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Can We Laugh? Jewish American Comedy's Expression of Anxiety in a Time of Change, 1965-1973

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American Studies Honors Project
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Alvy, you're incapable of enjoying life, you know that? I mean you're like New York City.

You're just this person. You're like this island unto yourself." – Annie in *Annie Hall*

Identity is more than a label; it is the enactment, performance, and ascription of histories and internal and external experiences. Identity is also constantly changing in relation to others. For Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*, identity is also deeply linked to his (failed) relationships with others, to his connection to place over people. Alvy's, a comedian, negative point of view leads to a daily balance of the tragic and the comic.

I intend to utilize films in a character analysis to demonstrate the ways Jewish humor expresses pain, anxieties, confusion, and triumphs of identity for Jewish Americans. I locate the mid 1960s to the late 1970s as a crucial point in identity formation of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish Americans have struggled to define themselves and their relation to dominant society in the midst of internal divisions and external hostility or invitation.

Comedy is the means through which Jews negotiate their anxieties about their relationship to U.S. society through both performance and spectatorship. *Tragicomedy* or dark comedy, which blends aspects of tragedy and comedy, is a more specific site for Jewish voices to wrestle with the expression of pain throughout the navigation of identity. In looking at tragicomedy, I interrogate the sources of pain: tensions of gender, race, citizenship, sexuality, and class. The question of who or what is the object of humor or of

a joke complicates the ways it is interpreted. How are the anxieties about a Jewish ethnic identity expressed through comedic performance? How can comedy serve as a site for the expression of pain? I argue that tragicomedy uniquely articulates the tensions and anxieties of post-World War II American Jews as they navigate their identities.

The historical era of 1965-1973 reveals a moment of uncertainty of American Jewish belonging, a time period that acknowledges Jews' Whiteness and their upward class mobility during post-World War II suburbanization. This time period also included the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars in Israel. The strengthening of Israel and the Whitening of previously "Off-White" ethnics granted Jews access to dominant culture. Alongside these newfound privileges and points of access to dominant culture, Jews still struggled with pathologized gender and sexual roles and the recent histories of discrimination by dominant society. Thus, post-war Jewish humor reflects the deep ambivalence present throughout many facets of American Jewish experiences.

This project is a site of intersection of my academic and activist interests in interrogating Whiteness, my social identity as a cultural Jewish American, and my creative passions in comedy performance. Growing up in a culturally Jewish family, humor has always been a part of our family's ways of coping with stress and sadness. When my great aunt Yetta passed away ten years ago, I distinctly remember my mother reflecting: "It's such a shame she passed when she did. She had just gotten new carpets." This comment mocked a materialism in which objects matter more than people, and attempted to make sense of loss. Humor is a part of the joys and pains of our lives. Our family's dark humor reflects tragicomic representations in popular culture. I have always

viewed popular culture as an important cultural text worthy of interrogation and exploration as a reflection of broader cultural discourse. Additionally, I have been drawn to humor and the complexity of laughter in my own performance. Through this project, I am able to draw linkages between Jewish American historical connections with humor and the ways that humor has facilitated and articulated changes in status for Jews, with my own personal investment in comedic performance present as well.

This project is rooted in ongoing conversations within the discipline of American Studies, including former American Studies Association President Elaine Tyler May's 1995 Presidential Address, "The Radical Roots of American Studies." In her speech, May outlines three waves of Marxisms that have characterized American Studies scholarship. My research is a part of the third Marxism, named for Jewish comedian Groucho Marx, a Marxism that analyzes popular culture as a force created largely by marginalized Americans who used it not only to express, but also to create, resistance to the dominant culture. My research enters decades of American Studies dialogues by George Lipsitz, Henry Giroux, Tricia Rose, and others.

My project blends American Studies theory, historical analysis, and film interrogation. The second chapter starts broadly with a description of the pertinent theories and ideas that buttress my argument. The next chapter places my work in dialogue with Jewish immigration history, American cultural studies, critical race theory, Whiteness studies, film analysis, and performance studies. This literature review displays an application of these theories, situates my research in an interdisciplinary field, and connects multiple ways of thinking. This literature review will inform my own application of relevant theories and schools of thought.

The next chapter provides an overview of Jewish American cultural history upon immigration to the U.S. in the 1800s and an analysis of important themes of self-definition, internal divisions among Jews, external hostility and tensions, the significance place, the intersection of labor and leisure, and Jewish humor. My historical chapter concludes with a detailed description of a more recent history, the political and social climate of the mid-1960s to the early-1970s in the United States.

The fifth chapter of this piece analyzes three case studies. The analysis of film examines *The Graduate* (1967), *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), and *Annie Hall* (1977). These films present similarities in their representation of masculinity, class, and failed romance, and exemplify tragicomedies. Respectively, these films demonstrate failed romance of Jewish men with women of different age, class, and/or ethnicity. Each of these male protagonists wrestles with non-normative masculinity. This section will discuss these three films as texts to understand the significance of each film.

My hope is that this project matters to both academics and non-academics and reminds readers of the power of popular culture to reflect and dictate social experiences. My intention is to utilize case studies to demonstrate the ways Jewish humor expresses pain, anxieties, confusion, and triumphs of identity for Jewish Americans and position the mid 1960s to the late 1970s as a crucial point in identity formation of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender.

The title of this project, *Can We Laugh?*, is a re-imagining of Jewish comic Joan Rivers' catchphrase, "can we talk?". In borrowing Rivers' question, I deploy language of popular culture to emphasize its power in shaping Jewish American identity. Additionally, the question addresses the tensions of tragicomedy, the ambiguities in

whether to approach pain with sadness or with humor. Even when we wonder about its

appropriateness, we laugh to keep from crying. This title encapsulates the main thesis of

this project: humor is a means for post-War Jewish Americans to negotiate a new

relationship to dominant society amidst internal divisions and external ambivalence.

This project situates itself in American Studies, an interdisciplinary field of study that employs theory in its analysis of identity and structures of power. American Studies takes as its evidence cultural texts, symbols, and performances; historic events, documents, landscapes, and artifacts; social/political/intellectual movements; and diverse communities and individual profiles. The manifestation of American Studies that most deeply influences this paper incorporates scholarly thought from critical race and ethnicity studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. This chapter utilizes interdisciplinary methodologies in order to address the key ideas and theories that inform my argument.

To support my overarching thesis that humor is a site for Jewish Americans to wrestle with the tensions of internal division and external hostility or invitation as they navigate their relationship to dominant culture, I have incorporated key theories and ideas of various thinkers across academic disciplines. I will demonstrate how these theories connect to one another as well as to the primary source comedic materials. The main themes that influence my argument are social structures, identity formation, visual culture, and the intersections among these ideas. Racial formation and Whiteness theories deeply inform our understanding of the ways that American Jews have struggled with their relationship to dominant culture, and representational and humor analysis can be more directly applied to comedic texts.

Racial Formation and Whiteness Theory

Omi & Winant

Racial formation theory operates as a crucial analytical tool in American Studies. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theorizing on race situates race as a unique social construct that is linked to class, ethnicity, and nation, but that reflects the "historical flexibility and immediacy in everyday experience and social conflict" of race (2). Focusing on the mid-twentieth century and beyond, their text outlines and illuminates flaws in theoretical frameworks of race through the lenses of other social identities such as ethnicity, class, and nation. Omi and Winant argue for a distinct racial analytical framework for Americans (48). Racial formation is a powerful theoretical tool in interrogating race as a social construct, on complicating the origins of racism, and on the need for a unique racial formation perspective in the studies of identity and structures of power.

When writing about Jewish American subjectivities, race and racial formation are particularly crucial lenses through which to analyze Jewish experiences. Jews' relationship with race has morphed as race and ethnicity's correlation changed in American political and social consciousness, as Jews have navigated both Otherness and Whiteness within the twentieth century. While "White" too is a race, its histories of mutually constituting invisibility and dominance demand its specific articulation. Thus, my analysis of racial formation theory will examine schools of thought on race and Whiteness.

Racial formation theory can be applied to American Jews not only through its explicit engagement with White ethnicity but through its analysis of micro- and macro-

levels of identity. *Racial Formation in the United States* reiterates the historical racial

ambivalence displayed towards many ethnic Whites by both dominant White culture

during the early twentieth century and also within the critical study of race: "'*They All*

Look Alike'. In what sense can racial minority groups be considered in ethnic group

terms? In what sense is the category 'black,' for example, equivalent to the categories

'Irish' or 'Jewish'?" (Omi & Winant 22). Omi and Winant's description and subsequent

deconstruction of ethnicity frameworks of race both positions ethnicity as part of its own

group formation processes that apply mostly to European immigrants of the early

twentieth century and describes the ambiguous racialized identities of Jewish people.

American Jewish cultural history can be described by the struggle between the

macro and micro forces that inform identity formation. Omi and Winant reflect on race as

a process or in formation by structures "not only at the macro-level of racial policy-

making, state activity, and collective action, but also at the micro-level of everyday

experience" (58). Thus, a racial identity is shaped by both external factors, dominant

institutional or structural conceptions of race, and internal factors, individual experiences

and senses of self. Anthroplogist Karen Brodkin describes this duality as "the

counterpoint between identity and ethnoracial assignment" (21). Using Brodkin's

language, identity is internally felt, while race and ethnicity are assigned and projected by

the outside. Omi and Winant argue that these two entities, the internal and external, are

mutually constitutive.

The notion of a dialectic is an important lens through which to understand Jews as

they are marked as the (racial, ethnic, or religious) Other in the pursuit of a political and

individual identity. The dialogue between forces of definition from within Jewish

communities and dominant, non-Jewish culture leads to the complex ways Jews form their identities. This dually faceted relationship of internal and external signifiers of identity is also crucial to American Jewishness and lies at the crux of my larger argument that humor is a site where Jews enact their struggles with both internal division and external hostility or invitation as they define their relationship to dominant culture.

Roediger

Within the critical study of race and ethnicity lies critical Whiteness studies, a school of thought that articulates Whiteness as a race, rather than as a neutral existence. American Jews' complicated location within Whiteness and Whiteness studies illuminates key contradictions within the parameters of White dominance and of White ethnicity. In David Roediger's study of racism in the development of a White working class in the U.S. in the nineteenth century, he provides a useful starting point for the study of Whiteness. Roediger's writings focus on White ethnics, incorporating examples about Jews to make a larger argument about the construction of Whiteness.

Roediger frames White racism through the lens of class: "whiteness was a way in which White workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline," through the pitting of White workers in opposition to Black people (Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness* 13). This text wrestles with how race and class became nearly unified concepts in the formation of the American Working Class during the nineteenth century. The book explores how White workers sought after a "wage" for their color, by placing on Black Americans the mantle of the Other, objectifying and stratifying Blacks into an object of prejudice and discrimination.

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Whiteness became a marker of non-Blackness, a way of creating hierarchies amongst workers.

Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness* furthers the concepts addressed in *Wages of Whiteness* to more closely engage the immigrant and ethnic world at the turn of the twentieth century. Similar to other European immigrants, Jews' relationship with Whiteness and Americanness connotes a complicated connection. Coming from immigration in the late nineteenth century to the twentieth century, Jews have navigated new identities from oppressed ethnic Others in most Eastern European nations, to racialized immigrants, to citizens for whom the American Dream is attainable. As Jews assimilated to life in America, the idea of citizenship and Americanness became intertwined with Whiteness. Thus, becoming a Jewish American meant becoming White, a half-century long process for many Jews. In becoming White, Jews were able to simultaneously accept White privilege and align with their other more marginalized identities. George Lipsitz attributes this possessive investment in Whiteness to a notion of interest and property, the institution of binaries to establish dominance. As Jews navigated their relationship to majority culture, they balanced internal senses of self with external invitations to White privilege.

