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From The Lower East Side To *Seinfeld*: The Radicalization and Corporatization of American Jewish Identity

Louie Siegel

Abstract

This essay details the vastly different public expressions of American Jewish identity in the twentieth century through the areas of entertainment and social activism. Critical to this study is a notion I call the Jewish Radical Tradition of Solidaric Jewishness - our culture's historical legacy of aligning Jewish values with the fight to liberate all oppressed groups, supporting mutual emancipation from systems of social, political, and economic domination that elevate a few individuals at the expense of the collective. I argue that the twentieth century represented the ultimate battle within the American Jewish community to decide what form of Jewishness would triumph in the public eye. This battle was fought between Jews who remained loyal to the radical, leftist politics of the Lower East Side versus those who departed from that phenomenon, either physically or ideologically joining the bourgeois class on Park Avenue through assimilation, depoliticization, and corporatization in order to protect their newly gained whiteness privileges after the Second World War. I explore the continuation of the Jewish Radical Tradition through the six Jewish members of the Hollywood Ten, the trial and lives of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and the transgressive stand-up comedy of Lenny Bruce. I then illuminate the betrayal of the Tradition and the corporatization of American Jewish identity through the hugely successful sitcom *Seinfeld*. To conclude, I will delineate my vision for how I believe the American Jewish community can continue our Tradition of Solidaric Jewishness in the current political moment.

Keywords:

Jewish, Jewish identity, Jewishness, *Seinfeld*, Lenny Bruce, anti-Semitism, radical, leftist, solidarity

Introduction: Radical Roots

My Jewish homeland is not the State of Israel. It is located right here in this nation, in a place where countless Eastern European Jewish immigrants created bold, new, radiant lives: the Lower East Side of New York. At the turn of the twentieth century, this is the neighborhood in which the radical seed of American Jewish identity was planted: Yiddish Socialism.¹ More than two million Jewish immigrants came to this country's major urban areas from the 1880s to the 1920s,² and they were welcomed to "the land of the free" with a slap in the face. After departing the boats at Ellis Island, they faced grueling, "long workdays, low pay, mistreatment by bosses...dirty sweatshops, substandard dwellings,"³ and vicious anti-Semitism. As Professor Karen Brodtkin notes, America's white, Protestant, wealthy elites racialized Jews with the tools of anti-immigration policies, scientific racism, eugenics, and systematic exclusion from professional jobs and elite colleges, the latter through quota systems.⁴ Anti-Semitic sentiments were mainstream: The *New York Times* published an article in 1893 characterizing the predominantly Jewish Lower East Side as the "eyesore of New York" and "perhaps the filthiest place on the Western Continent."⁵

Jewish immigrants would not be deterred and continued to pour into the Lower East Side in large numbers: by 1916, this neighborhood alone contained 353,000 Jews,⁶ making it by far "the densest Jewish neighborhood in New York."⁷ In response to their persecution, Jewish immigrants created "an atmosphere of rebellion on the Lower East Side,"⁸ which, through their activism in leftist movements and causes, challenged the very fabric on which this white, Gentile nation was built. Strikes and the picket line became the anthem of the day, and Jewish workers proudly shut down all branches of

¹ Michels, Tony. "Socialism In American Jewish History." Introduction. In *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

² Michels, Tony. "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus." Introduction. In *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary Reader* (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2012), 1.

³ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 1.

⁴ Brodtkin, Karen. "How Did Jews Become White Folks?" In *How Jews Became White Folks And What That Says About Race In America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 26-33.

⁵ "EAST SIDE STREET VENDORS; THEIR PUSH CARTS OBSTRUCT MANY STREETS," *New York Times*, July 30, 1893,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1893/07/30/archives/east-side-street-vendors-their-push-carts-obstruct-many-streets.html>.

⁶ Diner, Hasia R. "Becoming Americans: 1924-1945." In *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews In America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 71.

⁷ Diner, Hasia R. "Transplanted People: 1880-1924." In *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews In America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51.

⁸ Michels, "Socialism In American Jewish History," 9.

the garment industry in 1886,⁹ advocating for justice and dignity for the worker. Jewish immigrant New Yorkers helped create a massive network of working-class solidarity that challenged corporate greed and called for the creation of an egalitarian society devoid of all forms of poverty and discrimination.¹⁰

From the very beginning of this late nineteenth and early twentieth century wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration, involvement in radical, leftist politics was central to the practice of American Jewish identity. As Tony Michels details, Jewish advocacy for an egalitarian society manifested itself through the creation of a massive Jewish labor movement and enthusiastic membership in the American Socialist and Communist Parties. The International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, nearly two thirds of which was "Russian/Eastern European Jewish" in 1909,¹¹ worked tirelessly for the collective through community organizing and care, helping build "medical clinics, workers' banks, vacation centers, summer camps, cooperative housing developments, and extensive educational programs..."¹² Jewish-led unions, in a departure from wider American labor unions, accepted Black workers into their ranks and supported anti-racist organizing efforts.¹³ About 250,000 Jewish people in New York belonged to the United Hebrew Trades in addition to supporting the American Labor Party in large numbers.¹⁴ In conjunction with their labor activism, New York Jews were also politically active. Between 1908 and 1912, nearly 40% of the New York Socialist Party was composed of Jewish members, with almost two thirds of Jewish voters supporting New York Socialist Party Candidates in 1904.¹⁵ During the 1920 presidential election, Socialist Party candidate Eugene Debs received an astonishing 38% of Jewish voters' support, a figure ten times higher than his national average.¹⁶

This trend continued after the formation of the American Communist Party following a split within the Socialist Party.¹⁷ Between 1921 and 1950, between 32-45%

⁹ Michels, "Socialism In American Jewish History," 8.

¹⁰ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 2.

¹¹ Hannah Meyer and Lynn Weinstein, "Founding of The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU)," Library of Congress, June 19, 2023, <https://guides.loc.gov/this-month-in-business-history/june/international-ladies-garment-workers-union>.

¹² Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 8.

¹³ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 8.

¹⁴ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 2, 16.

¹⁵ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 5.

¹⁶ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 7.

¹⁷ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 10.

of the Party's Central Committee identified as Jewish. Additionally, the readership numbers of the communist Yiddish *Di Frayhayt* newspaper exceeded those of even the most famous English speaking *Daily Worker* newspaper, and the Communist Party's approximately two thousand strong Yiddish-speaking section became its second largest, losing only to the Party's Finnish language section.¹⁸ According to Michels, this Jewish support for the communist cause was passed down to the sons and daughters of the immigrant generation more than the support of any other immigrant group.¹⁹ The Young Communist League became the focal point of second-generation Jewish activism, which also helped power the Jewish section of the International Workers' Order to around fifty thousand members in the 1940s.²⁰ In short, it is no surprise that the forces of McCarthyism in the Post-War era viewed the word "communist" as synonymous with "Jew" in the United States. Even beyond communism, Michels notes, "the Left and the Jews were so thoroughly enmeshed that one could not necessarily discern where one ended and the other began."²¹ In a country with a conservative power structure, leftism - and therefore, Jewishness - was viewed as an existential threat to the status quo.

This legacy is the beginning of what I refer to in this essay as the Jewish Radical Tradition of Solidaric Jewishness in the United States, our tradition of aligning the values of Jewish culture with the fight for the liberation of all oppressed groups, supporting mutual emancipation from systems of social, political, and economic domination that elevate a few individuals at the expense of the collective.

Those who practiced the Jewish Radical Tradition became what political theorist Hannah Arendt called "a pariah people." In her essay, "The Jew As Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," Arendt argues that historically there has been a long tradition of Jews existing as a group of oppressed minorities and "social outcasts" who have lived without political freedoms, experiencing isolation from the mainstream "normal" life of a nation and even isolation from their own people. "Pariah people," Arendt argued, needed to "create an emancipation of their own."²² In the mid-twentieth century, Jews who

¹⁸ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 10, 15.

¹⁹ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 11.

²⁰ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 15.

²¹ Michels, "The Jewish-Socialist Nexus," 14.

²² Arendt, Hannah. "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition." *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 2 (1944): 100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4464588>.

continued to exist as pariahs had first-hand experiences of dealing with the fragility of emancipation and the “treacherous promise of equality” which assimilation had given them.²³ Jewish pariahs refused to acculturate themselves to a largely Christian society, and instead sought “an admission of Jews as *Jews* to the ranks of humanity,” not an admission of Jews as Gentiles.²⁴ In short, Jewish pariahs did not sacrifice their Jewishness to be seen as human beings. For that and more, they were betrayed by many of their own brethren whom Arendt calls the “Jewish *parvenu*.”²⁵ Arendt describes the Jewish parvenu as upper-class Jews, who, in order to gain access to a life of comfort, were willing to sacrifice their identity through assimilation and join the ranks of their Gentile bourgeoisie oppressors in making life difficult for working class American Jews. Members of the parvenu sought to disown the pariahs for fear that they themselves would become pariahs again. However, their attempt to purge pariahs from their ranks would oftentimes be futile, for as Arendt notes, “the pariah Jew and the parvenu Jew are in the same boat, rowing desperately in the same angry sea.”²⁶

In this essay, I will detail the vastly different public expressions of American Jewish identity throughout the twentieth century. Especially in the aftermath of World War Two, a serious divide intensified within the Jewish community between those who remained loyal to the Jewish Radical Tradition of the Lower East Side and those who decided to purge Solidaric Jewishness and either physically or ideologically join the ranks of the wealthy on Park Avenue. (This is a neighborhood harboring some of New York’s “most expensive real estate” with luxurious apartments for those who had the capital to afford them.²⁷) Those who purged the Jewish Radical Tradition did so in an effort to maintain their newly granted privilege of whiteness (granted largely after World War Two) and appear patriotic in the eyes of Gentile America. The promise of inclusion, especially on an economic level, was undoubtedly enticing and those who chose the path of Arendt’s Jewish parvenu were often rewarded with a massive amount of capital.

²³ Arendt, 100.

²⁴ Arendt, 100.

²⁵ Arendt, 108.

²⁶ Arendt, 121.

²⁷ Joyce Cohen, “If You’re Thinking of Living On/Park Avenue; Expansive Spaces, Expensive Prices,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/03/realestate/if-you-re-thinking-of-living-on-park-avenue-expansive-spaces-expensive-prices.html>.

As we shall see, for those who remained unapologetically “Lower East Side” Jewish, the promise was alienation at best and death at worst.

The Jewish Radical Tradition was dangerous for Jewish pariahs to practice for it required them to publicly take a moral stand for justice in a society founded on injustice. Nevertheless, as I will trace through this paper, the pariahs continued to publicly align Solidaric Jewishness with the social and political fight for justice: the six Jewish members of the Hollywood Ten, whom I will be referring to in this essay as the Hollywood “Six,” went to jail and got blacklisted for practicing the Tradition,²⁸ Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were murdered by the U.S government for embodying it,²⁹ and Lenny Bruce was arrested a series of times for expressing it onstage, leading to his tragic death.³⁰ While the legal books will say that the Hollywood “Six” were convicted of contempt, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg of espionage, and Lenny Bruce of obscenity, I will argue that these folks were all *really* convicted for practicing the Solidaric Jewishness of the Jewish Radical Tradition. The “Six,” the Rosenbergs, and Bruce all did this through consistently aligning themselves with the fight to liberate the oppressed from the exploitation of the American Empire at home. Their Solidaric Jewishness took different forms: the “Six” and the Rosenbergs expressed it through a firm commitment to socialist values and labor organizing, and Bruce expressed it with a commitment to breaking the taboos of oppressive Gentile society, forcing the expansion of the boundaries of free speech, and brilliantly critiquing the gnawing gap between American ideals and the American reality.

Throughout the twentieth century, the battle between assimilated Jewishness and the Solidaric Jewishness of the Jewish Radical Tradition continued vociferously in the public entertainment sphere. During the 1990s, the Jewishness of the parvenu on Park Avenue displayed itself all too clearly through the hugely successful sitcom *Seinfeld*. This show represented a significant departure from the deeply leftist politics of the aforementioned Solidaric Jews of the mid twentieth century. As I watched Larry David accept the “Best Writer” Emmy Award for his work on “The Contest” episode, I thought

²⁸ David L. Dunbar, “The Hollywood Ten: The Men Who Refused to Name Names,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/hollywood-ten-men-who-refused-839762/>.

²⁹ Irving Kaufman. “Sentencing of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg,” Teaching American History, April 05, 1951. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/sentencing-of-ethel-and-julius-rosenberg/>.

³⁰ John Kifner, “No Joke! 37 Years After Death Lenny Bruce Receives Pardon,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/24/nyregion/no-joke-37-years-after-death-lenny-bruce-receives-pardon.html>.

of his predecessors, the radicalized, unapologetic Jews of decades prior who sacrificed their blood, sweat, and tears, willingly or unwillingly, for a Jewish artist like Larry David to have the privilege of being on that stage. Instead of thanking those ancestors, he pleased the crowd: “This is all very well and good, but I’m still bald.”³¹ In a sharp departure and betrayal of the Jewish Radical Tradition, I will argue that *Seinfeld* corporatized American Jewish identity by marketing a deradicalized, palatable, and at times, demeaning Jewishness to the public on white Christian terms, resulting in massive profit for everyone involved in the making of the show.

To prove these arguments, I draw on a wide variety of academic, scholarly essays and books, newspaper articles, and primary source media. Critical in illuminating the radical roots of American Jewish identity in this introduction were Arendt’s article “The Jew As Pariah,” Brodtkin’s book *How Jews Became White Folks*, and Michels’ books *A Fire In Their Hearts* and *Jewish Radicals*. Instrumental in detailing the lives of the Hollywood “Six” and the Rosenbergs, in addition to an interview I conducted with Julius and Ethel’s son Robert Meeropol, were David Dunbar’s article, “The Hollywood Ten - The Men Who Refused to Name Names” in the *Hollywood Reporter*, Michael Freedland’s book, *Witch Hunt In Hollywood*, Deborah Moore’s article, “Reconsidering The Rosenbergs,” and Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton’s book, *The Rosenberg File*. Vital in studying Lenny Bruce was the documentary *Lenny Bruce Without Tears* directed by Fred Braker, John Cohen’s transcription of Bruce’s routines in *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, and David Kaufman’s chapter, “Lenny Bruce: Dirty Jew.” Finally, essential in analyzing *Seinfeld* were news articles relevant to the show’s profits, the documentary *Seinfeld: How It Began*, Rosalin Krieger’s article, “Does He Actually Say The Word Jewish?,” Joel Stratton’s chapter, “Seinfeld Is a Jewish Sitcom, Isn’t It?,” Jarrod Tanny’s essay, “Deconstructing *Seinfeld*’s Jewishness,” and David Zurawik’s chapter, “Too-Jewish’/Not-Jewish-Enough Jew for the ’90s.” This essay is dedicated to my mother, Lauren, and my grandparents, Brenda and Howard, to whom I owe everything.

³¹ Sogut, Firat. “Larry David Accepts Emmy Award for ‘The Contest’ in 1993.” YouTube, December 17, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVGdSqvOtSM>.

The Hollywood “Six” And The Rosenbergs: Solidaric Jewishness At Its Finest

After the Second World War, as Brodtkin notes, formerly non-white Eastern European Jewish immigrants were increasingly included under the racial umbrella of whiteness. Through the GI Bill’s job training programs, loans for small businesses, tuition subsidies, and cheap home mortgages, many Jewish families were able to enter the American middle class in large numbers.³² However, those who refused to adopt a depoliticized Jewish identity that sacrificed Solidaric Jewishness would not fully access these newly gained privileges associated with whiteness. The refusal to assimilate, manifested through an expression of a radicalized public Jewishness, came with dire consequences. This was made particularly clear for Jewish artists working in Hollywood, many of whom would be accused of harboring communist or leftist sympathies by the House-Un American Activities Committee, known commonly by its acronym HUAC.

Congress created HUAC in 1938 to investigate “private citizens, public employees, and organizations” with suspected communist affiliations. The Committee thrived during the Second Red Scare when McCarthyism spread a manufactured frenzy over Soviet influence in American society.³³ Those who refused to cooperate with HUAC during their testimony - including refusing to name names - would be blacklisted, meaning that “actors could not get parts, writers could not submit scripts, directors could not get work.”³⁴ The anti-Jewish bias of the Committee was pervasive, embodied most clearly by one of its Chairmen, Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi, a renowned anti-Semite who blasted Jewish artists for changing their names to sound more Gentile³⁵ and sent a letter to musician Larry Adler beginning with “Dear Kike.”³⁶ From 1947 to the mid 1950s, at least 50% of people accused of communist or leftist sympathies by the House Un-American Activities Committee had Jewish ancestry.³⁷

³² Brodtkin, 36, 38.

