these representations, the members of the outdated, older generation are the ones that bear the brunt of the obligation. In *The O.C.*, the Nana shoulders the pain. It is evident in “The Nana” that Sandy does not adhere to ritual. He does not observe Passover correctly; it is only when Sandy finds out his mother is visiting that he wants to throw away the bread.

“It means my mother’s plane lands at noon,” says Sandy frantically, “and if she walks in here on the first day of Passover and sees us eating pancakes, she’ll platz!”

In true *schlemiel* fashion, Seth observes coyly, “I love it when the Nana comes and suddenly Dad’s all Jewish again.”

### **Religion as a Soothing Device**

In regards to religion, the deemphasizing of ritual and emphasis on family and community on *The O.C.* is perhaps reflective of trends in American society. Schwartz explains, “I thought it would be really cool to do an episode with a Passover seder on broadcast television. Taking arguably two of the hottest guys on television [Gallagher and Brody], and putting yarmulkes on them and showing a real loving family ritual dinner observing the holiday” (qtd. in Tweti). These trends are found in all religions, not just Judaism. Wade Clark Roof discusses the “erosion of authority and influence of religious institutions”; “the increased role of the media industries in the contemporary matrix of institutions”; “the greater autonomy people assume in matters of religious faith and practices”; and the idea that “Americans increasingly *choose* whether to believe and what to believe” (62). American society has become increasingly more forgiving toward those who do not abide by institutions’ rituals and obligations. Liebman writes of Jews “to whom the Jewish New Year is not a new year in any meaningful sense, for whom Hanukkah is at most a surrogate Christmas and Passover the occasion for the extended family to eat together” (85). Seder, specifically, can “mean a family meal and little more to many American Jews” (88).

Gordis writes of the same shift in Jewish-American identity:

We don't know what to say or what to do. At the Passover Seder, we would like an experience that was more than social, beyond the quaint. But the *Haggadah* is complicated, and most of it seems irrelevant because making our way into America meant that we didn't have time to study it. So with time, a tradition that we no longer understand doesn't speak to us, and we begin to wonder why it is worth preserving. Our desperation to blend into America has robbed us; we are only now beginning to feel the cost of what we have lost. (77)

Gordis refers to this inclusion as “a complicated gift” (77). While it is easier to be part of the majority, Gordis says that Jews in the process “removed what we thought were the key obstacles to Jewish survival and thriving (77).

On *The O.C.*, nearly every episode ends with a friendly gathering of all characters after conflicts have been resolved. The seder that is featured in the closing scene of “The Nana”—a scene which shows the Cohens, Summer, and Marissa all gathered happily around the dinner table—functions in a similar manner. Once Sophie agrees to receive the chemotherapy treatment, the family is united in a loving and accepting atmosphere. Liebman explains that religion “serves to strengthen family life by legitimating its ultimate meaning, rooting it in ultimate reality” (10). He outlines six purposes of religious ritual, one of which being that rituals “arouse and channel but also sublimate and control such strong emotions as anger, grief, love, hate, and so on” (14). It also “evokes the sense of ties to community, the community of the present and the past, and strengthens one's sense of dependence on and obligation to that community” (15). No

mention is made as to why the Cohens are participating in the ritual or why they feel a connection or commitment to Judaism.

It should also be noted that Kirsten, Marissa, Ryan, and Summer participate as wholly as Sandy, Seth, and Sophie—the Jews are outnumbered by gentiles in their seder celebration. It seems perfectly acceptable for the WASPs to participate in the Jewish traditions. Summer even makes a point to learn the prayer rituals. She tells Seth defiantly, “I’m going to study this thing so hard I’m even going to out-Jew you,” to which he responds good-naturedly, “You’re reading it backwards.”

In another scene, Summer lies down next to Seth, who is holding his forehead in frustration. “For all other nights, we eat either chametz or matzah,” she recites, mispronouncing both words terribly. Seth corrects her, confessing to Ryan over the telephone, “Summer’s having a Hebrew hernia.”

Yet, by the end of the episode, Summer performs a perfect recitation for Seth.

“Did you just do that all by heart?” Seth asks in astonishment. When he informs her that she is allowed to use the book, she hits him flirtatiously, visibly upset. “What?! You’re my little chachka!”

Summer attempts to learn Judaism as a way of connecting with Seth, not because she believes in the ritual or tradition. This is another example of Judaism being used for cultural rather than religious purposes.