However, Roediger clarifies by warning scholars against reverting "into easy assumptions that all European immigrants were simply white and that their stories were always one of assimilation (or not) into American rather than specifically white American ways" (Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness* 7). This reading would allow for the mutually constitutive relationship of Whiteness's dominance and invisibility. American citizenship encompassed a nationalist project *and* a racializing agenda. Additionally,

American citizenship is a heteronormative project that molds the ideal American family, a nuclear unit consisting of one mother, one father, and biological offspring. Becoming an American meant becoming White and subscribing to ideals of sexual citizenship through a normative family. Just as Roediger carefully reads race through the lens of class in *Wages*, he reads immigration through the lens of race in *Working Towards Whiteness*. Roediger's writing on White ethnics links tensions of citizenship, race, and class.

Goldstein

While Roediger's scholarship addresses the raced and racializing experiences of many ethnic White identities, Eric Goldstein narrows Roediger's work and focuses on American Jewish racial experiences. Goldstein writes specifically about how Jews were placed and, more importantly, how they placed themselves within a U.S. racial hierarchy. Goldstein reflects upon the intersections of Whiteness and Jewishness not as a teleological journey of becoming, but as a continual process of negotiation. This negotiation meant that Jews simultaneously and situationally advocated for racial particularity and inclusion into Whiteness. As Jews negotiated a White identity, they gained a (White) privilege which allowed them to define themselves by other identities along lines of religion, class, nationality, gender, or sexuality. This power of self-definition reflects a privilege, as assimilated Jews in the twentieth century were not read or marked racially by dominant culture. Whiteness connotes a clear privilege as it pertains to Jewish communities, opening opportunities for class mobility, education, power in industries like entertainment, and decreasing racialized anti-Semitism.

Goldstein states: "Writing on whiteness almost always emphasizes the unmitigated benefits such an identity confers on the holder: power, social status, and financial rewards that are attained primarily by the exclusion of African Americans and other peoples of color" (5). Goldstein argues, however, that this negotiation of a racial identity is far more complicated than an entirely beneficial situation; earning Whiteness and White privilege is also a reflection of a profound loss on the behalf of Jewish Americans, a loss of tradition or Jewish "uniqueness". This constant renegotiation of insider/outsider subjectivies makes tragicomedy a particularly useful lens through which to read Jewish American experiences. Comedy and tragedy are hopelessly entangled; it is no wonder that Jewish people have to laugh to keep from crying as they navigate the simultaneous gains and losses through becoming White Americans. Thus, the study of Whiteness explores the sites of agency in the formation of Jewish racial identity, as well as the price of Whiteness that each American Jew has paid. However, while Jewish sacrifice for the ultimate goal of Whiteness is a real loss, the ability to assimilate into Whiteness reflects a clear privilege towards White-skinned bodies.

With the privileges of Whiteness conferred onto Jewish bodies, Jews navigated their relationship to dominant culture through the navigation of race. As Jews negotiated a socio-cultural identity in the United States, they were able to deploy race as a rhetorical strategy. That Jews were able to manipulate race and racial language is a signifier of privilege; persons of color, marked by their skin color, are unable to manipulate the boundaries of race. Jews, however, were and are able to pass as White or "*appear* like the majority." (Prell 5) Jews used racial language in Jewish spaces to forge a communal identity among Jews, and cultural or religious language in non-Jewish spaces that

assuaged anti-Semitic and xenophobic sensibilities (Goldstein 25). Jewishness became

situationally malleable, as a race, religion, culture, or nationality. The ability to *become*

White reflects a privilege unique to Jewish and other "ethnic Whites" like Italians and the

Irish that is inaccessible to communities of color. Roediger writes about the ways

working-class Whites utilized Whiteness as a response to wage-labor dependence (3),

acknowledging the privilege conferred of self-definition. In *Blackface, White Noise,*

political scientist Michael Rogin writes about the privilege of assimilation: "History, not

biology, distinguishes ethnicity from race, making the former groups (in the American

usage) distinctive but not assimilable, walling off the latter, legally, socially, and

ideologically, to benefit those within the magic circle and protect the national body from

contamination" (12). As Jews gained a sense of American citizenship, a claim to this

new land, "racial language also allowed Jews to maintain their self-image as a persecuted

people as they rose on the economic ladder and attained an unprecedented level of social

acceptance" (Goldstein 19). This language led to a complex self-perception that

maintains one foot in the realm of the Other and the other in the space of (dominant)

Whiteness, a dynamic that reached it peak in the mid-twentieth century. Goldstein's

writing acknowledges these ambiguities of Whiteness for American Jews.

Jacobson

Similar to Goldstein, Matthew Frye Jacobson sees Whiteness as a more insecure

identity, rather than something that can definitely be kept once attained, for those in the

"melting pot". In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Jacobson examines historical

documents of the dominant American narrative (courts, reformers, academics) to

understand the ways European immigrants were described as Caucasians. Jacobson

writes: "Contradictory racial identities come to coexist at the same moment in the same body in unstable combinations, as the specific histories that generated them linger in various cultural forms or in the social and political relationships that are their legacies" (42). Jacobson examines different understandings of race throughout the twentieth century, including scientific exhibits that debated whether Jews are or are not a separate race. The American Missionary Association's exhibit of the 1940s and 1950s concluded that "The Jews Are Not a Race…they are represented in many racial groups," (107) making Whiteness a possibility. As he examines a court case involving Jewish man Leo Frank, Jacobson states: "he was *inconclusively white"* (65). This instability and inconclusiveness is a part of the tensions presented to American Jews during European immigrant of the turn of the century, and of the ways that even once Whiteness was "attained" it could easily be lost in particular spaces or contexts. Whiteness is so complicated because of its instability to attain and also because of its invisibility in dominant culture.

Dyer

Beyond the historiography of Whiteness through immigration and labor, the construction of Whiteness as a neutral race that encompasses everything and nothing can also be read through visual culture. Whiteness' dominance comes from its invisibility, from its interpretation as neutral. Representational scholar Richard Dyer writes about how White people are represented and how they represent themselves, with a broad scope that incorporates dominant, Christian, Anglo conceptions of Whiteness, as well as representations of ethnic Whites like Jews. Dyer describes Jews' relationship to Whiteness as defined by the terms established by dominant culture: "often excluded,

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sometimes indeed being assimilated into the category of whiteness, and at others treated as a 'buffer'…between the white and the black or indigenous" (19). Dyer's language reflects the *inconclusivity* of Jewish Whiteness, of its liminal qualities. The next section in this chapter will continue the analysis of visual culture and its application to the study of mid-twentieth century American Jewish subjectivities

Many scholars have written about the complicated identity of Jews that transcends religion to include culture, ethnicity, and sometimes race. As Whiteness became more applicable to Jews, Jewishness enacted other identities. George Lipsitz writes: "Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see" (1), alluding to the shift from an Otherized racial identity to a marginalized religious or ethnic association. This means even as racial identity became invisibilized during the Progressive Era, Jewishness still remained a strong part of a Jewish American's identity through the language of religion or culture. As Goldstein iterates: "American Jews became preoccupied with the need to situate themselves socially as white and to find ways of defining Jewishness that did not interfere with their whiteness" (50). For example, a Whiteness-compatible definition of Jewishness includes an emphasis on supposed Jewish cultural values of "family" or "education," whereas differences in religious practices would otherize Jewishness. After immigration at the turn of the twentieth century, Jews were able to navigate through American spaces as both the Other and the Dominant, a positionality of privilege, as the parameters of marginality and discomfort were limited. This dynamic illustrates the internal and external factors at play in the formation of a Jewish American identity.

I have traced the geneologies and main arguments of racial formation and Whiteness theory. Omi and Winant's racial formation theory serves as a paradigm through which to read the dialectical process of Jewish American identity navigation of the individual and the institutional. Additionally, racial formation theory provides a critical reading of racialized ethnicity theory. My analysis of Whiteness has drawn heavily on the scholarly engagement with privilege and Jewish Whiteness beyond a Black/White racial binary, as established by Roediger, Goldstein, Jacobson, and Dyer. These ideological frameworks heavily inform my analysis of Jewish American identity.

Film Analysis, Representation, and Humor

This theoretical chapter is concerned with the interplay between social structures, identity formation, and representation. This project argues that Jewish American comedy has been and continues to be a location for the negotiation of Jews' relationship to dominant culture, as informed by both divisions among Jews and projections from non-Jews. My thesis specifically looks at the films *The Graduate, Goodbye, Columbus*, and *Annie Hall* in this analysis. I have organized theory on race and representation as separate, but these two powers shape one another. Film is a medium that represents race, and racial formations are often dictated by popular culture such as film.

Cinema is a unique institution in that the audience cannot pause, go back and re-watch, or take notes, unlike the reading of a book (Bellour 2). In reading these three films as cultural texts, they must be interrogated with a specific methodology that looks toward unique filmic tropes and frameworks. This section outlines the key theories in film analysis and the study of representation that are essential to my argument.

Critical media and cultural studies focuses on the production of culture through the lens of representation. This interdisciplinary approach examines the "circuit of culture" (Hall 1), a deeply interconnected relationship between representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. My project incorporates discursive analysis, which is "concerned with the *effects* and *consequence*s of representation- its 'politics,'"(Hall 6) into to the study of humor as a site for the development of a Jewish identity in relation to dominant culture and in contention with both internal divisions and external antagonism and inclusion. This discursive approach emphasizes the production of meaning through both representation and consumption. To reiterate, both the performer/subject and the spectator hold power. Therefore, meaning reflects society and meaning is simultaneously constructed by society. When I analyze *The Graduate, Goodbye, Columbus,* and *Annie Hall*, I will look not only to the potential messages each film sends to the audience but how the audience may interpret these messages based on how particular social structures inform their identities.

An application of a constructionist approach to representation interrogates the spectator or audience and destabilizes the objective ideal of watching. Raymond Bellour writes ambivalently about the "semi-distance…that is maintained through the film object," (4) the way that a spectator is never fully removed from the action or drama of a film. Thus, the identities of a spectator matter, as their specific positions affect the way they may interpret a cultural representation such as a film. Many theorists write about the gaze, a politicized perspective, the notion that, according to bell hooks, "there is power in looking" (307). *The* gaze often refers to a subject who inhabits dominant racial, sexual, national, and class-based identities. My research on American Jews struggles with the

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powers that inform their gazes as potentially both insider and outsider to dominant culture.

Representation theory addresses the textual specificities in examining comedic films, and theory on humor addresses the structural tendencies and interpretations of the comedic aspects of the films. Specific theorizing on humor, made clinical and also legitimate by Freud, talks about humor as a social process, as a release of latent nervous energy and desires. Freud even pondered Jewish humor in particular as a source of self-ridicule, a tragic-comic aesthetic (Epstein 306). When thinking about the humor, we can add another player to the performer and audience relationship: the butt of ridicule. Who is disenfranchised through a joke and who gains power? Lawrence Epstein writes: "If Freud's psychoanalytic understanding is correct, humor helps us deal with our fears" (275). Epstein's use of the term "us" implies a particular collective gaze of American Jews. In my specific analysis of American Jewish dark comedy, I ask: What is the source of the pain that is the cause of the laughter? Answers to this question reaffirm the power of humor and laughter as sites for American Jews to confront internal and external tensions and to deal with their changing relationship to dominant culture.

