

“Cutting Off Your Nose to Spite Your Race”: Jewish Stereotypes, Media Images, Cultural Hybridity

Bernice Schrank
Memorial University of Newfoundland

This paper explores the growing acceptability of the “Jewish” nose amongst women in Hollywood and in television as an indicator of Jewish acceptability. At a time when cosmetic surgery to alter appearances of media stars as well as ordinary people has become a growth industry, rhinoplasty (“nose jobs”), so popular amongst Jewish women in the 1950s and 1960s, has declined amongst Jewish women. It is not just that such Jewish superstars as Barbra Streisand have refused the standardization of a nose job. It is also that identifiably Jewish stars have made their names playing non-Jewish roles, as is the case with Sarah Jessica Parker, the apparently ethnically standardized star of *Sex and the City*. This paper theorizes that the change from unacceptability to acceptability is based on an increasingly successful challenge to the American myth of melting pot sameness by the politics of ethnic difference, based on a realization by the dominant culture of the reality of ethnic hybridity and erasure.

“Looking Jewish” and “Passing”: An Introduction

This is a paper about “Jewish noses” and how perceptions of them have varied in American popular culture in the twentieth century. The importance of the “Jewish nose” is that it is perceived as one of the most obvious defining features of Jews. Jews with non-Jewish noses are often able to “pass,” by which I mean being able to blend into the dominant culture and thereby being able to become invisible as Jews.¹ Hollywood at least until the 1960s provides many examples of Jewish stars (I provide the names of some of the most famous later in this paper) who had their Jewish identities erased. Hollywood images

¹Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 16–26.

not only reflect but perpetuate mass trends, so Hollywood’s de-Semitization of Jews had a cultural impact far beyond the movie theater.² The importance of the de-Semitized, commodified Hollywood image is that it both reflects and perpetuates mass trends.³ Hollywood’s (and, later, television’s) insistence on erasing Jewish identity, widely practiced until the 1960s, tells us a great deal not only about the attitudes of the Hollywood studio bosses, many of whom were Jewish, but about the attitudes of the viewing public, including Jews, toward Jews.⁴

Hollywood passing is not as easy as it used to be.⁵ Celebrity culture, facilitated by television and the internet, obliterates the distinction between the public and private lives of the stars, both past and present. There are even websites devoted to listing, as comprehensively as possible, the names of actors and directors known or believed to be Jewish (see, for example, “Jewish Actors and Directors”).

Passing, now so undependable a strategy for the stars, still remains available to ordinary Jews on whom no limelight shines. So why pass? Passing is often chosen to avoid any potential (or actual) negative social or economic fallout associated with being Jewish. I am not only talking about the in-your-face, red-neck, Archie Bunker type antisemitism,⁶ but even more so about its genteel, covert, and far more insidious variations. Subtle discrimination is pernicious precisely because it does its damage almost invisibly, is difficult to pin down, and is therefore virtually impossible to document, challenge, or change. Passing is abetted by the anxiety that haunts the Jewish imagination, as Philip Roth’s recent work, particularly *The Plot Against America* (2004), makes ex-

²P. Erens, “Images of Minority and Foreign Groups in American Films: 1958–73. Part One,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, Vol. 7 (1975): 3.

³Erens, “Images of Minority,” p. 3.

⁴N. Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown, 1988), pp. 79–119; D. Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), pp. 1–16.

⁵This is so whether a celebrity looks Jewish or does not look Jewish, whether he or she has or has not had a nose job, changed his/her names (i.e. given names [Camryn Manheim, from Debra Francis Manheim], or family names [Winona Ryder, from Winona Laura Horowitz]), or kept them (Alicia Silverstone, Jon Lovitz, Janet Margolin, Eugene Levy).

⁶See Henry Ford, *The International Jew: The World Foremost Problem. Being a Reprint of a Series of Articles Appearing in The Dearborn Independent from May 22 to October 2, 1920.* ([Dearborn, Michigan]: No Publisher, November 1920); N. Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York: Public Affairs Publishing, 2001).

travagantly clear, an uneasy sense that polite, dinner-party antisemitism is easily able to morph into its more virulent formations.

We are, after all, only two generations removed from those university quotas that limited Jewish admissions to many American universities, and especially to their medical and engineering schools. It is worth remembering too the restrictive covenants that excluded Jews from owning property in certain areas, or the “gentlemen’s agreements” that denied Jews membership in various clubs, fraternities, and sororities, and perhaps still do. Employment discrimination operated subterraneously at all levels of American society, and may still be practiced.⁷

Previously discrimination was fairly overt. In more recent times, discriminating against Jews (and others) has become more subtle. North Americans do not as yet carry identity cards. Passports and drivers’ licenses do not provide information about religion. Public Law 94-521 prohibits the U.S. Census Bureau from making responses to questions of religious affiliation mandatory, so there are no official U.S. government statistics enabling Jews to be separated from the general population. Some Jews self-identify. They may wear Jewish stars, mezuzahs, or skull caps. Hassidim wear distinctive dress: men with long coats and side curls, women in wigs. Most Jews do not. Jewish family names like “Goldberg” or “Horowitz” may help gatekeepers seeking to exclude Jews, but they are not infallible markers. Molly Goldberg is Jewish, but Whoopi is not. (Of course, many gatekeepers might like to keep out both.) Given the sparseness and unreliability of other markers of identity in North American

⁷The experiences of Milton Friedman and Paul Samuelson are instructive. Both men are Nobel Prize winning economists. Both are Jewish. Friedman received his doctorate in Economics from Columbia University and soon thereafter went to teach at the University of Wisconsin (Madison). Department politics combined with antisemitism to drive him out. He later went to the University of Chicago and there became its most famous economist (W. Breit and R. L. Ransom, *The Academic Scribblers: Revised Edition* [Chicago: The Dryden Press, 1982], pp. 227–8). Samuelson did his graduate work at Harvard and was regarded by his professors as a prodigy. When his doctorate was completed, however, he was unable to secure a permanent teaching position there, primarily because he was Jewish. He accepted a position at the then lackluster Department of Economics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and made it into a world-class center for the study of economics, a place whose reputation, many economists believe, outshines that of Harvard (Breit, *The Academic Scribblers*, pp. 109–110). When men of such impressive training and recognized talent encounter job-related antisemitism, it is reasonable to infer that discriminatory practices are widespread, and equally reasonable to infer that Jews will attempt to subvert those practices.

society, discriminating gatekeepers need to invest heavily in their ability to discern ethnicity based on looks. This is how the “Jewish nose” becomes useful.

