

“I USUALLY KNOW A JEW WHEN I SEE ONE”:  
RACE, AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY, AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY U.S. FILM

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While a newer, “post-race” theoretical lens has emerged in film studies to help expand notions of difference, there are questions regarding its ability to address whether racialization persists in movies, particularly in the form of cinematic stereotypes. A poignant example of this issue is the question of American Jewish racial identity in U.S. film, as recent studies of American Jewish onscreen representations have steadily dropped explicit reference to race, opting instead to use the conceptual frameworks of culture and ethnicity in their analyses. In my study, the results of a qualitative content analysis of 125 American Jewish characters from more than 50 movies released in the U.S. since the year 2000 reveal that four of the most highly racialized stereotypes of American Jewish identity from 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. cinema persist in post-Y2K American Jewish onscreen portrayals: the “meddling matriarch” stereotype of American Jewish over-involvement, the “neurotic nebbish” stereotype of American Jewish ineffectuality, the “pampered princess” stereotype of American Jewish hyper-materialism, and the “scheming scumbag” stereotype of American Jewish deceit. While the newer versions of these stereotypes appear to include a wider diversity of characters with regard to age, class, gender and sexuality, the overall cinematic racialization of American Jewish identity embodied in these characters

seems to have changed relatively little in films from the new millennium. At the same time, a highly disproportionate number of the filmmakers whose work was included in my study are American Jewish, indicating the importance of identifying these persons' possible interests in proliferating such imagery of American Jewish racial identity. Overall, my study's findings reveal the importance of adopting a dialectical approach to studying race in film, recognizing the mutual reinforcement of structure and agency as well as material conditions and ideology, in producing particular onscreen forms of racialization. Future research along these lines may branch out beyond the study of stereotypes to include textual analyses of the racialization in these films, institutional ethnography of those filmmakers involved in producing these films, as well as focus group research with spectators of these films.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election victory has been heralded across the U.S. as the culmination of a profound historical shift in this country's race relations. For many, Obama's biography symbolizes the seemingly boundless opportunities now available to racial minorities in the U.S. This change in American conventional wisdom about race appears to parallel, temporally speaking, changes in the study of race at universities around the country. Specifically, the structurally oriented, philosophically materialist interrogation of race within a "black/white" binary is being increasingly challenged by the "post-race" theoretical paradigm of a new anti-foundationalist generation of scholars.

This theoretical debate with regard to race is highly visible in scholarship of American mass media, especially cinema. Film studies have not only been important to understanding race because of the seeming ubiquity of movies in the U.S.,<sup>1</sup> but because of the relatively unique way Hollywood leads the American public "to misrecognize the nature of the racial divide in which [we] live" (Vera and Gordon 2). A major part of "the culture industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno) propagandizing the media consumption-based society in the U.S. today as well as an ideological opiate offering an escape from reality through the supposed safety and anonymity of cinematic spectatorship (Metz), film produces a "reality effect" which leads viewers to feel that "they can penetrate the veil of superficial appearances and see the hidden structure of reality itself" (Black 62). In this manner cinema has helped proliferate, perpetuate, and reinforce racial identity politics since the very beginning of the movie industry in the U.S. (Parenti).

Interestingly, though, the longstanding disciplinary tradition in film studies of identifying and critiquing visible representations of race onscreen, exemplified by voluminous scholarship on cinematic stereotypes in U.S. film, has been surpassed by a new "interethnic" research agenda

that subsumes racial identity within a “de-centred, poly-vocal multiculturalism” now thought to exist here (Wiegman 165). In other words, systematic interrogations of how “the logic of race [becomes] visually discernible [through] the production and circulation of the stereotype” (Wiegman 159) in American movies are becoming less popular, replaced by more anecdotal, textual analyses of “ethnicities-in-relation” (Wiegman 164). While this newer scholarship seems to expand theoretical notions of difference, especially vis-à-vis narrower understandings of race posited by overly structural analyses, “post-race” theory may suffer from a blind spot when addressing the question of whether racial stereotypes persist in U.S. cinema, and if so, what such ongoing imagery says about race, race relations, and racism in broader U.S. society.

A poignant example of these developments in the study of race in film is the case of American Jewish persons.<sup>2</sup> Historically identified as immigrant “Others” in the U.S., American Jewish persons are thought to have undergone a process of assimilation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century which culminated in their widespread acceptance as a culturally diverse group of “honorary white ethnic” individuals (Goldstein; Brodtkin). In fact, most contemporary scholars of American Jewish identity declare that antisemitism,<sup>3</sup> as an institutionalized form of racism, has become virtually non-existent in the U.S., and that, ironically, the most significant threat to American Jewish survival in this country are American Jewish person individuals themselves through their high intermarriage rates and relatively low birthrates (Dershowitz).

Not surprisingly, this “post-race” narrative regarding the evolution of American Jewish identity parallels closely the historical changes in the research on American Jewish portrayals in U.S. film. Even though American Jewish cinematic representations have consistently been “predicated on nineteenth-century racialized notions of Jewish identity,” scholarship of American Jewish imagery in film offers “the most extreme example” of the disciplinary shift

away from the systematic study of filmic racial identity in its traditional materialist sense (Wiegman 157). Indeed, since the 1980s, research and theorizing about the onscreen displays of American Jewish persons, including even studies of American Jewish cinematic stereotypes, have steadily dropped explicit reference to American Jewish racial identity altogether, opting instead to analyze American Jewish onscreen portrayals using the conceptual frameworks of culture and ethnicity (Woodbury; Rosenberg; Samuels; Erens).

It is within such a context that my study addressed the following research questions:

- Is American Jewish identity still racialized in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. society, particularly through the mass media of cinema? If so, how and with what implications for the academic study of race, particularly in film studies?
- Specifically, which American Jewish racial cinematic stereotypes, if any, persist in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film? How do these stereotypes differ from their 20<sup>th</sup> century antecedents? How are the two similar?

To answer these questions, a qualitative content analysis of 125 American Jewish characters from 53 U.S. movies released this decade was undertaken. Four of the most prevalent and pronounced racialized stereotypes of American Jewish identity from 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. cinema were found to persist in 21<sup>st</sup> century onscreen portrayals of American Jewish persons: the “meddling matriarch” stereotype of American Jewish codependency, the “neurotic nebbish” stereotype of American Jewish ineffectuality, the “pampered princess” stereotype of American Jewish materialism, and the “scheming scumbag” stereotype of American Jewish deceit. While the newer versions of these stereotypes appear to include a wider diversity of characters with regard to age, class, gender and sexuality, the overall cinematic racialization of American Jewish identity, a simultaneously structural and agential process linking “easily consumable visual and verbal cues” to “physiognomic assertions of innate and inferior differences,” (Wiegman 158-9) seems to have changed relatively little in the new millennium. These results indicate the utility of dialectically synthesizing the traditional materialist doctrine on race with the more

philosophically idealist “post-race” theoretical paradigm, demonstrating the benefits of incorporating racialization as a conceptual framework for analyses of contemporary cinematic representations of racial identity.

### **Theoretical Assumptions and Conceptual Frameworks**

Historically, scholarship of race has been one of the most significant areas of academic study in the sciences. However, there have been significant changes in the more recent study of race, race relations, and racism, with social and natural scientists coming to a tentative agreement that race, as traditionally understood, has little to no biological evidence, as there is often a greater degree of genetic diversity within historically constructed racial groups than between such groups (Fulwille). This consensus has led to a noticeable shift from research and theorizing that views race as physical toward works that conceptualize race in increasingly metaphysical terms.