Although in this chapter I have organized theory on race and representation as separate, these two powers deeply inform one another, as can be seen through the representation of Whiteness. Within the study of cultural representation and signifying practices, identities are central to media representations. As a result, racial agendas can be integral to a film's representations. Images of Whiteness help construct Whiteness as the norm in the ways that they are or are not specifically acknowledged. In response to the scientific components of White as a color on the spectrum and its cultural meanings,

Richard Dyer explains: "This property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power" (142). Dyer describes the ways that White privilege allows for a focus on other identities or sub-identities, rendering the particularities of Whiteness useless or irrelevant, which can even slide to a discussion of Blackness and Otherness. Thus, how can we watch and read film and search for the invisible? This question of the invisible stands as a reminder of the ways that representations of "normalcy" and "Americanness" are often racially coded as White. As American Jews navigate hostility and/or invitation by non-Jews into dominance, I will examine what racial signifiers are attached to Jewish bodies and why.

The theoretical nuances of film analysis, representation and psychoanalysis of humor enhance and complicate my understandings of these comedic texts beyond historical and critical race analysis. The study of cultural representation and signifying practices incorporates historical and critical race methods to wrestle with questions of the object, the spectator and the gaze, coded signifiers, and the power of humor and its relation to the unconscious and conscious desires and anxieties.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly outlined the main theories and thoughts that buttress my argument and that fill many conversations in American Studies. The lenses of racial formation and Whiteness theory help me to interpret American Jews' relationship to dominant (White) culture through both internal senses of identity and external projections of Jewishness, Whiteness, Americanness, as well as gender and sexuality. Theories that centralize social structures, identity formation, and visual culture central substantiate the importance of comedy and comedic films in particular as a crucial site for the enactment

of and struggle with these larger anxieties and pressures. These theoretical frameworks

support and inform my analysis of Jewish American humor in the mid-1960s to the late-

1970s as a location cultural production and identity formation. The next chapter will

provide a review of the scholarly conversations that apply and argue with these theories.

To support my overarching thesis that humor is a site for Jewish Americans to wrestle with internal and external tensions as they navigate their relationship to dominant culture, I have referred to many monographs and articles that deploy many of the theoretical proposals outlined in the previous chapter. The study of Jewish humor and identity lies at the intersection of multiple fields of study. Thus, I enter an existing dialogue, emphasizing the collective character of scholarship. American Studies is interdisciplinary in nature, and I have found that the distinct lenses of Jewish cultural history, performance studies, and intersecting identities can inform my research of Jewish humor. These fields of study interact both within and outside of American Studies. This chapter will provide a review of the relatively robust body of research on Jewish American experiences with descriptions of the methodologies and arguments of relevant texts.

Jewish Cultural History

Historical events and trends inform the philosophies and cultures of future generations. Jewish American cultural history has a broad scope that includes immigration history, labor and leisure history, transnational Jewish relations, and the historical importance of place. Most of the texts I examined are monographs that wrestle with a particular topic or time period in American Jewish history, while some locate Jews within a larger, cross-ethnic analysis of a specific historical or spatial moment. Many of these texts address similar themes of assimilation in dominant American culture and maintaining Jewish tradition, identity, and voice. The existing dialogue about the

experiences of American Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provides a foundation for my research and a context and climate for my study of Jewish American comedy in the 1960s and 70s.

Gerald Sorin's *Tradition Transformed* chronicles the Jewish experience in the United States, focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sorin traces and questions the ways in which Jews attained freedom in the U.S., and argues that American Jews have found the States to be fairly hospitable to them, particularly in the twentieth century. He deploys the term "acculturation," rather than "assimilation," when referring to the Jewish Americanizing experience to acknowledge the ways that Jews also maintained and incorporated their traditions as they became American (15). Not only does Sorin discuss the American experience, but he addresses the histories of the home countries of many Jewish immigrants and the climates that motivated their migration. He also addresses Israel and Zionism, and the Holocaust and Europe's climate in WWII, a reminder of the effect of both domestic and international matters on the American Jewish experience. This book's scope encompasses interactions amongst Jews, between Jews, as well as with other religious and ethnic groups, analyzing American Jews' cultural, religious, labor, ethnic and political history.

Scholarship in Jewish cultural history addresses the intersections of labor and leisure. Using the timeframe of 1880-1920, Sabine Haenni's *The Immigrant Scene* outlines leisure entertainment of immigrants in New York and links it to the creation of a mass, Americanizing film culture in Hollywood. This piece places Jewish melodrama in conversation with Italian and German theater cultures and the performative Chinatown rubbernecking tours, using specific case studies and close readings. Haenni emphasizes

the importance of leisure in urban life among immigrants, and intentionally labels this as a "scene," reflecting the performative, dramatic and ephemeral nature of this culture (10-15). *The Immigrant Scene* analyzes theater, vaudeville, the nascent film culture and how they intertwined and influenced one another. In her specific analysis of Yiddish melodrama, Haenni traces the convivial audiences, the ways in which the Yiddish theater was simultaneously modern and an escape from urban modernity, and the way that the theater became a site for the enactment of anxieties and issues within the community. Although *The Immigrant Scene* does not focus entirely on Yiddish theater, it provides a framework for looking at leisure culture of Jewish immigrants and their descendants and seeing how it fits into mass culture in the United States. This text is an integral part of the historiography of Jewish comedy, emphasizing Yiddish theater's significance and Jewish comedy's interplay with popular culture.

Yiddish Proletarian Theatre: The Art and Politics of the Artef, 1925-1940 is a one-volume historical study of the Artef (Arbeter Teater Farband), a Yiddish communist theatre that resided in many spaces in New York. Using an in-depth historical lens to analyze the political context of the theatre's productions and performance analysis and critic's reviews to describe the Artef's repertoire, Nachshon frames the Artef theatre as a hub of theatre of social consciousness. The reviews come from both the Yiddish and mainstream American press, demonstrating the broad impact of the Artef on theatre across class, political, religious and language lines and a historical methodology that values multiple narratives. This book uses scholarship to legitimize the work of the Artef as a professional theatre and wrestles with the connections between labor and leisure.

Nachshon describes the direct relationship between performance and politics, a theme that resonates with many Jewish comics.

Jewish cultural history also takes a transnational approach: In *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick meticulously charts the history of the U.S. postwar response to the Holocaust and questions how the Holocaust has become centered in the American Jewish psyche. This piece moves chronologically, discussing the many different countries involved in World War II and the Holocaust, and places the formation and support of the state of Israel as inextricably linked to the experiences and collective imaginations of the Holocaust. Novick seamlessly bridges a historical approach with moral concerns. Most useful to my project is Novick's analysis and destabilization of language like Holocaust, memory, victim, complicity, survivor, and trauma. Part Three of Novick's book, "Years of Transition," is particularly relevant, as it discusses changes in public discourse about the Holocaust in the years after the immediate postwar period. The context of the Cold War and the Israeli Six Day (1967) and Yom Kippur Wars (1973) contribute to the change in the way the Holocaust is discussed in the U.S. and how American Jews see themselves in the world. The rejection and appropriation of the language of victimhood particularly frames the outsider to insider experience of American Jews in the 1960s and 1970s. *The Holocaust in American Life* provides an in-depth analysis of the transformation of the role of the Holocaust in America alongside, and correlated with, the changing social role of Jews in America. The urgency of Novick's writing emphasizes the centrality of the mid-1960s to late-1970s as a crucial time in American Jewish identity, as Americans wrestled with their recent past of discrimination and their newly found belonging to the American majority.

Lastly, Judaic studies professor Hasia Diner emphasizes the power of place in her text *Lower East Side Memories*. The Lower East Side, both a real and imagined space that served as a home to many Jewish immigrants, has come to represent Jewish cultural authenticity in America. In a historical narrative that critically analyzes history and memory, Hasia Diner outlines the events and experiences that made the Lower East Side so central to American Jewish identity, as well as the cultural contexts that elevated the neighborhood to its mythic status. To examine its place in memory, Diner looks towards pop culture, texts, photographs and even museum representations of the neighborhood. *Lower East Side Memories* explains why and how the Lower East Side has come to signify American Jewry in the twentieth century. It is an analysis of a people and, most importantly, a place. It explains why iconic photographs of tenements or crowded streets provide visceral reactions and serve as images of a homeland memorialized. Diner's monograph illuminates the simultaneous external or dominant association of Jews with New York and the Jewish connection to New York as a homeland and common community. Echoing Diner's argument, it is no surprise New York is the setting and/or the punch line for each of the films I analyze.

As a field of study, Jewish cultural history provides a historical context through which to understand the comedic texts. The study of these secondary sources reveals the theme that across time Jewish American identity and sense of belonging in the United States has been defined by tensions between internal divisions and external expectations. While much of the scholarship I focused on is dedicated to the nineteenth century, histories of immigration, assimilation, discrimination, labor, leisure and performance

inform the anxieties and identities of Jewish comics of the next generations and reveal the

manifestation of this internal/external tension in more contemporary contexts.

Jewish Performance

Scholarship on Jewish identity through the discipline of performance studies

narrows my research and asks similar questions to mine. These texts reflect

internal/external tensions, as performance can serve as a tool for both dominant and

subordinate social groups. The body of knowledge of Jewish performance acknowledges

the deep historical linking of Jews and mass entertainment, and of comedic performance

in particular. Additionally, these pieces describe the ways all Jews, not just comedians,

use and sometimes manipulate comedy and comedic tropes to tell their stories.

Lawrence Epstein presents a very complete history of American Jewish comedy

from 1890 to present in *The Haunted Smile*. While it provides more straightforward

information rather than analysis, Epstein frames Jewish comedians in their historical

moments and thematic contexts. The second and third chapters, on "The Years of Fear:

1930-1950" and "The Years of Acceptance: 1950-1965," are the most applicable to my

thesis. These chapter titles allude to the rapid transitions for Jews in the post-WWII

period.

Harley Erdman's *Staging the Jew* utilizes many case studies and examples in a

study of how Jews were performed on the stage from 1860, ending in the 1910s, with

what he views as the decline of Jewish stage visibility. The text argues that in both

comedy and drama, the stage and the stage Jew were sites for the enactment of

(dominant) American anxieties about Jews, race, class, gender and sexuality. Erdman

carefully outlines the ways the Jew was imagined on stage by gentiles for a gentile

audience with gentile actors, as well as the complications of representation and embodiment with Jewish actors, playwrights and/or managers. Erdman notes the major stage types as the *sheeny* and the Shylock, male characters who were sometimes villains, sometimes comical, and often effeminized (38). While Erdman presents a comprehensive gendered analysis, he discusses race and the Whitening of Jews without a discussion of the complicated nature of race and Whiteness in the nineteenth century and today. His text would have benefited from a more careful reading of race with attention to intersections of power.

In the discipline of performance studies, José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications* specifically informs my analysis of pathologized Jewish masculinity with its intersectional framework. Muñoz's theory of disidentification describes the processes of queers of color in navigating majoritarian culture, particularly through performance. In this process, queer people of color neither align themselves with or against hegemonic tropes, but transfigure and (re)embody these tropes to transform meaning for their own cultural purposes. Although most Jews do not share the political identity of a (queer) person of color, the effects of being multiply marginalized are evident in Jewish performance, particularly in the performance of gender. Unlike Erdman's treatment of performance, Muñoz's lens assumes the agency of the performer and of the joke-teller and the ways oppressed peoples have found a voice through performance. All of these performance histories and theories wrestle with questions of power and performance, ruminating on the power of the performer and the spectator. Through performance, Jews have been silenced and stereotyped by dominant narratives, but have also found a space to give voice to their histories and struggles.