³³ Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, “House Un-American Activities Committee,” | <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/house-un-american-activities-committee>.

³⁴ “Hunting Communists? They Were Really After Jews,” The Jewish Chronicle. <https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/hunting-communists-they-were-really-after-jews-opb4divc>.

³⁵ Freedland, Michael. “The Blacklist’s Real Victims Weren’t Just Communists.” The Jewish Chronicle. November 24, 2016. <https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/the-blacklists-real-victims-werent-just-communists-qpqnjqwq>.

³⁶ See “Hunting Communists.”

³⁷ Glenn Frankel, “The Jews of the Blacklist,” Jewish Book Council, February 6, 2017, <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/the-jews-of-the-blacklist>.

HUAC's rise to power escalated in October of 1947 when Congress subpoenaed a group of forty one screenwriters, directors, and producers to testify before the Committee.³⁸ It was on a mission to prove that "card-carrying Party members dominated the Screen Writers Guild, that Communists had succeeded in introducing subversive propaganda into motion pictures."³⁹ While most of the Hollywood artists were "friendly" and willing to answer whether or not they were members of the Communist Party,⁴⁰ ten of the witnesses refused to cooperate with HUAC, using the First Amendment as their justification.⁴¹ They became known as the Hollywood Ten. Described as "the most important event since the end of World War Two,"⁴² the Hollywood Ten were called before Congress and effectively put on trial, found in contempt, sentenced to prison, and subsequently fired by studio executives, beginning the Hollywood Blacklist.⁴³ Six members of the Hollywood Ten were Jewish: John Howard Lawson, Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Albert Maltz and Samuel Ornitz.⁴⁴ I argue that what made the Hollywood "Six" particularly dangerous and un-American to HUAC was the fact that they practiced Solidaric Jewishness by dedicating their lives to the freedom of the marginalized poor from a ruthless capitalist system.

Many of the Hollywood "Six" expressed their Solidaric Jewishness on the ground by way of union organizing. John Howard Lawson was elected the first president of the Screen Writers Guild,⁴⁵ a national labor union for writers belonging to the motion picture industry.⁴⁶ Lawson co-founded the Guild alongside fellow "Six" members Lester Cole (also president at another time) and Samuel Ornitz.⁴⁷ The American Communist Party, which spearheaded union organizing, was a central representation of Solidaric Jewishness in the twentieth century as referenced above. Lawson, Maltz, Cole, and Bessie were members, and Ornitz was giving socialist speeches on the Lower East

³⁸ See Dunbar 2015.

³⁹ Michael Freedland, "HUAC," In *Witch Hunt in Hollywood: McCarthy's War Against The Movies* (London, UK: Jr Books Ltd, 2009), 27.

⁴⁰ See Dunbar 2015.

⁴¹ Michael Freedland, "The Hollywood Ten," In *Witch Hunt in Hollywood: McCarthy's War Against The Movies* (London, UK: Jr Books Ltd, 2009), 88

⁴² Freedland, 79.

⁴³ See Dunbar 2015.

⁴⁴ See "Hunting Communists."

⁴⁵ See Dunbar 2015.

⁴⁶ Hillary Swett, "The Screen Writers' Guild: An Early History Of The Writers Guild Of America," The Writers Guild Foundation, 2020, <https://www.wgfoundation.org/screenwritersguild-history>.

⁴⁷ See Dunbar 2015.

Side since he was twelve years of age.⁴⁸⁴⁹ In regards to their reasons for joining the Party during their political moment, Maltz explained it best: nowhere else in political texts could he find a better system for ending human exploitation as he knew it. Communism called for the elimination of wage labor, an end to the subjugation of women, and the dismantling of white supremacist colonialist systems all around the world.⁵⁰

The Hollywood “Six” also demonstrated their Solidaric Jewishness through allyship with anti-fascist movements through their artistic creations and progressive activism. They were just as cognizant of the dangers of fascism at home and abroad as they were about capitalism. Maltz’s anti-fascist work *The Cross and the Arrow*⁵¹ illustrated the brutality of the Nazi genocide in Germany, Biberman organized the Hollywood Anti-Nazi league (one of the first groups to warn America about Hitler), and Bessie served in the ranks of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War in support of the Republic’s fight against the Nationalists.⁵² Bessie’s support for the Republic was shared by John Howard Lawson, who wrote *Blockade*, a drama film about the Spanish Civil War which the Knights of Columbus blasted for allegedly promoting Marxist propaganda.⁵³ In addition to helping free thousands of prisoners as a social worker with the New York Prison Association and writing books about American Jewish life and anti-Catholic bigotry,⁵⁴ Samuel Ornitz vocally supported the Soviet Union.⁵⁵ Intellectualism, a salient value in Jewish culture, threatened the members of HUAC, and all of the “Six,” in some form, were Jewish public intellectuals.

In the fall of 1947, when each of the Hollywood “Six” were subpoenaed to answer questions before HUAC with the press watching their every move,⁵⁶ they refused to allow their reputations to be slandered by demagogues. John Howard Lawson, when

⁴⁸ See Dunbar 2015.

⁴⁹ “Bessie, Alvah,” The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, June 20, 2022, <https://alba-valb.org/volunteers/alvah-bessie/>.

⁵⁰ Simkin, John. “Albert Maltz.” Spartacus Educational, September 1997. <https://spartacus-educational.com/USAmaltz.htm>.

⁵¹ Albert Maltz, “The Cross and the Arrow,” Google Books, 2024, https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Cross_and_the_Arrow.html?id=T1raEAAAQBAJ.

⁵² Matt Hormann, “The Hollywood Ten (1950),” YouTube, January 10, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taancRcLQ8o>.

⁵³ See Dunbar 2015.

⁵⁴ See Hormann.

⁵⁵ See Dunbar 2015.

⁵⁶ Freedland, 79.

asked by Chairman J. Parnell Thomas about his membership in the Screen Writers Guild, seized the opportunity to make Thomas look foolish for asking a question for which there was already an answer: "It is a matter of public record that I am a member of the Screen Writers Guild." For this remark, Lawson received a round of disruptive applause from the audience much to Chairman Thomas's chagrin.⁵⁷ Alvah Bessie also dramatically declined to cooperate, accusing the committee of creating "intimidation and terror" which aided the rise of fascism. To counter the allegation that they wanted to destroy America, the "Six" used patriotism to their advantage. Albert Maltz proudly asserted, "I am an American, and I believe there is no more proud word in the vocabulary of man."⁵⁸ In response to a question about his Screen Writers Guild membership, Sam Ornitz refused to answer, saying he did not want to help the Committee nullify the Constitution.⁵⁹ The "Six" brilliantly accused HUAC of being the *true* un-Americans. By rebelling against HUAC's frame of questioning, they placed themselves firmly within the Jewish Radical Tradition of Solidaric Jewishness.

To be a radical, Solidaric Jew in the twentieth century meant there would be severe consequences. Each of the "Six" was convicted of contempt of Congress, sentenced to up to a year in prison, and fined what would be nearly \$14,000 today.⁶⁰⁶¹ In addition to being blacklisted, many of their previous rights of citizenship were stripped after their prison sentences ended. They could no longer vote and all suffered social alienation. Their professional lives and finances were destroyed. When they did write screenplays, they were often uncredited - they needed to find a non-blacklistee to "front" for them. In Lester Cole's case, he was prevented from even finishing his script for *Viva Zapata*. John Steinbeck completed it instead and won an Academy Award.⁶²

On the other hand, many of the "Six" came out more resilient and determined than ever to spread the message of the Jewish Radical Tradition, and continue the work they started before being blacklisted. Herbert Biberman, for instance, directed the 1954 labor drama *Salt of the Earth* about a New Mexico miner's strike. While being banned

⁵⁷ "'They Want to Muzzle Public Opinion': John Howard Lawson's Warning to the American Public," *History Matters* (George Mason University), <https://www.historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6441/>.

⁵⁸ See Dunbar 2015.

⁵⁹ Freedland, 86.

⁶⁰ See Dunbar 2015.

⁶¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "U.S Inflation Calculator," December 12, 2023, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.

⁶² See Dunbar 2015.

for eleven years after only a two month run, the U.S National Film Registry later deemed the movie “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant” nearly forty years later. John Howard Lawson would not be deterred either. He co-wrote the screenplay for *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951), the first film showing apartheid in South Africa.⁶³ The Hollywood “Six” made a conscious moral decision in refusing to sacrifice their radical, political identity. That came at a substantial price.

On the very same day that Hollywood “Six” member John Howard Lawson was sentenced to a year in prison, the State concluded presenting its case against Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Indicted in January 1951, they were charged with conspiracy to commit espionage (passing secrets to the Soviet Union) by a government poisoned with the hysteria of McCarthyism.⁶⁴ Disgraced former F.B.I Director J. Edgar Hoover called it the “crime of the century.”⁶⁵ After receiving a guilty verdict from a jury without a single Jewish member, a Jewish judge, Irving Kaufman, sentenced the Rosenbergs to death.⁶⁶ They were the first U.S citizens to be convicted and executed for espionage during peacetime⁶⁷ as well as the only Americans ever sentenced to death for this crime.⁶⁸

To commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg’s execution, their son Robert Meeropol’s foundation, *The Rosenberg Fund For Children*, produced an event in which Julius and Ethel’s last letter to Robert and his brother, Michael, was read aloud to an audience. Renowned activist and Black Public Intellectual Angela Davis introduced the letter, highlighting the gravity of the Rosenberg case. On June 19, 1953, the *best* outcome that Robert and Michael could hope for was to be able to grow up visiting their parents behind bars. There were protests around the globe and a “24 hour picket line outside the White House.” After receiving 21,000 messages urging him to stop another murder of Jewish people at the hands of the State, President Eisenhower denied the request for clemency. Eisenhower refused to

⁶³ See Dunbar 2015.

⁶⁴ See Kaufman, “Sentencing of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.”

⁶⁵ Suzanne McGee, “10 Major FBI Cases of the 20th Century,” History.com, October 16, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/fbi-top-cases-20th-century>.

⁶⁶ Moore, Deborah. “Reconsidering the Rosenbergs: Symbol and Substance in Second Generation American Jewish Consciousness.” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1988): 22, 28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27500639>.

⁶⁷ History.com Editors, “This Day In History: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg Executed for Espionage,” History.com, November 24, 2009, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/rosenbergs-executed>.

⁶⁸ Ted Morgan, “The Rosenberg Jury,” *Esquire Classic*, May 1, 1975, <https://classic.esquire.com/article/1975/5/1/the-rosenberg-jury>.

meet with Julius's mother, and to give the illusion of respect toward the Jewish Sabbath, the government changed the time of the Rosenberg's execution on a Friday evening from 11PM to 8PM. In the last hours of their lives, they wrote one final letter to their sons. In an excerpt, Ethel writes:

We wish we might have had the tremendous joy and gratification of living our lives out with you. Your Daddy who is with me in these last momentous hours, sends his heart and all the love that is in it for his dearest boys. Always remember that we were innocent and could not wrong our conscience.⁶⁹

At the beginning of the interview I conducted with Robert Meeropol, he gleefully recited his parents' friend Abe Osheroff's most formidable memory of the Rosenbergs' wedding: "It was so Jewish, you could smell the pickled herring halfway down the hall."⁷⁰ Julius and Ethel did the most Jewish work you could do in the twentieth century: labor organizing. And that is exactly how they met: at an International Seamen's Union benefit concert where Ethel was performing.⁷¹ Born three years apart and both second-generation children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Julius and Ethel grew up firmly enmeshed in the Yiddish socialism of the Lower East Side of New York.⁷² Their heroes, in Meeropol's words, were the folks from the Young Communist League. After landlords evicted families, changed the locks, and threw them out on the street, comrades from the League would break the locks and move the families back into their homes.⁷³ Moving into a one-bedroom apartment, the Rosenbergs both physically and ideologically stayed in the Lower East Side.⁷⁴

Julius grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family who wanted him to become a Rabbi, but when he talked with the Rabbis about real social problems, he wasn't satisfied with what they had to say. He saw they talked the talk of *tikkun olam* - *repairing the world* - but didn't walk the walk. Religion having failed him, Julius sought out the people who he believed were truly healing the world: the Young Communist League.⁷⁵ Julius soon got involved in efforts to save activist Tom Mooney, and became a member of the

⁶⁹ Rosenberg Fund for Children, "The Rosenbergs' Last Letter (Angela Davis, Eve Ensler, Cotter Smith)," 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oyN2E6j07Q>.

⁷⁰ Robert Meeropol, interview by Louie Siegel, Skokie, IL (over zoom), October 27th, 2023.

⁷¹ Moore, 31.

⁷² Moore 21, 32.

⁷³ Meeropol, interview.

⁷⁴ Moore, 31.

⁷⁵ Meeropol, interview.

Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians, "a militant union for white-collar professionals with a pro-Communist leadership."⁷⁶ In short, he reacted to the failures of religious Judaism by becoming a political activist. Julius lost his job in the Army Signal Corps following reports that he denied his membership in the Communist Party, and as a result, his father, Harry, refused to speak to him until he was on his deathbed.⁷⁷

Ethel Rosenberg was wise beyond her years, graduating high school at fifteen years old, and growing up in a family committed to a deep, cultural Judaism.⁷⁸ Living in a tenement apartment where hot water was nowhere to be found,⁷⁹ she wanted to go to college, but her family could not afford it. Instead, like many Jewish women, she took a job in the garment district as a typist, and quickly got involved in union organizing.⁸⁰ At age 19, she led a strike of garment workers at her office, and they won by sitting down in front of trucks delivering materials, the truckers understandably being afraid to run over a group of striking women. After Ethel was fired for being a member of the strike committee, she filed a case in 1936 before the newly formed National Labor Relations Board and won before the decision was reversed on a technicality.⁸¹ Knowing first-hand what it felt like to grow up in poverty, she saw a way out through union organizing. Like Julius, she grew up during the Great Depression, and felt the most genuine practice of Jewish identity was through joining the Communist Party.⁸²

The men who fought to end the Rosenbergs' lives grew up practicing a very different set of Jewish values. Born to a New York Jewish family, Judge Irving Kaufman of the District Court for the Southern District of New York enrolled in a Catholic college at age fifteen and lived in a much wealthier neighborhood on Park Avenue.⁸³ He was a member of a conservative synagogue and identified as a religious Jew.⁸⁴ Having served as a special assistant to the Attorney General, Kaufman came to admire J. Edgar

⁷⁶ Moore, 31.

⁷⁷ Moore, 31-32.

⁷⁸ Meeropol, interview.

⁷⁹ Moore, 31.

⁸⁰ Meeropol, interview.

⁸¹ "Ethel Greenglass v National New York Packing and Shipping Company," NLRB Vol 1, 1936, p.1016.

⁸² Meeropol, interview.

⁸³ Moore, 29-30.

⁸⁴ Moore, 30, 32.

Hoover as someone who was “like Jesus Christ to him.”⁸⁵ The prosecutor Irving Saypol had a history of hunting down communists and viewed the Rosenberg Trial as an opportunity to advance his reputation as a man who would bring left-wing defendants down.⁸⁶ Saypol’s prosecuting assistant was none other than Donald Trump’s future lawyer Roy Cohn. As a third generation Jew, Cohn had less proximity to the immigrant experience, and it showed. He grew up in the luxurious neighborhood of Park Avenue, and his assistance in fabricating the case against the Rosenbergs was critical to their downfall.⁸⁷ Cohn was historically devoid of even the smallest modicum of compassion, defining his career with the following strategy: “I bring out the worst in my enemies and that’s how I get them to defeat themselves.”⁸⁸

The trial of the Rosenbergs firmly divided the Jewish community into the few who defended them and fought to keep them alive versus the vast majority who eagerly cheered on or were complicit in their death. Establishment Jewish organizations used the trial as an opportunity to purge ties with the Radical Tradition of the Lower East Side and define their own assimilationist Park Avenue public Jewishness which conformed to the standards of McCarthyism. In short, the Rosenberg Trial was the ultimate moment of decision for what the future of public Jewishness would look like. The next time, dear reader, that you are compelled to cite a statistic on anti-Semitism from the Anti-Defamation League or the American Jewish Committee, remember that these groups turned a blind eye to the ways anti-Semitism enabled the execution of the Rosenbergs. The AJC refused to call for clemency, and instead openly called for the death penalty, using the case as an opportunity to cut ties with communism.⁸⁹ The AJC also went out of their way to tell the Velde Committee in Congress that the Rosenbergs’ communist views were “utterly incompatible” with Judaism.⁹⁰ One AJC staff member, Rabbi S. Andhill Fineberg, went even further by writing a book which supported every part of the government’s case against the Rosenbergs, and showed a “shocking

⁸⁵ Radosh, Ronald, and Joyce Milton. *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth*. (1st ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983), 288.