In particular, the theoretical paradigm introduced by a newer generation of scholars has raised the possibility of stripping race of its corporeality given their descriptions of race as “fiction” and “performance.” When abstracted from the body in this manner, it is possible for race to be thought of as merely “linguistic” (Nayak). If this perspective is taken to its extreme logical end, race can be conceived as neither structural nor material, but rather simply a figment of the popular imagination (as a collective of subjectivities), since “post-race” theory posits that “it is not about *being* a [race], it is about *being thought of* as a [race]” (Ware xii). In its strongest form, then, “post-race” theory understands race as existing purely in an ideal realm that is sustained through symbolic regimes of language that summon its representation to life (Frankenberg), since race is then seen as an ideological “social vocabulary” (Fields 97) with no scientific basis.

Scholars loyal to a more materialist understanding of race have reacted to the “post-race” theory by arguing that an ontological understanding of race offers “a real foundation for what one ‘is’, [thus providing] the basis for questions about equality and difference – and how they may be tied to a ‘racial identity’” (Suki 324). Exemplifying this perspective are studies of the social institutions of “white racism” which are thought to have a material reality in and of themselves (Feagin, Vera, and Batur). Indeed, scholars working from this vantage point criticize what they see as the nominalism in “post-race” theory’s denial of the ontology of race, claiming that such philosophical idealism is characteristic of newer, “color-blind” forms of racism that are increasingly taking hold in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva). However, taken to its extreme, such an overly structural approach leads to the position of positing “racism without racists,” ignoring the agency of the various actors and interests involved in racial identity politics.

In an attempt to bypass, or provide a “middle-ground” solution to, this theoretical conundrum, there has been a growing predominance in social sciences literature of the concept of “ethnicity”, derived from the Greek term *ethnos*, or nation, since the 1990s (Barrett and Roediger). Thought to be a helpful alternative to racial identity since it highlights shared cultural practices as opposed to biological traits, ethnicity has become increasingly popular as a way of accounting for a supposed “explosion of difference” that is said to have taken place across the U.S. over the past two decades (Gibel Azoulay 90). Indeed, there is perhaps no greater testament to the popularity of ethnicity as a “way out” of the theoretical deadlock regarding race than the commonplace disciplinary social science moniker of “race/ethnicity,” an odd combination of seemingly incompatible terms that symbolizes the growing ambivalence about the former and increasing hope assigned to the latter.

It is important here to point out, however, that both idealism and materialism in their strong forms have been thoroughly critiqued as internally-contradictory epistemologies (Jay). The materialist doctrine must always refer back to the realm of ideas, while idealism itself can only exist because of a material history which gave rise to it. Hence, taken to their extremes, the debate between the race-is-real and race-is-imaginary camps will always end up in an infinite regress logically speaking, as both perspectives fail to recognize the dialectical, lived experience of race as simultaneously material and ideological as well as structural and individual. And the conceptual frameworks of culture and ethnicity are also not sufficient for resolving the theoretical divide regarding race, since these terms either act as code words for race, “creating a common-sense awareness that race is, indeed, the subject that is being evoked” (Carby 247), or represent analytically separate modes of identity that must be accounted for in their own right.

Ultimately, then, it is the guiding theoretical assumption of my study that a dialectical synthesis of the competing schools of thought on race is necessary for two reasons: first, as a way of mitigating the potential of gravitating toward the theoretical extremes of materialism or idealism in their respective strong forms, and secondly, as a means of properly accounting for the both the persistence and metamorphosis of race in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence the “antiessentialist” understandings of race emerging from “post-race” theory and the more traditional focus on material conditions which shape collective and individual identity must be simultaneously upheld. Such a conceptual framework would be able to reject converting race from “a political/economic construct [and] battleground where Americans vie for power and turf” into “a stick-on, peel-off label” (Jones 57) while recognizing the equally ideological nature of essentializing race using traditional notions like biology and the “black-white” binary.

These guiding conceptual principles for my study emerge from the social constructionist intellectual tradition, and represent what are called “critical theories of race” (Gordon), or scholarship that resists placing race within the dualist binary of physical reality or metaphysical fiction, instead conceiving of race as an embodied power relation. The theoretical focus here is on the concept of “racialization”, or the “sociohistorical process[es] by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 55) and the particular constellation of mutually reinforcing social forces (including political economic structures, ideological discourses, and subjective agencies) which produce particular forms of racialization. Such a dialectical understanding of race has significant consequences for identity politics, as it supports “race-conscious strategies” for anti-racist activism without essentializing racial identity (Crewnshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas). And rather than politically neutralizing race through conciliations to culture or ethnicity (Appiah), the centrality of race “as part of the [historical] spectrum of the human condition” is acknowledged, “while...simultaneously and categorically resist[ing it] as a means of stratifying national or global societies” (Winant 183). My study thus takes as its inspiration the works of scholars as disparate as bell hooks, David McNally, and Slavoj Žižek, interrogating the interplay between structure and agency, as well as material conditions and ideological superstructures, responsible for the racialization of American Jewish identity in Hollywood film.

### **Racialization and American Jewish Cinematic Stereotypes**

A helpful starting point for understanding how racialization operates in an increasingly diverse U.S. society is the notion of a “racial contract,” a theory undergirded by the principle that a “dyadic partition [i.e., ‘black-white binary’] really does [still] capture the essential structure of the global racial polity” (Mills 79). Contrary to the strong form of “post-race” theory, in which race as a material reality ceases to exist, the “racial contract” notion of racialization posits that

color terms remain vital for discussing the relations of political domination and subordination that are produced and reinforced by structures and agents in today's society. At the same time, however, the "racial contract" acknowledges the ways that late 20<sup>th</sup> century racialization processes in the U.S., particularly the institutional assimilation that supposedly "de-racialized" several immigrant groups (including American Jewish persons), require a new conceptual schema able to "retain but 'fuzzify' the categories, introducing internal distinctions within them" (Mills 79).

Specifically, a category of identity known as "off-white" is used to denote those minority groups who now "count as white" by virtue of a "contractual agreement" they have made with the W.A.S.P. hegemonic majority to subordinate those groups who are considered "nonwhite" (Mills 80). In this manner, the "racial contract" highlights the agency of "off-white" groups, including the American Jewish persons themselves, while emphasizing the divide-and-conquer racial identity politics within which those groups are structurally conditioned to participate in order to secure an ideological sense of "whiteness." Such a dialectical understanding of agency and structure can be particularly helpful in explaining the persistence of American Jewish cinematic stereotypes propagated by American Jewish filmmakers themselves.