Intersecting Identities

Scholars in the discipline of American Studies in particular emphasize the connected nature of social identities and structures of oppression, the way different identities cannot be separated, but rather inform one another as they are simultaneously at play. The work in intersecting identities, particularly pertaining to gender and race, enhances the discourse on American Jews. These texts raise questions about Jewish masculinity and femininity, Whiteness and Jewishness, among other intersections of power, identity, and lived experience.

Riv-Ellen Prell's *Fighting to Become Americans* deploys gendered stereotypes from throughout the twentieth century to examine anxieties of Jews in the United States and of non-Jews towards Jews. She draws linkages between the Ghetto Girl, the Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage, the Jewish Mother and the Jewish American Princess, all of which are linked by desire, consumption and the distorted body. Prell emphasizes that these stereotypes are the intersection of both internal and external constructions of ethnicity, that Jews actively shaped these stereotypes through Jewish press, literature and performances. These stereotypes were also mediated by the dominant (White, non-Jewish) culture. Jewish males, by other Jewish women and by non-Jews, projected anxieties about the family, class and economy onto Jewish female bodies. While Prell does also look at stereotypes about Jewish men, they are often in relation to or in conflict with these female stereotypes. This strategy illuminates the ways external hostilities dictated internal divisions between men and women, as they struggled for Americanness through the villanizing of and at the expense of one another.

Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks* actively engages with a dynamic Jewish American racial identity through the weaving of personal narrative, the first person plural ("we"), and academic research. She asks: How do Jews present themselves to each other as Jews as how do Jews present themselves to a nation that sees Jews as White? Like Prell, Brodkin addresses the intersection and discrepancies between internal and external constructions of identity, and discusses Jewish womanhood. Brodkin's text discusses the intersections, confusions, and conflations of Jewish religious, ethnic, and racial identities. The writings of Prell and Brodkin, among others in the academy, acknowledge the ways oppression based on race, gender, religion and citizenship inform one another and inform identity formation. These texts bridge the historical with the theoretical.

Conclusion: Entering the Conversation

Given the Jewish history of disagreement and discussion, my research borrows from the collective thoughts generated by scholars across disciplines and themes, particularly in Jewish cultural history, performance studies, and interdisciplinary studies. These texts have influenced my argument about the importance of Jewish humor as a site for grappling with notions of self and of the simultaneous impacts of internal division and external hostility on American Jewish life. This conversation simultaneously informs and is informed by Jewish cultural history in the U.S., the subject of my next chapter.

Jewish American cultural history lies at the intersection of critical race theory, Whiteness studies, immigration and labor history, Jewish studies and gender studies. This thesis is deeply rooted in historical analysis and American cultural studies. In order to contextualize the historical moment and meaning of the comedic texts under review, this chapter examines the history of what and who has defined Jewishness. I will provide a description of Jewish migration from Europe to the United States in the nineteenth century and of the tensions between division and unity, especially in the face of external pressures.

As American Jews negotiated their relationship to dominant culture amidst internal division and external ambivalence, humor became a crucial site for them to wrestle with these pressures. This chapter will offer a historical foundation of these pressures, with analysis that includes an outline of distinctions between Jews through Orthodox and Reform Judaism, and the both imaginary and lived division constructed between Jews from Germany and Jews of Eastern European descent. I will also describe and locate the Lower East Side as a site of Jewish history and memory. Lastly, this analysis will trace historical legacies of Jewish performance through leisure history, Yiddish theater, and Jewish humor. In the generations since initial Jewish immigration, American Jewish identity has grown and been shaped by many internal and external factors, many of which originated in the nineteenth century. The last section of this chapter will jump beyond turn-of-the-century Jewish history and look to the specific climate of post-World War II, the era in which my case studies take place. This historical

chapter serves to establish a context for the comedic texts that will be later examined in this thesis, important locations of exploration of Jews' status within dominant culture amidst internal and external tensions.

What is a Jew? Who Defines A Jew?

The important yet problematic questions posed in the heading above are central to Jewish American history. Jewishness is understood through and defined by religion, culture, nation, place of origin and place of destination. Many of the key themes in Jewish American history are yoked by both internal and external constructions of Jewishness and Americanness, a tension explored by theater and gender historians.

The internal/external dynamic of Jewishness and Jewish definition applies to both the in- and out-group dynamics of Jews and non-Jews, and deeply internally, from within and from outside of the body. This internal/external relationship can be articulated as "the fluctuating expectations gentiles have had of Jews and Jews have had of themselves" (Erdman 4). These expectations range from gender stereotypes to class perceptions of Jews, having a mixed effect on Jewish acceptance in dominant society. Prell's *Fighting to Become Americans* addresses both the ways in which the dominant society projected its anxiety about Jews onto Jewish bodies and the externalization of those anxieties by Jews themselves (1). Prell uses the particular lens of gender roles and the enactment of stereotypes in her analysis as a site of internal and external construction of Jewish identity.   This work destablizes gendered stereotypes from throughout the twentieth century to examine anxieties of Jews in the United States and of gentiles towards Jews. Prell draws linkages between the 1920s garish Ghetto Girl, a "nightmare of excessive

Americanization and desire projected by professionals and middle-class Jews onto young working-class Jewish women" (24); the twentieth century Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage; the post-war pushy Jewish Mother (present in the films I interrogate); and the contemporary materialistic Jewish American Princess. All of these types are connected by anxieties about desire, consumption and the distorted body. Prell emphasizes that these stereotypes are the intersection of both internal and external constructions of ethnicity, that Jews actively shaped these stereotypes through Jewish press, literature and performances. These stereotypes were also mediated by the dominant (White, non-Jewish) culture. Anxieties about the family, class and economy were projected onto Jewish female bodies by Jewish males and by non-Jews, but also were internalized by Jewish women. These stereotypes often place men and women in conflict with one another, an anxiety articulated in romantic situations and media representations.

The intersection of external and internal constructions of ethnicity has been at the core of Jewish American identity and culture, as Jews have looked towards cultural representations and histories to figure out who they are in American society. Memory, personally lived, and more importantly, collectively experienced, have strongly influenced American Jewish identity. Collectively held roles and expectations of men and women and collectively held memories greatly influence American Jewish culture. Lines of difference among Jews were also drawn along the divide between German and Russian Jews, an internal division that informed the ways Jews understood their relationship to dominant society.

Western and Eastern European Jews

The line drawn between Western and Eastern European Jews is historically one of the strongest lines dividing Jewish people from other Jewish people. Historically, a substantial Jewish presence in the United States can be attributed to mass migration patterns beginning in the mid-late 1800s, consisting of Jews from Western and Eastern Europe. Arriving at staggered times, these two groups of people are referred to more generally as German and Russian Jews, respectively. While the identity "Jew" might seem to be all-encompassing, real and imagined differences between western and eastern European Jews created intra-ethnic frictions, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although some historians argue that the distinction of German Jews and Russian Jews is not useful at best and problematic at worst due to its erasure of other key markers of Jewish heterogeneity (Diner 21), ethnicity still serves as an important structure of identity for Jews because of its real consequences on American Jewish identity formation. This section acknowledges the tensions in establishing a dichotomy between German and Russian Jews and seeks to interrogate the ways this dichotomy was also affected by class, geographical location, and historical moment. Furthermore, this section examines the ways one facet of Jewish ethnicity, eastern European, eclipsed German Jews as the popular "face" of all American Jews. This larger project does not address the differences between *Ashkenazi* (Central and Eastern European Jews) and *Sephardic* (from the Iberian Peninsula) Jews, as the prevailing image and largest populations of Jews in the United States come from Ashkenazi backgrounds.

German Jews were the first large population of Jews in the United States. Part of a larger wave of immigration from Western Europe, German Jewish populations migrated

and grew in the United States from 1820-1880, moving to rural and urban communities across the United States. While New York is often framed as the hub of Jewishness (to be deconstructed in a forthcoming section), German Jews also created vibrant communities in the American South and Midwest. German Jews were of a Reform religious tradition that subscribed to a more lax philosophy towards dietary and Sabbath[1] laws. However, they often came to the United States with already established Reform values, rather than becoming Reform upon migration. Unlike Russian Jews, "Jewish immigration from Germany was partly connected to the general German immigration of the period" (Sorin 26). Thus, German Jews were already integrated into German urban communities, immigrating together with non-Jewish Germans. Also unlike the Eastern European Jews who arrived to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, German Jews generally encountered a more rapid and accessible social mobility through acculturation. These Jews arrived as merchants and artisans, and many German Jews who initially found work as peddlers later found success as businessmen (Sorin 23).

With time, German Jews were able to rise into the White (non-ethnic) elite in many instances, joining elite spaces like country clubs. The significant influx of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the late 1800s, along with other ethnic immigrants, led to German Jewish anxiety about the possible effects of being linked to Eastern European Jews and their supposed less genteel nature. According to Sorin, "the opposition by German Jews to the unrestricted immigration of East European Jews was more directly tied to class and cultural differences and to social insecurity than to the economic burden they might become" (51). However, many German Jews simultaneously carried a sense

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[1] The nexus of laws that forbids work from sunset on Friday night to Saturday night at sunset (Polland 36).

of duty to be agents of assimilation through charitable organizations. When Russian Jews arrived to the United States, German Jews thus confronted the non-Jewish linking of all Jews as one community through pan-Jewish solidarity and through the establishment of ethnic divisions.

Russian Jews arrived to the United States at a much different cultural moment than German Jews. The end of the nineteenth century up until World War I marked a period in mass migration to the U.S. by people from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe.   These immigrants were Italians and Jews from the Russian Empire. The "cultural baggage" that these Jewish immigrants carried differed greatly from the contexts of German Jewish migration. Eastern European Jews came to the United States in to escape from Czarist Russian anti-Semitism that promoted conversion and assimilation and positioned Jews as the scapegoats for Russia's economic problems (Sorin 38-39). In addition to governmental propaganda campaigns, Jews were attacked through violent pogroms, prompting an exodus from their homes. Many of the Eastern European Jews that eventually migrated to the United States initially moved internally through other European cities.

Before facing prejudice in the United States, Russian Jews met discrimination in their countries of origin. Unlike their German predecessors, Russian Jews were not urban and also not integrated into the dominant society due to their religious and linguistical differences. Originally from *shtetls* or small towns, many Jews of Eastern European descent came from more observant religious traditions, carrying the cultural baggage of Orthodox religious cosmology. Additionally, they spoke Yiddish, an "indigenous" (Jacobs 2) Ashkenazi linguistical blend of Hebrew and European languages that they

carried into their immigrant communities. Yiddish has continually been a language in

evolution, changing over time, across regions and a dialectical continuum. Currently

referred to as a "postvernacular" (Shandler 4) language, Yiddish blended a sacred tongue

with location-specific vernacular. While German and Russian Jews alike spoke their own

variations of Yiddish, Yiddish came to define the immigrant culture of the second wave

of Jewish immigration because of its prevalence in Jewish ethnic enclaves. Yiddish

language became an important feature of Jewish humor, particularly through word play.

This language affirmed European Jews' subjectivities and helped to sustain Jewish

immigrant communities in the United States, a theme to be elaborated upon in a later

section of this chapter.

