“OUT OF DARKNESS COMES LIGHT” : RECREATING STEREOTYPES AS A SURVIVAL MECHANISM IN JEWISH COMEDY

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ABSTRACT

Alongside contemporary conversations on race and representation in the media, this paper will discuss how Jewish comedians reappropriate negative Jewish stereotypes as survival mechanisms. In refuting Audre Lorde's theory "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", this paper will assert the ability of Jews as a marginalized people to reuse negative Jewish tropes through self- deprecation. In this discourse, is a focus on the history of Jewish humor, the production of comedy from Jewish comics and the reception of Jewish comedy from a Jewish audience. To discuss Jewish representations in popular culture, participants discussed Jewish representations in *Broad City* and *The Producers* and four Jewish comedians and writers were interviewed to understand their perceptions of Jewish representation. Through these interviews, I identified five survival mechanisms that rely on using Jewish stereotypes. This contributes to the larger conversation on the beneficial qualities of reclaiming and reusing harmful portrayals or ideology.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Freud on Jews: "I do not know whether there are any other instances of a people making fun to such degree of its own character." (Freud 1993: 81)

"Is it appropriate to wonder why Jews should enjoy laughing at themselves? Why joking acquired such value in Jewish society, or why Yiddish-- the language of American Jewry, -- is thought to be inherently funny?" (Wisse 2013, 5)

Cozy under a few blankets in the dark Washington winter, my parents and I cuddled up to watch the musical rendition of Mel Brooks' *The Producers*. On the screen, the character Max Bialystock, clad in a black hat, white shirt and black jacket sat down and began to pray. My mom, always talkative during movies, commented, "That's funny, they sort of made him look like an Orthodox Jew." As he sat, the intensity of his prayer increased, reaching its climax as he cried and plead to God "Oh Lord, dear Lord. I WANT THAT MONEY!" (Figure 1). I cringed, feeling like I looking at an anti-Semitic cartoon of a greedy Orthodox Jew whose only religion is money (Figure 2). My parents, however, did not react to the plea, and later when I interviewed them about the film, were clearly not strongly affected by the scene as they could not remember what Bialystock had yelled up to God.

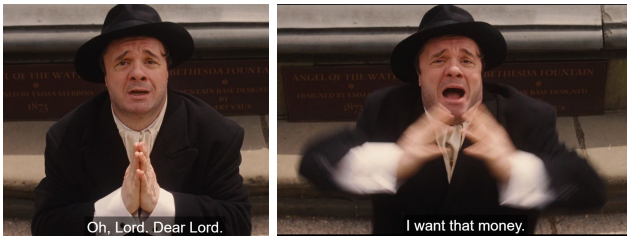


Figure 1

Nathan Lane in *The Producers*[1]

[1] (Brooks 2005)

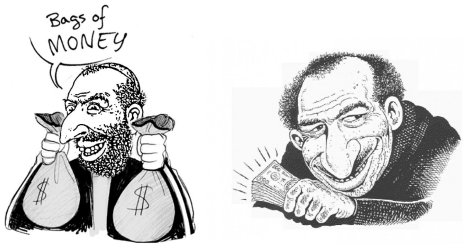


Figure 2

Anti-Semitic Cartoons[2]

In March 2018, at Lewis & Clark College, I attended a talk on anti-Semitism by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a Jewish organization that combats anti-Semitism and hate crimes. The program I attended focused on identifying different forms of anti-Semitic actions and phrases, rooted in their historic meaning and impact. Another student, Shoshana, and I discussed Jewish self- deprecation, and how we often see Jews in the media depicting a "Cheap Jew". She said "Jokes like these, coming from both Jews and non-Jews, allowed for the Holocaust to occur as they normalized anti-Semitic ideology." Shoshana felt that this normalization of anti-Semitic language among Jews allowed the "stereotype to become a believed reality and allows for Jews to become the scapegoat and then be targeted." Hilary Bernstein, the ADL representative facilitating the event, responded to her comment by drawing a "Pyramid of Hate" on the board (Appendix A). This pyramid symbolizes the way hate of a community or people build and exist in a society. Directly relating to the question is the lowest slab that includes jokes, name-calling, stereotyping and accepting negative information. Bernstein illustrated how every layer relies on a

[2] (ADL 2008)

lower tier to support it, so if the bottom layer is removed, the entire pyramid collapses. Hilary stated, "Making an anti-Semitic joke does not mean you support genocide, but genocide can only occur in a society where all of the lower layers are present. And that includes anti-Semitic jokes."

Theorist Audre Lorde expresses a similar sentiment to Hilary Bernstein in her writing. Lorde writes from a queer, black, feminist perspective about systems of oppression, like white supremacy, heteronormativity and sexism, being recreated in feminist circles and feminist academia, arguing, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." (Lorde 2007, 2). Her theory has been applied to many instances of reclaiming oppressive language, practices and tropes (Kreiss 2008).