Noses are not infallible markers either. All too often these days, the Jewish nose is the centerpiece of a generic ethnic look which may include, but is not limited to, the Jewish look. Ben Kingsley illustrates the difficulties of contemporary gatekeeping. Born Krishna Bhanji, Kingsley is half Indian and half English. His father, Rahimtulla Harji Bhanji, was a Kenyan-born physician of Indian descent while his mother, Anna Lyna Mary Bhanji, was an English-born fashion model of Jewish-European extraction. Amongst his many roles, Kingsley has plausibly played an Iranian immigrant, Massoud Amir Behrani, in *House of Sand and Fog* (Vadim Perelman, 2003), a Latin American torturer, Dr. Miranda, in *Death and the Maiden* (Roman Polanski, 1994), the Jewish bookkeeper Itzhak Stern in *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), V. I. Lenin in the made for television *Lenin: The Train* (Damiano Damiani, 1990), an Arabian sheik, Selim, in *Harem* (Arthur Joffé, 1985), and Mahatma Gandhi in *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982). Like many other ethnics, Kingsley looks Iranian, Spanish, Indian and, in a pinch, Russian. He also “looks Jewish.”

Here then is a gatekeeper’s dilemma: in a heterogeneous population, the Jewish look may include many more than just Jews. The distinguished German Jewish historian George Mosse in conversation with me some time in 1963 at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) asked rhetorically why it was that the Italian fascists had not developed racial consciousness and stereotypes of the Jews in the manner of the Nazis. He immediately answered his own question with the wry observation that it was because Italians fit the Jewish stereotype. Clearly, the Jewish look lets in more than it was intended to keep out. There is yet another wrinkle in its application. Ethnicity does not float free of its social contexts. Ethnic recognition is a function of socially available cognitive frames. Consider for a moment the situation of Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State in U.S. President Bill Clinton’s Cabinet from 1997 to 2001.

Why were so many Americans surprised to learn that Madeleine Albright was Jewish? Even she claims she was surprised to learn of her Jewish background.⁸ It is possible, given her remoteness as a public figure whose life did not seem to lend itself to gossip and scandal in the way that her employer’s did, that her given and married names created the expectation of ethnic neutrality. Her predecessor as Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, had not

⁸Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 235–49.

the slightest whiff of ethnicity about him. As well, her rigid bearing in her public appearances, her tightly coiffed hairdos, her immaculate, slightly dowdy clothes and her deployment of unobtrusive pearl earrings, the little gold necklace and the big brooch evoke images of Queen Elizabeth II, thus further distancing Albright from considerations of ethnicity.

Yet, were we to use the criterion of the Jewish nose, it ought not to have been such a surprise. The dust jacket of her recently released memoir shows what now appears to be a very Jewish looking face. Once her Jewish identity became public, it seemed odd that nobody had previously noticed her Jewish look, including her Jewish nose. In other words, she began to look Jewish when her Jewish identity became public knowledge. What the Albright example suggests is that the face is an indeterminate text, read in terms of a variety of social contexts not all of which lend themselves to interpretations based on ethnicity. Once, however, an individual is identified as an ethnic, the face is read through the filter of ethnic stereotyping. Ethnic looks may be embedded in appearance, intrinsic to the individual, but they are also dependent on the gaze of the observer.

In the case of Ms. Albright, it is not the face that lends credibility to the stereotype, but the stereotype that, in the right circumstances, re-shapes the face. Woody Allen makes much this same point in the dinner scene with Annie Hall's relatives in the film *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977). The circumstances are inauspicious. To the cosmopolitan and anxiety-laden Alvy Singer (Woody Allen), Annie's family appears as an impenetrable phalanx of the quintessentially WASP. Suddenly, the camera sees Alvy as an ultra-orthodox, heavily bearded Jewish stereotype. The image is ambiguous. Is this image what Alvy imagines that Annie's relatives see, or is it what Annie's relatives think when they see Alvy? It may, of course, be both. The point is that circumstances determine imagery.

With the increasing acceptance and accessibility of rhinoplasty (nose jobs) in North America, Jews who believed they looked Jewish now had an easy choice: they could pass, or they could retain their ethnic look. By the middle of the twentieth century, there was, especially amongst Jewish women, an epidemic of nose jobs. By the 1960s, Jews became less infatuated with nose bobbing. In the present social climate, all possibilities kaleidoscopically co-exist and are represented in film and television, that is, in powerful media imagery. It is possible to find Jews who conform to the Anglo-Saxon ideals of beauty and are unrecognizable (and for the most part unrecognized) as Jews (Gwyneth Paltrow; Rena Sofer); Jews who have had nose jobs (Jennifer Grey); Jews with Jewish noses who decline that surgical procedure (Barbra Streisand); and Jews with Jewish noses who are treated as if having a "Jewish

nose” is a matter of supreme indifference (Sarah Jessica Parker, Lisa Kudrow). The question this paper tries to answer is what circumstances allow the Jewish nose to gain such visibility and acceptance.

The answer is not found in a straightforward, chronologically ordered cultural narrative, but in a series of interactive and sometimes synchronic historical and social phenomena that, taken together, illuminate this paper’s preoccupation with nasality. Included are the following, discussed roughly in this order: (1) the construction of the Jewish nose stereotype; (2) the recurring phenomenon of antisemitism, which exploits the stereotype of the Jewish nose and suggests that it is an infallible means of identifying Jews; (3) the Jewish immigration experience in the new world with its dream of assimilation; (4) the powerful imagery disseminated by film and television; (5) the availability and popularity of cosmetic surgery, and (6) the current stylishness of ethnic chic. In short, this is a paper about Fanny Brice becoming Barbra Streisand and Barbra Streisand becoming Fanny Brice.

Consider The Nose

The nose has been observed, measured, and commented upon from the Greek era to modern times.⁹ A protruding facial feature like the ears, the nose lends itself to a host of metonymic usages related to social interaction and intrusion, as in the word “nosy,” or in such phrases as “a nose for news,” “keep your nose out of other people’s business,” “keep your nose clean,” “rub your nose in it,” “led by the nose,” “your nose is out of joint” and “looking down your nose.” Noses are sometimes associated with sex. In *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne deployed it as a phallic symbol. Freud associated the nose with sexual stimulation and female genitalia.¹⁰ It has been the subject of sociological study¹¹ and historical analysis.¹²

Efforts to academicize the nose have to contend with the fact that noses are so often used for comic effect. Whether as “honker,” “beak,” “proboscis,”

⁹F. Vegter and J. J. Hage, “Clinical Anthropometry and Canons of the Face in Historical Perspective,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* Vol. 106, No. 5 (2000): 1090–6.

¹⁰Masson, J. M., ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 116–118; C. Blackledge, *The Story of V: Opening Pandora’s Box* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), pp. 278–90.

¹¹V. De Rijke, L. Ostermark-Johansen, and H. Thomas, *Nose Book* (Middlesex: Middlesex University Press, 2003).

¹²G. Glaser, *The Nose: A Profile of Sex, Beauty, and Survival* (New York: Attria/Simon & Schuster, 2002).

“snout,” “snorkel,” “conk,” “schnoze” (sometimes “shnoze”) or “schozzola,” the nose is the feature of the face that most encourages laughter. It was Bob Hope’s identifying feature, and the essence of Jimmy Durante’s comedy routine. It inspired Cyrano De Bergerac’s wittiest and most amusing comments. One has only to recall the repeated caricatures of Presidents Nixon and Clinton to appreciate the creative possibilities the politician’s nose affords the political cartoonist.