⁸⁶ Moore, 30.

⁸⁷ Moore, 30-31.

⁸⁸ NYT Digital Archives, “Roy Cohn’s Descent on the Libraries of Europe; A Legacy of Hate,” *New York Times*, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/08/17/opinion/l-roy-cohn-s-descent-on-the-libraries-of-europe-a-legacy-of-hate-798586.html>.

⁸⁹ Radosh and Milton, 329-30, 352.

⁹⁰ Moore, 26.

insensitivity to the humanitarian arguments in favor of clemency...an eagerness to brand anyone who questioned the death sentences as a Communist dupe or worse.”⁹¹ The ADL stood idly by and shared files on communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee.⁹² American Jewish organizations, eight years after the Holocaust, enthusiastically purged the Yiddish socialism of the Lower East Side to maintain their fragile privilege of whiteness and appear patriotic in the eyes of Gentile America. That is not what solidarity looks like. That, my friends, is cowardice and betrayal at its finest.

During the trial, Judge Irving Kaufmann made it his chief responsibility to prove that Jews were patriotic Americans who were diametrically opposed to everything the Rosenbergs believed. Meeropol said it best: “The judge wrapped himself into the American flag and pronounced the death sentence to prove that he was a loyal American who wasn’t going to coddle his co-religionists.”⁹³ In a rare defense of the Rosenbergs, a Jewish newspaper accused Kaufmann of being afraid to show leniency toward fellow Jews, and of elevating anti-Semitic views. There was speculation that this trial was even more personal to the Judge: his wife Helen’s maiden name was Rosenberg, and people posited that because of this, he developed a “psychological animosity” toward the Rosenbergs because they offended the respectability of assimilated Jews such as himself.⁹⁴ Kaufmann called the charges against the Rosenbergs “worse than murder” and the campaign to defend them “propaganda that gives me great concern as an American and a Jew.”⁹⁵ His attacks not only blasted what he viewed as their treason, but they were also brutally personal: “Love for their cause dominated their lives. It was even greater than their love for their children.”⁹⁶ The parents’ final letter to their two children proves quite the opposite. When Judge Kaufmann gave both Rosenbergs the death sentence, he gave a punishment that exceeded the desire of even J. Edgar Hoover, who actually didn’t want Ethel Rosenberg to be executed.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Radosh and Milton, 355.

⁹² Moore, 26.

⁹³ Meeropol, interview.

⁹⁴ Radosh and Milton, 270.

⁹⁵ Moore, 32.

⁹⁶ Moore, 33.

⁹⁷ Radosh and Milton, 289.

As Meeropol stated in our interview, anti-Semitism and anti-communism became a deadly mixture in the trial.⁹⁸ The former manifested itself in the hate mail the Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case received, the potential Jewish jurors who were screened off the jury by lawyers from both sides, as well as in a key remark by the lead Gentile juror: "I felt good that this was strictly a Jewish show. It was Jew against Jew. It wasn't the Christians hanging the Jews."⁹⁹ This was a theater production for Christian America pitting a Jewish prosecutor, his Jewish assistant, and a Jewish judge, against a Jewish defense lawyer and the Jewish defendants.¹⁰⁰ Anti-Semites could not have asked for a better show. But, the Rosenbergs would not be deterred in their confidence that they would be on the right side of history: "By our conduct in this case, when our lives are at stake, we are illustrating the fundamental tenets of our democracy."¹⁰¹

The Rosenberg case fundamentally shattered any sense of security for an American Jewish community wondering if they would finally be included in the American Dream. Choices needed to be made. Many saw a need to detach themselves from the Jewish Radical Tradition embodied by the Rosenbergs in order to continue to be seen as white.¹⁰² Sinatra's vision of a multicultural America in *The House I Live In*¹⁰³ seemed to be reserved only for those Jews who cut ties with the Yiddish socialism of the Lower East Side. Haunted by the specter of another Holocaust in America, the execution of Julius and Ethel was traumatic for American Jews. There was guilt for not standing with them. There was fear. Most crucially, there was failure.¹⁰⁴ The Jewish "New-Deal liberal" Judge Jerome Frank on the U.S Circuit Court of Appeals denied the Rosenbergs another trial, and the only Jewish Justice on the Supreme Court, liberal Felix Frankfurter, couldn't convince his Gentile colleagues on the Court to even hear the Rosenbergs out.¹⁰⁵ This case exposed the gnawing gap between Jewish liberals and Jewish radicals, a gap that continues to the present day.

⁹⁸ Meeropol, interview.

⁹⁹ Radosh and Milton, 270, 288, 352.

¹⁰⁰ Moore, 28.

¹⁰¹ Moore, 34.

¹⁰² Moore, 26.

¹⁰³ Sinatra, Frank, RKO Radio Pictures, Alex Stordahl, and Albert Maltz, *The House I Live In*, 1945, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mbrs00009167/>.

¹⁰⁴ Moore, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Moore, 34-35.

The Rosenbergs' sons, Michael and Robert, at six and ten years of age, dressed up in their best suits and caps, and saw the last image they would ever see of their parents in prison and behind bars.¹⁰⁶ They quickly became orphans, the fabric of their lives torn apart. Few people wanted to take in the sons of dead communists as their own. Thankfully, after an extensive legal battle with right-wing groups, Michael and Robert finally found a new home through the close-knit network of solidarity between Black and Jewish Americans in New York City. Among many others, Shirley Graham Du Bois stepped up and became a trustee on the fund that financially supported the boys' childhood after their parents' murder. Michael and Robert met their adopted parents at the Brooklyn home of the legendary Black Public Intellectual, communist, and civil rights activist - W.E.B Du Bois. Their parents would be none other than Jewish leftist activists Abel and Anne Meeropol.¹⁰⁷

Michael and Robert became part of a family where Solidaric Jewishness was front and center. Both Abel and Anne Meeropol were public school teachers, both were involved in union organizing, both were members of the Communist Party, and both, according to Robert, were secular and culturally Jewish. At Dewitt Clinton High School, Abel taught future Black Public Intellectual James Baldwin.¹⁰⁸ Anne was an actress and drama teacher, and Abel was a writer. Abel was appalled by American racism. According to Robert, when Abel was young, he witnessed a car hit a Black man on the street, and when the police arrived, they did nothing, failing to even call an ambulance. This experience, in addition to being haunted by a picture of a lynching, spurred Abel to act ("I am a Jew. The Negro lynched reminds me well," he wrote).¹⁰⁹ Abel made history by writing the lyrics for and composing the most famous anti-lynching song of the twentieth century, *Strange Fruit*, performed by the incomparable Billie Holiday. The piece was deemed "song of the century" by Time Magazine in 1999.¹¹⁰ When New York lawmakers heard the "song of the century," they were not pleased. Meeropol was called

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Blair, "The Strange Story Of The Man Behind Strange Fruit," *National Public Radio*, September 5, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit>.

¹⁰⁷ Annie Levin, "The Rosenberg Orphans and the Power of Radical History," *Current Affairs*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2021/01/the-rosenberg-orphans-and-the-power-of-radical-history>.

¹⁰⁸ See Levin 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Meeropol, interview.

¹¹⁰ See Blair 2012.

before a committee of them to answer for whether communists paid him to write *Strange Fruit*. They did not.¹¹¹

In their letter to Michael and Robert, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg wrote, “Eventually, too, you must come to believe that life is worth the living.”¹¹² The sons took their parents' words to heart. Michael became a Professor of Economics at Western New England University,¹¹³ and Robert founded and is the executive director of *The Rosenberg Fund For Children*, which provides aid for the children of targeted progressive activists,¹¹⁴ a role Robert said he was in training for his whole life.¹¹⁵

While assimilationist Judaism attempted to rule the day through the Rosenberg trial, the Jewish Radical Tradition continued, and for its next embodiment, I will transport us to the world of American stand-up comedy, which featured a new generation of radicalized Jews who dramatically refused to assimilate in the public eye. These children or grandchildren of the same Jewish immigrants whom the New York Times blasted as “the eyesore of New York”¹¹⁶ would go on to become some of the nation’s most powerful and evocative entertainers in its history. This is no more true than with the case of Jewish activist comedian and intellectual Leonard Alfred Schneider, more commonly known as Lenny Bruce.

Lenny Bruce: A Conscious Pariah

Thirty seven years after he died, Lenny Bruce was finally pardoned for a 1964 obscenity conviction he received after performing a set at Greenwich Village’s Cafe Au Gogo. Republican Governor George E. Pataki granted the pardon in 2003 in an effort to promote free speech during the War On Terror. (The irony of pardoning a leftist Jewish comic to promote conservative political policy is palpable.) By 2003, Bruce’s shattering of free speech limits was obvious: his comedy contained “words you wouldn’t bat an eye at today -- you can hear them on any HBO offering.”¹¹⁷ Bruce paid a heavy price to pave

¹¹¹ See Levin 2021.

¹¹² See “The Rosenbergs’ Last Letter.”

¹¹³ “Michael Meeropol,” Foundation for Economic Education, August 7, 2015, <https://fee.org/people/michael-meeropol/>.

¹¹⁴ “About the Rosenberg Fund for Children,” *The Rosenberg Fund for Children*, <https://www.rfc.org/about-us>.

¹¹⁵ Meeropol, interview.

¹¹⁶ See “East Side Street Vendors.”

¹¹⁷ See Kifner 2003.

the way for his comedic descendants. By his last performance, he was nearly bankrupt, having spent all his money on legal troubles and trying to exonerate himself. Bruce was arrested a series of times beginning in 1961¹¹⁸ (six arrests which occurred in two years¹¹⁹), and in addition, he was blacklisted by nightclubs all around the country.¹²⁰ While technically dying of a morphine overdose in 1966,¹²¹ his friend and record producer Phil Spector aptly claimed that Lenny died of “an overdose of police.”¹²² A prosecutor in the Manhattan DA’s office confirmed that sentiment: “I feel terrible about Bruce. We drove him into poverty and bankruptcy and then murdered him...We all knew what we were doing. We used the law to kill him.”¹²³ Cardinal Francis Spellman teamed up with Manhattan D.A Frank Hogan to try and stop Lenny Bruce from talking. The D.A even went so far as to send a license inspector to listen and record Bruce’s act.¹²⁴ All of this context should prompt us with two questions: one, why did mainstream America desperately want to stop Bruce’s unapologetically Jewish stand-up comedy from being heard? Two, why did they find it so offensive?

Hannah Arendt proposes four models of the Jewish pariah, calling one of them the “conscious pariah.” These are Jews who show an “awareness of [their] position and, conscious of it, become a rebel against it – the champion of an oppressed people.”¹²⁵ They recognize assimilation as a problem, and fight against rather than expect generosity from the Jewish parvenu. In political terms, the Jewish conscious pariah is a rebel and a revolutionary.¹²⁶ Lenny Bruce was the definition of a Jewish conscious pariah, someone who fearlessly expressed unapologetically Jewish humor during a time in which it was still unacceptable to Gentile America and was still uncomfortable to elite

¹¹⁸ Brandon Weber, “The Huge Price One Comedian Paid So That George Carlin, Richard Pryor, And Others Could Make It Big,” *Upworthy*, April 3, 2015, <https://www.upworthy.com/the-huge-price-one-comedian-paid-so-that-george-carlin-richard-ryor-and-others-could-make-it-big>.

¹¹⁹ Baker, Fred, director. 2001. *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*. First Run Features. 44:45 mins. <https://www.kanopy.com/product/lenny-bruce-without-tears>.

¹²⁰ David Schultz, “Lenny Bruce,” The Free Speech Center, 2009, <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/lenny-bruce/>.

¹²¹ See Weber 2015.

¹²² “Lenny Bruce - He Fought For The Right To Offend,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/lenny-bruce-he-fought-for-the-right-to-offend-d0979es2>.

¹²³ Richard Corliss, “A Tribute To Lenny Bruce,” *Time Magazine*, August 10, 2006, <https://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1225432,00.html>.

¹²⁴ See Kifner 2003.

¹²⁵ Arendt, 108.

¹²⁶ Arendt, 109.

and assimilated American Jews. When Lenny Bruce performed, the police sat in the front,¹²⁷ watching like hawks, waiting to defend Americanism from the dirty Jew.

Bruce made himself a conscious pariah in the eyes of a largely Christian America when he went after Christianity's sacred deity:

You and I know what a Jew is—*One Who Killed Our Lord*. I don't know if we got much press on that in Illinois—we did this about two thousand years ago...there should be a statute of limitations for that crime...¹²⁸

As Bruce alludes, ever since a Jew named Jesus was crucified, Jews have been taunted, tortured, brutalized, killed, or worse because of the popular myth that they were responsible for his murder, despite there being no basis in scripture for this belief. Rather than resist this lie by pointlessly repeating the truth, Bruce mocks his Christian audience for believing it, having enough confidence as a Jew to joke about the most enduring piece of Christian anti-Semitism. Not only did he own this myth with every bone in his body, he encouraged Christians to get over it, because it happened two thousand years ago. For a Jew to say this less than two decades after the Holocaust, at a time when many of his co-religionists were still afraid to cross this boundary is a tremendously bold assertion of agency and power. Rather than say “no, we didn't do it,” Bruce boldly jokes that Jews did in fact kill Jesus. The greatest revenge is laughter: “Yes, we did it. I did it, my family. I found a note in the basement. It said: *We killed him. Signed, Morty.*”¹²⁹

Bruce was not afraid to declare the Church an institution supported by the ideal of power-hungry domination, big business, and a removal from peoples' material conditions. As a Jew living in a country which had figured little to no place for him in it, he could not help but feel the overpowering influence that Christianity had on American institutions compared to Judaism. America, he said, still did not know how to draw the line between Church and State: “...there's more churches and people that work for the church than I think there are courthouses and judges.”¹³⁰ Catholicism, in his view, preached a “‘what should be’ that never existed.”¹³¹ The hypocrisy of the Church, as

¹²⁷ Baker 2001, 46:02 mins.

¹²⁸ Lenny Bruce and John Cohen, *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), 40.

¹²⁹ See note 128 above.

¹³⁰ Bruce and Cohen, 54.

¹³¹ Bruce and Cohen, 55.

Bruce pointed out, made the Christian power structure a lot of money at the expense of the marginalized community outside of it: “Why are there Puerto Ricans starving in New York while Cardinal Spellman was wandering round wearing a \$8000 ring?”¹³² Bruce criticized Christian piety as a mechanism for the monetary greed of the Church. He also critiqued the Pope as completely disconnected from the needs of everyday Catholics who worship him, questioning, for example, how the Pope can weigh in on the issue of contraceptives while simultaneously practicing abstinence.¹³³

Bruce provoked outrage and was subsequently ostracized from the Catholic community due to his blistering accusations of Catholic hypocrisy in terms of their lived values as compared to their preached values. He refers to a remark in Denver where Cardinal Francis Spellman said that the principal problem with pornography was that it ended in “self-gratification.”¹³⁴ Realizing the significant number of people who undoubtedly engage in this act of “self-gratification” before confessing it as a sin to a priest, Bruce comes to the realization that a large number of Catholics are using confessions as a personal mechanism to appear clean on the surface to their community while still retaining the ability to continue committing acts of “sin” in private. No one, especially those at the highest levels of the Catholic Church, are nearly as clean and upstanding as they proclaim to be. The truth of people’s lives is much dirtier. Bruce leans into this dirtiness:

SINNER: Father, father I want to confess that I punch my eight-year-old son with the same force that I'd punch a drunk. The reason I punched him that hard is he was cruel to the cat—the cat that I put in a burlap bag and drowned. But I wanna say that I gave him a good home. I also exploit the church and crippled people and blind people, and screw the income tax people too.¹³⁵

While exaggerating this scenario for comic effect, he manages to elucidate real societal problems of masculine violence against children and animals, an avoidance of reckoning with one’s emotions, and perhaps most devastatingly, a justification of that behavior with “I gave him a good home.” Perhaps Bruce’s most brilliant critique of the sinner’s hypocrisy is when the sinner confesses that he exploits crippled and blind

¹³² See “Lenny Bruce - He Fought For The Right To Offend.”