Applying her theory to this research, anti-Semitic stereotypes are the "master's tools" and is systematic and historical anti-Semitism is "the master's house". Lorde's theory asserts that Jews reappropriating negative stereotypes can never bring about "genuine change" to the existence of systematic anti-Semitism.

Despite these arguments made by the ADL and Audre Lorde of the harm in using the tools of oppressors, American Jewish humor continues to use self- deprecating or stereotyping humor, drawing from various anti-Semitic stereotypes. Stereotypical depictions of Jews saturate the American media; Woody Allen made famous the nebbish, anxiety-ridden Jew, Mel Brooks, bases *The Producers* off two greedy businessmen Jews, and the television show *Broad City* tells a story of two young Jewish women joking about being Jewish American Princesses (J.A.P.) as well as their "Jewish" cheapness (Wisse 2013).

There is evident opposition between the assertions of Hilary Bernstein and Audre Lorde and the reality of Jewish humor which often uses traditionally anti-Semitic tropes in comedy. This begs the question: What is the purpose of self- deprecating Jewish stereotypes in Jewish comedy?

Through my research, I have collected five different ways comics using these stereotypes purpose as survival tactics. The first is "laughing instead of crying", a tactic identified among most participants as essential to Jewish survival through deplorable situations like pogroms, hate crimes and genocides (Craig 1899; Magid 2012). Then, "keeping a low profile", the act of staying modest to avoid unwanted attention. The third, "dodging instead of fighting", the act of deflecting anti-Semitism through joking. Next, "risk taking as resistance", making jokes about taboo subjects to show a willingness to cross boundaries and be a fighter. And lastly, "visibility and connection to other Jews", the act of taking up space to represent Jewish cultural trends to a larger audience.

Background Information

Jewish Humor

To situate Jewish comedy in both its religious past, as well as its current importance in American culture, Rabbi Michael Cahana of Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon[3], gives historical and biblical evidence to explain why Jews are often associated with American humor (Wisse 2013).

[3] Rabbi Cahana is a Reform Rabbi at one of the Jewish Temples in Portland, OR. As a Rabbi, he has situated my conversation on Jewish humor within the Torah and Jewish religion. He has an interest in humor and is knowledgeable of Jewish comedy.

"Jewish humor has always been a part of Jewish culture. Going back to the Torah with Abraham and Sarah, when Sarah *laughed* at an idea. They were very old and God's three angels come and tell Sarah that she is going to have a child. Sarah laughs and says, 'Look at my husband, he is 90 years old and he is going to give me a child?!' This is not a joke exactly, but it is *that response* in the face of adversity, when the thing she wants is being promised to her and instead of saying, 'Thank you.', she laughs, as if to say 'Yeah right.' She then names her son Isaac, *Yitzchak,* which means 'to laugh'.

That story ties into humor and absurdity. Jewish humor, if we track it back to its earliest form, is about absurdity. The book of Esther is written with absurdity and Gob also has dark humor with a lot of absurdity in it. That is a particular type of biblical humor; absurd storytelling. If you read it now, there is slapstick humor (physical humor) in the Book of Esther.

We just finished the holiday Purim, which is a part of the Book of Esther. Purim has traditionally been this time of absurdity in its celebration and the idea of the 'Purim Shpiel' was the beginning of Jewish theatre, the idea that you put on a play to tell the torah story and the telling of that story is done in a larger than life and humorous way. Purim is a story about genocide, utter destruction and then everything gets turned around, Haman (the antagonist) gets hung on his own gallows and the Jews have joy and light and gladness.

There is this idea of out of the darkness, comes light and joy. The traditional definition of Jewish humor is laughing instead of crying. Laughing in the face of attempted genocide and all of the horrors that have happened in the history of Judaism."

This concept is present throughout the following interviews, as respondents expressed use of unfavorable depictions of Jews having the ability to create laughter and lightness out of a dark and traumatizing source.

Rabbi Cahana then continued with the history of American Jewish humor, explaining that the "Borscht Belt", the area in New York where many Jewish summer resorts were in the 1950s, made Jewish comedy popular in the United States. In the following generation, Mel Brooks and Woody Allen then continued this tradition of humor on "The Show of Shows" . From this, the Rabbi explained, the popular American Jewish comedian became known as the "Cultural Jew" who "wears his Judaism lightly", but is also identified widely as Jewish.

Common Stereotypes

In the conversation of stereotypes, this paper will mainly draw from the common stereotypes of "Jews are cheap, greedy, and materialistic; Jews are good with money" and "Jews control the Banks, Media, Hollywood, Even the U.S. Government; Jews have a secret plot to take over the world". The American Defense League, in their informational booklet write of the origin of this stereotype, "The myth of Jewish greed dates back at least to the New Testament story of Jesus forcing the Jewish money-changers out of the Temple." At this time, Jews were "forbidden to own land", and hold most jobs. "The Church had forbidden Christians from practicing usury (lending money at interest)." Due to this, "Christians directed their anger at having to pay back loans and taxes against the Jewish money lenders and tax-collectors." Because of this, Jews were thought of having a "natural skill with money" (ADL 2008: 18).