Susan Wender’s “Marilyn Enters a Jewish Family,” an article published in a 1956 issue of *Modern Screen*, tells the story of Marilyn Monroe’s conversion to Reform Judaism following her marriage to Arthur Miller. Wender tells of Monroe’s difficult

upbringing and previous divorces. After such trials, Miller's home—and Jewish background—seemed a comfort to Marilyn. Wender writes of their Judaism: “And being Jewish—well, when people like you were in trouble, or when something good happened, you could share a little of it with them, you could feel at one with them” (185). Though the members of Miller's family were not strictly religious, being Jewish provided a source of comfort and belonging to them—and it could to Marilyn, too.

This “religion as soothing device” coincides well with television's programming limitations that are dictated by economic reasoning. As Roof writes, on television, faith and religion are “happiness, fulfillment, contentment, identifiable as something distinctly spiritual but similar to the benefits people obtain from the soaps and talk shows” (64). In an effort not to alienate audiences, television tends to emphasize the uniting and moral elements of religion and not specific religious identities or conflicts. Roof writes, “Religions ... begin to look more like one another as they become tamed through television” (64). He continues with a particularly insightful set of observations:

At one level, television operates in a context that encourages ‘religion a la carte,’ cafeteria religion, pastiche, bricolage, to list a few labels now in vogue. People are presented with a menu of religious and spiritual themes, and they are put in the position of picking and choosing among them, or of mixing elements eclectically. Experience is privileged over belief, exploration takes precedence over certitude; coherence and inner meaning are more important than rational consistency. Television is not to be blamed for all of modernity's ills, but it must

accept its share of responsibility for creating a world where individuals are less rooted in traditions. (65)

Bob Gale identifies two reasons why religion is seldom addressed on television. The first is that religious rituals are boring to watch. The second is that “the logical solution is to never mention a character’s religion; that way, we have less chance of offending someone. We’re trying to provide entertainment here, an escape. Why risk upsetting anyone?” (Gale 140).

Indeed, Schwartz himself seems to indicate a desire to veer away from anything markedly controversial. Though he is excited to portray Jewish characters on primetime, he also comments, "But it’s not gonna be a Star of David burning on the Cohens’ front lawn or anything inflammatory like that. I think we just want to sort of weave it into the background of these characters and have it be part of their personal culture" (qtd. in Engelberg).

Above all, television is a business that relies on its ability to attract as many viewers as possible. When asked about the new wave of gentile-Jewish union representations on television, Executive Director of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture Richard Siegal commented, “I think that it’s a reflection of demographics more than it is about any profound response to multiculturalism ... Between the phenomenon of intermarriage and divorce and remarriage you now have a rather large community of people or families of a mixed or blended nature” (qtd. in Leibovitz).



## Conclusion

### Exploring the Postmodern, Secular Jewish Identity as a Brand of Whiteness

In closing, I wish to reference the last scene of “The Best Chrismukkah Ever.” In it, Sandy, the emblematic Jew who has wholly, successfully assimilated into Whiteness, stands with his WASP wife Kirsten in his lavish living room as indie rocker Bright Eyes’s rendition of “Blue Christmas” plays in the background. Sandy stands jovially and proudly, comfortably interacting with his family and donning a Berkeley sweatshirt that betrays his liberal roots and loyalties.

I have already argued that *The O.C.* arrives in a moment when Jews are White. On *The O.C.*, cultural Jew Sandy Cohen has the ability to speak from a position of power to defend the underprivileged. However, *The O.C.* seems to project a discourse where the Jew’s honesty has brought him to even higher success than merely having achieved assimilation. In fact, by suggesting that Jews use their power to further liberal causes, help humanity, and execute their moral consciousness, the Jewish identity portrayed in *The O.C.* actually emerges as a morally superior brand of normative Whiteness. As Brodtkin writes, “Part of the psychic damage done by whiteness is that it is a worldview that has difficulty envisioning an organization of social life that does not rest upon

systematic and institutionalized racial subordination. In this effort, the heritage of Yiddishkeit has much to recommend it” (186).

The show celebrates Sandy’s liberalism and underdog mentality; hence, his “Berkeley” sweatshirt. However, he has also adapted to the mores and standards of Newport Beach—he surfs, he quits the Public Defender’s office to go into private practice, he opens restaurants, and he marries a gentile. He is “successful” by Newport standards, but because of his strong ethics, he constantly proves more competent than super-WASP Caleb Nichol in the business realm, in addition to possessing a more genuine affability and sense of integrity. Yet, compared to older Jewish identities, Sandy’s is very individualistic.