Constructing the Jewish Nose

Less benignly, the nose has for a very long time been (and continues to be) one of the most pervasive and popular means for negatively stereotyping Jews. This negative stereotype raises at least two questions. First, do Jews actually have such noses? This simple-seeming question is actually complex because it assumes what has not as yet been demonstrated: (a) the prior existence of a comprehensive and credible typology of human noses, and (b) an essentialist Jew. Second, who cares whether Jews have such noses and why do they care? Although the questions appear discrete, the answers converge.

The legitimation of the Jewish nose stereotype owes much to the racial taxonomies of late nineteenth and twentieth century anthropologists,¹³ whose studies lent scientific credibility to a much older belief that the nose was an important racial index. According to Preminger,

For over a century, the term the “Jewish nose” has been used in Western scientific literature to describe a set of physical features thought to constitute a distinct, race-based deformity. As early as 1850, Robert Knox, a prominent anthropologist, described the physical features of the Jew as including “a large, massive, club-shaped, hooked nose, three or four times larger than suits the face. . . . Thus it is that the Jewish face never can [be], and never is, perfectly beautiful.”¹⁴

Whatever notions of a Jewish nose pre-date these anthropological assessments, the inscription of the Jewish nose in the literature of science and social science gives the concept of a Jewish nose, however specious, the imprimatur of intellectual respectability. Even more disturbing is the casual way in which

¹³See, for example, the extensive reliance on taxonomies throughout the influential late nineteenth century work of P. Topinard (*Elements d’anthropologie générale* [Paris: Delahaye, 1885]).

¹⁴B. Preminger, “The ‘Jewish Nose’ and Plastic Surgery: Origins and Implications,” *SJAMA* Vol. 286 (2001): 286.

the work of early anthropology inextricably links Jews and Jewish noses with physical abnormality.

That linkage of Jews and Jewish noses was soon contested. In his early twentieth century revision of the highly influential *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, the Australian born Jewish writer, historian, and folklorist, Joseph Jacobs (1854–1916), co-authored with Maurice Fishberg (1872–1934), a Russian born American physician, anthropologist and author, an article entitled “Jewish Nostrility,” summarizing earlier work done by each of them.¹⁵ Jacobs and Fishberg argue that previous anthropological research was grossly mistaken in finding that a majority of Jews have prominent, arched, and hooked Jewish noses. Like their nose-gazing predecessors, Jacobs and Fishberg divided noses into four categories: (1) straight (“Greek”), (2) aquiline, or arched (“Jewish,” “Semitic”), (3) flat and broad, and (4) snub. Then, based on a series of observations of the noses of some 1,500 Eastern European Jews, both male and female, Jacobs and Fishberg present a table that quantifies and codifies the results of these observations by separating the observed Jews by gender and country of origin. Jacobs and Fishberg indicate the percentage found of each of the four nose types for each of their sub-categories. These percentages allow Jacobs and Fishberg to conclude that “the majority of noses in Jews are straight, or what is popularly known as ‘Greek.’”¹⁶

What, then, of nostril shape? Having demonstrated to their own satisfaction that Jews do not in fact have “Jewish noses,” Jacobs and Fishberg turn to the issue of Jewish nostrility. According to them, many anthropologists believe that it is not the profile of the nose so much as the shape and flexibility of the nostrils which make the nose Jewish. Again, Jacobs and Fishberg dispute anthropological findings that tie wide nostrils to Jews:

The relation of the breadth of the nose to its length, known as the “nasal index,” has been considered one of the best means of distinguishing the various races of mankind. Those in whom the breadth of the nose exceeds 85 percent of its height are considered as platyrhine; those in whom the width of the nose is less than 70 per cent of its height are leptorhine; and lastly those races in which the width of the nose varies between 70 and 85 per cent of its height are classed as

¹⁵J. Jacobs and M. Fishberg, “Jewish ‘Nostrility,’” *JewishEncyclopedia.com – Nose*, n.d., <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?aartid=345&letter=N>, last accessed: September 15, 2005.

¹⁶Jacobs and Fishberg, *JewishEncyclopedia.com – Nose*, p. 2.

mesorrhine. Measurements of Jewish noses show that they are mostly leptorrhine, or narrow-nosed . . .¹⁷

It would appear that Jacobs and Fishberg have at last successfully deconstructed the invidious stereotype of the Jewish nose.

Any celebration of their achievement would, however, be premature. It may indeed be the case that neither the Jewish nose nor the Jewish nostril is an authentically Jewish characteristic, but not because of the evidence adduced by Jacobs and Fishberg. One might be tempted to criticize the quality of their research. For example, are 1,500 observations a sufficient basis to generalize about all Jews? How were participants selected for the study? Are the categories of noses distinct and separate? At what point does a nose become “broad”? Cannot a nose be both broad and snub? Such caveats and questions are only relevant if the basic assumptions of anthropological work on racial types, and Jacobs and Fishberg’s critique of that work, are accepted at face value. The fundamental problem with the work of Jacobs and Fishberg is that it leaves intact the concept of racial taxonomies.

In a sense, all that Jacobs and Fishberg demonstrate is that the taxonomies are incorrectly applied. All they invite are further suspect observations and corrected reapplications of racial categories. Despite the aura of scientific accuracy provided by Jacobs and Fishberg’s quantifications, their findings are as pseudo-scientific as the findings they attempt to refute. The Jewish nose is not a biological reality but a social creation. In attempting to discredit the Jewish nose stereotype, Jacobs and Fishberg appear to produce, however inadvertently, yet another version of racialized biology.

Deconstructing the Jewish Nose: Nazi Racial Profiling

Unfortunately, the efforts of Jacobs and Fishberg have had no effect on the continuing popularity of the Jewish nose stereotype. By the 1930s the Nazis had developed their own version of the stereotype, transforming it from an aberrant feature of the individual face to a social problem that endangered the life of the Aryan community. One of the clearest and nastiest articulations of the Nazi version of the stereotype can be found in a children’s story, “The Poisonous Mushroom,” published in 1938. Written by Ernst Hiemer, editor of Julius Streicher’s antisemitic publication, *Der Stürmer*, and illustrated by Philipp Rupprecht, the story begins with a mother and son walking in the forest. In the course of this walk, the mother advises her son that there are good

¹⁷Jacobs and Fishberg, *JewishEncyclopedia.com – Nose*, p. 3.

and bad people in the world, just as there are poisonous and non-poisonous mushrooms. The poisonous mushrooms are a metaphor for the Jews. It is the task of all good people to learn to identify the poisonous from the non-poisonous mushroom, the dangerous Jew from decent people.