¹³³ Bruce and Cohen, 56.

¹³⁴ Bruce and Cohen, 53.

¹³⁵ Bruce and Cohen, 54.

people. Lenny Bruce, even as a Jew, knew the New Testament, and alluded to Matthew 15:30-31: “Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.”¹³⁶ Jesus, unlike the sinner who worships him, did not exploit the crippled and the blind. He *healed* them. This account of religious hypocrisy is as devastating as it is accurate. This bit, coupled with Bruce’s “Jews Killed Christ” routine became all the more revolutionary, and hence all the more dangerous for him. According to Kaufman, the religious makeup of the New York City Police Department at the time was largely Catholic, making Bruce a particular target.¹³⁷ The police department took orders from Catholic Manhattan D.A Frank Hogan. Hogan was a man that lambasted the deterioration of “moral values” in America.¹³⁸ He did not want the betrayal of those “moral values” exposed, and he certainly did not want them exposed by a Jewish conscious pariah.

Lenny Bruce did not just critique the dominance of Christianity in America. Perhaps most courageously, he also criticized his co-religionists in the reform and conservative Jewish community for their attempts to modulate or subdue their Jewishness to assimilate. This made him a pariah within his own community. Bruce was the first major celebrity in the American entertainment industry to take on the issue of assimilation and he rejected the fear of being overtly Jewish.¹³⁹ There were many in the Jewish community during Bruce’s time (and still today) who masked their ethnic, cultural, and political identities to gain the privileges of whiteness by changing their names or turning away from the Eastern European working-class socialism of the past. Lenny Bruce proudly refused to join the Jewish bourgeois class, and, like the “Six” and the Rosenbergs before him, faced a double burden of oppression¹⁴⁰ both from a hostile Gentile community and from the bourgeois Jewish community who joined their ranks.

Bruce’s critique of acculturated, parvenu Jews was articulated most astutely with a bit mocking 1964 Republican Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Known as “Mr. Conservative,” the Arizona Senator took pains to hide the fact that he was the first

¹³⁶ Holy Bible (New International Version), “Matthew 15:30-31,” Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+15%3A30-31&version=NIV>.

¹³⁷ David E. Kaufman, “Lenny Bruce: Dirty Jew,” In *Jewhoing The Sixties* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 147.

¹³⁸ Baker 2001, 51:38 mins.

¹³⁹ Kaufman, 101-2.

¹⁴⁰ Arendt, 108.

presidential candidate of Jewish ancestry in the history of the country to seek the office.¹⁴¹

Bruce reveals Goldwater's Jewish identity by ripping his mask off, mocking the Senator for his rather poor job hiding it. His first name Barry, as Bruce points out, is pretty Jewish on its own: "Where is there one goy with the name of Barry? It's the most Jewishjewishjewish..."¹⁴² A lot of Jews, Bruce points out, changed their last names to blend in -- including Bruce himself. What Goldwater did was a huge step further. Bruce jokes that the Senator said "I'll *keep* my name and I'll change my *religion*."¹⁴³ Goldwater lived in Arizona, in the southwest, where in 1964, the Jewish population was 1.2%. To give perspective, in New York, where Bruce lived, it was 14%.¹⁴⁴ That's a big difference in the eyes of a New York Jew, as he is living among a lot more of his co-religionists than Goldwater. However, Bruce still uses Goldwater's half-Jewish identity to act out a punchline representing Christianity's fears of the consequences of having a Jew in the Oval Office. President-elect Goldwater, Bruce posits, would take off his mask during his victory speech only to show his

big nose and the semitic look and the spittle coming out and [Goldwater screaming vindictively] YAHAAAAAAAAAAAA! WE'LL BURN ALL THE CHURCHES!¹⁴⁵

Bruce's main message here is that however far Jews may want to run from who they are to escape the above anti-Semitism, they still can't hide from it in the 1960s, and therefore, why even try? After all, Goldwater's mask did not help him among Jewish voters: he won a paltry 10% of their support nationally in the 1964 Presidential Election.¹⁴⁶

Bruce's critique of assimilation as a betrayal of particularist traits for toxic universalism extended to the home of Jewish religious life: the synagogue. In his famous routine, "Christ and Moses," Bruce acts out what the central figures of

¹⁴¹ Friedman, Murray. *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy*. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 97.

¹⁴² Bruce and Cohen, 88.

¹⁴³ Bruce and Cohen, 88.

¹⁴⁴ Chenkin, Alvin. "Jewish Population in the United States, 1964." *The American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 66 (1965), 147. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23603163>.

¹⁴⁵ Bruce and Cohen, 88.

¹⁴⁶ "U.S. Presidential Elections: Jewish Voting Record," Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-voting-record-in-u-s-presidential-elections>.

Judeo-Christianity would see if they came down to Earth to explore the state of American Jewry in temples. Moses, the liberatory hero of the Jewish people, concludes in his visit that mid-twentieth century Reform rabbis are “so reformed they’re ashamed they’re Jewish.”¹⁴⁷ The Rabbis no longer have beards in this imagination and they speak with a British accent, evoking the largest empire in history. Hence, they mispronounce words that are central to Judaism, which would be an affront to their unassimilated immigrant ancestors: Israel in this British pronunciation becomes “Is-roy-el,” a *yahrzeit* candle becomes a “flaming yortsite candle,” Chanukah becomes “Chin-ukka,” and Rosh Hashanah becomes “Rose-o-shonah.”¹⁴⁸ The hyphens in here imply the British Rabbi’s hesitation and pause before even pronouncing these words. The Rabbi’s empty Jewishness is further articulated when someone asks him whether God exists. The Rabbi dismisses the question outright and proudly declares, “we’re here to sell bonds for Israel.”¹⁴⁹ This here is a masterful commentary on the marketization of Judaism: a way of life has now, in Bruce’s mind, been reduced to a materialist interest in a nation-state. In a rarely cited quote from his autobiography, Bruce stated the following: “Goddamn Israel and its bond drives. What influence did they exert to save the lives of the Rosenbergs - guilty or not?”¹⁵⁰ In a brief but vital tribute to his fellow persecuted leftist secular Jews, Bruce placed himself squarely within the same Jewish Radical Tradition of fighting against the commodification of a culture, especially if it is unpopular to do so. He also points out the fact that all of the Israel fundraising drives are doing little to nothing to protect the Jewish people from our enemies. The punchline of “Christ and Moses” illustrates this exactly: even the labor of making a *mezuzah*, a central object of Jewish culture, is commoditized and outsourced: “He [Moses] breaks open a *mezuzah*—nothing inside! ‘GEVULT!’ But a piece of paper that says ‘Made in Japan.’”¹⁵¹

Bruce showcases a radical, rebellious Jewishness of liberation in an effort to deviate from what he sees as a hollowing out of a way of life that played on the oppressor’s terms. Like the Hollywood “Six”, the Rosenbergs, and the Yiddishers of the Lower East Side before him, Bruce chose to be a Jew without reservation - a choice

¹⁴⁷ Kaufman, 116.

¹⁴⁸ Kaufman, 116.

¹⁴⁹ Kaufman, 116.

¹⁵⁰ Lenny Bruce, “Chapter Twelve,” In *How To Talk Dirty And Influence People: An Autobiography* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 71.

¹⁵¹ Bruce and Cohen, 35-6.

that came with a set of well-known risks. Not only that, he chose to be a left-wing Jewish critic of both the Christian power structures of the U.S government and the Jewish elite who strove for assimilation. This proved to be both cathartic and deadly for him. Bruce showcased an unfiltered Jewishness most obviously with the sheer amount of Yiddishkeit and Yiddish words and phrases he used in his routines, which “embarrassed older Jews” who were only used to hearing the language “on stages at the Catskills and Miami Beach.”¹⁵² For the first time, words like *gevult*, *chutzpah*, *putzo*, *schtup*, *zug nicht*, *schlep*, *roch munas*, *schmuck*, *gai schoin*, and *punim* were heard by both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike, and most importantly, the words weren’t translated.¹⁵³ This shocked and embarrassed the public, as one attendee of his performance remarked, “he looks like such a nice Jewish boy—until he opens his dirty mouth.”¹⁵⁴ Bruce used yiddishkeit to provoke anxiety and disruption during an era of conformity during the Post-War consensus. He departed from the Jewish educated classes in refusing to seek the fruit of the Gentile capitalist class, forcing his audience to confront their Jewishness - and otherness - by putting it explicitly on stage.¹⁵⁵

Nowhere did Bruce do this more than in his groundbreaking “Jewish and Goyish” set. (*Goyish* is a word used by Jews to refer to non-Jews.) The routine is a list of examples of people, places, and things that he categorizes as Jewish or *goyish*. Here, he expands the boundaries of Jewish identity beyond the normally accepted confines of religion, ethnicity, nationality, or culture to include Jewishness as a sensibility, a “hip or cool” way of life, an authentic expression of humanity, creative, critical, rebellious thinking, and a clan based on common resistance to oppression.¹⁵⁶ *Goyish*, on the other hand, is defined by Bruce as being the opposite: a Gentile, white, bland, uncool way of life based in repression and conformity to the status quo. Here are what I believe to be the most critical examples in the routine:

Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish...All Italians are Jewish...Eddie Cantor's *goyish*...Pumpnickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very *goyish*...¹⁵⁷ To me, if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish...If

¹⁵² Kaufman, 99.

¹⁵³ Bruce and Cohen, 45, 50, 46, 77, 72, 112, 79, 44, 82, 90.

¹⁵⁴ Kaufman, 99.

¹⁵⁵ Kaufman, 110.

¹⁵⁶ Lawrence Bush, “Jewish-Goyish,” *Jewish Currents*, August 2, 2016, <https://jewishcurrents.org/jewish-goyish>.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce and Cohen, 41-2.

you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish.¹⁵⁸ People's heads turned. How could Count Basie and Ray Charles be Jewish? They were both raised Christian! Yes, proposed Bruce, but they were both Black Americans and by virtue of being the victims of discrimination like Jews, there is a common link of shared oppression and an implicit challenge to the status quo. Italians? Aren't they mostly Catholics? Yes, but when many of them arrived in America, they were persecuted in much a similar way as those "eyesore of New York"¹⁵⁹ Eastern European Jews. Wait a second! Isn't Eddie Cantor Jewish? He was born Edward Israel Iskowitz after all. But, Bruce regarded Cantor's persona and comedy as old and stale "with little social bite" coupled with the fact that he also performed blackface comedy routines, all goyish traits.¹⁶⁰ Lastly, in connection with his Goldwater bit, Bruce prescribes a Jewishness based on location: one is Jewish in New York based on proximity to a huge Jewish population and a crowded, textured, cultured, collaborative and diverse population and one is goyish in Montana based on proximity to a largely Gentile population which often insists on homogeneity.

Lenny Bruce's bold, untempered Jewish humor extends to a critique on Gentile views of Jewish masculinity. Jack Ruby, a Jewish Texan nightclub owner, shot and killed John F. Kennedy's alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. Bruce concludes that Ruby did it precisely because he was Jewish and wanted to fit the masculinity standards of Christian Texans around him. Lenny explains exactly what he thought was going through Ruby's head:

Well, if I kill the guy that killed the *president*, the Christians'll go: '*Whew! What bawls he had, hey? We always thought the Jews were chickenshit, but look at that! See, a Jew at the end, saved everybody!*'¹⁶¹

Only the weirdly creative mind of Lenny Bruce could reposition Ruby's motives as a critique on goyish America and its insistence on Jewish men being incompatible with the "proper" standards of manhood. While this bit is obviously played for laughs, it arises out of a very deep trauma from Lenny Bruce's childhood in which he developed hostility

¹⁵⁸ Devorah Baum, "Comedy As A Source: Lenny Bruce's 'Jewish Vs Goyish.,'" The Parkes Institute | University of Southampton, <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/parkes/resources/sources/pogromsdbstandup1.page>.

¹⁵⁹ See East Side Street Vendors.

¹⁶⁰ See Bush 2016.

¹⁶¹ Bruce and Cohen, 47-8.

towards Christians for making him feel less than human. The bit functions as a way for Bruce to get revenge at those who marginalized him and to point out that everything Ruby became was created by the dominant Anglo institutions of American society.

Make no mistake: Bruce's full embrace of the Yiddish culture of the Lower East Side got him in tremendous trouble. It also came at the price of Gentile and even acculturated Jewish audiences understanding his humor. At the Troubadour Theatre in Los Angeles, he was arrested for saying his ex-wife was "fressing the maid" in the bathroom. The authorities took the Yiddish word "fressing" to mean "an act of oral copulation." Here, Bruce cleverly makes the police look silly with a lesson on language. He points out that fressing in Yiddish just means eating, and oral sex is a *goyish* act. In effect, he was arrested because "some putz" police officer didn't take the time to understand his material, and thought his use of the Yiddish language was hiding the use of swear words.¹⁶² This experience of lack of understanding was also evidenced in Bruce's tour stop in Milwaukee. He recounts hearing rumblings in the audience of people asking each other what his words mean, and details their general confusion and disinterest:

I dunno what the hell he's talking about. I dunno, it's a bunch of silliness. It's doubletalk, I think. That's what he's doing, doubletalk. Well, I dunno, it's, ah, its, ah, good...I guess. You like him? I wanna go to the toilet.¹⁶³

In these moments, it was Bruce's explicit Jewishness that was not comprehended. It's important to note that the laughs a comedian receives is the way they make money. If not enough people are laughing, the comic doesn't get booked at the specific location again. Lenny knew that by using Yiddish phrases outside of his very Jewish hometown of New York City, there was a strong chance his bits wouldn't play well, and hence his way of making a living would suffer. But, being a man of authenticity and conscience, he brings Yiddish to Milwaukee anyway, whether the Wisconsinites liked it or not.

Bruce was engaged in an active reframing of identity that didn't conform to either the Christian notion of Jewish identity nor most of Judaism's notion of Jewish identity for that matter. Crucially, as Professor Devorah Baum notes, Bruce reclaims the Nazi methods of distinguishing Jews and Gentiles from anti-Semitism. Jewishness is no

¹⁶² Bruce and Cohen, 43-4.

¹⁶³ Bruce and Cohen, 121-2.

longer a solid identity. It is dispersed. It encompasses anyone cool, hip, and marginalized who is challenging the status quo.¹⁶⁴ This notion of Jewish identity is instructive for many of us in the twenty-first century who are struggling to imagine what it could look like beyond a religion and beyond a nation-state.

Of course, the Jewish community's reaction to Lenny Bruce was similarly dispersed - and very mixed. Critical to note here is how the Jewish reaction was divided along similar lines as the support or lack thereof for the Rosenbergs. Radical, young, counterculture Jews loved him. Establishment, assimilated Jewish people distanced themselves from him. Bruce loved to read aloud the criticism he received from mainstream America, and frequently pointed out the wide-ranging differences in his reception. After reading a complaint from an American newspaper, "Bruce is one comic who doesn't care what he says, as long as he gets a laugh,"¹⁶⁵ he pulls out a copy of what he calls a "newspaper of some integrity," which is the Yiddish Daily Forward. The headline: "Last night, a star was born!"¹⁶⁶ Enough said. Although he doesn't usually show up in Jewish history, when Bruce was arrested, a new generation of radicalized young Jews was growing up less afraid than their parents, and they threw their support behind him in droves: a petition supporting Bruce's right to self-expression was signed by eighty eight prominent public figures, and almost half of whom were Jewish. The Jewish supporters included the likes of Bob Dylan, Woody Allen, Irving Howe, Lillian Hellman, and Irving Kristol.¹⁶⁷ In addition, Jewish political activists Allen Ginsburg and Abbie Hoffman showed him their love, Ginsburg forming the "Emergency Committee against the Harassment of Lenny Bruce,"¹⁶⁸ and Hoffman dedicating his book to Bruce: "This story is for you, Lenny, from all the Yippies."¹⁶⁹ Jewish Radical Solidarity was alive and well.