However, while the "racial contract" is an important theoretical advancement in the study of the contemporary structures of racialization in U.S. society, it has its pitfalls. For starters, the categorization of American Jewish identity as "off-white" implies that American Jewish persons structurally "count as white" in U.S. society today, an assumption that is problematized by a 1987 Supreme Court ruling giving American Jewish persons the ability to file racial discrimination suits based on the fact that they are considered "genetically part of...[a] physiognomically distinctive sub-grouping of homo sapiens" (Gibel Azoulay 93). In other

words, despite the supposed 20<sup>th</sup> century “de-racialization” of American Jewish persons claimed by many contemporary scholars of American Jewish identity politics, the most significant legal-institutional body in U.S. society continues to categorize American Jewish persons as a “nonwhite,” racialized “Other.” Also, a “racial contract” conceptualization of race relations in the U.S. today does not explicitly link racial identity to socio-economic class, a fundamentally important element underlying newer forms of racialization in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. society, especially for those groups like American Jewish persons whose identity is tied to their class-based assimilation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is therefore helpful to enlist another conceptual schema for analyzing contemporary racialization in the U.S., specifically a framework introduced by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, a critical theorist of race that applies the tripartite model of racialization in South African apartheid to the predicament of American Jewish identity within U.S. race relations today. To clarify, Kaye/Kantrowitz borrows the form of South Africa’s apartheid model of a tripartite structure of racialization without necessarily transferring the specific content of each of the three racializing classifications in this structure; in other words, while she argues that the U.S. has a tripartite structure of racialization, Kaye/Kantrowitz does not posit that each of the three classifications is identical in content to the classifications that operated in apartheid South Africa. Specifically, in her model, Kaye/Kantrowitz transforms the cosmetically revised “black-white” binary of the “racial contract” into a more “nuanced hierarchy of privilege” (121), with three racialized classes emerging from the interplay of political economy, ideological discourse, and subjective agencies in contemporary U.S. society. The first two socially constructed racial categories are similar in many ways to the traditional “black-white” binary of U.S. race relations, with the classification

of white denoting those who “literally rule,” while black identity relates to “a category of particularly onerous [socio-economic] oppression” (121-2).

The real theoretical innovation in this schema, though, is the identification of a third socially constructed category of racialization: the “colored” classification, which has come to act as “a safety valve for [the] class rage” that emerges from the historical political economy of race in the U.S. (i.e., the traditional “black-white” binary (123). While persons who are racialized as “colored” “benefit concretely from not being black,” receiving socio-economic life chance opportunities through their racialization as a “model minority,” the fact remains that “they will never be white” (121). The overwhelming majority of “colored” minorities in the U.S. are immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, South and Eastern Asia, and the Middle East, or those parts of the world that are not typically considered to be the Global South (i.e., Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, etc.); the descendents of indigenous peoples or former slaves as well as immigrants from the Global South are typically subsumed within the “black” classification. Given the immigration history of the overwhelming majority of American Jewish persons in the U.S. (i.e., Ashkenazim from Central and Eastern Europe), their classification within this racialization schema would be that of “colored.”

Even more relevant for the purposes of my study are the “potent stereotypes” that such a framework propagates to “recharge primal categories that manifest in opposing ways among ‘blacks’ and ‘colored,’ thus dividing the human universe into those who are too much and those who are too little, while whites – white men, to be exact, are just the right amount” (122). With these stereotypes, racialization emerges out of the structural and agential “division of several strands of undesirable qualities and values into two poles” and “the projection of these poles” onto the two categories of racial “Others” in a way that stokes conflict between them (122-3).

Specifically, “black” persons are racialized through stereotype that portray them as bestially oversexed, deservedly poor, rebelliously violent, intellectually inferior, and savagely uncivilized, while those who are racialized as “colored” are stereotyped as sexually neurotic, unjustly wealthy, exploitatively manipulative, academically shrewd, and distastefully garish (123). It is important to point out here that both sets of stereotypes are negative when compared to the supposed “normality” and “universality,” indeed even the apparent “invisibility,” of “whiteness.” However, “the way ‘blacks’ [sic] make ‘coloreds’ [sic] look good and ‘coloreds’ [sic] make ‘blacks’ [sic] look like losers” (123) performs an additional structural imperative in protecting “white” hegemony by subtly privileging one group of racialized minorities (i.e., those classified as “colored”). Such a context of divide-and-conquer identity politics catalyzes a situation in which those who are racialized as “colored” can be “scapegoated for the ravages of global capitalism” (123).

This tripartite model of contemporary racialization in the U.S. accounts for the agency of American Jewish filmmakers (who have had a disproportionate influence on the movie industry and thus the representation of American Jewish onscreen racial identity), while incorporating the important structural issues of class, capital, and labor. Indeed, given its emphasis on the political interests undergirding each of the three categories of racialization, this conceptual framework recognizes that the formation of American Jewish racial identity onscreen is not simply the result of structural forces, but a dialectical process of racializing structures engaging with the differing subjectivities of American Jewish filmmakers, Gentile “mainstream” audience members, etc. Ultimately, it is not surprising, then, to find that the four most prevalent American Jewish cinematic stereotypes found in previous scholarship of the subject are in almost complete congruity with the stereotypes associated with the “colored” classification. These stereotypes

racialize American Jewish persons as “the nitpicky, overbearing mother who wants her son or daughter to marry Jewish; high maintenance daughters interested in shopping and material pleasure as opposed to pleasure in the bedroom; and men who possess a neurosis or avarice that overwhelms any other positive character trait” (Baskind 6). For the purposes of my study, such stereotyped filmic portrayals were renamed the “meddling matriarch,” the “neurotic nebbish,” the “pampered princess,” and the “scheming scumbag.”

The “meddling matriarch” stereotype derives from the archetypal figure of the “Jewish mother,” racialized as dark in appearance (especially hair, eyes, and complexion), domineering (both in physical stature vis-à-vis her husband as well as through her behavior), overprotective, loud-mouthed, and pushy. Historically, such racialized imagery of child-rearing, middle-aged American Jewish women owes to the Jewish experience of diaspora, particularly the need for a tight-knit family amidst the struggle for survival in often hostile environments (Antler). As one study of this stereotype explains, Jewish women were often structurally left with the sole responsibility of family management, a task that required the development of a strong personality and hyperbolic sacrifice of person well-being for that of the children (Stora-Sandor). And while other immigrant groups in the U.S. are also racialized through onscreen depictions of extraordinarily strong familial bonds, what ultimately defines the “meddling matriarch” as a uniquely American Jewish racialization are “the excesses of nurturance and pressures of guilt” American Jewish maternal characters are portrayed as using to manipulate their family members, most notably their children (Prell 75). A perfect example of this American Jewish cinematic stereotype is Sheldon’s mother (Mae Questel) in Woody Allen’s vignette “Oedipus Wrecks” from the film *New York Stories* (Touchstone, 1989), whose overbearing nature is comically

literalized through her physical augmentation to the size of Manhattan, with her larger-than-life head spanning the entire horizon in a ceaseless quest to meddle in Sheldon's personal affairs.

The "neurotic nebbish" cinematic stereotype of American Jewish identity owes a great deal to the longstanding rendering of "non-white" male characters in film with "an opposed symbolic pair" of racialized traits, specifically sexual over-aggressiveness that threatens white womanhood juxtaposed with emasculation and symbolic castration (Wiegman 161). However, the American Jewish manifestations of this stereotype can be traced to the intersection of racial and sexual categories in European constructions of Jewish identity historically (Johnston). In particular, the traditional Yiddish theatrical character of the "schlemiel," a hapless, insecure, physically undesirable, romantically ineffectual, and sexually impotent male upon whom the "neurotic nebbish" stereotype is based, reflects the European Gentile inspired historical discourse linking the Jewish circumcised penis with the female clitoris (Stratton; Biale; Gilman). These characters are often racially marked by physical appearances that play to the worst antisemitic stereotypes about the "Jewish body," including large pronounced noses, eyeglasses, dark and/or curly hair, frailty, short stature, etc. And these "neurotic nebbishes" have an exaggerated penchant for lusting after Gentile women, a direct result of "the homology [of] Jew-as-woman, [in which] the Jewish female body goes missing" (Pellegrini 17-8). In other words, there are no American Jewish women, symbolically speaking, for the feminized "neurotic nebbish" to lust after, hence the proclivity to long for a Gentile woman. Another Woody Allen film, in this case *Zelig* (Warner Bros., 1983), exemplifies the "neurotic nebbish," with the title character so unsure of his own identity and so eager to please given his pathologically low self-esteem that he literally adopts, in a chameleon-like manner, the identity of anyone with whom he interacts.