As the story continues, it provides instruction for identifying poisonous mushrooms/Jews. In response to a question from the teacher about how the boys in the class will be able to recognize a Jew, little Karl correctly responds:

A Jew is usually recognized by his nose. The Jewish nose is crooked at the end. It looks like the figure 6. So it is called the “Jewish Six.” Many non-Jews have crooked noses too. But their noses are bent, not at the end, but further up. Such a nose is called a hook nose or eagle’s beak. It has nothing to do with a Jewish nose.¹⁸

Despite the clarity of this description, the accompanying illustration of Karl at the blackboard pointing to the number six which has been made to look like the stereotypical Jewish nose,¹⁹ and the many caricatures of Jews with Jewish noses that regularly appeared in *Der Stürmer* and elsewhere in Nazi propaganda, the Nazis found the stereotype an inadequate means for identifying Jews as the Nazis prepared to implement the final solution.

For the Nazis, identifying Jews was first a matter of legal definition and genealogical research. The Nuremberg race laws defined Jews as all persons with three Jewish grandparents. Eventually, though, even one Jewish grandparent was sufficient to be designated a Jew. The laws were implemented through an ensemble of bureaucratic measures which included the gathering of raw numbers, the manipulation of punch cards, the exploitation of statistical expertise and the use of identity papers. In their recent studies of this process, Black, and Aly and Roth agree that the success of the final solution rested on statistical analysis. Aly and Roth describe the ways by which the 1939 German census data were used to identify Jews:

In 1939, German Jews and “Jewish half-breeds” were registered by name during the course of the census and with the cooperation of the *Reich* Main Office for Security (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*). Information about the religion of all four grandparents, which was mandatory under penalty of law and ostensibly protected as “secret” by the state, was immediately transferred to police files under

¹⁸J. Noakes and G. Pridham, *Documents on Nazism 1919–1945* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 468.

¹⁹“How to Identify a Jew,” *The Church of True Israel*, <http://www.churchoftrueisrael.com/streicher/Mushroom-02.html>, last accessed: September 15, 2005.

the category of 'descent' if even one grandparent was listed as Jewish. German archivists at the secret Prussian State Archives created *Reichskartei* ("Reich registry") for German Jews from the original census data.²⁰

Aly and Roth conclude that "every act of extermination was preceded by an act of registration."²¹ What these studies of the Nazi census tell us is that the Nazi version of the Jewish nose stereotype had many uses in Nazi Germany including the denigration and ostracism of Jews, but identification of Jews was not one of them.

Four years later, in 1943, the Nazis were still unable to identify accurately all the Jews in their midst. At that time, the chief inspector of the statistical bureau of the SS, Richard Korherr, was instructed by Heinrich Himmler to prepare a progress report on the final solution, a report that would explain the difficulties being encountered in implementation. That report recognizes that religion alone is insufficient to deal with the targeted population, but race as a definable category proved elusive. Diaspora Jews come from everywhere, and in places where they have lived for long periods of time, they resemble the people amongst whom they live. So the Bene Israel Jews of India resemble their non-Jewish Maratha neighbors²²; the Beta Israel black Jews of Ethiopia "look and dress the same, live in similar types of houses and conduct their lives in much the same manner as the non-Jews" of Ethiopia²³; the remnants of the Chinese Jewish community look Asian²⁴; and pre-War German Jews looked German. Because their racial ideology insisted on the illusion of difference through the fiction of an essentialist Jew, Nazis had continuing difficulties identifying Jews, and the Jewish nose stereotype provided no serious help.

Immigration, Assimilation, Rhinoplasty

The fact that the stereotype is a totally unreliable guide for identifying Jews does not render it obsolete. Whatever the deficiencies of the Jewish nose ste-

²⁰G. Aly and K. H. Roth, *The Nazi Census: Identification and Control in the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), p. xi.

²¹Aly and Roth, *The Nazi Census*, p. 1.

²²Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley: University of California Press., 2000), pp. 151–3.

²³M. Bard, *From Tragedy to Triumph: The Politics Behind the Rescue of Ethiopian Jewry* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), pp. 2–3; "History," particularly photograph, p. 1.

²⁴W. C. White, *Chinese Jews: A Compilation of Matters Relating to the Jews of K'Aifeng Fu* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1966), specifically the unpaginated photographs of members of the K'Aifeng Fu Jewish community.

reotype, it continues to have an autonomous existence divorced from reality. There is a diabolical irony in the fact that the Nazi organizers of the final solution were de facto forced to admit that their stereotypes were useless, while many ordinary people, including many Jews, continue to believe that it is possible to identify Jews by their noses. Given that belief, it is not surprising that American Jews sought to alter their looks by surgical interventions, particularly when the full dimensions of the Holocaust began to seep into American Jewish consciousness in the late 1940s and 1950s.

A feeling of vulnerability gave added impetus to the already well established aspiration for assimilation within the newly arrived Jewish American immigrant community. It is true that Jews became part of the American landscape soon after the first European settlers arrived, but these early immigrants (by 1880 they totaled around 250,000) were grouped together with other European immigrants and absorbed without conspicuous fuss into American mainstream society.²⁵ The same was not true for the Jews arriving after 1880. From the 1880s until 1924, when revised immigration legislation established discriminatory quotas that severely reduced non-Western European (read “Jewish”) immigration, approximately two million Jews entered the United States. Unlike the pre-1880 Jewish immigrants, these Jews were poor, excluded, ghettoized and humiliated.²⁶ The Jewish-American novel of this period, in particular Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1935) and Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934), record with passionate intensity the feelings of alienation and rejection that permeated this Jewish immigrant community.

By mid-century, however, the longing of American Jews for assimilation was being realized. Many believe that Jewish assimilation was achieved by the application of a Jewish version of the Horatio Alger work ethic. Brodtkin, however, argues that assimilation was facilitated if not achieved by post-World War II government policies aimed at suburban development and a series of G.I. entitlements.²⁷ Whatever the explanation, Jews gradually assimilated into the dominant culture. Reflecting the realities of that experience, assimilation supplanted the trauma of immigration as the dominant trope of Jewish-American writing. When Saul Bellow’s Augie March proclaims lustily in the first

²⁵S. Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor 1900–1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), pp. 7–15.

²⁶Gorelick, *City College*, pp. 22–30.

²⁷K. Brodtkin, *How Jews Became Whites Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp. 25–52.

sentence of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), "I am an American, Chicago born," who is there to gainsay him and suggest that perhaps his proclamation of national identity needs hyphenation. Jewish by birth, cosmopolitan by choice, Augie eventually escapes the confines of all ethnic categorization to best realize his authentic, non-hyphenated self.

The trajectory of Augie's life is far more adventurous than that of the eponymous central character of Herman Wouk's assimilationist novel, *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955), turned into film in 1958. Born Marjorie Morgenstern, Marjorie Americanizes her name and seeks her fortune on the stage. When she fails at that, she subsides into a conventional Jewish middle-class existence. Her artistic longings may be unfulfilled, but she takes satisfaction in having liberated herself from immigrant parents she finds embarrassing. Bellow's and Wouk's novels show Jewish characters entering the mainstream in quite different ways. Augie is a free spirit, buoyant and open to experience, an up-dated and somewhat more mature version of the quintessentially American character, Huckleberry Finn. Marjorie Morningstar is considerably less free than Augie March. But if her projected future domestic life is one of diminished expectations, it is in its contours no different from the lives lived by non-Jewish American married women of the 1950s.