Bruce saw himself in solidarity with fellow persecuted Jews as well. I've mentioned his grief for the Rosenbergs above, but he also expressed disdain for the horrible treatment of members of the Hollywood "Six" after the completion of their prison

¹⁶⁴ See Baum.

¹⁶⁵ Bruce and Cohen, 132.

¹⁶⁶ Kaufman, 129.

¹⁶⁷ Kaufman, 140.

¹⁶⁸ Kaufman, 140.

¹⁶⁹ Kaufman, 138.

sentences. After Frank Sinatra bought the rights to produce a film adaptation of William Bradford's book, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, he hired Hollywood "Six" member Albert Maltz to write the screenplay.¹⁷⁰ The public outcry following the announcement of Maltz as the screenwriter was so great that John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign implored Sinatra to cancel the movie, and he obliged.¹⁷¹ Lenny Bruce didn't hold back his disgust for Sinatra's cowardice, calling him out for his blatant abandonment of a blacklisted writer:

Sinatra had enough money to afford some integrity...I feel that this is not a man, a guy who balls a million chicks and gets juiced out of his kug...I want a down person, who's concerned with issues, who would have the *chutzpah* to stand by Maltz...¹⁷²

Sinatra didn't have the *chutzpah*, but Lenny always did. He called for the country to allow the blacklisted Hollywood Ten to live their lives again, free of persecution. What is most crucial is that he used this plea for justice as an opportunity to again critique Christian hypocrisy. "Christ forgave, and if you say you're Christians, then you forgive." Even after the Hollywood "Six" served their prison sentences, the nation refused to treat them with dignity. Bruce argued that if the nation refused to forgive (what did the "Six" do that needed to be forgiven?), they should be honest about what that means. This is what Bruce imagines that brutal honesty would look like: "We're not Christians, we're gonna persecute an ex-con...we're gonna take those writers tomorrow and put them up against the wall and shoot them..."¹⁷³ Lenny Bruce expressed Solidarity Jewishness until the end, and courageously extended it to others in the Jewish community whom the American Empire deemed unfit to live free.

The most essential act of Lenny Bruce's social commentary was the insistence on discussing taboo topics or dirty words in his sets that challenged Puritan constraints on language. This violation of the rules of acceptable speech is what in particular was deemed obscene. In Bruce's view, those offended by dirty words should really be offended by dehumanizing institutions and systems - such as segregation in the

¹⁷⁰ "Win Fanning - 'Pvt. Slovik' Moving Drama," Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, March 13, 1974,

https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=nA5ZAAAAIBAJ&sjid=_mwDAAAAIBAJ&pg=7339%2C1673187.

¹⁷¹ Scott Allen Nollen, *The Cinema of Sinatra: The Actor, On Screen and In Song* (Baltimore, MD: Luminary Press, 2003), 214-16.

¹⁷² Bruce and Cohen, 301.

¹⁷³ Bruce and Cohen, 302.

South¹⁷⁴ and prisons.¹⁷⁵ 1960s America, in Bruce's view, chose to focus on painting the body as "dirty"¹⁷⁶ and not state-sponsored murder in Vietnam, for starters: "What's wrong with appealing to the prurient interest? We appeal to the *killing* interest."¹⁷⁷ He also blasted the illogical, homophobic fear that students would be perverted by homosexual teachers: "There's been no incident reported yet where a kid came home and said, 'today in school I learned five minutes of geography and ten minutes of cocksucking.'"¹⁷⁸ The word "cocksucker" alone was too traumatic for the power structure, and it directly resulted in one of his arrests in 1961.¹⁷⁹ Lenny indicted the backwardness of Christian American values: why this uptightness and policing of language rather than a focus on real problems of systemic cruelty both at home and abroad?

Bruce was a chief critic of American notions of national superiority. *London Observer* critic Kenneth Tyson shows how Bruce transcended comedy, became a philosopher, and in the process, did his audiences a huge service: "He...root[s] out their deepest inhibitions...and tries to force the audience to come to terms with reality..."¹⁸⁰ The reality, for Bruce, was often quite brutal. In a routine I believe encapsulates his career, Bruce acts out senior Nazi official Adolf Eichmann describing his gleeful participation in the Holocaust. Just when the audience gets comfortable with a comedian talking about a genocide which occurred outside of America, he pulls the blanket out from under them and reminds us, in an act of sheer brilliance, that our own nation too commits war crimes with impunity:

Do you people think yourselves better because you burned your enemies at long distances with missiles? Without ever seeing what you'd done to them? Hiroshima...*Auf Wiedersehen*...¹⁸¹

With his willingness to be a Jewish conscious pariah, Lenny Bruce did something remarkable: he made the Gentile American empire the *true* pariah.

¹⁷⁴ Baker 2001, 9:38 mins.

¹⁷⁵ Bruce and Cohen, 293.

¹⁷⁶ Bruce and Cohen, 288-89.

¹⁷⁷ Bruce and Cohen, 283.

¹⁷⁸ Bruce and Cohen, 301.

¹⁷⁹ See Weber 2015.

¹⁸⁰ Baker 2001, 40:45 mins.

¹⁸¹ Bruce and Cohen, 304.

Seinfeld: A Betrayal

When he appeared on *The Steve Allen Show* in 1959, Lenny Bruce ignored the advice of the censors to be civil,¹⁸² confidently waltzing onto the stage to perform with a sly expression on his face. He paused, reveling in the discomfort of the audience, and delivered the now famous, transgressive opening line: “Will Elizabeth Taylor Become Bar-Mitzvahed?” He sarcastically walked it back, mocking the censors: “No I promise continuity, I’ll behave myself. I’ll do all the lines we rehearsed, you know?”¹⁸³ Bruce opened his set with a violation of social and moral boundaries by mocking one of the most popular Christian movie stars in America who just recently converted to Judaism.

Fast forward more than two decades later. On May 6th, 1981, the host of the *Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson, introduced a much more respectable, refined, and bourgeois Jewish comedian. The up-and-comer Jerry Seinfeld had “worked a lot of small clubs in New York and Los Angeles,” and entered the stage of the most crucial performance of his career in a neat, polished outfit, showing right away he was not interested in defying any norms or boundaries. He was just grateful to have this amazing opportunity to boost his career, and therefore, he chose to open his set in strikingly timid fashion: “Hey! Well! Good evening! Boy, this is so exciting for me I’m so excited to be here this is really a Big Thrill!”¹⁸⁴

That is the first line most Americans heard come out of Jerry Seinfeld’s mouth. He proceeded to discuss his favorite subject of nothing, cracking jokes about weather reports,¹⁸⁵ photos of the Earth from 10,000 miles away,¹⁸⁶ and the Guinness Book of World Records’ 1,400 pound heaviest man in the world. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he jokes, “the man has let himself go!” “Whaddaya down to 1200 now?”¹⁸⁷ Seinfeld mentioned he’s from Long Island,¹⁸⁸ but that’s the closest he got to discussing any aspect of his identity. You would never know he was Jewish, unless you recognized the

¹⁸² Kaufman, 129.

¹⁸³ Baker 2001, 8:04 mins.

¹⁸⁴ Carson Tonight Show, “Jerry Seinfeld The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson Appearances,” YouTube, January 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1EZDsf2Sso&t=303s>, 0:25 mins.

¹⁸⁵ Carson Tonight Show, 0:40 mins.

¹⁸⁶ Carson Tonight Show, 0:55 mins.

¹⁸⁷ Carson Tonight Show, 4:30 mins.

¹⁸⁸ Carson Tonight Show, 0:30 mins.

signature Yiddish inflection which permeated his every delivery of every line. When Seinfeld finished his set, Johnny Carson, on behalf of establishment, white, Christian America, gave him the all-important “cool sign.”¹⁸⁹ Seinfeld was in. The audience gave him uproarious applause.¹⁹⁰ They seemed thrilled with the opportunity to turn their brains off for a little while, and hear the comedic descendant of Lenny Bruce honor his predecessor by talking about...nothing. Seinfeld’s lifelong professional discussion of nothing has amassed him enormous capital: he is now \$50 million shy of becoming a billionaire.¹⁹¹ For Lenny, rebellion had consequences. For Jerry, conformity rewarded him handsomely.

Seinfeld’s career took off from his first *Tonight Show* appearance, and he slowly began courting the corporate power structure at NBC. His agent, George Shapiro, sent NBC executives a letter stating he thought Jerry would soon be doing a series on the network.¹⁹² George was correct. After a meeting with executives Rick Ludwin and Warren Littlefield, Jerry signed a development deal with NBC to make a pilot for a TV show.¹⁹³ Together with his co-creator, Larry David, they came up with the idea for “The Seinfeld Chronicles” after making fun of items in a Korean grocery store.¹⁹⁴ They soon discovered what they would be willing to sacrifice for NBC and where they would draw the line. Larry David initially wanted the show to be filmed with three cameras, but gave up once he thought about the \$25,000 alone he would earn from the pilot.¹⁹⁵ Although determined to get “their stuff” out and “our stuff” back in, ultimately Larry admitted that “all [he] wanted to do here was write this thing, get [his] money, and go back to New York.”¹⁹⁶ Jerry often stood his ground at meetings with NBC executives and refused to incorporate several of their demands, saying he was happy to be a stand-up again if the show didn’t work out.¹⁹⁷ However, that is not how he wanted to tell the story to the public

¹⁸⁹ Cinema Archives, “How It Began Making of Documentary | Seinfeld Season 2 Extras,” YouTube, September 6, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bn7yC-fUzjs&t=322s>, 1:02.

¹⁹⁰ Carson Tonight Show, 5:58 mins.

¹⁹¹ Mehera Bonner, “Jerry Seinfeld Is *This* Close to Being a Billionaire Thanks to His Incredible Syndication Deals,” *Cosmopolitan*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/a44422212/jerry-seinfeld-net-worth/>.

¹⁹² Cinema Archives, 1:30 mins.

¹⁹³ Cinema Archives, 4:00 mins.

¹⁹⁴ “How It Began (1/6),” YouTube, August 4, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4n7CqN26K04&list=PL3816491C2D8C852B>, 4:15 mins.

¹⁹⁵ Cinema Archives, 10:30 mins.

¹⁹⁶ Cinema Archives, 14:15 mins.

¹⁹⁷ Cinema Archives, 36:45 mins.

in a later appearance on *The Tonight Show*: “NBC is, I have to say, wonderful, letting us really do the type of comedy and the type of show that we wanted to do.”¹⁹⁸

The pilot of *Seinfeld* almost did not get on the air, and before it did, Jerry and Larry were faced with the long legacy and continuing persistence of Jewish self-censorship in Hollywood.¹⁹⁹ Brandon Tartikoff, the Jewish President of NBC, resisted airing *Seinfeld* because he thought it was “too Jewish, too New York.”²⁰⁰ He believed that “a show about a specifically Jewish family, à la The Goldbergs of 1948-54, would not work today.”²⁰¹ Tartikoff’s fears should be contextualized within the decades-long anxiety many Jews in Hollywood had about asserting an explicitly Jewish presence on television, fearing an anti-Semitic backlash.²⁰² The implications of that fear were the complete absence of directly-defined Jewish characters on television since the Goldbergs left the air in the 1950s, and the embellishment of negative stereotyping and self-deprecation when Jewish representation was seen at all. Jewish men in Hollywood felt the need to characterize their people on television as being content with inferiority²⁰³ and abided by the seminal formula, “write Yiddish, cast British.”²⁰⁴ This legacy is precisely the reason why the fate of *Seinfeld* was on life-support. It is also why it became the duty of Rick Ludwin, a non-Jewish NBC executive, to override Tartikoff by financing a four episode order of *Seinfeld* within his own budget.²⁰⁵ The executives reached a compromise which they believed would ensure maximum profits: only one of the four main characters, Jerry, would be explicitly Jewish, and the others would remain Gentile on paper.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁸ Cinema Archives, 40:50 mins.

¹⁹⁹ Jarrod Tanny, “Deconstructing Seinfeld’s Jewishness,” In *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World*, ed. Gabriel N. Finder and Eli Lederhendler (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55–56.

²⁰⁰ Zurawik, David. “Chapter 7: A ‘Too-Jewish’/Not-Jewish-Enough Jew for the ‘90s -- Seinfeld.” In *Jews of Prime Time*, (University Press of New England, 2003), 204

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f3h&AN=37220322&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²⁰¹ Jon Stratton, “Seinfeld Is a Jewish Sitcom, Isn’t It? Ethnicity and Assimilation in 1990s American Television,” In *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities* (London; New York: Routledge, n.d.), 291.

²⁰² Stratton, 289.

²⁰³ Krieger, Rosalin. “Does He Actually Say the Word Jewish?’ - Jewish Representations in Seinfeld.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 7, no. 4 (October 2003), 400, 402. doi:10.1080/1479758032000165048.

²⁰⁴ Tanny, 54.

²⁰⁵ Zurawik, 204.

²⁰⁶ Zurawik, 206.

On July 4th, 1989, Americans celebrated the founding of a nation by white, Gentile men. On the evening of July 5th, many of them tuned in to see the debut of the first show featuring an explicitly Jewish leading character since *The Goldbergs*²⁰⁷ ended, and in a huge departure from the past, Jerry Seinfeld did not change his name. As Tanny notes, *Seinfeld* was undoubtedly a “watershed in the depiction of Jewishness” on national television,²⁰⁸ as twelve series featuring explicitly Jewish characters aired between 1992-1998 alone.²⁰⁹ In spite of Tartikoff’s reservations, it was a tremendous *comedic* success, and while I disagree with Tanny’s assertion that *Seinfeld* “eliminated the ‘too Jewish’ barrier from network television,”²¹⁰ it certainly punched holes in it. In each episode, Jews are able to see the carefully inscribed yiddishkeit that, if one looks *very* carefully, permeates every gesture, every line delivery, every situation, and every characterization. The show has been influential in the creation of many descendants: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *Big Mouth*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* are just a few shows that come to mind. The *Jewish Journal* put it this way:

Viewers choose shows, so the programmers believe, based on whom they’d most like to invite into their living rooms. Right now, that’s Jerry Seinfeld. In effect, America has chosen a Jew as its favorite Thursday night date...²¹¹

In short, the show’s influence on the Jewish community and American society and culture writ large has been enormous. That is precisely the reason why the show deserves a far sharper, more detailed critique than the Jewish community and the nation writ large have been willing to give it.

The Jewishness that *Seinfeld* was able to exhibit directly or indirectly was owned and sold to the public by corporations under an increasingly deregulated capitalist system in the 1990s.²¹² The show was aired on NBC, produced by Castle Rock Entertainment²¹³ and West-Shapiro Productions,²¹⁴ and distributed by Columbia Tristar

²⁰⁷ Krieger, 387.

²⁰⁸ Tanny, 53.

²⁰⁹ Tanny, 70.

²¹⁰ Tanny, 54.

²¹¹ Zurawik, 216.

²¹² Dan Roberts, “Wall Street Deregulation Pushed By Clinton Advisers, Documents Reveal,” *The Guardian*, April 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/19/wall-street-deregulation-clinton-advisers-obama>.

²¹³ James Sterngold, “‘Seinfeld’ Producers Wonder, Now What?,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/27/movies/seinfeld-producers-wonder-now-what.html>.

²¹⁴ Mike Barnes, “George Shapiro, Personal Manager and ‘Seinfeld’ Producer, Dies At 91,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 28, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/george-shapiro-dead-seinfeld-producer-1235155925/>.

Entertainment.²¹⁵ By the end of the show's run, NBC was making \$200 million a year from *Seinfeld* in advertising revenue,²¹⁶ Jerry made \$267 million in the final year of the run alone, and billions more were made through syndication deals after the finale. Most recently, Netflix paid more than \$500 million for the streaming rights.²¹⁷ In sum, people and corporations, the latter which have now attained peoplehood status in the eyes of the Supreme Court,²¹⁸ will be making a fortune off of this show for a long time to come. If *Seinfeld* was, as scholar Jon Stratton called it, "the most sophisticated example of the surfacing of American-Jewish identity as an ethnic identity in the entertainment sector of the American public sphere in the 1990s..."²¹⁹ we should care whose capital was valorized by the show's depiction of Jewish identity, the reasons why the enormous profits resulted as they did, and the sacrifices that were made to make a multitude of corporations and individuals obscenely wealthy.