Another common stereotype is of Jewish domination that "Jews control the banks, media, Hollywood, and even the U.S. government; Jews have a secret plot to take over the World". The ADL also traces this stereotype, writing, "Anti-Semites point to 'The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion' as proof of a Jewish conspiracy to dominate world political and economic sectors as well as media. This proven forgery, written by agents of the Russian czar in the late 19th century, claims to be the minutes of a secret meeting of Jews that details plans of Jewish leaders to rule the world. The proven forgery spread throughout the 20th century and continues to this day to promote the stereotype that the Jews own the banks and control the media" (ADL 2008: 21) They continued, stating: "The myth is also related to the misperception that Jews are different, alien people with strange powers to control others." In conversation about conspiracy theories, they write: "It is easier to blame one group for everything bad that happens rather than try to understand the complex and multifaceted causes of problems. Conspiracy theories have always tended to be popular in difficult economic times, and Jews often surface as the traditional scapegoat." (ADL 2008: 22).

These two conceptions of Jews are among the most well known and therefore are often recreated in Jewish humor. Both of these stereotypes fueled the Holocaust, as well as other violence against Jews and continue to be used in anti-Jewish propaganda (ADL 2008: 22).

Methodology

To build background knowledge on the subject of Jewish humor, I wrote an ethnography on Jewish humor in the lives of young Ashkenazi women in the Fall of 2017. Additionally, I did research on stand-up comedy in Los Angeles. With the help of a Lewis & Clark SAAB Grant, I

went to three comedy shows at both *The Laugh Factory* and *The Comedy Store*. This research focused on contemporary American humor and helped me to understand what comedians were speaking about in the winter of 2018. At these shows, I took notes on anything I perceived as self- deprecating or referencing ethnicity and marginalization. At the comedy shows, I gained a critical understanding of how comedians use satire which aided me in understanding satirical humor and self- effacing humor. Specifically, I observed how other marginalized comics used self- deprecation to speak social or political truths in their stand-up. This background research allowed me to gain a perspective on contemporary American humor, as well as insight into what is positively and negatively received by an audience. To situate my conversation of Jewish humor, I spoke with Rabbi Michael Cahana in Portland, Oregon. Speaking with him provided context of the history of Jewish humor and how humor plays a role in Jewish religious practices.

To understand the creation of Jewish humor, I interviewed four Jewish comedic writers who have audiences ranging from small (stand- up comedy, around 20-50) to very large (*Ellen,* 3.9 Million viewers in 2011) (Seidman 2011). The interviews were conducted on the phone, over email, or in person. I chose to interview these writers to understand their personal relationships to Jewish representation in their own work. They also helped me to understand the way they make use of Jewish stereotypes and the functions the stereotypes serve.

To look into Jewish television representation, I focused on the show *Broad City (2014)*, as it is popular among people in my generation (currently in their 20s) and stars two Jewish women who also write, direct and produce the show. I also looked at *The Producers (1967, 2004)*, a movie that is popular among my parents' generation.

I had participants sit through watching sessions of the show with me in which we watched the episodes or movie, and I instructed them to pause the screen whenever they saw something that looked like a Jewish stereotype. When they pressed pause, I asked them to identify what they saw and explain the implications they felt the stereotype held. Following the episode or movie, I had individual discussions with each person. I allowed them space to speak about the stereotypes they saw and did not attempt to guide the conversation. To document these conversations, I either took notes as we spoke or recorded the discussions. In this, I aimed to understand the way my participants relate to and understand Jewish comedic portrayals.

My focus was on popular depictions of Jews, so they were they are mainly Ashkenazi, Jews of Eastern European descent. Due to my positionality as an Ashkenazi Jew, the majority of my Jewish contacts are also Ashkenazi. Due to the lack of breadth in my participants, as well as the small sample size, the interviewees are not intended to represent all Jews. Every Jewish person has a different relationship to to anti-Semitism and stereotypes. This paper is meant to give insight into the creation of Jewish media representations and their receptions, but not account for the vastness of Jewish experience.

Literature Review

This paper aims to enter the conversation on Jewish humor, Jewish stereotypes and the larger conversation on representation and reappropriation in the American media. In this process, it will build off of numerous scholars to make the claim that the reclaiming of Jewish stereotypes allows for the continuation and preservation of the Jewish people.

Humor has been described as an effective device to combat conflict due to its ability to conceal animosity. Burma explains that in the United States, black people and Jews have been associated with using comedy as a defensive technique. Burma focuses on the ways black Americans have interacted with humor as a medium to address discrimination and oppression (Burma 1946: 2).