Assimilating Jews were not, by and large, interested in conversion. Jews wanted to remain Jews however they defined (or ignored) their religious beliefs. Like Augie March and Marjorie Morningstar, they wanted to distance themselves from the impoverishment and stultification of the immigrant generation. For many Jews the way to achieve their desired assimilation was not to change their religion, but to change their looks. Since noses were the facial feature most closely identified with Jewish identity, however incorrectly, Jews, particularly Jewish women, changed their noses.²⁸

Rhinoplasty provided the means. Although Fanny Brice's nose job in 1923 (discussed below) was much noted, it did not become a popular option for Jews, especially Jewish women, until the 1950s and early 1960s, when its usefulness as a facilitator of and accompaniment to accelerating Jewish assimilation was better appreciated and, in a period of general prosperity, more affordable. It would be wrong, however, to neglect other perhaps less obvious motives for the rush to rhinoplasty. As Jews sought in increasing numbers to lose their visibility as Jews, they were gaining visibility as subversives and spies, which in turn encouraged an even faster rate of assimilation. The popularity

²⁸Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, pp. 86–198.

of nose jobs coincided with the period of the Communist witch-hunt. The 1950s were the heyday of McCarthyite hearings, investigations and trials, and the most publicized of these frequently involved Jews. Of the Hollywood Ten, at least six were Jewish (Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, and Samuel Ornitz) and three of them had Jewish sounding names.²⁹ Amongst the actors and directors called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee were many other Jews. These included Zero Mostel, Lionel Stander, Morris Carnovsky, Jeff Corey, Howard da Silva, and Jules Dassin. Still other celebrated appearances of Jews before HUAC included the renowned atomic physicist Robert Oppenheimer³⁰ and the playwrights Arthur Miller, who appeared before the Committee with his then wife, Marilyn Monroe,³¹ and Lillian Hellman.³²

The trial of the Rosenbergs, accused of having conspired to give the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union, was almost exclusively Jewish, from the defendants, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg and Morton Sobell, to the lawyers, Emanuel Block (defense) and Irving Saypol (prosecution), to the witnesses (Harry Gold, Ruth and David Greenglass) to the Judge, Irving Kaufman. Only the twelve-person jury was entirely non-Jewish.³³ E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and Robert Coover's *A Public Burning* (1977), two fictionalized versions of the Rosenberg case, capture the hysteria of those times, and the ways in which many American Jews conflated the prosecution of the Rosenbergs, the anti-Communist crusade, the pogroms of Eastern Europe, and the Shoah. Many Jews felt they were in danger, a feeling exacerbated by the growing presence in poorer Jewish neighborhoods of Jewish refugees, survivors of the Holocaust who were, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, leaving the displaced persons camps of Europe and settling in the United States. However subliminally, the linking of Jews to the anti-Communist crusade, subversion, spies and the Holocaust, gave added momentum to the Jewish desire for assimilation and to the rhinoplasty that facilitated it.

²⁹P. Buhle and D. Wagner, *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's Favorite Movies* (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 380–4.

³⁰K. Bird and M. J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Knopf, 2005), pp. 428–35.

³¹S. Kanfer, *A Journal of the Plague Years* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 109.

³²E. Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 201–2.

³³See Bernice Schrank, “Reading the Rosenbergs After Venona,” *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 49 (2002): 189–210.

The rhinoplasty which assisted passing ironically perpetuated the stereotype of the Jewish nose for which it was supposed to be the cure. The reason has to do with rhinoplasty's dual history as both a medical and cosmetic procedure. Its origins are as a subset of reconstructive surgery used to repair damage to the nose caused by accident and disease (in the days before penicillin, usually syphilis). It was widely used during World War II to restore the faces of fighter pilots burned when their planes were hit, as well as soldiers suffering from disfiguring facial wounds. That war-based practice improved the delivery of voluntary nose jobs in the post-War II era. It also provided employment for surgeons whose careers might otherwise have been curtailed by the arrival of peace.

The type of rhinoplasty we are discussing differs from the accident-illness-war model in that it is a non-therapeutic, consumer-driven, voluntary surgical intervention. Whether the dominant motive in selecting rhinoplasty is to erase one's Jewish look, to avoid discriminatory practices, or to fit better into the mainstream (or some combination of these factors), the procedure reinforces the notion of the Jewish nose as a deformity. In correcting a perceived facial abnormality, rhinoplasty perpetuates a racialized aesthetic in which features regarded as typically Anglo-Saxon are considered not only more acceptable, but more beautiful than those of ethnics and non-whites. Before and after photographs, which have become part of the rhinoplasty procedure, visually emphasize that perception. Usually taken in profile, these photos show the irregular nose and then its putative correction.³⁴ In other words, the nose job maintains the Jewish nose stereotype.³⁵

Rehabilitating the Jewish Nose: From Fanny Brice to Barbra Streisand

In 1923, the comedian Fanny Brice (born Fania Borach) bobbed her nose. Afterwards, she denied that she had done it to erase her ethnicity.³⁶ In *The New York Times* of 15 August, 1923, Brice is quoted as saying, "No woman on the stage today can afford to have a nose that is likely to keep on growing until

³⁴See, for example, Michael Bermant, "About your rhinoplasty consultation (nose job) nasal surgery," http://www.plasticsurgery4u.com/procedure_folder/rhinoplasty_consult.html (5/14/05).

³⁵Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, pp. 85–118; E. Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 44–90.

³⁶Haiken, *Venus Envy*, pp. 182–3.

she can swallow it.”³⁷ One recent Brice biographer, Herbert S. Goldman, understands Brice’s nose bobbing as part of a patterned response to downturns in her career: “Fanny always made substantial changes in her life when she felt things were just not working. Sometimes it involved auctioning her furniture or buying a new house. This time, it was getting a new nose.”³⁸

Dorothy Parker interpreted Brice’s actions differently. On learning of Brice’s operation, Parker wittily if somewhat cattily remarked that Brice had “cut off her nose to spite her race.” Although much of Brice’s comic effectiveness came from physical comedy and sight gags—a spoof of Salome dancing, send-ups of opera divas, imitations of movie star vamps—she was known primarily as a Jewish comic who exploited Yiddish dialect. Despite Brice’s denial and the support it receives from Goldman, the most plausible explanation for her nose job was that she sought to escape the limitations of ethnic stereotyping which she had so successfully deployed up until that time. As Grossman notes, Brice “was too Jewish to play well in the hinterlands.”³⁹ Unfortunately, the nose job changed little. It was only in 1937, some fourteen years after her nose job, when Brice took the part of Baby Snooks on radio (CBS, 1936–1951), that she broke free of her Yiddish *schtick*. For this role, Brice discarded the dialect. Her nose, Jewish or otherwise, was not an issue since it could not be seen by the larger listening audience beyond the radio studio.⁴⁰

Parker’s one-liner is at least as interesting as a marker of attitudes towards ethnicity as Brice’s nose job. Parker certainly illustrates her sophisticated cleverness when she transforms a maxim about human fallibility and individual perversity into a Jewish joke at the expense of a Jewish comedian. There is more to it, though. In Parker’s use of the word “her” in the phrases “her nose” and “her race,” Parker distances herself from Brice, Brice’s nose and Brice’s Jewishness. In so doing, Parker effectively conceals her own half-Jewish identity as the daughter of a prosperous Jewish father, J. Henry Rothschild, and a non-Jewish mother. Concealment appears to have been a family project, begun early when her father identified Parker as Episcopalian to school administrators, and sent her to boarding school.⁴¹ Parker may have felt secure

³⁷Quoted in B. W. Grossman, *Funny Woman: The Life and Times of Fanny Brice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 148.