On that note, I will argue in this section that *Seinfeld* marketed a coded, palatable portrayal of Jewishness on white, Christian terms to a majority Christian American public. The show was simply Jewish-lite. Jerry's Jewish identification was only accepted because he was, as writer Larry Charles called him, a "nice Jewish boy"²²⁰ that fit the image Gentiles had of Jewish men. The anglicisation of Jerry was accompanied by the embellishment of negative, distasteful Jewish stereotypes present in or espoused by the characters of George Costanza, Elaine Benes, and Cosmo Kramer. Gentile audiences were able to laugh at the four main characters because they fit the image of Jews that they harbored in the back or front of their minds. For this, NBC and Castle Rock executives, as well as the writers, actors, and creative team of the show were awarded with more money than most Americans could spend in multiple lifetimes. In what surely

²¹⁵ Billboard Staff, "'Seinfeld' Headed To DVD," *Billboard*, August 6, 2004,

<https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/seinfeld-headed-to-dvd-1431462/>.

²¹⁶ Schneider, Michael. "Seinfeld Masters His Own Demise. (Cover Story)." *Electronic Media* 17, no. 1 (January 5, 1998): 1,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=aph&AN=76048&authtype=shib&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²¹⁷ Andrew R. Chow, "Why Netflix Paid More Than \$500 Million For Seinfeld," *Time*, October 1, 2021,

<https://time.com/6103335/seinfeld-netflix-business/>.

²¹⁸ Tim Lau, "Citizens United Explained," Brennan Center for Justice, December 12, 2019,

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained>.

²¹⁹ Stratton, 283.

²²⁰ Zehme, Bill, and Mark Seliger. "Jerry & George & Kramer & Elaine. (Cover Story)." *Rolling Stone*, no. 660/661 (July 8, 1993): 40,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=aph&AN=9306300411&authtype=shib&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

would have been an absolute disgrace in the eyes of the Hollywood “Six,” the Rosenbergs, Lenny Bruce, and the many other past proponents of the Jewish Radical Tradition, *Seinfeld* represented the ultimate corporatization of American Jewish identity at the end of the twentieth century.

Let us begin with the delicate, neatly packaged construction of Jerry’s Jewish identity. It isn’t until the seventy-fourth episode of the show, in its fifth season, in an episode called “The Cigar Store Indian,” that Jerry gives his first verbal indication of being Jewish.²²¹ The brutal irony is that his identification comes at the expense of two other marginalized groups in this episode, which has been characterized as racially insensitive by several sources.²²²²²³ Jerry, in front of Elaine’s Native American friend Winona, gifts Elaine with an antique statue of a cigar store Indian while mocking Native American chants. Jerry, being unaware of Winona’s background, feels remorse and figures a good way to make amends would be going on a date with this woman.²²⁴ Jerry then asks a Chinese mailman where a good Chinese restaurant would be around town, and Jerry doesn’t understand why the mailman takes offense:

Jerry: You know, I don't get it. Not allowed to ask a Chinese person where the Chinese restaurant is! I mean, aren't we all getting a little too sensitive? I mean, someone asks me which way's Israel, I don't fly off the handle.²²⁵

Notwithstanding the fact that not every Jewish person has a natural connection to Israel, it is in the very same sentence in which Jerry doesn’t understand the nature of a microaggression that the show’s writers decide to include the first explicit indication that Jerry is Jewish. His brief disclosure of identity is offset by racism. Make no mistake about it: if there is any conversation of race at all in *Seinfeld*, it is discussed through a character espousing racist sentiments.

Jerry’s Jewishness is further watered down through his endless quest to fit the norms of white, Anglo middle class America while retaining just enough particularist Jewish traits. Rosalin Krieger has given us a useful metric by which to think about

²²¹ “The Cigar Store Indian,” SeinfeldScripts, <https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/TheCigarStoreIndian.htm>

²²² Sola Agustsson, “10 ‘Seinfeld’ Episodes That Are Racist And Sexist In Retrospect,” Salon, July 22, 2015, https://www.salon.com/2015/07/22/10_seinfeld_episodes_that_are_racist_and_sexist_in_retrospect_partner/.

²²³ Todd Van Luling, “Jerry Seinfeld Admits Some ‘Seinfeld’ Material Is Now Offensive,” HuffPost, October 10, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/seinfeld-offensive_n_59d8d036e4b046f5ad9877ec.

²²⁴ “‘Seinfeld’: The Cigar Store Indian - Synopsis,” IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0697677/plotsummary/>.

²²⁵ Gammill, Tom; Pross, Max; writers. *Seinfeld*. Season 5, Episode 10, “The Cigar Store Indian.” Directed by Tom Cherones. Aired December 9th, 1993. <https://www.netflix.com/title/70153373>, 10:55 mins.

Jerry's Jewish identity. Delineating zero as the dividing line between the unassimilated Eastern European Yiddisher immigrant identity (below zero) and the white, Anglo American identity (above zero), Krieger positions Jerry at exactly zero,²²⁶ the perfect idealized balance between someone like Lenny Bruce and someone like Ronald Reagan. In short, he is ambivalent about his Jewishness. He is an American who just *happens* to be a Jew. This explains why Jerry's heritage is only mentioned a mere five times in the entire one hundred and eighty episode run of the show.²²⁷ He is constantly in brief relationships with a "parade" of Gentile girlfriends, whom we never know if he marries or ends up with for the long-term.²²⁸ This is deliberate. The *Seinfeld* team does not want to take any sort of stance either way. If Jerry ends up with a Jewish partner, they will be entering "too Jewish" territory. If he ends up with a Gentile partner, Jerry won't be Jewish enough. His identity is so tightly sealed in a bottle that anything remotely resembling a comprehensive study of his background rarely occurs.

The yiddishkeit of *Seinfeld* is so subtle that it appears absent to those who aren't actively looking for it. The markers are subtly shown through Jewish speech patterns, language, cultural references, history, foods, physicality, and behavior.²²⁹ When George laments in "The Opposite," asking, "Why did it all turn out like this for me? I had so much promise,"²³⁰ one would not recognize that line as Jewish-coded unless they comprehended that an essential aspect of Jewish humor is self-deprecation. Similarly, one would not recognize Estelle Costanza's line, "I come home, and find my son treating his body like it was an amusement park!" as Jewish-coded in "The Contest"²³¹ unless they understood that her hysterical, brash delivery and expressive gesture to the heavens is consistent with similar characterizations of the Jewish mother in popular culture. Authentic Jewish life in the show became what Stratton calls "Jewish moments."²³² And these "Jewish moments" are still few and far between: a measly six out of one hundred and eighty episodes have what one could call "Jewish plot-lines."²³³

²²⁶ Krieger, 394, 397.

²²⁷ Tanny, 69.

²²⁸ Krieger, 398.

²²⁹ Krieger, 388.

²³⁰ *Seinfeld*, Jerry; David, Larry; Cowan, Andy, writers. *Seinfeld*. Season 5, Episode 21, "The Opposite." Directed by Tom Cherones. Aired May 19th, 1994. <https://www.netflix.com/title/70153373>, 1:50 mins.

²³¹ David, Larry, writer. *Seinfeld*. Season 4, Episode 10, "The Contest." Directed by Tom Cherones. Aired November 18th, 1992. <https://www.netflix.com/title/70153373>, 7:25 mins.

²³² Stratton, 307.

²³³ Tanny, 53.

This absence of obvious, recognizable Jewishness (to Gentiles) is what gives the show its universal (universalism is entrenched in whiteness from the get-co), mainstream appeal. As Tanny notes, *Seinfeld* owes its existence to a Yiddish sense of humor that arose in the Lower East Side,²³⁴ but, throughout its run, the show was ashamed of this American Jewish ancestral homeland.

One of the NBC executives, Warren Littlefield, admitted that as *Seinfeld* progressed, he realized Tartikoff's "too Jewish" fears were unfounded:

Whether you're in a major market in the east or whether you were in a small market in the west, or more importantly even the midwest, the numbers all seem to be the same and young adult men felt something was out there on television that was fresh and original...²³⁵

Several elements are worth unpacking here. One, Littlefield is viewing "the most sophisticated example of the surfacing of American-Jewish identity..."²³⁶ through a market lens. Corporatization is hard at work. Two, he says the quiet part out loud: "*more importantly, the Midwest,*" which has historically been code for white and Gentile. Three, he indicates the show is primarily geared toward appealing to young adult men, as he does not mention how *Seinfeld* is being received by any demographic of women.

This male-centric audience is indicative of *Seinfeld's* firm entrenchment within the patriarchal norms of society. Added to that is the intersectional marginalization of Jewish women on the show. Stratton notes the "virtual absence of female Jewishness on 1990s television,"²³⁷ and this is one of the sacrifices *Seinfeld* felt it needed to make to stay the top-rated show on the air. The only explicitly Jewish character on *Seinfeld* is male, and for the only female main character, Elaine, the writers take time to directly mention that she is Gentile.²³⁸ Jewish men matched with Anglo women made Jewishness more palatable on television, as evidenced by the fact that Jerry has only one Jewish girlfriend, Rachel, in the entire show. Rachel, Krieger notes, had to be equally or more attractive than Jerry's other Gentile girlfriends.²³⁹ One of the few episodes Rachel appears in is "The Raincoats" where she and Jerry are caught having a makeout

²³⁴ Tanny, 54.

²³⁵ Cinema Archives, 41:24 mins.

²³⁶ Stratton, 283.

²³⁷ Stratton, 295.

²³⁸ Stratton, 304.

²³⁹ Krieger, 398.

session during a showing of the film *Schindler's List*.²⁴⁰ What makes this scenario particularly problematic is that it is one of the only direct Jewish representations on the show. Not to mention that Larry David came up with the idea for the episode while he was in temple, thinking about “what would happen if [he] reached over and touched [his] wife's breast now?”²⁴¹ Not to mention that Jerry Seinfeld earned \$100,000 for this episode alone during Season Five.²⁴² Not to mention that this episode was one of many that made *Seinfeld* one of NBC's “most profitable products,”²⁴³ earning the network an astonishing \$400 million through the show's nine season run.²⁴⁴ *Seinfeld* represented the commodification of Jewish pain.

As Lenny Bruce (and his persecution) has taught us, language is paramount. Inspired by the title of Krieger's analysis, “Does He Actually Say The Word Jewish,” I decided to calculate how many times the words “Jew,” “Jews,” “Jewish,” or “Judaism” were said outright over the course of *Seinfeld*'s nine seasons, and in what circumstances the words were used. Initially, I got excited when I thought I found a mention of “Jew” in the show's second episode. “Oh wait,” I said. “That doesn't say ‘Jew!’ That says jewelry!” For a show which carries an Ashkenazic-Jewish name in the *title*,²⁴⁵ we have to wait until the *seventh* season to hear a single, solitary usage of any variation of the word “Jewish.”²⁴⁶ In its 112th episode, quite appropriately titled “The Postponement,” aired six years into the show's run, we hear the debut of the word “Jewish” on *Seinfeld*:

Jerry: Elaine, if I could say a word here about the *Jewish* people. That man in no way represents our ability to take in a nice piece of juicy gossip and keep it to ourselves.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁰ Seinfeld, Jerry; David, Larry; Gammill, Tom; Pross, Max, writers. *Seinfeld*. Season 5, Episode 18, “The Raincoats, Part 1 & II.” Directed by Tom Cherones. Aired April 28th, 1994. <https://www.netflix.com/title/70153373>, 25:38 mins.

²⁴¹ *Seinfeld Season 5: Inside Look - "The Raincoats"* (DVD). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. 2005.

²⁴² See Bonner 2023.

²⁴³ James Collins, “Television: Can Anybody Fill Seinfeld's Shoes?,” *Time*, January 12, 1998, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,987649,00.html>.

²⁴⁴ “A show about nothing, worth a lot of something.” *Forbes*. September 21, 1998. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3TNX-YX40-0019-F2DG-00000-00&context=1516831>.

²⁴⁵ “Seinfeld - Family Name Origins & Meanings,” FamilyEducation, June 9, 2019, <https://www.familyeducation.com/baby-names/name-meaning/seinfeld>.

²⁴⁶ “The Postponement,” SeinfeldScripts, <https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/ThePostponement.html>.

²⁴⁷ David, Larry, writer. *Seinfeld*. Season 7, Episode 2, “The Postponement.” Directed by Andy Ackerman. Aired September 28th, 1995. <https://www.netflix.com/title/70153373>, 19:07 mins.

The very first utterance of the word “Jewish” casts it in a negative light. In “The Postponement,” Elaine seeks advice from a gossipy Rabbi about how to deal with her jealousy of George’s engagement. The Rabbi proceeds to reveal their discussion to the whole neighborhood.²⁴⁸ In the word’s debut, Jerry first asked permission to even say “Jewish”: “Elaine, if I could say a word here...” Then, the purpose of the word’s utterance is for Jerry to marginalize the Rabbi by saying that Jewish people aren’t normally like him. There is no power, no agency, no positive self-expression in the word’s usage. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. There was an episode which aired during the show’s fifth season two years before “The Postponement” which contained zero usages of any variations of “Jewish.” The episode’s title? “The Bris.”²⁴⁹ Second, the writers titled two episodes “The Chinese Restaurant” and “The Chinese Woman,” used the words “Chinese,” “Indian,” and “Native American” a cumulative total of thirty six times and featured George’s attempted conversion to Latvian Orthodoxy before feeling that they were ready to use the word “Jewish” once.²⁵⁰ This, my friends, is how powerful Jewish censorship remained in the 1990s. In one singular episode, the word “Chinese” is used twenty four times.²⁵¹ Through the show’s one hundred and eighty episode run, variations of the word “Jewish” were used a paltry thirty one times.²⁵² Fourteen out of the thirty one usages occurred in one singular episode, “The Yada Yada.”²⁵³ Peter Mehlman, a writer on *Seinfeld*, said he didn’t think “we shied away from talking about Jewish identity.”²⁵⁴ Mr. Mehlman, the numbers don’t lie.

“Follow the money.” Deep Throat famously states that phrase in the film *All The President’s Men*,²⁵⁵ and by doing so with *Seinfeld*, we can find some answers for why the hallowed-out depiction of Jewishness was allowed to take place. In 1992, Westinghouse Electric was trying to sell Castle Rock Entertainment to entrepreneur Ted Turner, and Donald Trump’s future chief strategist Steve Bannon was brought in to help

²⁴⁸ “The Postponement” - Storyline,” IMDb, September 28, 1995, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0697759/>.

²⁴⁹ “The Bris,” SeinfeldScripts, <https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/TheBris.htm>.

²⁵⁰ “The Chinese Restaurant,” “The Chinese Woman,” “The Cigar Store Indian,” “The Conversion,” SeinfeldScripts, https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/episodes_oveview.html.

²⁵¹ “The Chinese Woman,” SeinfeldScripts, <https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/TheChineseWoman.htm>.

²⁵² All Episodes, SeinfeldScripts, <https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/seinfeld-scripts.html>.

²⁵³ “The Yada Yada, SeinfeldScripts, <https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/TheYadaYada.htm>.

²⁵⁴ Zurawik, 207.

²⁵⁵ “All The President’s Men’ - (Movie Clip) Follow The Money,” Turner Classic Movies, 1976, <https://www.tcm.com/video/298571/all-the-presidents-men-follow-the-money/#:~:text=Reporter%20Bob%20Woodward%20>.

Westinghouse negotiate the deal. Through Bannon's assistance, the firm agreed to accept an ownership stake in the royalties for several TV series under Castle Rock's name. One of those shows was *Seinfeld*.²⁵⁶ Calling Bill Kristol a "renegade Jew," and columnist Anne Applebaum "a Polish, Jewish, American elitist", and reportedly refusing to send his children to a school with a large number of Jewish students,²⁵⁷ Bannon made a huge sum of profit from a show known for its Jewish humor. According to *The Financial Times*, *Seinfeld* earned around \$3.1 billion in reruns by 2013. If Bannon and his company's profit was one percent of that number, they would have already made \$31 million.²⁵⁸ The writer Peter Mehlman's response to this revelation was tepid at best, stating that Bannon "made a ton of money. It was a smart decision...It doesn't make him any less of a human being."²⁵⁹ When asked whether Jerry felt any measure of responsibility, his response was simply "no" and added that "there are dozens and dozens of investors and people you don't know about."²⁶⁰ Jerry and Mehlman, when confronted with an anti-Semite's financial gain from Jewishness, responded with a shrug. Once again, like the Rosenberg trial, albeit in a slightly different fashion, the Gentile community could not have asked for a better show.