Upon arrival in the United States, Russian Jews encountered more difficulty

negotiating Jewishness and Americaness than had their German counterparts, with issues

arising regarding working on the Sabbath or eating kosher foods, articulating boundaries

of Jewish difference. Oftentimes, the more assimilated German Jews employed Russian

Jews and required them to break religious tradition to work an Americanized,

Christianized work schedule (Polland 36). However, Jews often had to adopt a more fluid

observance to maintain a stable family religious economy structure. Russian and German

Jews experienced America differently through the intersections of their respective

religious cosmologies with the American labor system.

In *Tradition Transformed,* Sorin reflects upon the dynamic between German and

Russian Jews:

> Like the German Jews before them, the East European immigrants and their children became
> Americanized, even if not with the same remarkable rapidity. Many also achieved relatively rapid
> economic and occupational mobility, sometimes, as in the garment business, by displacing the
> Germans. And like their German predecessors, the East Europeans retained and reshaped a

distinctive, if somewhat transformed, ethnoreligious Jewish culture. Indeed, if the Germans set the stage for the new immigrants, the East Europeans supplied the biological and cultural reinforcements needed to save American Jewry from assimilation or at least from becoming a virtually invisible remnant. German Jewish population increases in the nineteenth century were notable, but they did not keep pace with even greater increases in the general American population. It is at least arguable that without the East Europeans a viable, visible, distinctively Jewish culture would have become increasingly unlikely in American and might have disappeared (33).

Although the divide between German and Russian Jews reveals complications, the measurable separation between Jews from central and eastern European upon Russian Jewish arrival remains a historical fact that influenced Jewish labor, leisure, religious, and geographical histories. This divide is part of the internal division that informed Jews as they contended with external prejudice and deduced their role in a larger America.

The Lower East Side: A Jewish Stage?

Internal and external constructions of identity have intersected through geography: ethnic enclaves that reflect both Jewish community building and American ghettoization. This section describes the Lower East Side as a real and imagined site of American Jewry, with Yiddish theater as a cultural site for American Jewish people. Ellis Island was the official immigration center of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and because of this, all transatlantic immigrants passed through New York City, a place where many Jews remain to this day. The real and imagined site of American Jewry in the nineteenth century was (and arguably still is) the Lower East Side in New York, a place of memories and myth. While American Jews lived and continue to live throughout the country in urban and small town settings, it seems as though almost all Jews have physically encountered the Lower East Side or have engaged with its mythology. The Lower East Side serves as a Jewish homeland within the United

States, a constructed site of Jewish cultural authenticity. It is important to note, however, that while Jews have claimed the Lower East Side as home, Italian, Polish, and Irish immigrants also occupied spaces on the Lower East Side. Many Jews lived in tenements in the heterogeneous area, and many worked in the garment industry, often in sweatshops. It is in the Lower East Side that eastern European Jews developed a new class identity from artisan/craftsman/merchant in Russia to American proletarian (Sorin 61, Nachshon 2). Additionally, Russian Jews forged a "transitional culture" (Sorin 61) in the cities, creating new urban communities that differed from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, but that also provided for cultural needs of immigrants, like food markets, religious shops, and leisure venues.

On the Lower East Side, American Jews lived, worked, and spent their leisure time and religious commitments, building communities, reframing Jewishness and defining a mass culture. Yiddish publications and performances created a culture that sustained the language of Eastern European Jewish immigrant communities. Using the timeframe of 1880-1920, Sabine Haenni's *The Immigrant Scene* outlines leisure entertainment of immigrants in New York and links it to the subsequent creation of a mass, Americanizing film culture in Hollywood. She researches and analyzes the theater cultures of Italian, German and Eastern European Immigrants and the performative rubbernecking tours of Chinatown. Haenni emphasizes the importance of leisure in urban life among immigrants, and intentionally labels this as a "scene," reflecting the performative, dramatic and ephemeral nature of this culture.

Place informed identity and culture performance on the Lower East Side. *The Immigrant Scene* emphasizes the centrality of place the ways place informs identity

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performance, a theme that resonates contemporarily with post-World War II comedians like Woody Allen, a subject in my primary source analysis. Haenni provides a theoretical framework for looking at leisure culture of Jewish immigrants and their descendants and seeing how it fits into mass culture in the United States. It is with the mass culture of the 1960s and 1970s that my thesis continues analysis. In her specific analysis of Yiddish melodrama, Haenni traces the convivial audiences, the ways in which the Yiddish theater was simultaneously modern and an escape from urban modernity, and the way that the theater became a site for the enactment of anxieties and issues within the community. Many times, the Yiddish stage presented a theatricalized agency, a virtual mobility for its immigrant audiences and performers. Hainni writes: "Yiddish melodrama and Italian vaudeville provided an aesthetic form that allowed conflicts within the communities to be staged" (98). Through the melodrama of performance, actors could experience (dis)empowerment. *The Immigrant Scene* also examines the space of the Yiddish theaters and their location within the city. There were many competing Yiddish theaters, existing for the most part in the Bowery, right next to the Lower East Side, and they were able to cater to different audiences. The audiences found connections with not only the characters on stage, but the stars who played them. Thus, Yiddish theater was an essential part of the lives Jewish immigrants created for themselves, lives that allowed leisure spaces to work out issues of family, labor, assimilation, and identity

The performance of an identity informed by place can also be affected by political and class-based identities. Edna Nachshon also writes about a performance culture informed by place in the Artef, a Yiddish communist theatre that resided in many spaces in New York, whose strength grew from 1925-1940.   Nachshon reflects: "Life had

become increasingly politicized, and the relationship between art and life began to be examined in greater depth" (21-22). During the early twentieth century, politics and identity became the explicit focus of a theater whose strength and self-awareness was strongly shaped by its location. Thus, identity and performance intertwined for Jews in the twentieth century and has long-lasting impacts on communities and theaters.

Beyond the connections of place to performance and identity, place also impacts and is simultaneously impacted by memory. The resurrection of a Jewish historical memory of the Lower East Side gained momentum in the mid-1960s to late-1970s, the historical climate of *The Graduate, Goodbye, Columbus,* and *Annie Hall,* in response to the attainment of the American Dream and the perceived loss of a distinctive Jewish culture (Diner 177). Internal constructions of Jewishness deepen with the level of collective and historic memory. American Jewish collective memory projects a monolithic teleology that particularly memorializes the home country ("Russia"), the immigration experience from the home country to the U.S., and the Lower East Side as the culminating site of Jewish cultural authenticity. Hasia Diner's *Lower East Side Memories* is a text of sensory memory, of examining "how American Jews [of the mid-twentieth century] made sense of their past as they contended with a particular kind of present" (14). Diner analyzes the mythic narratives that frame Russia as anywhere in Eastern Europe, a site of dire oppression and persecution, placing the United States as the alternative promised land (21). Most interesting is Diner's interpretation of the way in which the Lower East Side of Manhattan serves as a cultural homeland for *all* American Jews, regardless of whether people share specific ancestral connections to the site. This memory glorifies parts of the past, erasing other parts; for example, there is an emphasis

on Eastern European culture and cuisine in the performance of a Lower East Side history, and this memory does not feature German Jews (Diner 50).

The Lower East Side is a liminal space without fixed borders where boundaries of public and private life were blurred, dictated by memories and nostalgia. The Lower East Side demonstrates the way place shapes identity, performance, and memory and the ways place is shaped by these same factors.

Assimilation and Tradition

Jewish negotiation of their place in and relationship to dominant society lies in the conflict between assimilation and tradition. The effort towards acceptance in American society mixed with the desire to maintain religious and ethnic tradition led to conflicts and re-negotiations of identity beginning the moment Jews arrived to the United States. While tensions of assimilation are not exclusive to Jewish immigrants, the process manifested itself uniquely amongst Jews. Sorin addresses "questions about the costs of freedom and mobility, especially in regard to the erosion of Jewish tradition and distinctiveness" (1). Sorin's text, *Tradition Transformed*, outlines the difficult struggle that remains at the core of American Jewish identity: the desire to become American while still remaining Jewish. In the nineteenth century, the family and its economic stability were often in conflict with tradition, as many families needed to break the Sabbath to provide for their families, and families had to forgo Jewish dietary laws when kosher foods or meals from their home countries were unavailable or too expensive. Out of these struggles, the modern Reform religious movement was born in the United States

in 1885 as a way of incorporating aspects of Jewish culture and religion into American and Americanized life.

While many German Jewish immigrants already arrived to the U.S. in the 1840s-1850s carrying a Reform religious identity, the Reform movement became part of an assimilation project for Eastern European Jews towards the end of the nineteenth century In an attempt to illustrate the complexities of this balance, Sorin deploys the term "acculturation," rather than "assimilation" when referring to the Jewish Americanizing experience. This Americanizing experience is both about class, in terms of economic mobility, as well as about racial assimilation, as ethnic immigrants who were initially viewed as alien to the dominant, White, Christian, Central European class began to "*appear* like the majority" (Prell 5). Eric Goldstein's *The Price of Whiteness* further examines how Jews are raced as White and addresses the "costs" to which Sorin alludes. Historian Hasia Diner also talks about the "price" of Jewish success.

The use of the terms "cost" and "price" are strategic, as Americanization and the "Whitening" of Jews are explicitly linked to their entrance into the middle class by the 1930s and 1940s. The economically-based rhetoric links to the ways that Jews often assimilated through consumption (Sorin 206). This trend of Jews assimilating via consumption, however, became dangerous as negative stereotypes of the Jew and money, like the Shylock or the "stingy" Jew, (Prell 117-118 and Erdman 32-33) and later the materialistic Jewish American Princess (Prell 178) intensified.

Internal and external constructions of identity and culture are crucial in the ways Jewish immigration, labor, class, place, leisure, gender and performance history are enacted and embodied. The struggle to maintain tradition and obtain Americanness is a

substantial theme in the study of this history. Tensions of acculturation were often enacted and worked out in comedic spaces.

A History of Jewish Humor

Throughout Jewish American history, humor has served as a site to wrestle with tensions of assimilation and tradition and internal and external constructions of self. Comedy is a site where Jewish relationships to American culture are worked out by Jews in response to pressures and opportunities from dominant culture, and choices, resources, power of other Jews. Like many dynamics of American Jewish life, comedy works internally and externally. Thus, humor for Jews has been a means of maintaining Jewish culture while asking questions about what Jewish culture is and where it is going, often times through dark or tragic means to laughter. From Jewish immigrant performance and vaudeville to the prevalence of Jewish stand-up comedians and writers and characters on television, joke-telling has been a space for cultural critique and agentic creativity. It is important to reflect upon the complicated nature of telling jokes, particularly those of self-deprecation, critical to many Jewish humorists' routines, as the power of the last laugh is not always clear. Another important characteristic of Jewish American humor is the dark or tragic quality of much of Jewish comics' material, a departure from the conventional, light-hearted forms of laughter to the expression of deep pain through humor. As in many oppressed communities, humor is a means deployed to compensate for emotional hardship (Levine 299). With these strains in mind, this section will briefly address Jewish cultural history through the specific lens of Jewish humor.

The internal and external pressures on Jews caused pain. In an attempt to gain control over forces of anti-Semitism and White hegemony, humor became a powerful tool for Jews. Although the experiences of African Americans and Jews in the United States have very different histories, Lawrence Levine's writing on humor in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* provides insight into the ways that Black people used laughter to combat feelings of oppression and powerlessness. Levine himself draws connections between Jewish and Black perspectives on the links between tragedy and comedy. He writes: "It is this that gives meaning to the proverb of East European Jews who lived on such intimate terms with poverty, prejudice, and pogroms: 'Suffering makes you laugh too'" (300). Humor allowed for an articulation of criticism of systems of power and an expression of the deep pain inflicted by these systems, while still maintaining a sense of agency through the ability to make people laugh and experience a release.