Another “opposed symbolic pair” of character traits informs the racialized American Jewish “pampered princess” cinematic stereotype. In this case, it is the stereotypical “non-white female” oscillation between being a “de-sexualized figure” and “a woman of exotic, loose, and dangerous sexuality” that undergirds the filmic racialization of American Jewish non-maternal women (Wiegman 161). What makes the “Jewish American Princess,” or “J.A.P. [sic],”<sup>4</sup> stereotype unique, though, is its connection to a constellation of socio-historical factors in the U.S. over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, the defining features of this American Jewish racialized representation onscreen, namely obsessive materialism and a heightened aversion to sex, can be linked to the antisemitic assimilatory process whereby American Jewish persons entered into the Gentile dominated middle-class economy of “manipulation rather than manufacture” and “consumption rather than production” (Prell 84). Within such a political economic context, the bodies of younger American Jewish women become “the site of [material] adornment” (Prell 78) *par excellence*, and their psyches become totally consumed with “no object of desire other than the self” (Prell 80). In this sense, “pampered princesses” are racially marked by their hyper-flashy physical appearances, including fashionably loud attire, hairstyles, and make-up. The overindulged daughter emerging from a newly suburbanized American Jewish populace, Lenny Cantrow’s wife Lila Kolodny (Jeannie Berlin) in *The Heartbreak Kid* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1972) exemplifies the racialized “nouveau riche” physiology and personality of the “pampered princess” stereotype in U.S. film, ultimately abandoned by her newlywed husband on their honeymoon for a Gentile woman.

Finally, there is perhaps the oldest racialized stereotype, specifically the American Jewish “scheming scumbag.” This cinematic representation reflects a centuries old European Gentile projection of their own alienation and authoritarianism onto Jewish persons, the latter being the

subject of antisemitic myths claiming Jewish conspiratorial designs for societal domination through political deceit and commercial miserliness (Bronner 5). Dating back to the Medieval times and emerging most prominently in the political economic context of the *shtetl* pogroms and Nazi Germany, the racist caricature of an adult Jewish male as a *Luftmensch* (“air man”) agent, banker, broker, or investor who uses manipulative scheming to “live on air” and salivates at the sight of money, has survived through the 20<sup>th</sup> century in cinematic form (Brook 3). Specifically, male American Jewish movie characters have often been portrayed using stereotypical imagery of “the misanthropic miser or slimy social climber” (Bronner 144), harkening to the literary canon of antisemitism that includes Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. Several characters from 1980s Hollywood blockbusters were racialized, even if subtly, as American Jewish “scheming scumbags,” including “greed is good” stock broker Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) in *Wall Street* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1987) and the title character Bugsy Siegel (Warren Beatty) in *Bugsy* (TriStar, 1991). In these, and many other cases, the characters’ self-interest and personal profit were shown as superseding all moral and ethical imperatives, a clear tip of the hat to the American Jewish “scheming scumbag” racial stereotype.

### **Methodology**

To answer my study’s research questions, a qualitative content analysis of American Jewish representations in contemporary U.S. cinema was conducted. More than 50 feature-length 21<sup>st</sup> century movies from the U.S. were screened to identify if and how the four historically predominant racial stereotypes of American Jewish characters appeared in these films. Following the guidelines for conducting qualitative analysis of mass media content, all efforts were made to be “an open minded researcher [with] specific research question[s] and a systematic way of looking at whatever content is chosen” (Priest 114).

In “delimiting the population” of content for analysis, “boundary conditions” (Stacks and Hocking 256) were established for inclusion in my study. Firstly, only films that were produced by U.S. movie production companies (including both Hollywood big-budget blockbusters as well as limited release independent films) and released theatrically between 1/1/2000 and 8/31/2009 were included. At the same time, a film was included only if it featured at least one prominent character who was explicitly identified in the film as American Jewish<sup>5</sup> or whose otherwise ambiguous racial identity embodied pronouncedly at least one of the four cinematic stereotypes of American Jewish racial identity described above. Hence the unit of analysis for my study was American Jewish characters, particularly their physiognomic representations as well as their “specific communicative behaviors” and “roles” in relation to the narrative and other characters in their respective films (Stacks and Hocking 258).

To clarify, racially ambiguous characters who were not explicitly identified as American Jewish were chosen for analysis, but only if their physical appearance and/or actions matched the aforementioned historically constructed racialized stereotypes of American Jewish looks as well as behaviors. This method of operationalizing American Jewish racial identity bridges the analytical distinction one scholar makes between characters explicitly identified as “Jews” [sic] and “Jewish” portrayals, the latter consisting of those characters who embody highly racialized “signifiers” despite their otherwise “vaguely inferred” racial identities (Stratton 300). However, to try and minimize the possibility of tautology in this methodology, notations were made regarding which, and how many, characters were explicitly identified as American Jewish in their films vis-à-vis characters who were selected because they embody one of the four stereotypes listed above. Also, the racial identity of the films’ creative teams (i.e., directors and writing staff) were noted in order to compare the portrayals of American Jewish characters

produced by American Jewish filmmakers themselves versus those portrayals emerging from Gentile filmmaking endeavors. Finally, the budgets of the films were noted in order to analyze any distinctions between the racialization of American Jewish characters in big-budget movies versus independent cinema.

The following is the list of 53 films that met my study's boundary conditions through either pre-screening or background research conducted about them using online sources.<sup>6</sup> The films are listed here in alphabetical order (with studio and year of release in parentheses) alongside the characters in each that comprise my study's "data-set" ( $n = 125$ ):

- *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* (Touchstone, 2002) – Jacob Elinsky (Philip Seymour Hoffman)
- *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (Universal, 2005) – Cal (Seth Rogen), Seth (Loren Berman), Seth's Father (Jeff Kahn)
- *50 First Dates* (Columbia, 2004) – Henry Roth (Adam Sandler)
- *Adaptation* (Columbia, 2002) – Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage), Donald Kaufman (Nicholas Cage)
- *Along Came Polly* (Universal, 2004) – Reuben Feffer (Ben Stiller), Lisa Kramer (Debra Messing), Stan Indursky (Alec Baldwin), Vivian Feffer (Michele Lee), Irving Feffer (Bob Dishy)
- *American Pie 2* (Universal, 2001) – Jim Levenstein (Jason Biggs), Noah Levenstein (Eugene Levy)
- *American Pie 3: American Wedding* (Universal, 2003) – Jim Levenstein (Jason Biggs), Noah Levenstein (Eugene Levy), Grandma Levenstein (Angela Paton)
- *Anger Management* (Columbia, 2003) – Dave Buznik (Adam Sandler)
- *Anything Else* (DreamWorks, 2003) – Jerry Falk (Jason Biggs), Amanda Chase (Christina Ricci), David Dobel (Woody Allen), Harvey Wexler (Danny DeVito), Paula Chase (Stockard Channing)
- *Beerfest* (Warner Bros., 2006) – Charlie Finkelstein aka "Fink" (Steve Lemme)
- *Bride Wars* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009) – Liv Lerner (Kate Hudson), Emma Allan (Anne Hathaway)