Seinfeld, long considered to be a Jewish sitcom, finally decided to make one singular episode out of one hundred and eighty in which Jerry was the recipient of anti-Semitism, an experience that is still all too common in the experience of American Jews. As we shall see, however, the episode is made at the expense of Jewish pain, and to the benefit of Gentile laughter. Released in the show's eighth season, "The Yada Yada" featured 45% of the usages of "Jewish" and its variations throughout the series,²⁶¹ and it owed its title, in part, to one of Lenny Bruce's routines, "Father Flotsky's Triumph."²⁶² For those who are unaware, the yiddish phrase "yada yada" is used in

²⁵⁶ Connie Bruck, "How Hollywood Remembers Steve Bannon," *The New Yorker*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/01/how-hollywood-remembers-steve-bannon>.

²⁵⁷ Rory Carroll, "Seinfeld Writer Says 'it's Pretty Galling' That Steve Bannon Still Earns Royalties," *The Guardian*, December 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/09/steve-bannon-seinfeld-royalties-peter-mehlman-trump>.

²⁵⁸ Joe Otterson, "How Steve Bannon Made a Fortune Off of 'Seinfeld,'" *TheWrap*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.thewrap.com/steve-bannon-seinfeld/>.

²⁵⁹ See Otterson 2016.

²⁶⁰ Hilary Lewis, "Jerry Seinfeld Responds to Steve Bannon Profiting From 'Seinfeld,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 8, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/jerry-seinfeld-steve-bannon-trump-julia-louis-dreyfus-comedy-movies-a-t-new-yorker-festival-2017-1046825/>.

²⁶¹ Zurawik, 207.

²⁶² "Letters," NPR, December 15, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17282998>.

sentences to replace words or phrases that are too long, boring, or uncomfortable to say out loud.²⁶³ The episode showcases Jerry's Gentile dentist, Tim Whatley's recent conversion to Judaism. Only two days after his conversion, Whatley is making demeaning Jewish jokes: he calls sitting in the sauna "a Jewish workout,"²⁶⁴ and asks Jerry if he's heard the jokes about "the Rabbi and the farmer's daughter"²⁶⁵ and "the Pope and Raquel Welch on the lifeboat."²⁶⁶ For the first joke, writers Peter Mehlman and Jill Franklyn have Jerry simply respond with a perplexed look. Later, to their credit, Jerry does call Whatley out, and asserts what is his only burst of agency as a Jew in the entire series: "Tim, do you think you should be making jokes like that?"²⁶⁷

What is clear as the episode progresses, however, is that Jerry is offended not because of Whatley's anti-Semitic microaggressions, but because of what he calls Whatley's goal of "total joke-telling immunity."²⁶⁸ Jerry strangely goes to see a priest in a confessional booth to complain about Whatley's jokes. The priest asks him the standard "tell me your sins" question, and in a self-demeaning response, Jerry says, "Well I should mention that I'm Jewish." This is the first and only time in the entire series where we directly hear Jerry say "I'm Jewish," and it is in a confessional booth where it is stated as a sin. The priest then asks Jerry if Whatley's jokes offend him as a Jew. Jerry's response is, I would argue, the most important line not just of the episode, but the entire series in regards to the way the show deals with Jewish identity: "No, it offends me as a *comedian*."²⁶⁹ This is the ultimate sweetener to a bitter cup of coffee. For audience members who were uncomfortable with the newfound quasi-directness of Jerry's identity, they breathed a quick sigh of relief. The Gentile comfort level only increases as the episode progresses, as anti-Semitism is trivialized and played for laughs when Kramer calls Jerry an "anti-dentite" for complaining about dentists.²⁷⁰ However, the final scene may be the most brutal. We are at a wedding and Jerry

²⁶³ "'Yada Yada' Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/yada%20yada>.

²⁶⁴ Mehlman, Peter; Franklyn, Jill, writers. *Seinfeld*. Season 8, Episode 19, "The Yada Yada." Directed by Andy Ackerman. Aired April 24th, 1997, <https://www.netflix.com/title/70153373>, 1:45 mins.

²⁶⁵ Mehlman and Franklyn, 7:07 mins.

²⁶⁶ Mehlman and Franklyn, 10:55 mins.

²⁶⁷ Mehlman and Franklyn, 7:15 mins.

²⁶⁸ Mehlman and Franklyn, 12:33.

²⁶⁹ Mehlman and Franklyn, 16:37.

²⁷⁰ Mehlman and Franklyn, 20:45.

explains his confrontation with Whatley to his Gentile girlfriend sitting beside him. They have this exchange to conclude the episode:

Beth: Hey, what do you call a doctor who fails out of med school?

Jerry: What?

Beth: A dentist. (They laugh).

Jerry: That's a good one. Dentists.

Beth: Yeah, who needs 'em? Not to mention the Blacks and the Jews. (Jerry fakes a smile).²⁷¹

The freeze frame ends on Jerry's face quickly fading from an amused smile to a grimace of sadness and slight pain. In a shocking twist, the writers have decided to end the episode with Jerry being the recipient of the most serious anti-Semitic remark in not just the episode, but of the entire series. But, he does not get to respond. The episode ends there. He retains his reputation as "the perfect catch" and the "nice Jewish boy."²⁷² This, my friends, is once again the commodification of Jewish pain, one of *Seinfeld's* most important moneymakers.

As Professor Vincent Brook reminds us, "Jewish sitcoms had become not only 'safe' but also potentially lucrative commodities."²⁷³ *Seinfeld's* other lucrative strategy besides coding was the presentation of demeaning Jewish stereotypes. Knowing that they couldn't get away with presenting them through the directly Jewish Jerry, the writers pass them on to George Costanza and his family, who are ostensibly Gentile Italians on paper.²⁷⁴ But, there are countless signs of them being Jewish-coded. Jerry Stiller, a Jewish actor casted as Frank Costanza, revealed to a journalist that "we're a Jewish family in the Witness Protection Program under the name Costanza."²⁷⁵ George is the pinnacle of the powerless, schlemiel Jew who can never seem to achieve success.²⁷⁶ As Tanny notes, his physical being is presented as "the sickly antithesis of the Gentile body"²⁷⁷ and one of the themes of George's character is trying and failing to

²⁷¹ Mehlman and Franklyn, 25:09.

²⁷² See Zehme and Seliger 1993.

²⁷³ Tanny, 70.

²⁷⁴ Tanny, 59.

²⁷⁵ Tanny, 57.

²⁷⁶ Stratton, 305.

²⁷⁷ Tanny, 58.

meet Gentile definitions of manhood. For Estelle Costanza, we see the stereotype of the Jewish mother firmly at work: she is “short tempered, argumentative, nagging, loud, aggressive,” and “pushy.” Her husband Frank serves the purpose of mocking the working-class, unassimilated Jews who have held onto the culture of the Lower East Side.²⁷⁸ Most of Frank’s line deliveries are so aggressive, loud, and manic that we as an audience can’t help but think of him as a lunatic.

We also see the writer’s disassociation with the Yiddish culture of the Lower East Side through Kramer and Elaine. Though also not Jews on paper, both are implicitly Jewish. In fact, Kramer’s original name in the pilot’s script was Kessler, but again, for the *Seinfeld* team, one openly Jewish character was apparently enough, and so they changed his name.²⁷⁹ Kramer, like Jerry, rents his apartment rather than owns it on a block that is primarily white.²⁸⁰ His Yiddishisms are not presented in a positive light; they are foolish clownery played for laughs.²⁸¹ Kramer exists on the margins of society, which is an essential Jewish quality of Lenny Bruce’s “Jewish and Goyish” routine. The characterization of Elaine, too, exhibits many aspects of Jewishness. Julia Louis Dreyfus, the actress, is Jewish on her father’s side, distantly related to Alfred Dreyfus of the Dreyfus Affair.²⁸² Her character has the stereotypically physical Jewish traits of a “petite stature, dark eyes and thick hair.”²⁸³ Elaine is familiar with the neuroses of Jewish maleness,²⁸⁴ she is prone to outbursts of great emotion traditionally associated with stereotypes of Jewish women,²⁸⁵ and the inspiration for her character, in part, came from Jewish comediennes Carol Leifer and Elayne Boosler.²⁸⁶ At the same time, Elaine’s goyish civility is often a vehicle that the writers use to ridicule the more “uncivil” traits of the more Jewish characters, Jerry and George. I’ve already mentioned her interaction with the gossipy Rabbi, and in addition to that, she is presented as the victim of

²⁷⁸ Krieger, 396.

²⁷⁹ Krieger, 391.

²⁸⁰ Stratton, 307.

²⁸¹ Krieger, 401.

²⁸² Gabriela Geselowitz, “Dreyfus! Dreyfus! Dreyfuss!,” *Tablet Magazine*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/dreyfus-dreyfus-dreyfuss>.

²⁸³ Krieger, 400.

²⁸⁴ Cooper, Evan. “I’m a Little Scared of Elaine: Representations of Jewish and Gentile Women on ‘Seinfeld’ and ‘Curb Your Enthusiasm.’” *Studies in American Humor*, no. 27 (2013): 104. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23823981>.

²⁸⁵ Cooper, 100.

²⁸⁶ Cooper, 111.

threatening Jewish male attraction in "Serenity Now."²⁸⁷ In short, all four characters, while only one directly Jewish, are at least indirectly Jewish, and in too many instances, the writers use the three ostensibly non-Jewish characters as an opportunity to present Jewishness as foolish and deserving of mockery.

The corporatization of American Jewish identity was no more evidently seen than in *Seinfeld's* finale, which was the most hyped up cultural phenomenon that one can imagine. In order for companies to air a thirty second advertisement during the *Seinfeld* finale, NBC charged them \$2 million, the largest price in television history. With the finale alone, NBC stood ready to make \$40 million.²⁸⁸ The episode was watched by 76 million people,²⁸⁹ which at the time was almost a third of America's total population.²⁹⁰ Jewish identity became the Super Bowl. As one NBC executive drooled, "You have a Super Bowl every year," but "this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to reach the most coveted audience in television."²⁹¹ Corporate greed was on such full display that NBC executives were willing to pay Jerry \$5 million per episode to keep the show going,²⁹² as they did not want to lose the lucrative commodity that amounted to 40% of their \$500 million annual profit.²⁹³ Perhaps most crazily, New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani wanted to hold a mass viewing of the show at Times Square and project it onto a video screen, but the city thankfully prevented that plan from materializing.²⁹⁴

Now that we've established the manic interest of the forces of capitalism in the finale, we need to analyze the plot of the episode itself. After the gang's private jet crashes in goyish small town Latham, Massachusetts, they are arrested for violating the norms of civility: they refuse to help a fat guy getting robbed, which violates the town's

²⁸⁷ Stratton, 295.

²⁸⁸ "'Seinfeld' shocker: \$2 million price tag". *Advertising Age*. February 9, 1998.

<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentitem:4F4N-YYW0-00TC-W19W-00000-00&context=1516831>.

²⁸⁹ Schneider, Michael. "Cheers to 'Seinfeld.'" *Electronic Media* 17, no. 21 (May 18, 1998): 1A.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=aph&AN=656928&authtype=shib&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁹⁰ "United States - Population - 1998," *Country Economy*, November 14, 2016,

<https://countryeconomy.com/demography/population/usa?year=1998#:~:text=United%20States%20ended%201998%20with,3%2C207%2C179%20people%20compared%20to%201997>.

²⁹¹ See Schneider 1998.

²⁹² See Chow 2021.

²⁹³ See "A show about nothing, worth a lot of something."

²⁹⁴ Daniel Frankel, "No Times Square Bash for 'Seinfeld,'" *E!* Online, April 1, 1998, <https://www.eonline.com/news/36186/no-times-square-bash-for-seinfeld>.

newly passed Good Samaritan Law. (It is important to note that mocking people's weight is part of how the real Jerry Seinfeld's career began.) "Why would we want to help somebody? That's what nuns and Red Cross workers are for!" George declares.²⁹⁵ All four main characters become as Jewish and as marginalized as they've ever been on the show, as they are put on trial for the whole nation to see as "The New York Four," in similar fashion to that of the Rosenbergs and Hollywood "Six" before them. "There's no love lost with that group," a reporter says.²⁹⁶ The prosecuting attorney makes the gang's character, and hence, Jewishness, the central issue of the trial before the small-town, all-white jury, and calls up an assortment of witnesses that one or more of the four has wronged throughout the show's run. Among those who testify against them are George's boss Steinbrenner, who, similarly to the Hollywood "Six," fires George for being a communist.²⁹⁷ In addition, there was the mall security guard who arrested Jerry for urinating in the parking lot,²⁹⁸ and the infamous Soup Nazi,²⁹⁹ who is effectively collaborating with the State against the Jews in this episode. The trial is theater for both the fictional white, Gentile audience and the real white, Gentile audience. Once again, the Gentile community could not have asked for a better show.

In *Seinfeld*, even being Jewish-lite has consequences. The "New York Four" are inevitably found guilty and sentenced to a year in prison for "criminal indifference,"³⁰⁰ the length of the sentence being the same as the one given to several members of the Hollywood "Six." However, the "Four" don't go to prison for holding firm to their moral principles like the "Six." They go to prison for being bystanders. At the end of the series, Jerry and the Jews end up exactly where Gentiles want them: in prison. The scene fades out with them behind bars.³⁰¹ In the show's "tag" scene, the last image we see of *Seinfeld* is actually quite similar to the many images we see of Lenny Bruce. Jerry is performing stand-up before his fellow prisoners and the police are watching like hawks with their clubs, waiting for the right moment to take him offstage. One of them finally

²⁹⁵ David, Larry, writer. *Seinfeld*. Season 9, Episode 22, "Finale, Part 1 & 2." Directed by Andy Ackerman. Aired May 14th, 1998. <https://www.netflix.com/title/70153373>, 21:30 mins.

²⁹⁶ "Finale," 25:10 mins.

²⁹⁷ "Finale," 41:58 mins.

²⁹⁸ "Finale," 40:13 mins.

²⁹⁹ "Finale," 42:37 mins.

³⁰⁰ "Finale," 50:50 mins.

³⁰¹ "Finale," 54:10 mins.

says “that’s enough” and drags Jerry away while he gets booed by his fellow prisoners.³⁰² And that is the last we see of the “the most sophisticated example of the surfacing of American-Jewish identity as an ethnic identity in the entertainment sector of the American public sphere in the 1990s.”³⁰³ But this time, in the greatest act of dishonor to his predecessor, Jerry isn’t taken off stage for shattering a glass ceiling. He is dragged off for discussing the same subject in which he began his career: the subject of absolutely nothing.

What may be most notable and most disappointing about the portrayal of Jewish identity on *Seinfeld* is the show’s complete omission of our people’s commitment to the betterment of humanity. Stratton has in fact validly called the main cast “the most selfish, self-centred, and yet naive characters that have been envisaged for American television.”³⁰⁴ The show has asserted a depoliticized Jewish identity that is divorced from the politics of the union organizers of the Lower East Side. The creative team, like Judge Kaufmann, is saying the following in no uncertain terms: Jews are no longer Julius and Ethel Rosenberg or immigrant Yiddish socialists who can’t conform to the Gentile standards of purity. This time, we are “civilized,” assimilated, ready to try our best to embody the Protestant work ethic, and if we fail, well at least you’ll be entertained by our failure, laughing at us all the way to the bank where anti-Semites like Steve Bannon gleefully cashed their checks at our expense.

We can talk endlessly about the many players involved in the production of *Seinfeld*, but at the end of the day, it is Jerry Seinfeld’s last name in the title, and hence, any discussion of the show should start and end with his identity, and so I will conclude on that note. It is obvious that Jerry himself has never been committed to an authentic expression of Jewish identity. His chief commitment has always been the valorization of his capital at any expense. Based on his apolitical comedy, subdued Jewish identity, and his need to be comforting, I would understand the urge to call *Seinfeld* a sellout to the establishment status quo defined by Gentile America. But, by definition, the term sellout necessitates a betrayal of more radical principles to gain privileges from the

³⁰² “Finale,” 54:41.