This project treats humor as a dynamic and contested site of Jewish identity formation. Lawrence Epstein writes: "[The story of Jewish comedians] is haunted by the Jewish past, by the deep strains in American Jewish life- the desire to be accepted and the concern for a culture disappearing" (x). Harley Erdman's *Staging the Jew* looks at Jewish performers as well as Jews were performed on the stage from 1860, ending in the 1910s, with what he views as the decline of Jewish stage visibility. Erdman's text argues that in both comedy and drama, the stage and the stage Jew were sites for the enactment of American anxieties about Jews, race, class, gender and sexuality. Erdman carefully outlines the ways the Jew was imagined on stage by gentiles for a gentile audience with gentile actors, as well as the complications of representation and embodiment with

Jewish actors, playwrights and/or managers. Erdman notes the major stage types as the *sheeny* and the Shylock, characters who were sometimes villains, sometimes comical, and often effeminized. On stage and screen, Jewish comedic actors struggled with the power of agency, representation and self-definition.

The emergence of American Jewish humor was initially defined through the maintenance of ethnically-specific comedy, but it gained popularity through the use of gendered ethnic stereotypes. Evolving alongside and sometimes within Yiddish melodrama described by Haenni, Jewish comedy in immigrant America (approximately 1890-1930) initially developed as a counterpoint to the more American vaudeville, with (male) Yiddish stars rarely gaining popularity outside of Jewish communities (Epstein 14). While Jews have always lived across the United States, location did play a factor in cultures of comedy, making New York City central to American Jewish humor history. Epstein reflects that many early Jewish American comedians grew up in communities that condoned or even allowed childhood mischief, and that "it was a sort of assertion and transgression that would in subtle ways influence the Jewish comic voice" (16). Jewish humor of this time period wrestled with the realities of poverty, non-traditional family situations, and a struggle with being a social outsider. These tensions often manifested themselves in a dark humor, the tragicomedy that has come to define much of Jewish American humor across time. While it was and largely is the outsider experience that informs Jewish comedy, the adoption of insider or dominant stereotypes of Jews propelled Jewish comics' success.

As Jewish humor gained popularity in vaudeville scenes, Jewish comics adopted more and more of a generally popular *schtick* that often degraded (Jewish) women. Riv-

Ellen Prell writes about the ways Jews wrestled with Americanness through the lens of gender; Jews felt a divide from dominant American culture and replicated that divide between Jewish men and women (12). Therefore, the comic use of gendered stereotypes often became a strategy for Jewish acceptance into broader circuits at the expense of other Jews, a downplay of ethnic critique and a surge of ethnic stereotypes. Overt racism and misogyny became a price of Whiteness. The nebbish character, an impotent, neurotic male to be described in detail in the upcoming chapter, emerged out of Jewish insecurities and a warped performance of patriarchy. Jewish humor gave Jews a voice as they struggled for acceptance into dominant culture, but it silenced the voices and nuances of other Jews.

From 1930 to 1950 Jewish humor struggled for popular recognition, as American Jewish comics found their place in the mainstream through the performance of ethnic stereotypes, and then lost their place to the silencing of non-normative identities. The years after the height of Jewish vaudeville were marked by the advent of radio, films, and the Jewish Borscht Belt, a time Epstein refers to as "The Years of Fear." During the years of the World Wars, as Jews struggled with global realities of anti-Semitism, many realized that "humor was their most potent weapon" (Epstein 77). The arrival of film initially only featured Jewish voices through physical and cultural stereotypes. But, in agreement with Erdman, Epstein cites film historian Patria Brett Erens: "Beginning in the thirties, Jews were pushed off center" (Epstein 98). The Holocaust no doubt influenced this silence of Jewish subjectivities on film. However, as mainstream comedy media pushed Jews away, Jews created their own spaces for humor in the safe leisure spaces of the Borscht Belt, Jewish-operated resorts in the Catskill Mountains in New York. The

humorists of the era were "caught in a crucial struggle for self-definition" (Epstein 105).

As the Catskills declined in popularity after World War II, "the Jewish comedians' efforts

to enter American culture were about to meet with unparalleled success" (Epstein 125).

After a twenty-year period of finding and losing success in mainstream comedy venues,

American Jews gained momentum in Jewish spaces that propelled them once again into

the mainstream.

I have provided a succinct overview of American Jewish humor as it evolved as a

crucial site for working out questions of Jewishness and Americanness. The

entertainment histories of 1890 to the 1950s greatly inform the dynamics present in the

comedic films I analyze in a later chapter. Epstein writes about the post-war comedy

culture as years of acceptance and later, triumph, for American Jews. But this triumph

through Jewish cultural presence on stage and (big and small) screens comes from a

history that struggled with what was funny, who made jokes, and who was listening.

The turbulence and ambivalence of the 1960s and 1970s facilitated a comedic

conversation about assimilation, tradition, and identity.

In the Midst of a Moment: The Post-World War II Historical Climate

This short section focuses specifically on what I see as the middle of a turning

point in American Jewish identity, the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. This turning point

in internal and external understandings of Jewishness is best described by Peter Novick:

> "Previously, Jews had seen American as different. They had emphasized the contrast between the
> precariousness of Jewish existence elsewhere with the security and acceptance they had achieved
> in the United States. Jews had viewed with satisfaction the rapid decline of anti-Semitism in
> American society- the fact that they were no longer outsiders looking in, but now were insiders to
> whom no doors to advancement were closed" (170).

During this historical moment, Jews wrestled with insider/outsider tensions of
Americanness. What did citizenship and being an American mean? Did legal citizenship
guarantee Americanness? It is during this transitional time that the plots of *The Graduate*
(1967), *Annie Hall* (1977), and *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969) unfold. The historical
legacies of the Holocaust, the U.S. civil rights movement on Jewish ethnicity and the
significance of the Israeli Wars and its impact on American Jews are central to this time
period.

The concerns and anxieties central to American Jewish identity from the mid-
1960s to the early 1970s focused on the simultaneous tensions of belonging to and
rejection from dominant culture. Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life*
meticulously charts the history of the U.S. postwar response to the Holocaust and
questions how the Holocaust has become centered in the American Jewish psyche.
Novick places the formation and support of Israel as inextricably linked to the
experiences and collective imaginations of the Holocaust, discussing changes in public
discourse about the Holocaust in the years after the immediate postwar period. The
context of the Cold War and the Israeli Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars contribute to the
change in the way the Holocaust is discussed in the U.S. and how American Jews see
themselves in the world. The rejection and appropriation of the language of victimhood
particularly frames the outsider to insider experience of American Jews in the 1960s and
1970s. *The Holocaust in American Life* provides an in-depth analysis of the
transformation of the role of the Holocaust in America alongside, and correlated with, the
changing role of Jews in America.

Although the civil rights movement primarily fought for political inclusion of marginalized African Americans, the movement presented liberatory possibilities for American Jews. In a White ethnic backlash to the inclusion of non-dominant histories and subjectivities, the late 1960s saw a revival of heritage for Jews, Italian-, Greek-, and Irish-Americans. Matthew Frye Jacobson writes about this *Roots Too* phenomenon, a moment that marked a shift from White ethnic assimilation into Whiteness to the voicing of a "usable past" (10) through mass media, including films. Thus, writers, directors, and comedians "reveal[ed] the ethnic impulses that had been repressed inside their closed, seemingly 'assimilated' mid-century homes" (Jacobson 151), publicly rendering the private. This ethnic revival assuaged White guilt of skin color privilege, illuminated during the civil rights movement (Jacobson 2). While the civil rights movement may not have provided legal changes for American Jews, it provided a climate that valued White ethnicity, making Jewishness an essential part of a nation of immigrants. This rewriting of America's cultural history placed the experiences of Jews and other immigrants as closer to the center, rather than marginal.

Transnational dynamics also deeply dictated the dynamics of American Jewish identity. The State of Israel operated and continues to operate as a central unifying symbol for Jews in the United States and across the Diaspora. Novick writes about the Spring of 1967 as a dramatic turning point for American Jews' relationship to Israel with the Six Day and later the Yom Kippur War of 1973. The fears of a renewed Holocaust so shortly after the initial event led to an "Israelization" (149) of American Jewish consciousness. The linking of the Holocaust to Israel's plight gave Israel strategic support: "In the years immediately following the Yom Kippur War, the sense of Israel's

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vulnerability, of its isolated and beleaguered situation, was nearly universal within American Jewry, which made the use of Holocaust imagery almost a reflex" (Novick 160). While through the "Roots Too" phenomenon American Jews gained power in American dominant culture to maintain their Jewishness, they did so through a capitalization of Jewish vulnerability in Israel.

I have described the mid-1960s to the early 1970s as the middle of a turning point because it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when Jews' feelings of inclusion in American Culture changed. The tensions of internal and external constructions of Jewishness and notions of self deeply inform this liminal period, when Jews ambivalently encountered White skin privilege while contending with real and raw histories of discrimination. Factors from within and outside of the United States influenced this change, from the civil rights movement in the U.S. to the Holocaust and Israel's early wars abroad. The ambivalence of outsider/fish out of water and dominant subjectivities is clear in the films analyzed in the forthcoming chapter.

Conclusion

Historical research provides a context for the comedic texts and bodies explored in later chapters. This section has briefly described and analyzed relevant historical information about Jewish immigration to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century and subsequent tensions of assimilation and maintaining tradition, the history and collective memory of Jewish placehood in the Lower East Side, and the differences between Jews of Eastern European and German origin. The writing on Jewish place and space through Jewish performance venues establishes the centrality of

performance of identity and later (intentionally) comedic performance to this thesis. While the primary sources engaged in my research operate two to three generations later than the initial surges of Jewish immigration, these historical legacies directly affect Jewish identity on stage/screen and off.

The last section of this chapter articulates the specific events and movements that impacted post-World War II American Jewish identity. The comedic texts of this time period make sense of their turn-of-the-century histories of assimilation while contending with a present that celebrates diversity, at least in theory. This entire chapter is framed by the notion that Jewish lived experience and identity is informed by historical events as well as constructions of Jewishness by Jews and non-Jews and has thus provided an outline of pertinent historical legacies that inform the post-War present of my comedic case studies. This chapter emphasizes the significance of internal and external tensions and the space provided for resistance to those tensions through tragicomedy.

Introduction

Tragicomedy is and has historically been a site for Jews to claim agency and

voice as they navigate internal division, external expectation, and articulate their place in

America. The post-WWII moment particularly encapsulates the anxieties of Jewish

American assimilation and identity formation and history. Tragicomedy expresses the

need to find humor within the deep pain affecting American Jews in the 1960s and 1970s.

While comedy has broad incarnations in stand-up comedy and stage plays, I have chosen

to focus on film as a medium because of its broad reach. Additionally, film's fixed

quality facilitates a unique unidirectional relationship between the film and the audience.

Tragicomic films reiterate the duality of American Jews' experiences and the

understanding that "I never saw anything funny that didn't cause pain" (*Funny Bones*).

In this section I examine three films: *The Graduate* (1967), *Goodbye, Columbus*

(1969), and *Annie Hall* (1977). I focus on their representations of anxieties about

masculinity, class, Whiteness, and citizenship for American Jews. Their plots revolve

around failed romances, and they can be read as tragicomedies in their dual portrayal of

romance's folly and loss, as well as in their enactment of American Jewish tensions of

(not) belonging, as articulated by *Heeb Magazine* as the "Jew Out of Water". In this

section I will provide close character analyses of all three films, and I will situate them in

conversation with the broader cultural discourse through discursive film analysis. The

films' representations of these aforementioned anxieties through the construction of the

male protagonists are particularly striking. In order to fully analyze the issues and anxieties presented by these three films, I will begin with a description of the context in American society that informs each film. I will follow with description of their respective plots and central characters.