- *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Touchstone, 2009) – Rebecca Bloomwood (Isla Fisher)
- *The Devil Wears Prada* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2006) – Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway), Irv Ravitz (Tibor Feldman)
- *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2004) – White Goodman (Ben Stiller)
- *Duplex* (Miramax, 2003) – Alex Rose (Ben Stiller), Kenneth (Harvey Fierstein)
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Focus Features, 2004) – Joel Barish (Jim Carrey)
- *Everything is Illuminated* (Warner Independent, 2005) – Jonathan Safran Foer (Elijah Wood)
- *Funny People* (Universal, 2009) – George Simmons (Adam Sandler), Ira Wright (Seth Rogen), Leo (Jonah Hill)
- *Garden State* (Fox Searchlight, 2004) – Andrew Largeman (Zach Braff), Gideon Largeman (Ian Holm), Sylvia Largeman (Jackie Hoffman)
- *The Heartbreak Kid* (DreamWorks, 2007) – Eddie Cantrow (Ben Stiller), Doc Cantrow (Jerry Stiller)
- *The Hebrew Hammer* (Comedy Central, 2003) – Mordechai Jefferson Carver (Adam Goldberg), Esther Bloomenbergensteinenthal (Judy Greer), Mrs. Carver (Nora Dunn)
- *He's Just Not That Into You* (New Line, 2009) – Gigi Phillips (Ginnifer Goodwin), Anna Marks (Scarlett Johansson)
- *I Love You, Man* (DreamWorks, 2009) – Barry (Jon Favreau)
- *Inglourious Basterds* (Universal, 2009) – Donny Donowitz aka “Bear Jew” (Eli Roth), Smithson Utivich (B. J. Novak), Omar Ulmer (Omar Doom)
- *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry* (Universal, 2007) – Chuck Levine (Adam Sandler)
- *Igby Goes Down* (MGM, 2002) – Sookie Saperstein (Claire Danes)
- *Keeping the Faith* (Touchstone, 2000) – Rabbi Jake Schram (Ben Stiller), Ruth Schram (Anne Bancroft), Rachel Rose (Rena Sofer), Bonnie Rose (Holland Taylor), Ali Decker (Lisa Edelstein)
- *Keeping Up with the Steins* (Miramax, 2006) – Benjamin Fiedler (Daryl Sabara), Adam Fiedler (Jeremy Piven), Arnie Stein (Larry Miller), Zachary Stein (Carter Jenkins), Irwin Fiedler (Garry Marshall), Rose Fiedler (Doris Roberts), Ashley Grunwald (Brittany Robertson), Casey Nudelman (Cheryl Hines)

- *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Fox Searchlight, 2001) – Jessica Stein (Jennifer Westfeldt), Judy Stein (Tovah Feldshuh), Joan (Jackie Hoffman), Josh Meyers (Scott Cohen), Esther Stein (Esther Wurmfeld)
- *Knocked Up* (Universal, 2007) – Ben Stone (Seth Rogen), Jason (Jason Segel), Jonah (Jonah Hill), Jay (Jay Baruchel), Ben’s Father (Harold Ramis)
- *Lucky Number Slevin* (MGM, 2006) – Shlomo aka “The Rabbi” (Ben Kingsley), Yitzchok aka “The Fairy” (Michael Rubinfeld)
- *The Man from Earth* (Shoreline, 2007) – Harry (John Billingsley)
- *Meet the Fockers* (Universal, 2004) – Greg Focker (Ben Stiller), Bernie Focker (Dustin Hoffman), Roz Focker (Barbara Streisand)
- *Meet the Parents* (Universal, 2000) – Greg Focker (Ben Stiller)
- *My Best Friend’s Girl* (Lionsgate, 2008) – Dustin (Jason Biggs)
- *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist* (Columbia, 2008) – Norah Silverberg (Kat Dennings), Tal (Jay Baruchel)
- *Pineapple Express* (Columbia, 2008) – Saul Silver (James Franco), Mrs. Mendelson (Mae LeBorde)
- *The Producers* (Universal, 2005) – Max Bialystock (Nathan Lane), Leo Bloom (Matthew Broderick), Mr. Marks (Jon Lovitz)
- *Punch-Drunk Love* (Columbia, 2002) – Barry Egan (Adam Sandler), Elizabeth Egan (Mary Lynn Rajs kub)
- *Reign Over Me* (Columbia, 2007) – Charlie Fineman (Adam Sandler)
- *Requiem for a Dream* (Artisan, 2000) – Harry Goldfarb (Jared Leto), Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn), Marion Silver (Jennifer Connelly)
- *Saving Silverman* (Columbia, 2001) – Darren Silverman (Jason Biggs)
- *Sex and the City* (New Line, 2008) – Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Harry Goldenblatt (Evan Handler), Lily York Goldenblatt (Alexandra and Parker Fong)
- *Sidewalks of New York* (Paramount Classics, 2001) – Benjamin Bazzler (David Krumholtz)
- *Small Time Crooks* (DreamWorks, 2000) – Ray Winkler (Woody Allen), Frenchy Winkler (Tracey Ullman)
- *Snatch* (Columbia, 2000) – Abraham Denowitz aka “Avi” (Dennis Farina)

- *Superbad* (Columbia, 2007) – Seth (Jonah Hill), Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), Officer Michaels (Seth Rogen)
- *Taking Woodstock* (Focus Features, 2009) – Elliot Teichberg (Demetri Martin), Sonia Teichberg (Imelda Staunton), Jake Teichberg (Henry Goodman), Max Yasgur (Eugene Levy), Michael Lang (Jonathan Groff)
- *The Thing About My Folks* (Picturehouse, 2005) – Ben Kleinman (Paul Reiser), Sam Kleinman (Peter Falk)
- *Tropic Thunder* (Paramount, 2008) – Les Grossman (Tom Cruise)
- *Two Lovers* (Magnolia, 2008) – Leonard Kraditor (Joaquin Phoenix), Sandra Cohen (Vinessa Shaw), Reuben Kraditor (Moni Moshonov), Ruth Kraditor (Isabella Rossellini), Michael Cohen (Bob Ari)
- *The Wackness* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2008) – Luke Shapiro (Josh Peck), Dr. Jeffrey Squires (Ben Kingsley), Luke’s Father (David Wohl)
- *Whatever Works* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2009) – Boris Yellnikoff (Larry David)

Of these 53 films, 36 (or just under 68%) featured a character who was explicitly identified as American Jewish in the film’s narrative; the other 17 films were included because they featured characters who embodied racialized traits associated with the four traditional American Jewish cinematic stereotypes discussed above to a degree that overrode their otherwise ambiguous racial identity. An overwhelming number of the 53 films in my study’s sample (39, or almost 74%) were the products of directors and/or writers who identify or are identified as American Jewish, and 42 films (or just under 80%) were classified as “Hollywood” movies (defined here as having a production budget of \$10 million or more) with the remaining 11 classified as “independent” cinema.

Addressing the unit of analysis directly, 88 (or just over 70%) of the 125 characters listed above were explicitly identified as American Jewish in their respective films, meaning that less than 30% of the characters in my study were included as a result of the inferential interpretation of the researcher. 103 (or more than 82%) of this overall sample of 125 characters were in films

that were directed and/or written by American Jewish persons; 31 (or just under 25%) of the characters appeared in “independent” films, with an overwhelming number of these characters (27, or more than 87%) explicitly identified as American Jewish. Finally, there was a significant difference in the gender distribution of my study sample, with 88 (or approximately 70%) of the characters being male.