There are many conversations surrounding the usage of humor by marginalized American communities (Gutiérrez-Jones 2003). Gutiérrez-Jones focuses on the Chicano community due to the lack of conversation surrounding humor in communities of color. Hughes calls on the practice of black communities adopting whiteface to parody white privilege, asserting how this reversal allows black communities to reclaim oppressive devices (Hughes 2014).

This form of humor is focused on the reclaiming of the same devices used by violent forces and contributes to a larger conversation of reclaiming language. This is seen seen in the current conversations of the reusing of the "n-word" among black Americans, as well as the usage of the words "dyke" and "queer" among sexual minorities (Kreiss 2008; Harkness 2008; Van Heerden 1991).

On this topic of reclaiming, the argument has been made that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", while others argue that repurposing oppressors tactics is a way to take power from them (Lorde 1984). Lorde neglects the ability of reclaiming to free an oppressed group or allow for healing from historical wounds. Christie Davies writing is in disagreement with Lorde, and argues for the ability of Jews to reclaim negative stereotypes. He confidently rejects the possibility of Jewish humor to act masochistically, pointing to its restorative qualities (Davies 1991).

Scholars have specifically looked into the characteristics and intricacies of Jewish humor (Wisse 2013; Wex 2005). Wisse comments on the oppressive conditions that have brought Jewish humor its specificities. She focuses on the ability of Jewish humor to bring relief to both Jews and believes that other oppressed groups should use humor similarly to Jews, to encourage healing and resistance.

Jewish stereotypes have been present in various academic discussions: The large Jewish nose, the nagging Jewish mother as well as the common anti-Semitic tropes that have appeared throughout literature and media (Antler 2007; Rosenberg 1970).

The question of the ability for Jewish humor to reinstill negative perceptions of Jews has been debated, with the main conclusion being the importance of the audience and circumstance (Saper 1993: 75). Saper claims that the joke is anti-Semitic when it speaks only of the "Jews' faults, and not their virtues" at which point it "derogates the Jewish people as a people." (Saper 1993: 78) He also points to the healing qualities of self-effacing humor.

One of the reasons this kind of humor can be beneficial is because it allows Jews a cultural connection in the media. Jewish communities create an internal, isolated culture, Wirth argues. He writes that this is true of other ethnic migrant groups, including Italians and Black people. He discusses the reproduction of the immigrants' previous practices in their food, religion and culture (Wirth 1928). Using stereotypes in humor allow for Jews to claim media space as an ethnic group and represent our specific cultural and religious practices.

Humor is useful due to this Jewish insularity. Jewish theorist Georg Simmel asserts that Jews are seen as the sociological outsider due to their nomadic history and are forever viewed as the visitor that stays too long in a community, but is never accepted. He explains that the "The

Stranger" is defined by their social distance from the majority, creating repulsion and prejudice (Simmel 1908). Wirth is in agreement with Simmel, writing, "The isolation of the Jew has been akin to the type of isolation of the person who feels lonely through in the midst of a crowd." (Wirth 1928: 197) Jewish humor is often created to point out the feelings of exile associated with Jewish experience, as well as the separateness from the dominant culture.

Jewish humor is often praised and recognized for its abilities to mend, and many authors write of its ability to extend its healing powers to other persecuted groups. Academics also point to the specificities of the Jews' experience and history to its forming of a specific sense of humor. This includes a long history of expulsion that led to a nomadic trend, and an insular, protective community. These themes of oppression and insularity are widely present in the following conversations on the abilities of Jewish self- deprecation humor to cure past wounds.

"Playing a Dangerous Game"

A Conversation With Jewish Comedians and Writers

"Grotjahn describes the Jewish Joke- Teller as 'Taking the enemy's dagger, splitting a hair in mid- air, stabbing himself and giving it back with the query 'can you do half as well?'" (Martin Grotjahn in Davies 1993: 42)

When discussing self- deprecating comedy, all Jewish writers have a different perspective about their responsibility to represent Jews to a general, usually non- Jewish, public. However, at the root of all of the writers interviewed were feelings grounded in the importance of Jewish survival, resistance and existence.

To discuss the complexities of Jewish representation in their creative works, I spoke with four Jewish comedians: Dylan Visvikis, Lauren Pomerantz, Jacob Fromm and Michael Gordon.

Dylan Visvikis is a screenwriter who works in Los Angeles, and our interview focuses mainly on the screenplay he wrote titled “I Want to Fuck Adolf Hitler”. Lauren Pomerantz is a television writer based in L.A. who has written for *Saturday Night Live*, *Community* and worked on *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show* for ten years. Jacob Fromm is a stand-up comedian from New York City, and Michael Gordon is a writer on *The Tonight Show with Conan O’Brien.*

Keeping a Low Profile

One aspect of Jewish self- protection that stereotypes allow for is to keep a low profile, stay out of the public eye and therefore avoid unwanted attention and remain unassuming and unpretentious. Self- deprecation can allow Jews to appear humble, and therefore avoid fueling anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of Jewish world domination. This is seen most often in self-effacing joking about Jewish success. In this practice, the Jewish person is able to mock themselves before someone threatening does, and thus hold the stereotype as their own. Additionally, it allows the Jew to seemingly assimilate, and not make themselves a target.