Turbulence and Ambivalence

The historical moment of the mid-1960s to the early-1970s was a powerful time for Jewish and non-Jewish Americans, characterized by turbulence and ambivalence. Jews experienced a shift in insider/outside dynamics in the aftermath of the Holocaust and Israeli Wars. The civil rights movement not only impacted American Jews and other ethnic Whites via the "Roots Too" phenomenon (as described in the previous chapter), but it clearly impacted the lived experiences of all Americans, particularly people of color, who faced newfound inclusion into American society. The effects of Second Wave Feminism began to be felt in middle-class households, as women entered the workforce in larger numbers. Additionally, the tension of the Vietnam War permeated all American households through divisive dinner conversations and the impact of the draft on men. This was a time of rebellion, of a rejection of the norms of the previous generations. This turbulent moment led to a heightened sense of instability and confusion for many Americans, not just Jews.

The ambivalence expressed by each of the three films' protagonists reflects the concerns of Jewish Americans at this historical moment and reflects non-Jewish experiences as well. Consequently, these films are iconic not just for Jews, but also for that particular moment in American history and culture. While some of this ambivalence comes from the ambiguities displayed through the *nebbish*, to be described in a

forthcoming section, this ambivalence reflects the feelings of many Americans during the post-World War II moment. This ambivalence reflects the tensions of assimilation: when Americanness and all it comes with became attainable, feelings of doubt arose about the meaning of this new-found Americanness. When Jews and other second-generation Americans gained access to previously unattainable spaces like the country club, their children, the Benjamins, Neils, and Alvys, wondered why their parents even desired access to those spaces. When the doors finally opened for Jews, many looked inside and wondered if what was inside was what they wanted. The race and class wars within American society and the combat wars in Vietnam particularly impacted young Americans, leading to feelings of confusion and ambivalence.

The Graduate

Mike Nichols's classic film *The Graduate* introduces Benjamin Braddock, a college graduate nervous about his future and wrestling with feelings of powerlessness, with a soundtrack fueled by acoustic icons Simon & Garfunkel. Benjamin cannot articulate what he wants for his future, only that he wants it to be "different," different perhaps from the trajectory laid out by his parents or the paths of his contemporaries (Nichols). Without friends his own age, during his first summer back home from his East Coast college, Benjamin enters a romantic relationship with Mrs. Robinson, the seductive wife of his father's business partner. This relationship begins as clumsy and awkward and slowly grows to familiar, yet disconnected.   Later, Benjamin embarks on a relationship with Elaine Robinson, Mrs. Robinson's daughter. In their relationship, Benjamin finds someone with who he can share his fears and worries.

The Graduate does not make Jewishness explicit; however, it presents an ambivalent stage in Jewish assimilation. The film captures the irony of an affluent society that has accumulated so many objects that it has lost sight of its values and its valuables, a society in which Benjamin too is a possession. A terribly awkward young man, Benjamin struggles through painful and comic moments of disconnect with his parents. He contends with his parents' pressures to date Elaine Robinson and the competing demands from his lover Mrs. Robinson to avoid her daughter. After developing feelings for both Mrs. Robinson and Elaine, Benjamin faces Mrs. Robinson's jealous wrath and is unable to continue a relationship with either woman. Facing his fear of loneliness, Benjamin pursues Elaine and frantically stops her wedding with another man, proclaiming his love for her. Although Mrs. Robinson tries to prevent her, Elaine runs away with Benjamin. They drive off in the distance and their originally ecstatic smiles fade to glazed, neutral expressions.   The happy ending is confused by uncertainty about the future. While the New York Times described *The Graduate* as "funny, outrageous and touching," the comedic qualities of the film are subtle, and laughter is not the takeaway; tense anxiety and uncertainty is. It is this dynamic of tragicomedy, where one does not even know if or why they are laughing, that unites *The Graduate* to *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Annie Hall* and raises important questions about representation of anxieties.

Goodbye, Columbus

Larry Peerce's *Goodbye, Columbus* is the cinematic adaptation of Philip Roth's 1959 satirical novella of the same name. Taking place in the 1960s, the film portrays the complicated summer romance between Neil Klugman, an intelligent New York public

library worker, and Brenda Patimkin, a wealthy college student from Westchester. Although Brenda and Neil are both Jewish, their cultural and class differences do not facilitate an easy relationship and suggest different positions in relation to Whiteness and privilege. Neil's gaze is immediately established in the opening shots of the film, as he watches tanned, ethnically unmarked women in bikinis frolic around a pool at a country club where he is not a member. While Neil occupies the same space as these bodies, his body is relegated to sitting and watching. Brenda, however, is a *member*. Neil expresses ambivalence about the country club, mocking those who obsess over status and superficialities.

The murky relationship between Whiteness and Jewishness is clear in *Goodbye, Columbus*. Through differences in Neil's and Brenda's families, the film pokes fun at the materialism of Brenda's family and the not-yet-assimilated Klugmans. Brenda is a representation of the Jewish American Princess, receiving a nose job, attending a country club, living in the suburbs, and growing up with a Black maid. Brenda's Jewishness in this role is both central and hidden, as a woman who attempts to assimilate herself into dominant White culture through both her class and her body. In contrast to Brenda and her family, Neil is a sarcastic, cynical, a nebbish type city boy living in a small Bronx apartment with his aunt (who embodies a Jewish Mother stereotype) and uncle. The film expresses both anxiety and amusement with the changing class and racial status of American Jews. This film is an example of the emerging Jewish White identity as it contrasts with an Otherized Jew. The Jew as a pathologized Other is a theme that resonates throughout each film's development.

Annie Hall

Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* comically presents a failed relationship that ends amicably. It deploys a non-linear form to chronicle the particular relationship of neurotic comedian and classic nebbish Alvy Singer, portrayed by Allen, and Annie Hall, a ditzy lounge singer, played by Diane Keaton. Alvy believes in anti-Semitic conspiracies, obsesses over death, and refers frequently to Freud, attending an analyst for many years. *Annie Hall* moves anachronistically through Alvy and Annie's previous relationships that brought them together. Once together, the non-Jewish Annie and Jewish Alvy struggle to reconcile their different upbringings, taste in foods, ideas of entertainment and recreation, and ways of sharing love and affection. Like many Woody Allen films, New York is central to both Alvy's identity and the identity of the film. *Annie Hall* demonstrates a "Jew out of Water" trope by contrasting Alvy's life in New York with visits to Wisconsin and Los Angeles. While Annie and Alvy do not end up as a couple, compare to the other two case studies, *Annie Hall* is the most positive representation of a failed romance, as they are able to remain friends with a positive nostalgia for their past.

In the North American Review, editor Grant Tracey reflects on *Annie Hall*: "the conversations are subtle, and the jokes grow out of the characters. They aren't created for a punch line but to reveal nuances and inner realities" (44). This dynamic reflects the particular nature of tragicomedy. The subtly of the jokes in all three films and the inner realities they reveal tell audiences and scholars much about the dual tensions of internal division and, during the post-War era, external invitation from dominant culture for Jews. Dark humor allows for the expression of the anxieties at play for Jewish Americans in the mid-1960s to the late-1970s. *The Graduate*, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and *Annie Hall* display

deep anxieties and ambiguities about Jews' place in the U.S. Failed romances

intergenerational and cross-cultural misunderstandings, interpersonal struggles as

portrayed on film, influence the formation of a Jewish identity amidst anxieties along

relatively new institutional conceptions of race, class, sexuality, and citizenship. The

nebbish protagonists embody the instability and inconclusiveness of these identities,

especially in light of the rapid changes of the post-WWII historical moment.

The Jewish Male Gaze: Impotence in a Time of Change?

The Graduate, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and *Annie Hall* use humor to express Jewish

anxieties and confusion about gender and masculinity and they position the mid 1960s to

the late 1970s as a crucial point in identity formation. The construction of the male

protagonists provides a particular insight into these anxieties and triumphs. As I describe

the different protagonists of these three films, I pose the following questions: What are

the signals that male protagonists share with male Jewish audiences? How do these men

embody or resist the "nebbish" stereotype? How do these characters deploy a normative

or radical male gaze? How is the nebbish constructed in conversation with the Jewish

Mother or Jewish American Princess stereotype? How do these characters resolve their

issues of masculinity by dominating the women, women with complex relationships to

Jewishness, which they encounter? How do their romantic relationships demonstrate a

possession of Whiteness?   Whiteness and visual culture theorist Richard Dyer argues:

"the presence of black people…allows one to see whiteness as whiteness" (145). How is

Whiteness made visible in these films through the presence of Jews? What happens

when each character is unchanged by the story, entering and exiting the plot as a

"nebbish"? These questions attempt to address the unstable embodiments of insider and outsider anxieties through the nebbish.

The "nebbish" stereotype must first be explained and situated within a history where the Otherization of Jews involved particular constructions of masculinity and femininity. I will apply Prell's writing on the ways in which dominant society projected its anxiety about Jews onto Jewish bodies and the externalization of those anxieties by Jews themselves, as described in detail in previous chapters (1). Prell's framework is particularly applicable to the nebbish as non-Jews placed particular expectations onto Jewish bodies, and Jewish women and men placed particular expectations on one another. Anxieties about the family, class and economy were projected onto Jewish female bodies by Jewish males, non-Jews, and were also internalized by Jewish women. These stereotypes often place men and women in conflict with one another, a tense distrust articulated in romantic situations and media representations.

Although Prell's writing focuses on misogyny's influence on Jewish citizenship and thus focuses on women, she shows how the Jewish male is often defined in relation to the Jewish female. This relationship is particularly clear with the emasculating Jewish Wife/Mother of post-World War II America. In contrast to the demanding Jewish Mother defined by suburban excess, out-of-touch-ness, and a powerful guilt, the nebbish emerges as a timid, pitifully ineffectual, submissive character, often paralyzed by his own anxiety. The women in the nebbish's life, often the Jewish Mother or the Jewish American Princess, are constructed as foils to the nebbish figure. Each of the main characters in *The Graduate, Goodbye, Columbus,* and *Annie Hall* simultaneously enact and disidentify with the nebbish as a type. While the nebbish experiences male privilege,

we can apply queerness as pertaining to the nebbish body. The nebbish does not embody

normative masculinity, but rather a deviant and pathologized masculinity.

From this history of Jewish male bodies being marked as queer came a Jewish

investment in heteropatriarchal ideals. The nebbish also comes from deep roots in labor

history and in sweatshops, where Jewish man established a gendered division of labor. In

Sweated Work, Weak Bodies, historian Daniel Bender writes: "Male workers'

representation of the sick, enfeebled worker's body undercut ideas of a muscular

masculinity. Instead, male Jewish workers grounded masculinity…[and] claimed the

workplace as a manly space" (109). Women's value in a labor context was rendered

inferior to men. The turn-of-the-century nebbish reconfigured masculinity beyond the

muscular in order to affirm their legitimacy and potency. Thus, film enactments of the

poster-World War II nebbish wrestle with the stereotype, both representing and

critiquing, often through hyperbolic representation. The characters attempt to resist the

roles presented to them by dominant society and by Jewish women, but often they fail,

remaining ineffectual nebbishes.