³⁸Grossman, *Funny Woman*, p. 112.

³⁹Grossman, *Funny Woman*, p. 179.

⁴⁰Grossman, *Funny Woman*, pp. 146–165.

⁴¹Daniel Itzkovitz, “Dorothy Parker,” in P. E. Hyman and D. D. Moore, eds., *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*. Vol II (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 1.

in that concealment because she did not have what she apparently regarded as an infallible signifier of Jewish identity, the Jewish nose. Indeed the image of her face captured on a recent U.S. postage stamp in her honor shows a woman with a small, straight, definitely not Jewish nose.

Brice's rhinoplasty and Parker's comment about it provide further illustration of the various ways the stereotypical Jewish nose serves as an index of Jewish acceptability within the dominant American culture. Hollywood practices reflected those attitudes. As Desser and Friedman note:

Although Jewish executives, producers, writers, performers, and directors dominate the American film industry, [the films they produced] which so accurately captured the country's spirit, almost totally ignored one of American's most prominent minorities. How ironic that those pictures, which forever froze our national experiences into unforgettable images, limited almost all references to the cultural and religious heritage of the industry's leaders.⁴²

Hollywood de-Semitized not only its films, but, as already noted, its actors. Jewish actors were certainly prominent in Hollywood, but, until the 60s, only if they were able to pass.⁴³ With the arrival of the 1960s, "the melting pot" boiled over" as Erens so accurately puts it.⁴⁴ The United States was engaged in an unpopular war in Vietnam. Anti-war protests gained increasing support, particularly on university campuses. The old left was transforming itself into the new left, using street theater, be-ins, happenings and other forms of assertive and colorful protest to mobilize opposition to the war, and to press for radical social change. Civil rights marches, boycotts, and sit-ins demanded an end to racial discrimination. Black became beautiful. Women demanded equality, as did American Indians, gays, and lesbians. In the ferment of emerging identity politics and multicultural ethnic pride, the stereotypical Jewish nose regained some of its lost dignity. At the edge of this new Jewish consciousness and helping to nurture and shape it was the perception of Israel after the Six Day War as a military powerhouse.

The imagery of Jewish victimization now began to share the spotlight with images of Jewish empowerment. Certainly a part of the process by which

⁴²D. Desser and L. D. Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers: Traditions and Trends* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 1.

⁴³The list is long. I cite only a few obvious examples: Lauren Bacall (born Betty Joan Perske); Tony Curtis (Bernard Schwartz), Kirk Douglas (Issur Danielovitch Demsky); Lee Grant (Lyova Haskell Rosenthal); Silvia Sidney (Sophie Josow); and Shelley Winters (Shirley Schrift).

⁴⁴Erens, "Images of Minority and Foreign Groups," p. 19.

the Jewish face was revalued was the appearance of Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman before HUAC in 1966 as the anti-war protest movement was gathering momentum. HUAC was, undoubtedly, trying to justify its existence by finding a 1960s audience for a re-enactment of its 1950s role as defenders of the state from the forces of subversion. They miscalculated. Rubin and Hoffman were well-known Yippies, hip Jewish (and Jewish looking) anarchist icons of the 1960s counterculture, who had no intention of replaying for the benefit of HUAC the 1950s hearings with its cast of staid if not cowed Jewish and other witnesses. Rubin and Hoffman and their supporters appeared before the Committee, but in the dress of the first generation of American revolutionaries, the patriots of 1776. Their ingenuity attracted considerable media attention and made HUAC a laughingstock.

There was more to Rubin and Hoffman’s manipulation of imagery than playful performativity. The protests against the war in Vietnam and the American Revolutionary spirit were conflated in the bodies and dress of New York Jews. HUAC and all it stood for appeared, at that moment, to be consigned to the dustbin of history. Jewish witnesses were no longer publicly humiliated and afraid. What Rubin and Hoffman were saying in as provocative a manner as possible was that to be young, radical, and Jewish was to be quintessentially and triumphantly American. In the Rubin-Hoffman lexicon of images, assimilation was no longer an issue because assimilation was achieved on terms that did not require passing.

By 1974, Hollywood found a way to cinematize the essence of that Rubin-Hoffman moment. In *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, 1974), the very Jewish looking Mel Brooks rides onto the screen dressed as an Indian chief, the camera closes in on Brooks’s bronzed and war painted face, and the viewer is forced to notice how plausible Brooks looks as an Indian. Then, using the body language of Hollywood Indians, Brooks comments in Yiddish on the strange goings on of white and black pioneers, thus reminding the audience of his actual ethnicity. Here was the authentic and indigenous American and the Lost Tribes of Israel rolled into one. As Bhabha notes, “counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities.”⁴⁵

The sea change that Rubin and Hoffman’s actions and the Mel Brooks vignette signal and advance was captured in other performances. The rejection

⁴⁵H. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 300.

of the assimilationist model in relation to the stereotypical Jewish nose can also be seen when Barbra Streisand was cast as Fanny Brice first in *Funny Girl* (William Wyler, 1968) and then in *Funny Lady* (Herbert Ross, 1975). Unlike Brice, Streisand never “cut off her nose to spite her race,” and in Streisand’s portrayal of Brice, Brice does not have a nose job either. The Streisand nose epitomizes the stereotype, yet Streisand has never felt the need to deconstruct her ethnicity. Indeed her theatrical and film persona depends on it. Many of Streisand’s most memorable roles are as strong and often attractive Jewish women (Miss Marmelstein in *I Can Get It For You Wholesale* (1962), Dolly Levi in *Hello Dolly* (Gene Kelly, 1969), Katie Morosky in *The Way We Were* (Sidney Pollock, 1973), Yentl in *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, 1983), Dr. Susan Lowenstein in *Prince of Tides* (Barbra Streisand, 1991), Roz Focker in *Meet the Fockers* (Jay Roach, 2004)), courted and bedded by some of Hollywood’s most desirable leading men.

A later-day Dorothy Parker might have observed that Streisand is Brice without a nose job. Similarities should not, however, obscure important differences. From slapstick comedy (*Meet the Fockers*), to serious romantic drama (*Prince of Tides*), Streisand’s Jewish roles show a range that Brice’s never did. Nor has Streisand been limited to Jewish roles. She played the non-Jewish airhead, Judy Maxwell, a college drop-out, in the screwball comedy, *What’s Up, Doc?* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1972), the tormented and non-Jewish Claudia Draper, a high-class prostitute and victim of child abuse, in *Nuts* (Martin Ritt, 1987), the repressed and lonely non-Jewish Rose Morgan, a University teacher desperate for love in *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (Barbra Streisand, 1996).