For example, Michael Gordon suggested, “I do go out of my way to avoid stereotypical depictions of racial or ethnic groups. I can't stand humor that plays on those stereotypes - other than that which plays on Jewish stereotypes, interestingly. But I don't think it's a self-hating-Jew sort of thing. Rather, I think it's just natural humility to be able to make fun of yourself, and aggressive intolerance to make fun of others.” Here, Michael explains that self- deprecation is not based on internalized self- disdain, but modesty and humbleness. The ability to joke about oneself and embrace mockery detracts arrogance and ego.

This sentiment was also present within my family, as my Jewish grandmother would tell my dad throughout his life, "You must always succeed and you will always fail." As my dad explained she meant that "You must work your hardest to be the most successful, but 'you will always fail' so you don't get big- headed." This Jewish mentality of remaining modest and unassuming allows Jews to avert dangerous conspiracy theories. Historically, for Jews, life has been full of tragedies and this approach to life also prepares for disappointment.

There is danger in bragging of that success due to the negative associations of Jewish achievement. Currently, there is a tension between Jews having success compared to other minorities in the United States and the danger in addressing that success. With the current success of Jews in the United States, inevitably come conspiracy theories tied to Jewish domination. Christie Davies writes, refers to the "indisputable secular success of individual Jews in Western capitalist countries." Continuing, "It is a striking pattern for people whose ancestors were often purunious immigrants or even refugees and whose success was often achieved in the face of opposition, prejudice and discrimination not just from the majority but from other minorities as well." (Davies 1993: 34). Davies points to the surprising ability that Jews have been able to maintain success despite numerous obstacles. Despite this reality, joking and keeping a low profile allow Jews to avoid attention.

Dodge Instead of Fight

Due to the danger in boasting of Jewish accomplishments, Jewish self-preservation often comes in the form of deflection. Many of my interviewees exhibited their ability to divert harmful Jewish stereotypes through joking about the conspiracies of Jewish power.

One way to combat these dangerous stereotypes is to embrace them in order to deflect them. In this way, Jews are not picking battles with potentially dangerous forces like Nazis or fascists. Once again, this method allows Jews to not draw too much attention to themselves, and therefore not make themselves a target. Christie Davies describes these jokes as survival tactics for Jews to not garner too much attention for their success, "self gratulation jokes have especially proliferated in the contemporary English- speaking countries where anti-Semitism is a social nuisance." (Davies 1993: 36). Christie Davies explains this phenomenon of facetious joking about Jewish success. He provides the joke as an example, "A Jewish dropout: A boy who didn't get his P.h.D." (Davies 1993: 34). This diffuses anti-Semitic encounters through jokes about success, because bragging about success can easily energize anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

This method of joking was present throughout my interviews. When speaking about feeling more comfortable in L.A. because there were more Jews than in his hometown, Dylan quipped, "I guess we do run Hollywood! That was a joke, everyone!" In another interview, I asked Jacob Fromm if he felt that there is a lot of representation of Jewish culture. Jokingly, he responded, "Yeah. Because we run the media. So of course."

With the intention of deflecting these stereotypes by embracing them humorously, Dylan said, "Say that we have power! That is nice of you, thank you." Jacob similarly expressed. "Well, sorry we became the money people. You made us - we had no option. If a friend makes fun of me for being financially well off- fine! Make fun of me, I still have money! You tried to kill us! Give us this!" These two comedians both exhibit a desire to quickly divert the danger present in these stereotypes through clever and satirical responses to them.

Risk Taking in Comedy

In contrast with the previous survival mechanisms, one aspect of Jewish survival is risk taking as a mode of Jewish resistance. The other identified survival tactics involve laying low and staying passive. However, for the Jewish people, simply remaining reserved can lead to ultimate erasure. Risky comedy allows for Jewish hyper-visibility in the media and an assertion of a rebellious mindset. This acts as a survival mechanism as it expresses Jewish anti-authoritarianism and nonconformity.

This defiance is a key element of Jewish risk taking. Michael Gordon explained his stance to me over email, articulating the use of social taboos to shock audiences. "I think of the *Borat* movie, written by and starring the Jewish filmmaker Sacha Baron Cohen. I liked that movie a lot, and the parts that made me laugh the hardest just happened to be the most anti-Semitic parts -- an anti-Semitic parade with papier-mache figures in his native Kazakhstan, and his belief that the Jewish owners of the bed and breakfast where he's staying have shape-shifted into cockroaches that he throws money at. Both are indefensible stereotypes, and both are - to me - absolutely hilarious." Michael concluded, stating, "Do moviegoers - both Jews and non-Jews - come out of the theater with their negative stereotypes reinforced? I think so. Would I have taken those scenes out of the film? No. Am I thus playing a dangerous game, sacrificing the actual safety of my people for the sake of a laugh? I suppose I am. Life is tricky that way." In this explanation, Michael navigates the contradiction between the use of its stereotype to create harm, but also its ability to entertain. Michael acknowledges the gambling that must occur with using these stereotypes, but also the ability of *Borat* to cross social boundaries and therefore make a shocking statement. These surprising

depictions leave the audience impacted by the film's willingness to say and do the unthinkable.