The protagonist of *The Graduate*, Benjamin Braddock, presents an implicit

Jewishness through his embodiment of nebbish qualities. Benjamin attempts to resist the

fate of men of his generation and sticks out as a nebbish who is "too short, too dark, too

neurotic…too Jewish" (Austerlitz*)* for his surroundings. Although the word Jew is never

uttered in the film, Jewish director Mike Nichols has shared that he framed Jewish actor

Dustin Hoffman's character as out of place as a result of his implicitly Jewish qualities,

"a face that suggested suffering" (Farber and Changes 37). Benjamin's outlook

throughout the film is one of malaise and of resistance towards an inevitable future in "plastics." (Nichols) Benjamin attempts to rebel against a future in trading objects, a future that confirms Jewish assimilation into an upper-middle class lifestyle. The film represents the bright artificiality and preoccupation with surfaces and appearances of the affluent Anglo Westside, complete with a personal swimming pool. In many ways, Benjamin's anxiety is an enactment of the nebbish stereotype: he is unsure of what to do with his life, defined by worry and doubt. However, it is through his relationship with Mrs. Robinson (a non-Jewish sounding name and a non-Jewish appearing character) that he is able to find a sense of excitement and agency.

Unlike the other films I address, *The Graduate* addresses a less explicit Jewishness, an outsider who cannot quite place his feelings of exclusion, but does not physically or emotionally fit with his surroundings. While Benjamin's perspective critiques the sterility of a suburban future, the supposed champion debater Benjamin is unable to formulate a sentence to counter that narrative, and maintains powerless, as he notes: "it's very comfortable just to drift here" (Nichols). When the film ends and Benjamin and Elaine stare off into the distance, the audience is meant to assume that Benjamin will end up exactly like his parents. While Benjamin may assimilate into the White middle class family, he inherits the superficiality and lovelessness of the older generation. He decides to play the game, "but the rules don't make sense to [him]" (Nichols). The anxieties of the nebbish and the fish out of water converge on the apparently non-Jewish – and therefore unquestionably White body of Mrs. Robinson. Nebbish desires to assert dominance on a White (non-Jewish) woman's body and fish-

out-of-water desires for inclusion in an isolating community led to the treatment of Mrs.

Robinson's body as a coveted object and souvenir of assimilation.

In contrast with Benjamin in *The Graduate* and Alvy in *Annie Hall*, who both

embark on (failed) relationships with gentiles, Neil Klugman of *Goodbye, Columbus*

enters a relationship with a Jewish woman, but she is of such a class stature that she

achieves Whiteness in a way that Neil has not. This film is particularly interesting in its

reflection of the post-war moment of change as embodied by the relationship between

Neil and Brenda. Neil remains a marked Jewish body and Brenda has literally unmarked

her body as Jewish. The midst of this turbulent moment is clear when Neil describes

himself to Brenda over the phone as "dark," perhaps referring to his dark hair (Peerce*).*

She asks if he is a "Negro," to which Neil laughs and responds "no". This telephone

exchange illuminates the ways that Neil sees his body as different and "dark," but

unquestionably not Black. While Neil does not explicitly identify with Blackness, his

palpable sense of Otherness in comparison to Brenda's wealthy, American Dream-living

family, expresses an uncertainty about his place in relationship to dominant (White)

America.

Neil does, however, embody a non-normative masculinity of a man without an

upwardly mobile career and without control of his relationships. Neil's lack of control is

made clear when he learns that Brenda has not been taking birth control and then

encourages her to take control through birth control pills, which she rejects, and

eventually, a diaphragm. Neil lacks a control of his body and over Brenda's body, which

is controlled and manipulated by dominant beauty ideals. An ineffectual nebbish, Neil's attempts to dominate the body of Brenda fails.

Another poignant juxtaposition between the normal Americanness of Brenda and the deviance of Neil is through their family meal: each member of Neil's family eats a separate meal at a different time. Neil informs his family: "Aunt Gladys, you know, this may come as a big surprise to you, but in some families they all sit down at the same time. They all eat the same thing" (Peerce). Due to his living situation with his aunt and uncle and their eating schedule, Neil's family can literally not enact the traditional heteropatriarchal imagery of an American family at a dinner table, an image that Brenda's family displays a few scenes later when they sit together around a dinner table, being served by Carlotta, their Black maid.

Due to their differences and the disapproval of Brenda's parents (particularly Brenda's villainous mother), Neil and Brenda end their relationship in the last moments of the movie. His character arc is unchanged, as Neil ends the film marked as a nebbish, unable to shed his neurosis and cynicisms. To use his own words, Neil "can't go all the way on either side, they both seem so ridiculous to me" (Peerce), as he remains trapped in a liminal, futureless existence, one that embodies the anxieties of Jewish American negotiating internal and external tensions and their place in relation to dominant U.S. culture. Neil cannot assimilate into Whiteness through heterosexual family and relationship norms.

Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* also deals with heteronormative expectations and represents and pokes fun at stereotypes of Jews and "Whitebread" gentiles alike. Alvy "is what [Annie's] Grammy Hall would call a *real* Jew," and Annie is a White,

Midwestern woman. When visiting her family in Wisconsin, Alvy notes: "they look so American," while his family, as shown in a split screen, is loud, unhealthy, and cramped (Allen). As in *Goodbye, Columbus*, the nebbish's family is Otherized through their communal eating habits, habits that do not conform to customs of the All-American nuclear family. Alvy sees himself as part of a different culture. He ponders: "Don't you see the rest of the country looks upon New York like we're left-wing, communist, Jewish, homosexual pornographers? I think of us that way sometimes and I live here" (Allen). As the film plays with time and space in nontraditional ways, the audience understands the dreamlike dislocation and disorientation that Alvy feels, a lack of control or a powerlessness. Form reflects content in Allen/Alvy's faze, as he lacks control over his narrative. Cultural clashes arise between Alvy and Annie, labeled explicitly as New York versus the Midwest and later versus Los Angeles, but also implicitly Jewish versus non-Jewish. In dating Annie, Alvy is granted access to celebrity status as her career gains momentum, and to the possession of Whiteness, but ultimately he remains in New York, without Annie. They end their relationship by acknowledging their fundamental differences. Alvy ends the film with a tragicomic reflection about how love and relationships are something we all require despite their often painful and complex nature. Failing to replicate the heteropatriarchal family structure that is a path to Whiteness, Alvy remains a nebbish. *Annie Hall* demonstrates a conflict within Whiteness, positioning the Jew as Other, and the centrality of New York to American Jewishness.

The failed romances and failure to escape Jewish nebbishness of these three male protagonists signify a disconnect between Jewish and gentile or Anglified bodies in the late 1960s- early 1970s, a near but not-quite assimilation. Benjamin's age and nebbish

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neurosis doom his relationship with the WASP-y (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) Mrs. Robinson, his parents, and potentially Elaine. Neil's cynicism and uncertainty do not allow him to see past his differences with the assimilated Brenda.   Alvy's commitment to place (New York) and all it signifies as the virtual citadel of American Jewishness keeps him from Midwestern Annie and from Los Angeles. At the end, each film demonstrates a distrust of the White woman who can provide access to inclusion, assimilation, Whiteness, status, but ultimately withholds that power from these nebbish men, often due to their own ineffective nature. None of the films end with the promise of a normative future.

I have focused on the construction of the nebbish as an embodiment of post-war Jewish American anxieties in order to illuminate Jews' struggle with privilege and pathology. Through the pathologized male gaze, these films demonstrate a particular imagination of and a silencing of women. While I have closely examined male constructions, I do not intend to repeat a silencing of women. As Prell articulates, Jewish men function and shape their conceptions of self in relation to Jewish women, and vice versa. A crisis of Jewish masculinity can only be addressed in conjunction with addressing a crisis for Jewish women.

Throughout time and various media, tragicomic humor has been deployed by both men and women to express similar anxieties about the self as the Other, the self in relationship to the Other and to dominant culture. However, in these films, written and directed by Jewish male creators, the woman is imagined by the nebbish, as the female actresses are reading lines and enacting truths written by men. This leads to a particular framing of male/female relationships and of the Jewish woman herself. *The Graduate*

features no representations of Jewish women; Benjamin's mother embodies a WASP stereotype and Elaine and Mrs. Robinson are positioned in opposition to Benjamin's Jewish nebbishness. *Goodbye, Columbus,* presents two different types of Jewish female characters: Brenda, the vapid Jewish American Princess and Aunt Gladys, the stereotypical Jewish Mother character, who is a part of what keeps Neil from succeeding in his relationship. His internalization of neurosis from the demanding and guilt-hurling Jewish Mother in Aunt Gladys keeps him as a nebbish. Thus, *Goodbye, Columbus* presents an argument that the Jewish man cannot be fixed without fixing the Jewish woman, as embodied through the Jewish Mother and the Jewish American Princess. Because of *Annie Hall*'s non-traditional narrative structure, the audience meets Allison, Alvy's ex-lover, a woman who meets Alvy's stereotyping with attitude and intelligence. At one point, Alvy turns to the camera and asks why he could not make his relationship work with Allison, especially given her smarts and beauty. What is implied in his unanswered question is that Allison was perhaps *too* strong, *too* intelligent, and therefore too much of a challenge to Alvy's unstable masculinity. These films present a treatment of Jewish women through a nebbish gaze, leading to an erasure of or a villainizing of Jewish women through harsh stereotypes that lamented Jewish matriarchy.

The Graduate, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and *Annie Hall* are representations of the anxieties, pressures, and concerns affecting American Jews during their post-World War II moment. These films each deploy subtle humor to work through and claim agency in the process of identity formation and assimilation in Whiteness. The nebbish protagonists in each film embody these tensions and the ambiguous place of (male) American Jews in relation to a greater sense of America, and each film ends with ambiguity and fear. The nebbish's acts of disidentification reveal the ambivalence within the character and during their historical moments. These three films demonstrate the power of comedy to capture and critique the political and social concerns of a historical moment. While the nebbish reflects the cultural and political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, the legacy of the nebbish continues in the characters of Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David, and others.

Nearly fifty years after a moment in American history defined by turbulence, rebellion, and ambivalence for Jewish and non-Jewish Americans, Jewish tragicomedy continues to resonate through national discourse and contemporary comedian's commentary. Tensions of male impotence in light of feminist movements, White disenfranchisement in response to xenophobia and post-racial ideology, and anti-Semitism in the current War on Terror, demonstrate the importance of my project from both a historical and contemporary perspective. Tragicomic tensions and questions continue to be prevalent in the works of Jewish comics like Larry David, Lewis Black, and Joan Rivers. Their material often provokes the question: Can we laugh?

Joan Rivers argues for the power of laughter in spite of tragedy. In response to the tsunami and earthquakes in Japan of March 2011, she tweeted: "That's what comedians do!!! We react to tragedy by making jokes to help people in tough times feel better through laughter" (March 15, 2011). Rivers took to popular culture and new media to work through feelings of powerlessness in the wake of tragedy through comedy, a true embodiment of tragicomic sensibilities.

Through the application of an American Studies theoretical framework, Jewish cultural historical analysis, and a critical reading of popular culture of the historical moment, I have demonstrated the power of humor for identity negotiation for American Jews in the 1960s and 1970s. The tragicomic films *The Graduate*, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and *Annie Hall* articulate the painful process of Jewish self- and group-definition in relation to dominant culture amidst fractures amongst Jews and external hostility and invitation. The collision of Jews' long history of humor as a cultural practice and the turbulence and ambivalence of the post-World War II moment facilitated a space for Jewish tragicomedy in popular culture. While tragicomedy may not always cause an audience to laugh out loud, tragicomedy allows for a release of painful tensions of assimilation and identity formation.

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