³⁰³ Stratton, 283.

³⁰⁴ Stratton, 310.

establishment. Jerry Seinfeld can't properly be called a sellout because, from the beginning of his career, he never articulated clear principles. He insisted, rather, on always being the playboy of centrist American society. He started his career with soft, "spoonful of sugar" comedy and he will undoubtedly end his career by playing the same ambivalent, apathetic guy without any semblance of a comedic soul or any important message of substance. "Sometimes the road less traveled is less traveled for a reason," he once said.³⁰⁵ Unlike Lenny Bruce's tragic death,³⁰⁶ Seinfeld will likely die comfortably in a bed surrounded by loved ones. He will have lived a life which took advantage of Bruce's shattered glass ceiling only to leave the next glass ceiling unbroken with one or two tiny dents in it. In the final scene of a documentary chronicling *Seinfeld's* rise, Jerry actually defines his legacy quite appropriately (the ellipses denote his pauses): "We went from a couple of bums...to, uhh, industry titans...right across first avenue...and 78th street. And that's the story."³⁰⁶

That, indeed, was the story. Jerry Seinfeld positioned himself and his show firmly within the legacy of Park Avenue Jewishness - he and the *Seinfeld* creative team were willing to divorce themselves and their show from the Solidaric Jewishness of the Lower East Side and present an image of establishment, palatable, bourgeois Jewishness devoid of passion and soul, just the kind of Jewishness that is acceptable to Gentile America. *Seinfeld* was a betrayal of the Jewish Radical Tradition.

"Not In Our Name": The Jewish Radical Tradition in the Twenty-First Century

As I conclude this work nearly a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, the American Jewish community continues to relitigate the public and private performance of our identity. Given the fact that we are Jewish, it is absolutely no surprise that we are engaged in fierce disagreement about how to most authentically practice our identity. We are seeing a battle rage between those of us who desire to continue the legacy of New York's Yiddish socialists and those of us who desire to see

³⁰⁵ Olivia Howard, "Conservatism and Anti-Liberalism: A Seinfeld Case Study," Medium, November 27, 2019, <https://medium.com/the-weight-of-wit/conservatism-and-anti-liberalism-a-seinfeld-case-study-12b0f5cd639d>.

³⁰⁶ Cinema Archives, 55:30 mins.

us depart from our radical roots and join the ranks of our Gentile oppressors. The battle between the Park Avenue Jewishness of Judge Irving Kaufman, Prosecuting Assistant Roy Cohn, and *Seinfeld* versus the Lower East Side Jewishness of the Hollywood “Six,” Lenny Bruce, and the Rosenbergs rages on in the public eye.

Today, this battle rages on most clearly with a vigorous debate on the most public manifestation of global Jewish identity: the State of Israel. Through the current iteration of the Zionist project in the Middle East, we are currently seeing the worst humanitarian crisis in Gaza in modern history.³⁰⁷ On October 7th, Hamas launched a terrorist attack which murdered approximately 1,200 Israeli people, many of them elderly, women, and young children, the largest mass killing of Jewish people in one day since the Holocaust. In addition, Hamas took an estimated 239 Israelis as hostages.³⁰⁸³⁰⁹ There has been a callous disregard and lack of acknowledgement of Hamas’s mass murder of Israeli civilians particularly on college campuses.³¹⁰ That has been a supreme disappointment. Like many Jews, I wanted time to grieve the massive murder of Israelis in peace, but the State of Israel did not grant the world that time, and chose to respond instead with blood. To justify Israel’s response, many have asserted the phrase, “Israel has the right to defend itself.” We should ask ourselves: What constitutes defense? The State of Israel has murdered nearly 20,000 Palestinian people in Gaza and the Occupied West Bank as of December 19th and approximately 70% of Gazans killed have been women and children. Every hour in Gaza, an estimated fifteen Palestinians are killed and six of them are children.³¹¹ As of December 2nd, around 80% of Gazans have been displaced. For those who continue to survive, living conditions are simply unlivable.³¹²

³⁰⁷ “Gaza Humanitarian Crisis Deepens as Fighting Rages on across the Strip,” United Nations, December 11, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144647>.

³⁰⁸ Aaron Boxerman, “What We Know About the Death Toll in Israel From the Hamas-Led Attacks,” The New York Times, November 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/12/world/middleeast/israel-death-toll-hamas-attack.html>.

³⁰⁹ Tia Goldenberg, “In Hamas’ Horrific Killings, Israeli Trauma over the Holocaust Resurfaces,” AP News, October 15, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-holocaust-war-7a05336b15666e6306845cfa617b699>.

³¹⁰ Jack Stripling, “Colleges Braced for Antisemitism and Violence. It’s Happening,” The Washington Post, October 31, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/10/31/antisemitism-college-campus-jewish-hamas-gaza/>.

³¹¹ AJLabs, “Israel-Gaza War In Maps and Charts: Live Tracker,” Al Jazeera, December 16, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>.

³¹² Zach Levitt and Amy Schoenfeld Walker, “What the Scale of Displacement in Gaza Looks Like,” The New York Times, December 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/02/world/middleeast/gaza-map-displaced-people.html>.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Israeli officials have issued a series of dehumanizing statements. Prime Minister Netanyahu, before deleting his tweet, characterized the Israel-Gaza War as “a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle.”³¹³ Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said, “We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly.”³¹⁴ There is a word for what is happening in Gaza, and it certainly isn’t Jewish. It is, as U.N experts have stated, a “genocide in the making.”³¹⁵ As Jews, we should be familiar with the term genocide, and we should know one is happening when we see it. However, Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove, who, in quite literal fashion, practices at *Park Avenue Synagogue*, responded by cheering on this “genocide in the making”: after calling for his congregants to take out their phones to donate to Israel’s Emergency Fund, the synagogue raised more than \$18 million, his own family contributing \$36,000 themselves.³¹⁶

Right here, right now, the Jewish community is facing our greatest inflection point and moment of decision of the twenty-first century as well as a crucial opportunity to re-radicalize our identity in the spirit of the ancestors of the Lower East Side. Will we, in this moment, in this century, have the courage and moral fortitude to divest our support from a nation-state that is currently committing what a former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court characterized as a genocide,³¹⁷ what a United Nations report³¹⁸ and Amnesty International call an apartheid state,³¹⁹ a country that, like the

³¹³ Naomi Ishisaka, “Understanding Gaza: Don’t Fall into the Trap of Dehumanization,” *The Seattle Times*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/understanding-gaza-dont-fall-into-the-trap-of-dehumanization/>.

³¹⁴ Nicholas Kristof, “Seeking a Moral Compass in Gaza’s War,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/opinion/israel-gaza-hamas.html>.

³¹⁵ Niamh Kennedy and Richard Roth, “UN Experts Warn of ‘Genocide in the Making’ in Gaza. Israel Condemns the Statement,” *CNN*, November 18, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-17-23/h_5f54936fa763f69532c73c0613a541a6.

³¹⁶ Alan Zeitlin, “Manhattan Synagogue Surpasses Historic \$18 Million Campaign For Israel,” *Jewish Journal*, October 17, 2023, <https://jewishjournal.com/community/363974/manhattan-synagogue-surpasses-historic-18-million-campaign-for-israel>

³¹⁷ Former ICC Chief Prosecutor: Israel’s Siege of Gaza Is a ‘Genocide,’” *Al Jazeera*, December 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/upfront/2023/12/1/former-icc-chief-prosecutor-israels-siege-of-gaza-is-a-genocide>

³¹⁸ Ben White, “UN Report: Israel Has Established an ‘Apartheid Regime,’” *Al Jazeera*, March 18, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/3/18/un-report-israel-has-established-an-apartheid-regime>.

³¹⁹ “Israel’s Apartheid against Palestinians: A Cruel System of Domination and a Crime against Humanity,” *Amnesty International*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/>.

United States, was built upon the displacement of indigenous people from their land?³²⁰ The State of Israel is a manifestation of bourgeois, Park Avenue Jewishness supported by the same American Jewish Committee that called for the death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and the same Anti-Defamation League that handed files over to a House Un-American Activities Committee that eagerly destroyed the lives of communist and leftist Jews. Israel has masked itself as the ultimate protector of the Jewish people. Several questions should be asked: How is that working out for us? How is it working out for the 1,200 Israeli people who were brutally murdered in Hamas's terrorist attack that Israel knew they were planning more than a year beforehand and did little to nothing to prevent?³²¹ How protected by Israel do the students facing anti-Semitism on college campuses feel at this moment?³²²

My father, documentary filmmaker, and proud Lower East Side Jew Bill Siegel died approximately five years before this essay was published. When I was a kid, he remarked to me that he was "Jewish enough for Hitler, but not enough for Israel." While I understand the intended meaning behind my dad's statement, there is a tacit assumption present in it and within the consciousness of many Jews today that the State of Israel represents the pinnacle, the standard bearer of Jewishness and Judaism. It is anything but. As many in my generation have come to realize, Israel, from its founding to the present, has betrayed the spirit of the Jewish Radical Tradition of Solidaric Jewishness. The insistence, often cultish in nature, that Jewish people should inherently support Israel represents to me a criminal reduction of a beautiful way of life; a way of being; a culture, a faith; a long, proud, almost six thousand year history of fighting for justice, humanity, and peace into the confines of a narrow-minded, misguided fealty to a ethno-nationalist state that reduces Palestinian citizens to the status of second-class citizens. When Christian anti-Semites enthusiastically support

³²⁰ "The Question of Palestine - About The Nakba," United Nations, <https://www.un.org/unispal/about-the-nakba/#:~:text=The%20Nakba%2C%20which%20means%20%E2%80%9Ccatastrophe,ethnic%20and%20multi%2Dcultural%20society>.

³²¹ Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, "Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago," The New York Times, November 30, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-attack-intelligence.html?fbclid=IwAR2nwcuee4Izpn3tZIRilOpPtbMXdbe4Xzruthh-S9pJFxlLivUzxsPvmQ>.

³²² See Stripling 2023.

Israel, we need to ask questions.³²³ Who is benefiting from the State of Israel? Who is paying the price? As Black Public Intellectual James Baldwin stated in 1979,

But the state of Israel was not created for the salvation of the Jews; it was created for the salvation of the Western interests. This is what is becoming clear (I must say that it was always clear to me). The Palestinians have been paying for the British colonial policy of ‘divide and rule’ and for Europe’s guilty Christian conscience for more than thirty years.³²⁴

Baldwin, and many other Black Public Intellectuals (Black feminists in particular) have boldly connected the oppression of Black Americans to that of Palestinians.³²⁵ Speaking of which, I don’t believe it is an exaggeration to say that in fifty years or sooner, mainstream historians and public opinion will regard Israel’s mass murder of Palestinian civilians with the same disgust and vitriol that we now look upon the images of the police beating civil rights activists in Selma, Alabama during “Bloody Sunday” and the murder of four Black girls in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham. Now is the time to be on the right side of history. As Rabbi Brant Rosen, founder of one of the first anti-Zionist synagogues in the U.S said, “If ever there was a moment for Jewish anti-Zionists to proudly stand up and be counted, this is it.”³²⁶

We are already seeing many in the American Jewish community do just that. Led by the Jewish anti-Zionist groups Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now, large numbers of American Jews, many of them young or young at heart, have been involved in protesting for a ceasefire across the country.³²⁷ In addition, they are challenging the very connection between Jewish identity and Israel.³²⁸ Honoring the radical spirit of the

³²³ Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg and Rev. Allyn Maxfield-Steele, “The Jewish Federation Is Marching With Christian Antisemites Out of Support for Israel,” Mondoweiss, November 14, 2023, https://mondoweiss.net/2023/11/the-jewish-federation-is-marching-with-christian-antisemites-out-of-support-for-israel/?fbclid=IwAR1kHJI0A0Q4_o1AVqtudD6Uq7SGXpplKEUfSi7Dz6r9s8ZpTUkEg0nglQw.

³²⁴ James Baldwin, “Open Letter To The Born Again,” The Nation, September 29, 1979, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/open-letter-born-again/>.

³²⁵ Black Women Radicals, “Black Feminist Writers and Palestine,” YouTube, October 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fI7IPMBneAs>.

³²⁶ Rabbi Brant Rosen, “In the Face of Israel’s Terrifying Onslaught on Gaza, It’s Time to Double down on Anti-Zionism,” Shalom Rav, December 1, 2023, <https://rabbibrant.com/2023/12/01/in-the-face-of-israels-terrifying-onslaught-on-gaza-its-time-to-double-down-on-anti-zionism/>.

³²⁷ Sophie Hurwitz, “How Anti-Zionist American Jews Are Organizing For a Ceasefire in Gaza,” Teen Vogue, December 8, 2023, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/anti-zionist-american-jews-organizing-for-ceasefire-gaza>.

³²⁸ Noah Hurowitz, “Not in Their Name,” Intelligencer, November 27, 2023, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/11/why-jewish-voice-for-peace-is-against-israels-war-in-gaza.html>.

Rosenbergs, Lenny Bruce, and the Hollywood “Six,” Jews have engaged in civil disobedience and acts of disruption, getting arrested at great personal cost in their calls for an end to the violence.³²⁹ Jewish activists and allies shut down the Manhattan Bridge and disrupted traffic for hours on November 26th,³³⁰ we shut down Grand Central Station in New York on October 27th,³³¹ we protested at the Statue of Liberty and Capitol Hill, and we crowded on highways and in front of government buildings all under the bold statement of “Not In Our Name.”³³² It is curious indeed that a simple condemnation of Israel’s actions is branded anti-Semitic, but not the police’s mass arrest of hundreds of Jewish protestors in Washington D.C. Once again, the ADL refused to come to the aid of their co-religionists and condemned this demonstration.³³³ Jews are refusing to stand idly by while Israel murders Palestinians in the name of protecting us.

On November 1st, Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg did not stand idly by. She bought a \$1,000 ticket to Joe Biden’s presidential campaign fundraiser in Minneapolis, stood up, and interrupted him in the middle of it: “Mr. President, if you care about Jewish people, as a Rabbi, I need you to call for a cease-fire right now.”³³⁴ Ethel and Julius *Rosenberg* (no familial relation, but absolutely a political relation) would have been proud. Her action was a wake-up call, a manifesto for what American Jewish identity can look like in this moment. The principal task of the American Jewish community in the twenty-first century, in order to continue the mighty Jewish Radical Tradition of Solidaric Jewishness, is to totally divest our support for the State of Israel and express total support for the liberation of the Palestinian people from oppressive conditions.

³²⁹ Sanya Mansoor, “Jewish American Calls for a Ceasefire Highlight Divisions in the Community,” *Time*, November 17, 2023, <https://time.com/6335528/jewish-american-ceasefire-progressive-jews/>.

³³⁰ Chelsia Rose Marcius and Liset Cruz, “Pro-Cease-Fire Activists Shut Down Manhattan Bridge for Hours,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/26/world/middleeast/protesters-manhattan-bridge-ceasefire-gaza.html>.

³³¹ Claire Fahy, Julian Roberts-Grmela, and Sean Piccoli, “‘Let Gaza Live’: Calls for Cease-Fire Fill Grand Central Terminal,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/27/world/middleeast/grand-central-protest-nyc-israel-hamas-gaza.html>.

³³² See Mansoor 2023.

³³³ Robert Tait, “Hundreds Arrested as US Jews Protest against Israel’s Gaza Assault,” *The Guardian*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/19/jewish-protest-israel-gaza-washington-dc>.

³³⁴ Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg, “Biden Told Me That a Pause in the Fighting Will Save Lives in Gaza. Here’s Why He’s Wrong.,” *CNN*, November 14, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/13/opinions/israel-gaza-ceasefire-palestinian-biden-rabbi-rosenberg/index.html>.

Senator Bernie Sanders, who has heartbreakingly refused to access the word ceasefire in his vocabulary, stated early on his career what I believe to be the mission of the Jewish people, a mission that must center the Palestinian people every day:

Every man, every woman who toils, every member of the working class without exception, is my comrade, my brother and sister, and that to serve them in their cause is the highest duty of my life.³³⁵

Amen. And may it be our life's work.

³³⁵ Too Far Left Media, "Keep Fighting, Bernie Sanders. (Mini-Doc)," YouTube, April 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVjElhx80PY>, 5:31 mins.

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