Ruth Wisse, a sociologist, also writes of the abilities of these depictions, "Borat's anti-Semitic slurs", "are there to expose the anti-Semites who hold such views" (Wisse 2013, 233). Although Michael does not comment on the way Borat's anti-Semitism could be expository, he does claim he is "playing a dangerous game". The method of toying with danger is present in much of Jewish humor as a resistance tactic.

Lauren Pomerantz, does not like using stereotypes of any kind in her writing, but still finds some humor in this element of risk taking. Lauren's sister is an Orthodox Jew, and her parents are Conservative Jews, because of this, she said, "Since my family runs the gamut of observancy, I am more careful to make sure I am not offending my sister". She told a story about a Passover Seder she had last year with friends in L.A. and her Jewish friend who is a comedy writer came dressed as an Orthodox man as a joke. Lauren explained that her Mom was extremely offended, but that she had thought it was funny. This crossing of a social taboo is essential to Jewish comedy, as it offends some, shocks others and consistently makes a statement.

Dylan Visvikis and I focused on the screenplay he had written titled "I Want to Fuck Adolf Hitler", a clearly provocative title in itself. His screenplay follows Caroline, a young Jewish woman, who gets diagnosed with syphilis and goes undercover as a German woman to have sex with SS soldiers and hopefully Adolf Hitler. At the end of the movie, she is shot and killed as it is discovered that she has given her disease to many SS soldiers. The story is based off of real women in 1942, when syphilis was fatal within a year, who infected Nazis. The plot to

his screenplay is heavy with risk, as he navigates the presence of a Jewish woman in Nazi Germany, and is filled with jokes about Nazis enjoying killing Jews. In one scene, an SS Officer is having sex with the main character, Caroline, and is subtitled in German saying "Come fuck me! Come fuck me like the Jews fucked my country!" (Visvikis 2017: 72). There is often a precarious balance in jokes such as these that cause the audience to test their limits and boundaries. This element of boundary breaking is essential to Jewish humor, as it provokes the enemy, and proves Jewish assertiveness, resistance and resilience.

Jewish Identity on Screen

In our conversation, Lauren Pomerantz explained how she did not intend to be a "Jewish Writer", meaning she did not want her Jewishness to define her work, but that it still unintentionally entered her work because of who she is. She explained, "For a good 10 years, I shied away from all sorts of political writing. Jewish writing in particular. Then I left the show and had to branch out and write stuff on my own. I noticed that what I am drawn to is writing what I know, which is the story of an anxious young Jewish girl. I think by my own nature I ended up writing like that and that it at least seeped into own writing, because it is in my DNA. Without calling it Jewish, it just sort of comes out." Here, Lauren expresses how the stereotype of the "Anxious Jew" relates to her own experience. Without wanting to call it that, it became a part of her writing because it was a truth of her life. Many Jewish stereotypes do hold truths that allow fellow Jews to relate to when they see Jewish depictions on screen. Lauren's writing has potential to relate to other Jews based off of this "Anxious Jew" stereotype, because anxiety and mental illness are common among Jews (Leavey 2016). This is seen in the following section on

Jewish audience perception. As writers like Lauren write Jewish depictions as media, many Jewish viewers are able to relate to the broadcasted Jewish representations, as they then feel seen and visible.

"We Can't Just Disappear": Watching Jewish Self- Deprecation in the Media

Audience Perceptions of Jewish Representation

"Almost by definition the members of an ethnic minority differ from the dominant majority in that they have to live in two cultures which may well differ in language, religion, values and way of life." (Davies 1993: 30)

To understand the way popular Jewish comedy in the media uses stereotypes, I focused on Mel Brooks' film *The Producers* and Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson's TV show *Broad City.* I chose these pieces because they are both created by Jewish comedians, are currently popular and are saturated with Jewish stereotypes and tropes.

The Producers, 2005

The Producers is a movie written and directed by Mel Brooks in 1967. Brooks then wrote a musical of the film which has been on Broadway since 2001. Following this, he made a second movie that was the musical version, which came out in 2005.