As suggested by the relevant methodological literature, each film was screened at least twice whenever possible,<sup>7</sup> once without taking notes to become familiar with the narrative and plot structure of the film and at least once more, with diligent note-taking on the characters to be analyzed for the study (Stokes). During data collection, four dimensions and layers for each character were noted (Berger 93): her/his physical characteristics (including the presence of any stereotypical features of the “Jewish body” (Gilman) like a pronounced nose, dark hair with a curly texture, frail stature, etc.), social aspects (including her/his occupation, education, socioeconomic class, status, prestige, role, etc.), emotional nature (is she/he warm or cold? Powerful or weak? Anxious or calm? Stable or unstable?, etc.), and thematic concerns (her/his historical context, ideological views, political stances, value system, etc.).

Upon completion of data collection, analysis and interpretation ensued whereby the constituent dimensions of these characters were re-assembled “to examine which ones co-occur in which contexts, for what purposes, and with what implications” (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, and Newbold 123). Specifically, “analytic induction”, made famous by sociologist Norman Denzin, was used to assess the data in relation to my study’s research questions. This procedure called for examining each specific case “to establish whether the assumed characteristics [in this case, the historically constructed stereotypical physical and behavioral traits of American Jewish characters in film] apply” (Jankowski and Wester 66). If the assumed characteristics did not

apply, then the case was either excluded (with a description of why) or the assumed characteristics themselves were modified so that the case could become part of my study. In this manner, it was possible to showcase the ways in which the racialization of American Jewish persons onscreen has prevailed into the new millennium, while highlighting the distinctly 21<sup>st</sup> century representations of American Jewish characters in U.S. film.

### **Chapter Outline**

Chapter 2 provides a more detailed review of the literature on American Jewish racial identity politics, focusing on two seemingly contradictory social forces which have shaped the historical racialization of American Jewish identity: antisemitism and assimilation. Throughout, an attempt is made to demonstrate how the structural politics of American Jewish identity is linked to the subjective agencies of filmmakers producing onscreen racializations of American Jewish identity. This historical outline of American Jewish racial identity politics is necessary as a context for situating the cinematic stereotypes found in my study.

Chapters 3-6 consist of the findings from my study's qualitative content analysis of 125 American Jewish characters across 53 post-Y2K U.S. movies. Specifically, each of these four chapters deals with one of the four historically constructed stereotypes found to persist in contemporary U.S. cinema: "meddling matriarchs," "neurotic nebbishes," "pampered princesses," and "scheming scumbags." In Chapter 3, the filmic stereotype of the overbearing American Jewish mother is discussed, along with how this racialized imagery has been extended to include non-maternal characters given the shifting family contexts and issues in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Chapter 4 deals with the racialization of American Jewish males as ineffectual, particularly with regard to romance and sexuality, while highlighting how gender-bending and sexuality-blurring have facilitated the inclusion of American Jewish female characters in this category along with the increasingly popular homosexualization of American Jewish male

characters. The perpetuity of the infamous “Jewish American Princess” cinematic stereotype is addressed in Chapter 5, with special attention paid to a younger generation of emotionally self-absorbed and materially spoiled brats across both genders. And in Chapter 6, the centuries-old antisemitic stereotype of Jews as conniving Shylocks is updated with an account of relevant contemporary American Jewish characters on the big screen in the U.S., including those whose sinister schemes have little or nothing to do with financial gain per se.

Finally, Chapter 7 connects the findings from Chapters 3-6 to the larger research questions my study hoped to address as well as the issues raised in Chapter 2. Specifically, the persistence and evolution of American Jewish filmic stereotypes is linked to the broader question of racialization in the United States today. Here the dialectical interplay of structure and agency in racialization is examined, with explicit discussion of the overwhelmingly disproportionate number of American Jewish filmmakers involved in the creative production of American Jewish cinematic stereotypes. Possible explanations for this phenomenon are offered, including the link between these filmmakers’ interests and the political economy of neoliberal capitalism, in which everything, including racial identity, is commoditized and sold for profit.

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<sup>1</sup> Americans spend, on average, more than one-quarter of their waking lives consuming film, which is more than five times the amount they spend reading (Vera and Gordon 8).

<sup>2</sup> In my study, the term “American Jewish” was used as opposed to “Jewish-American” given the persuasive argumentation for the former offered in Lang. Specifically, Lang argued that unlike most, if not all, other racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S., the Jewishness of American Jewish persons is semantically centered as the “noun” (with “American-ness” as the adjective) of American Jewish identity. Also, rather than support a racial essentialism that defines the entire person through her/his racial identity [i.e., the term “American Jew(s)”], my study used “American Jewish person(s)” when referring to the personified embodiments of American Jewish racial identity.

<sup>3</sup> The term “antisemitism” was spelled in this manner given the history of the term provided in Bauer. Specifically, Bauer traced the word’s etymology back to (antisemitic) German

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comparative philologists who constructed the category of “Semitic” languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, etc.) in order to lend greater (pseudo-)scientific credibility to their campaign against Jewish persons in German society. Given this problematic history and the questionable validity of the term “Semitism” itself, there was no reason to capitalize it or hyphenate antisemitism.

<sup>4</sup> Per the argument made in Biale, this acronym was used as infrequently as possible in my study given its suggestiveness of the anti-Japanese racism that emerged from World War II.

<sup>5</sup> Because most characters in films set in Europe during the Nazi Holocaust are not American Jewish (at least not during the setting of the film itself), hardly any films from the rich and diverse spectrum of this cinematic canon were included; only characters from these films who were identified/identifiable as “American Jewish,” (i.e., affiliated with residing permanently in America) were used in my study.

<sup>6</sup> Although this is not an exhaustive list of every single film that would have met my study’s boundary conditions, it represents a rather large sample size that achieved a clear saturation point of character portrayals. All background research on these films, including inquiries into their budgets as well as the identity of their directors and writers, was conducted using the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) and Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

<sup>7</sup> The films included in my study sample from 2009 that were limited to theatrical release (i.e., their DVD release date was after the cut-off date for inclusion) were screened only once for financial reasons.

## CHAPTER 2 AMERICAN JEWISH RACIAL IDENTITY POLITICS OFF- AND ONSCREEN

Although Chapter 1 offered a brief overview of American Jewish racial identity politics, it is important here to provide a more nuanced analysis of the dynamics relating to this issue. In particular, this chapter will provide the historical trajectory of how American Jewish identity, and its manifestation onscreen in filmic portrayals, has been shaped by the dialectics of antisemitism and assimilation in U.S. society. It is through a thorough discussion of these topics that my study's findings regarding the racialization of American Jewish identity in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film can be grounded and made more meaningful.

### **American Jewish Racial Identity Politics Off-Screen**

The history of American Jewish racialization in the U.S., like the racial history of the Jewish diaspora worldwide, is tied to the dialectically intertwined social forces of antisemitism and assimilation. Therefore, it is imperative right from the outset to define these two phenomena as best as possible, a task that has been the subject of much debate itself. Using the critical theories of race perspective, antisemitism is understood as an ideological and material power relation involving the social construction and subjugation of a racialized "Other" who is defined as Jewish by the hegemonic majority in a given society. Conceptualized in this manner, it is unnecessary to distinguish between institutional/public and interpersonal/private forms of antisemitism (a distinction that appears often in contemporary literature on antisemitism and will be critiqued later in this section), as the universal and the particular forms of this power relation are always already present in one another. Borrowing from Bauman (103), assimilation is defined as a socio-historical process that racialized minorities undergo to "become like" a racially hegemonic majority who have the power to demand the assimilation process in the first place; with the rise of modernity, capitalism, and nationalism, the onus to assimilate, which was

formerly understood in biological terms as being on the part of the “absorbing” material, has been shifted irreversibly to the “absorbed” material while at the same time being ideologically constructed as a politically-neutral project of “making alike.” In short, then, both antisemitism and assimilation, like race, are conceptualized in my study as embodied, historical, power-based, and relational in nature.