This is not to say that Streisand has been able to play any non-Jewish role she might wish, or that the apparently non-Jewish roles in which she has been cast are uninflected by her ethnic identity. As Richard Dyer points out, “Analysis of images always needs to see how any given instance is embedded in a network of other instances.”⁴⁶ Casting Streisand as Judy Maxwell, Claudia Draper, and Rose Morgan subliminally superimposes on their ethnic neutrality a secularized version of Streisand’s already well established Jewish identity. Indeed, the roles of Maxwell, Draper, and Morgan appear to have been carefully selected so that the effluvium of *Yiddishkeit* that Streisand inevitably brings to these parts in no way undermines their credibility. Except for their names, these women might just as easily be Jewish as not. The casting of Lauren Bacall as Streisand’s mother in *The Mirror Has Two Faces* reinforces the

⁴⁶Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

sense of Jewishness in this apparently non-Jewish family. Notwithstanding, Streisand is able plausibly to stretch ethnic boundaries to fit the contours of her secular, non-Jewish women roles. That elasticity suggests the degree to which the dominant culture is willing to accept ethnic identity as possibility rather than, as was the case with Fanny Brice, limitation. Certainly, the diversity of Streisand’s roles stands in stark contrast to the narrowness of Brice’s choices. When Brice finally broke out of her Jewish mold it was only to be infantilized as Baby Snooks. Streisand not only has played a greater range of parts than did Brice, but has gone beyond acting to recording, directing (*Yentl*, *Prince of Tides*, *The Mirror Has Two Faces*) and producing (*The Main Event* [1979—Streisand also played female lead]; *Prince of Tides*), thereby exerting a control over her artistic life that Brice never had and probably could not even imagine.

Barbra’s Children: Assimilation and Hybridity

Streisand’s rehabilitation of the stereotypical Jewish nose is part of a process, still on-going, by which Hollywood, reflecting the social and demographic changes in the United States, finds it useful to commodify diversity and hybridity. The reform of the 1924 immigration laws, starting in 1965 when the national origins quota system was abolished, has dramatically altered the ethnic makeup of new arrivals to America. Between 1961 and 1970, about 1,123,492 immigrants came to the United States from Europe, 427,624 came from Asia, 1,716,374 came from the Americas, and 28,954 came from Africa. Between 1991 and 2000, the numbers show a dramatic shift in immigration patterns: 1,359,737 came from Europe, 2,795,672 came from Asia, 4,486,806 came from the Americas and 354,939 from Africa. Clearly, from 1965 on, non-European immigrants considerably outnumber those from Europe.⁴⁷

Along with shifting patterns of immigration, the explosion in the number of mixed-race and mixed-faith people is changing the American landscape. “Between 1960 and 1990, the number of interracial married couples rose from 150,000 to more than 1.1 million, and the number of interracial children leaps accordingly.”⁴⁸ There are no credible statistics for interfaith marriages, but the growing concern of observant Jews with assimilation provides a good index of

⁴⁷“U.S. Immigration History,” <http://www.airus.org/Research/Research.cfm?ID=1820&c=2> (6/7/05), p. 1.

⁴⁸J. N. Pieterse, “Hybridity, So What?: The Anti-hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 2–3 (2001): 233.

its frequency. Of course, population movements, cross-cultural trade, intercultural contact and intermarriage are not new. What is new is the pace. According to Pieterse, these “are times of *accelerated mixing*.”⁴⁹ One consequence of a world increasingly migratory and diasporic is a cultural hybridity marked by a wide range of eroded and transgressed boundaries and the mix-and-match identities that such transgressions produce. According to Bhabha we are witnessing, “from the minority perspective . . . a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”⁵⁰ These changing demographics have encouraged Hollywood to portray Americans in their multiplicity of shades and ethnicities. As part of this process, Hollywood and television have revalued the stereotypical Jewish nose, although not necessarily the Jew. I look at three examples: *Meet the Fockers*, *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion* (David Mirkin, 1997) and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004).

A sequel to *Meet the Parents* (Jay Roach, 2000), *Meet the Fockers* has bumbling but good-hearted and underachieving Jewish Greg Focker, played by the Jewish Ben Stiller, introducing his bland, blonde, beautiful, and pregnant non-Jewish partner, Pam (Teri Polo), and her parents, the up-tight WASPs Dina (Blythe Danner) and Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro), to his brash, sentimental, intelligent, embarrassing, and stereotypical Jewish parents, Roz (Barbra Streisand), a sex therapist, and Bernie (Dustin Hoffman), an unemployed lawyer. Roz and Bernie are 60s leftovers, wilted flower power types, devoted to raunchy sex, Yiddish expressions, and a general hospitality towards the possibilities of life. Whatever their faults, Roz and Bernie Focker share an intimacy with each other and an openness with their son that Dina Byrnes longs for. In the end, Roz Focker converts Dina to Roz and Bernie’s lifestyle, if not to their religion. Dina in turn converts Jack. The intermarriage of Jewish Greg and non-Jewish Pam is blessed by all four parents, now all convinced that their children’s lifestyle is redemptive. The film ends in a celebration of cultural hybridity. It is, in essence, assimilation lite. The contrasting life styles of the two sets of parents are moderated in their children not by any apparent social pressure, but by the amiable dispositions of the children themselves. Greg and Pam resemble each other far more than they resemble their parents. Greg certainly lacks the intensity and color of Roz and Bernie; Pam is more open and sexually adventurous than Dina or Jack. Neither child is particularly

⁴⁹Pieterse, “Hybridity,” p. 231, emphasis added.

⁵⁰H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

memorable. The audience is left to wonder whether hybridization is going to produce in the as yet unborn offspring of Greg and Pam a totally anemic nerd, or a re-invigorated version of the previous generations.

The diminishing significance of the stereotypical Jewish nose is also apparent in *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion*. Lisa Kudrow plays Michele Weinberger opposite Mira Sorvino’s Romy White. While Kudrow’s nose is less assertive than Streisand’s, it evokes the Jewish stereotype. Mira Sorvino plays the part of a WASP. The film’s advertising, however, all but erases that difference. In posters and on the covers of the videos, Romy and Michele are pictured as Siamese twins, joined at the hip. Dressed in hot pink mini-dresses, similar in height and weight, body parts arranged in mirror images of each other, arms wrapped around each other, Romy and Michele gaze out at the world in a simultaneity of innocent expectation.