For example, his mother, who is much more committed to social activism Sandy, is depicted as horribly outdated and obnoxious—particularly in the Newport Beach setting—as well as collectivist in a way that runs counter to values of individualism and family that are important within normative White society. Sandy has transcended his mother’s extreme, arguably debilitating, commitment to social activism. Moreover, her commitment to religious traditions is a burden to him and is similarly portrayed as outdated and out of touch. Sandy also accuses her of putting her commitments before her most important commitment—the loyalty to her family. As discussed earlier, he tells her, “You were never home. You were working all the time. You were taking care of other people’s kids or marching for causes or circulating petitions or picketing City Hall. Look, it felt like you had no time for us.”

Sandy's son, Seth, represents the newest generation of Jewish Americans. He is quirky and neurotic—an “outsider” who celebrates his Jewishness; clearly he has adopted some of his father's sensibility. Yet, when Summer is forced to choose between Seth and Zach – who Seth describes as the WASP version of himself (“The Way We Were”) – she chooses the *schlemiel*, symbolizing the true gentile acceptance of the Jew. Moreover, Summer not only accepts the *schlemiel*—she embraces Hebrew religious practices in an attempt to assimilate with *them*.

Joanna Grossman applauds *The O.C.* in an article in *Canadian Jewish News*: Judaism has never been cooler, and Yiddish is reaching the masses. Of course, you might wonder whether it is only cool for a character to be Jewish if he or she is half-Jewish, and if the person is both willing and culturally able to mix Judaism with the culturally dominant religion. But given the superficial character of *The O.C.*, it seems safe to conclude that there is little wrong with a show that succeeds in making Yiddishkeit trendy.

The argument of this thesis is that Seth and Sandy are fully, normatively White, but with a distinctively Jewish sense of humor. More generally, my argument is that the key to the transformation of Jewishness into Whiteness on television is the compatibility of Jewish humor with normative Whiteness.

In reflecting on what the new brand of “Jewish” Whiteness means, it is important to think about how this and other representations of difference reflect the growth of a “global marketplace for the consumption of difference.” According to Stuart Hall and others, “difference” has become a valuable commodity in global popular culture. This is

because “difference” stands out in the sign systems of advertising, television, and other media. And “standing out” has become more important as media images have become more pervasive and their circulation has accelerated. In this respect, *The O.C.* is not only an important moment in the development of Jewish identity, but also an important moment in the development and differentiation of primetime soaps.

Brodkin’s analysis suggests that *The O.C.* represents a transformation in Jewish identity that undermines important social justice traditions:

Many Jews of my generation who grew up white did not experience the forced reciprocity and community obligations that constituted a coercive side of Jewish identity. One of the things I know as an anthropologist is that our parents and grandparents did not enact these cultural precepts because they were inherently better people than we are. They had to do it in ways that we do not—because we are white and therefore do not have to do it. The challenge for American Jews today is to confront that whiteness as part of developing an American Jewishness that helps build an explicitly multiracial democracy in the United States. (187)

Yet, no matter what it means in real Jewish lives, the transformation of Jewish identity on television has meant that, at least on a symbolic level, Jewish identity is defined primarily as a style of humor. Its connection to social justice has either been lost or transformed into individual critique and cynicism, and becomes more like normative Whiteness than it is like anything else.

However, Jewish identity, like any other identity, is a moving target under the assumptions of cultural studies. It is constantly being redefined and reshaped, and I hope

that future theorists and scholars will continue this research in order to track the course of these changes. How will the transformation of Jewish identity on television continue? What impact, if any, will the recent wave of Russian Jewish immigration have on television representations of Jews? What is the brand life of the present forms of televised Jewish identity, such as those represented on *The O.C.*? Will this new brand of Jewish identity go the way of other commodities and be taken out of circulation at some point (when it no longer “stands out” for audiences), or will it become a permanent part of the television landscape? These and other questions about the construction of Jewish identity are some areas for future research suggested by my project.

Finally, I hope that further research will examine the visual rhetorics of Jewish identity on television. What are the visual rhetorics involved in representing the *schlemiel*, how do these rhetorics challenge older visual representations of Jews, and how do they challenge conventions of the primetime soap opera? These questions of visibility suggest a fruitful field for further research.

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