Whether one subscribes to popular myth that Jewish persons fled the lands of Palestine and dispersed across the globe, or the more controversial claim that European Jews are, in fact, converts from central Asian tribes (Piterberg), race has always played a central importance in the social construction of Jewish identity. Cultural-religious differences have, for centuries, been inscribed into physical markers that delineated Jewish identity from the Gentile majority, and this racialization plagued Jewish persons in all of the societies within which they found themselves. Indeed, antisemitism became a defining feature of what became known as European society, including the hegemonic discourses that Jewish persons were “Christ killers” who routinely murdered Christians to use their blood during religious rituals (Perry and Schweitzer). As such, assimilation became a structurally necessary path for Jewish survival in Europe, as the threat of racialized antisemitic violence was omnipresent.

However, it was in Medieval Spain that the modern-day racialization of Jewish identity emerged (Cohen). Up to this point, Jewish persons had been racialized primarily through their differing religious beliefs and practices, and were therefore thought to be “redeemable” through the assimilatory act of conversion to the “true” faith of Christianity. Within the context of the Spanish Inquisition, though, Jewish persons began to be understood as tainted inexorably by their blood, classified as an inferior “race” of parasites, pests, and vermin who were innately hyper-materialistic, physically deficient, and diabolical by “nature.” It is important here to note

that while such essentialism may seem contradictory to the logic of assimilation, since Jewish persons were seen as unable to escape their timeless racial deficiency in the eyes of the Gentile hegemon, social structural pressures still bore down on Jewish persons to assimilate, most often through an internalization of their own antisemitic racialization.

With the Enlightenment, such racialized antisemitism, and the mutually reinforcing social current of assimilation, increased its foothold on Jewish persons living in European Gentile societies. As faith in the epistemological validity of physical sciences grew among the masses in Europe, so did the belief in the biological inherence of Jewish racial inferiority as a means of coping with the “enormous complexity” which Jewish identity began to assume (Sutcliffe; Lester). All aspects of “the Jewish body” became legitimate objects of racial scientific inquiry, from Jewish voices and feet to the Jewish psyche (Gilman). In fact, European modernity was hallmarked by an obsession with how to “de-contaminate” Gentile society of “the Jew” [sic] (Almog). Despite painstaking efforts by Jewish persons to “fit in,” the “final solution” to the “Jewish question” across Europe (particularly those societies hardest hit by the global political economic transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism and the commensurate worldwide economic depressions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), became the mass ghetto-ization, expulsion, and extermination of Jewish persons, culminating in the Nazi holocaust and the pogroms in Tsarist Russia/the Soviet Union.

While most historical accounts have emphasized the relative racial respite that American Jewish persons are thought to have experienced vis-à-vis their European counterparts, the history of American Jewish identity is no less marked by a racialized dialectic of antisemitism and assimilation (Sachar; Sorin; Feingold; Gerber). Indeed, from the very first Jewish immigrants to land in what would later become the United States of America, the “Old World” (i.e., European)-

imported, eventually distinctly American antisemitism of Gentile colonial settlers and their progeny has structurally conditioned the assimilation process and all its discontents for American Jewish persons, while assimilation has in turn impacted the evolving nature of antisemitism in the U.S.

The first Jewish persons who migrated to the eastern shores of North America were Sephardim from Recife, a Dutch colonial island off the coast of Brazil, who settled in the Dutch colony New Amsterdam (later renamed New York) (Schappes 1-5). Despite the fact that these Jewish settlers were seeking refuge after having attempted to defend Recife from Portuguese attack, their arrival was met with antisemitic hostility by New Amsterdam governor Peter Stuyvesant, who sought to expel the former on the European Gentile –inspired, racialized grounds that Jews were “deceitful parasites” and “hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ” whose presence would “infect” the host society. Ultimately succumbing to the dictates of his superiors back in the Netherlands, who argued that the Jewish refugees could be structurally assimilated into Dutch colonial life, Stuyvesant admitted them but not without first implementing regulations that would serve as the first legal forms of antisemitism in America; these first American Jewish immigrants were denied the rights of public worship, land ownership, certain forms of trade, and bearing arms. Given the political economy of colonial life in the Americas, such restrictions were especially egregious; the entire *raison d’etre* of European colonization was the trifecta of land/resource appropriation, religious proselytism, and military display, and thus from the outset Jews were structurally and conceptually constructed as an existentially racialized “Other” vis-à-vis their Gentile counterparts who had no such legal limitations.

The antisemitism facing these first American Jewish persons can be understood to have structurally conditioned the beginnings of American Jewish assimilation. The evidence of this racialized dialectic is most obvious in the relatively small size of Sephardic Jewish communities emerging out of the “first wave” of American Jewish immigration; in the colonial period of American history, no Jewish community ever numbered more than 300 people and a social phenomenon which has come to be known as an existential crisis for the American Jewish community (i.e., intermarriage between Jewish and Gentile persons in the U.S.) began almost immediately with many of these first Sephardim (Wertheimer 36). By the time the “second wave” of Jewish immigration was about to take place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century following American independence from Britain, the first Jewish persons in the U.S. had already been conditioned by a hegemonic Gentile majority to be “quiet,” “quiescent,” and “unobtrusive,” relegated to living as individual merchants operating outside the mainstream political economic institutions of American society (Blakeslee 21). This emphasis in nascent American society on politically neutralizing Jewish persons by having them seek to identify themselves as individuals first and Jewish community members second (if at all) would eventually have significant and long-lasting impacts on the American Jewish racial experience; needless to say, facing the structural demands of a Gentile social order in which they had little to no control, whether economic, political, or otherwise, Sephardic Jewish “first wave” immigrants, like all racialized minorities in the U.S., were forced to find individual “ways to circumvent or topple barriers” they faced (Wertheimer 35).

Following the political birth of the United States of America, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from central Europe (mainly Ashkenazim from Germany) began arriving on American shores from 1800-1860, bringing about a new dialectical synthesis of antisemitism and

assimilation. Once again harkening a deep-rooted, Medieval-based European racism, the Gentile government leadership in Maryland, for instance, openly opposed a bill that would have granted American Jewish persons the right to vote and serve in public office; forming a “Christian ticket”, they effectively destroyed what they dubbed the “Jew [sic] bill” and, as such, nullified any potential remedy for a lack of American Jewish communal political rights (Blau and Baron 49). Politically economically speaking, the antisemitism of the time was a reflection of emerging tensions between newly-arriving Gentile immigrants from Europe and their Jewish counterparts, initiated and stoked by entrenched Gentile leadership who engaged in divide-and-conquer politics by racializing the Jewish element of this immigration wave as conniving peddlers and untrustworthy traitors. The established Sephardic American Jewish persons, victimized through the racial politics of antisemitism and atomized through the aforementioned assimilatory process of individuation and community neutralization, were unable to institutionally support their Ashkenazi co-religionists, ultimately withdrawing into “the warmth and familiarity of their own social constellations” (Blakeslee 22). In short, the newly formed American society was just as unwelcoming an environment in its “absorption” of German Jews as it had been for the original Sephardic Jewish immigrants who arrived prior to the establishment of the United States; in both cases, the hegemonic Gentile majority created a conundrum for Jewish persons, in that the latter were racialized through antisemitism and yet the socially mandated assimilation process sought to strip them of their community identity so as to politically neutralize them.