The advertising accurately captures the way the film’s story line erases difference. Romy and Michele have been friends forever, went to the same high school and were ostracized together because they dressed outlandishly. They now live together, have similar dead end jobs, spend all their free time together, and finish each other’s sentences. These two are virtually interchangeable airheads. Michele’s Jewishness is reduced to a throwaway line or two and plays no role in the friendship. On impulse, Romy and Michele decide to go to their tenth-year high school reunion. There the WASP in-crowd attempts to reassert its power by marginalizing those they deem outsiders. They have antisemitic inclinations, but their exclusionary practices are wide-ranging, and leave out all differences. So it is not only Michele, but Romy, the Goth-like Heather Mooney (Janeane Garofalo), and Sandy Frink (Alan Cummings), the computer nerd, who are scorned.

The reunion easily reveals Romy and Michele’s lackluster lives. But, far more dramatically, the reunion strips away the facade of success and happiness of the in-crowd. That group is shown to be leading lives of increasing desperation characterized by financial ruin, lovelessness, and betrayal. By comparison, the caring and sharing Romy and Michele come off well. Their enduring friendship is a meaningful measure against which to judge the collective failure of the others. The triumph of the misfits comes when Sandy Frink, now a silicon valley tycoon in the Bill Gates mold, provides financial support for Romy and Michele to open an exclusive boutique featuring their own quirky clothing. Romy and Michele have evolved from social misfits to cool niche entrepreneurs. In this marketplace as in their friendship, ethnic distinctions have no place. The fairytale fluff of an ending rests on the bedrock of current social and economic realities and so helps explain what informs Hollywood’s acceptance of diversity and hybridity.

The diminishing significance of the stereotypical Jewish nose as a marker of Jewish identity is perhaps best captured in *Sex and the City*, in which the half-Jewish Sarah Jessica Parker, with a large crooked nose (in one episode, she comments that it is her worst feature) and often frizzy hair, plays Carrie Bradshaw, sexually liberated WASP, who differs from her close, equally sexually liberated WASP friends Samantha (Kim Cattrall), Charlotte (Kristin Davis) and Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) only in the degree to which she fetishizes Manolo Blahnik shoes. The only cosmetic surgery contemplated by any of the four women comes in a late episode when Samantha considers breast enhancement only to discover that she has breast cancer.

It has been argued that *Sex and the City* pushes the boundaries of television and redefines the nature of cosmopolitan sophistication.⁵¹ Where others see unmitigated sluttishness,⁵² Audrain believes the show's importance lies in the possibility it allows of substituting for the deficiencies of the male-female relationship the sustaining camaraderie of the sisterhood. I think both Shalit and Audrain have a point, but in terms of my preoccupations, it is relevant to note that the show, in relation to other media treatments, redistributes the Jewish look, which is now presented as non-denominational. Carrie, who is not supposed to be Jewish, resembles the Jewish stereotype. Charlotte, who does not, becomes Jewish.

In one of the early episodes of the 2003 season of the show, Charlotte descends into the mikvah, thus completing her conversion to Judaism that will enable her to marry the affable, good-natured Jewish Harry Goldenblatt (Evan Handler), who has made conversion a condition for their marriage. Recognizing in Harry something more enduring than the superficialities of her first marriage, Charlotte agrees. Her conversion is not simply a matter of form. Under the guidance of a rabbi, she begins studying Judaism in earnest, and seems more serious in the practice of her new religion than Harry, who, as the episodes surrounding their marriage progress, proves to be less observant than she. Charlotte's conversion is a startling reversal of the long media tradition of portraying Jewish assimilation as the erasing of Jewish identity.⁵³

⁵¹A. Audrain, "More in Her Closet Than Jimmy Choo Shoes: A Queer Analysis of *Sex and the City* and its Context in Postmodern Culture," *Meditations*, Vol. 1 (2004): 13.

⁵²W. Shalit, "Sex, Sadness, and the City," *City Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1999): 6; http://www.city-journal.org/html/9_4_a4.html, last accessed: September 15, 2005.

⁵³S. Freedman, S., "Sex and the City Celebrates Judaism," *USA Today* (July 17, 2003): 4; Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, pp. 4–7.

Charlotte’s conversion does not, moreover, alter her relationship to Carrie, Miranda or Sam, nor does their affection for her change. They attend her Jewish wedding, share her joy, and laugh together over the many glitches (the embarrassingly inappropriate toast, the glass that refuses to break). Charlotte’s choice of religious affiliation is treated as a personal matter with no social consequences. The acceptability of Charlotte’s conversion may be based on the show’s general tolerance toward non-standard life-style options. More cynically, it may also reflect a shared subliminal recognition that, unlike diamonds, neither marriage nor religion is forever. If the new husband or the new religion fails to satisfy on whatever grounds, there are other choices available.

The current popularity of *Sex and the City*, now in seemingly endless late night reruns, suggests that mainstream culture no longer requires Jews to choose a version of assimilation that abandons Judaism or erases their ethnic look, an interpretation reinforced by the fact that Sarah Jessica Parker adorns the cover of the September 2005 issue of *Vogue*, that arbiter of fashion and style. Clearly, religion is not a pressing issue in *Sex and the City*, a world in which commonalities are grounded on creature comforts and consumerist longing, usually for expensive shoes. Smarter and cooler than Romy and Michele, the women of *Sex and the City* are style-conscious customers in the cosmopolitan marketplace where nearly everything is for sale.

Not all Jews participate in this new media smorgasbord of Jewish types. Older forms of assimilation continue to be recycled. Jennifer Grey, whose most memorable performance was in *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987) playing Frances “Baby” Houseman, a budding young Jewish radical with a serious social conscience, had a stereotypical Jewish nose. On a summer holiday in the Catskills, she falls in love with the non-Jewish Patrick Swayze, the resort’s stunning dancing instructor, and although they bump noses, the result of the size of Baby’s nose, religious differences and nose shapes are less of an impediment to their romance than their class differences. In the years after *Dirty Dancing*, Grey’s career went into decline. Some time in the early 90s, Grey had a nose job, presumably to break out of the “Baby” Houseman Jewish stereotype. Grey’s nose job left her unrecognizable, another undistinguished pretty face, and her career has continued to decline. Grey’s nose job is a cautionary tale: passing in the manner of Fanny Brice, even for a star as talented as Grey, is not a surefire ticket to success, at least not at the present time.

Conclusion:

The current acceptance of the Jewish look as both cool and mainstream is not a fixed position. Jewish cool is a version of Jewish identity, fluid and subject to on-going negotiation amongst a host of shifting variables, which include, but

are not limited to, the social assignments of the dominant culture, themselves unstable, and the desire for Jewish self-expression in an ever more diverse and hybrid culture. The readiness of the media to accommodate images of that diverse and hybrid world says something about the tolerance and adaptability of mainstream culture, but it says something too about the media's need to reach out to all potential consumers, "regardless of their color or ethnicity."⁵⁴ It is no inexplicable accident that Romy and Michele end up selling clothes, or that Carrie and her friends are so often engaged in the impulse buying of them.

⁵⁴A. Ratner, A., "Jewish Actresses, Show Business, and Anti-semitism," *Sholem Community of Los Angeles*, <http://www.sholem.org/docs/ariannaratner.htm>, (n.d.), p. 3, last accessed: September 15, 2005.

Copyright of *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* is the property of Purdue University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.