The Producers tells the story of Max Bialystock and Leopold Bloom, two Jewish men in New York City who decide to produce the worst play ever made in order to exploit their investors. Bialystock and Bloom tell each investor that they own around 100% of the play, this way, when the musical closes on opening night, they will be able to keep all of the money from the investments. For the worst musical ever made, they settle on *Springtime for Hitler,* a musical

written by a Nazi who had fled to New York City. The musical is a love letter to Hitler, but the musical ends up being a hit because the audience thinks that it is satire of Nazis.

This film is filled with various Jewish stereotypes, mainly related to money: Jews being greedy, Jews being cheap, Jews being shady and Jews being exploitive. It also recreated the "Anxious Jew" stereotype, mentioned by Lauren Pomerantz, with the anxiety- ridden character Leopold Bloom.

Broad City "Jews on a Plane"

Season 3 Episode 10

With the goal of looking at a piece of media that is currently very prominent, I watched the *Broad City* episode named "Jews on a Plane" with friends. *Broad City* traces the misadventures of two Jewish women in New York City, Abbi and Ilana. This specific episode is a parody of the free ten day Israel trip for young Jews called Birthright, in the episode, they call it "Birthmark". The entire episode takes place on a plane to Israel, and shows the two women meeting their "Birthmark" group and trip leader. This episode was selected because it jokes about the many common Jewish stereotypes, some being: Jews being cheap, Jews wanting to reproduce with other Jews, and Jews having power.

Humor Written for Jews

Often, stereotypes are used to communicate with other Jews about specific trends in Jewish culture. Jokes like these leave non-Jews out of the joke, and give Jews a sense of belonging and portrayal in the media. Ari, a Jewish interviewee identified many "insular" Jewish

stereotypes in *Broad City* that act more as cultural signifiers. Some of the examples she addressed were, “The joke of the American Jew going to Israel to find yourself”, “Jews really love famous Jewish people”, and “Jews having similar names, like there are a ton of ‘Rachels’”. Additionally, one Jewish character introduces himself with, “My uncle’s an accountant”, and Ari laughed, replying that her Jewish uncle actually is an accountant. Many of the stereotypes identified by Ari are less harmful than those about Jewish domination or greed. She addressed stereotypes that are a result of Jewish culture: the use of naming children after people in the Torah, or the Jewish-American connection to Israel. Generally, when written by Jews, these tropes exist not to harm, but to connect to their Jewish audience.

This sense of relating to Jewish content was also present in our watching of *The Producers.* My mom, who was exposed to Jewish culture through my dad later in life, said, “The first time I watched it [The Producers], I didn’t know they were Jewish. They had funny names like ‘Bialystock,’ and Bialy means bagel, but non- Jews wouldn’t pick up on that, so it was really a joke for Brooks himself and for Jews.” In this, she explains that only specific Jewish knowledge allowed her to pick up on the joke. Although it is mocking Jews in a way, only Jews would understand the joke in the name, based on a cultural understanding of Yiddish.

The jokes in *Broad City* and *The Producers* poke fun at Jews but often in a way that connects Jews to their culture. This calls into question what defines a stereotype, as well as the nuance within Jewish stereotypes.

Hyper-Visibility of Stereotypes

After watching the episode of *Broad City*, and speaking of the current heightened Nazi activity, I asked Ari, "In the Trump Era, can it be dangerous to have representations of Jews like this?" Ari replied, with concern and care, "No, because we can't just fade away." She extended her statement, "Because most Jews are white, the overt claiming of the Jewish identity in *Broad City* by Abbi and Ilana is important. They are making their Judaism visible in a way that many do not. I can't think of another show like this because it is really specifically about two young *Jewish* women in New York." In this example, Ari comments on the importance of visibility in the media as well as the overt claiming of a persecuted identity. Depictions of Jews like those on *Broad City* allow Jews to claim space in the media and assert their existence.

For Jews, stereotypes act as ways to create an insular dialogue with other Jews as they allow for Jewish hyper-visibility to combat erasure and create a sense of Jewish cultural identity. The realities present within the stereotypes allow for Jews to see themselves in film or television, when Jewish representations are often "de-Semitized" for the wider audience. Claiming Jewishness is a statement, as many Jews present as white and commonly play non- Jewish characters or change their stage name to be less Jewish (Magid 2012).

Risk Taking

When discussing *The Producers,* my mom felt that the film was "not as Jewish as I had thought. However, it was very anti- Nazi, which is a common Jewish theme." This common theme can also be seen in Dylan Visvikis' movie about Nazis and World War II. On the topic of the Nazi depictions in *The Producers* my dad said, "This movie calls out things you wouldn't normally say. A lot of Jewish humor is that, and Mel Brooks made a career of that. It also works

to get others to accept a certain groups like Jews, through humor and visibility in the media. There is also this element of shock, where you watch it and say 'Oh my God, I can't believe a Jew would say that about a Jew.'" My dad's explanation is very similar to Michael Gordon's explanation of the anti-Semitic stereotypes present in *Borat.* With both, there is an awareness of the taboo, with no inclination to reject it, but rather to celebrate it.

My dad's interpretation of risk taking shows that Jewish audience members feel similarly about Jewish risk as Jewish comedy writers, as there is often a Jewish attitude of challenging oppressors through provocative comedy. This element of doing the unthinkable or inappropriate is frequent in Jewish humor as it challenges dominant social norms.

Laughing Instead of Crying

"Er lacht mit yashkis"--"Even in laughter the heart knows sadness" (Freud 1993: 81)

As Freud addresses in the quote, Jewish laughter is often not a result of joy, but a response to the absurdity of Jewish discrimination. Laughing about these stereotypes is a way of laughing at the ridiculousness and pain of anti-Semitism.

Similar to my discussion with Rabbi Cahana, my dad spoke about the way Jews have used humor historically to cope with challenging circumstances, "It seems so Jewish - if there is such a thing as that - to push so hard at something to where you laugh at it. That is where you have the history of Jews pushed through all of these years through deplorable situations." Similarly, at the end of our interview, Ari concluded, "We take on these stereotypes and laugh about them to cope."

Both my dad and Ari felt that this sense of pushing boundaries to create laughter grants an ability to sustain traumatizing and dire events.This attitude is present throughout the Jewish religion, and this concept dates to the origin of Judaism, as Rabbi Cahana explains, to the scene in the Torah story when "Sarah *laughed."*

Conclusion

Jewish humor is often described as "absurd" or "self-deprecating". Media productions such as *Broad City* and *The Producers* create representations of Jews that initially may seem like Jewish masochism. However, self- harm is an oversimplified examination of the reproduction of Jewish stereotypes by Jews. As seen in both the conversations with Jewish comics and audience members, stereotypes hold many utilities vital for Jewish survival and resistance.

Initially, I thought I would be writing about Jews making anti-Semitic jokes as a result of internalized anti- Semitism and the negative impact of these stereotypes on their audiences. However, my interviews illuminated that the work of using these stereotypes is often intentional, practical and useful.

Importantly, every Jewish depiction discussed was a Jewish-made representation. All of the interviewees expressed a disdain for any kind of negative Jewish representation from a non-Jew. Representations such as those are blatantly anti-Semitic and simply perpetuate negative conceptions of Jews, without the restorative qualities present in Jewish humor.

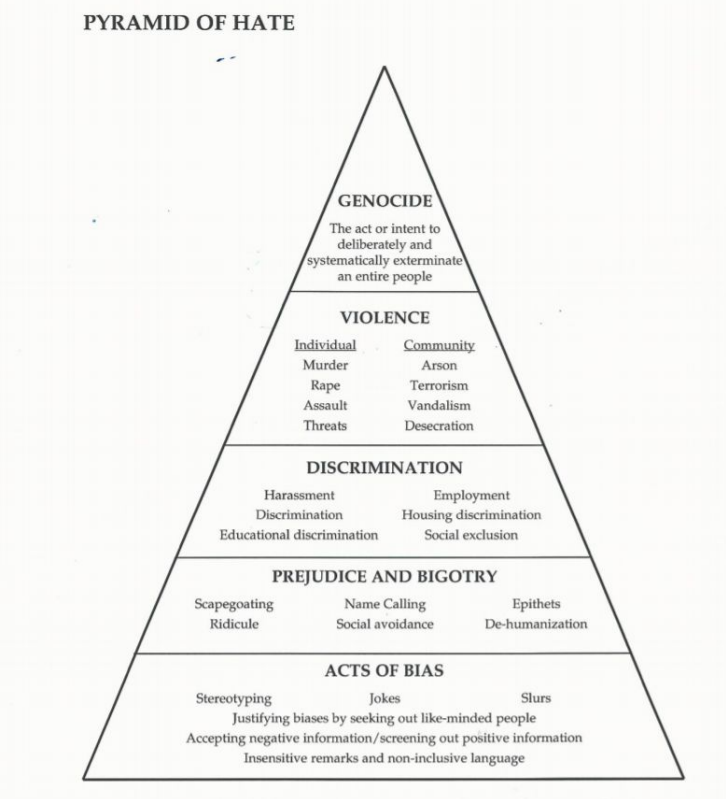
This conversation on reappropriation is currently being contented about in the context of the "n-word" among black Americans, and the use of the words dyke" and "queer" among sexual minorities. Generally, these arguments state that the oppressed group can reverse harm through

the use of these terms, but that there is always danger in reinstilling these originally hateful terms (Kreiss 2008; Harkness 2008; Van Heerden 1991).

Reclaiming language and tropes has a generally positive outcome, as described by screenwriter Dylan Visvikis, because there is a "net- positive" because the positive qualities outweigh the negative.

My research showed me that although Jewish stereotypes are the "Master's Tools" and have been used to systematically cause violence against Jews, these stereotypes can bring about genuine change, as the usage of them by Jews has allowed Jews to survive and persevere.

Appendix A



(ADL 2008)

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