Not surprisingly, then, this “second wave” of Jewish immigration was equally hallmarked by an identity politics of confusion and contradiction. Like the relatively small numbers of Sephardim who migrated before them, the incoming German Jewish persons (who were, for the most part, decidedly poorer than their Sephardic counterparts and thus even more fervently

racialized by a Gentile majority who appropriated classism in their antisemitism) were forced to try and secure economic survival as individuals in burgeoning cities in which they settled, compromising their communal-political power in the American social landscape. Indeed, the Gentile-controlled political economy forced most newly-arrived American Jewish persons to strap “a homely pack on their back” and set off as peddlers, rewarding individual “drive, ambition, and daring” over communal ties (Blakeslee 22). In fact, any possibility for community-oriented praxis among these German-American Jewish persons was undermined by a growing internalized antisemitism and assimilatory divide-and-conquer politics practiced by the more economically secure of the group who began to immigrate during the latter half of this wave; structurally encouraged to work within, rather than against, the unabashedly capitalist material conditions and ideologies of a Gentile-dominated American society, *petit bourgeois* German Jewish immigrants allowed class privileges to supersede any sense of collective identity with their equally racialized, working-class Jewish peers, as the pursuit of individual financial wealth (characterized at the time by the establishment of various familial Jewish banking dynasties) outweighed political commitments to a growing American Jewish community.

Rather than appeasing the Gentile masses through achievement and financial gains, however, the 19<sup>th</sup> century structurally-determined assimilation of American Jewish persons had not only failed to mitigate antisemitism, but had in fact reinforced it, and with significant consequences as far as racial identity for both ends of the American Jewish socio-economic spectrum (Jaher; Korn). Indeed, an antisemitic populist resentment surfaced during the Civil War, reaching its high point in 1862 when Union General Ulysses S. Grant ordered the expulsion of all Jewish persons from the territory of Tennessee on the pretense that “as a class [they] violated every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department” (Wertheimer 39).

Even though this ordinance was ultimately repealed by President Abraham Lincoln, such open and highly-racialized hostility toward American Jewish persons, particularly against those who were the most vulnerable (i.e., working class laborers living in urban squalor, traveling merchants in the Midwest disconnected from community, etc.), spurred an antisemitism that developed across large swaths of Gentile society, particularly among the dispossessed, poor farmers of the South and Midwest who lost the most during the War. However, such reactionary scapegoating need not be understood as having been born out of the socio-economic underbelly of Gentile America; indeed, it was the Gentile elite in American society who were displaying equal amounts of antisemitic racial animosity in their own spheres of activity as well. A particularly poignant example of this racialization was the increasing quantity and prominence of exclusionary restrictions intended to keep “*nouveau riche* Jews [sic]” out of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant enclaves of wealth and prestige; as Joseph Seligman, a wealthy Jewish businessman, found out the hard way in 1877, luxury resorts and other spaces of Gentile status across the Northeast were routinely denying Jews onto their premises on racial grounds (Blakeslee 24).

This double-pronged, racialized groundswell of antisemitic hostility was dialectically synthesized with another historical period of assimilation at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time period which saw the largest influx of Jewish immigrants in American history. Between 1881 and 1914, approximately two million Jewish persons came to the U.S., more than doubling the entire American Jewish population; overwhelmingly, these immigrants were from Eastern Europe, especially Russia and Poland, and served as a source of cheap labor for the turn-of-the-century industrialization that dominated this country’s political economic landscape of the time (Blakeslee 25). More than any other Jewish immigrant group before them, then, the Eastern European “third wave” were at the mercy of the labor market demands of (almost exclusively

Gentile) American capital and its hegemonic racializations. Characterized most pronouncedly by their poverty, the mere presence of this Jewish immigrant proletariat toiling in large urban centers catalyzed an even greater public outpouring of antisemitism. The lynching of Leo Frank in Georgia, the emerging pseudoscience of eugenics and I.Q. testing, and the government-sponsored “Red Scare” all reflected the increasingly racialized power relation between Gentiles and Jews in U.S. society. Indeed, the antisemitic quotation featured in the title of my study was taken from a Senate Judiciary Committee subcommittee hearing in 1919 on the supposedly pernicious American Jewish presence in the Lower East Side of New York (Dubkowsky 224). The political economic fallout of this era of American Jewish racialization included state-sponsored immigration restrictions that severely limited the number of Eastern European Jews allowed to enter the country, selective admissions policies at institutions of higher learning to curb the number of Jewish students, industry-wide lockouts of Jewish employees, and prolific anti-Jewish housing discrimination (Wertheimer 47-50).

During such tumultuous times, assimilation became mandatory for the overwhelming majority of American Jewish persons. And just as early 20<sup>th</sup> century antisemitism was a historical product of the racializing social structures that had greeted the first “two waves” of American Jewish immigration in the decades and centuries before, so too the assimilatory dynamics for the “third wave” of Jewish immigration to the U.S. reflected a racial divide-and-conquer politics already entrenched within the American Jewish community by a hegemonic Gentile majority. Indeed, an internalized antisemitism began to take hold among American Jewish persons, thanks in part to the Gentile-reinforced distinction between supposedly “established Americans” (i.e., German and Sephardic Jewish persons from the first two “immigration waves”) and the newly-arrived Eastern European Jewish immigrants, playing off a

distinction that dates back to the days when German Jewish persons in Germany orientalized the *Ostjuden* (Jewish persons from Eastern Europe). In the words of one scholar, the former were regarded as “Uptown Jews [sic],” while the latter were the “Downtown Jews [sic],” and the antisemitic division between these two groupings was often as racially significant as the one between American Jewish and Gentile identity (Blakeslee 29). While the so-called “Uptown” Jewish persons were structurally “rewarded” for their loyalty and obedience to the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant order (including the dissolution and fragmentation of traditional community structures, singularly-focused pursuit of financial gain, etc.) by having their identity de-racialized through “Americanization” (i.e., assimilation to the hegemonic majority), “Downtown” Jewish persons were far more communally oriented as well as culturally and religiously traditional upon arrival to the United States; unlike their predecessors who had been structurally conditioned to disperse across the country as financiers and peddling merchants, Eastern European Jewish immigrants were concentrated in ghetto-like enclaves in major American cities and had to leverage communal support to help survive the harsh and brutal conditions of proletariat life, thus making them easier targets for racialization.

These socio-economic differences, themselves the result of the not-so-invisible hands of Gentile hegemony and antisemitism in the U.S., translated into a heavy-handed paternalism by the “Uptown Jews [sic]” vis-à-vis their “Downtown” Jewish counterparts. Having themselves been forced through several generations of assimilation, including the internalization of the logic of American racialization, German and Sephardic Jewish persons were desperate to “Americanize” the new Eastern European Jewish immigrants, fearing that a failure to do so would only trigger even more hostile displays of animosity against the American Jewish community as a whole. Indeed, the anxieties and insecurities which the first two “waves” of

American Jewish immigration had been structurally conditioned to endure were essentially displaced onto a “third wave” that was being increasingly portrayed in Gentile society as an even more clearly racialized “Other” (Blakeslee 29). “Uptown” Jewish persons attempted to impress upon “Downtown” Jewish persons the importance of downplaying any identity-oriented differences (including culture, physical appearance, religion, etc.) that could be racialized by the Gentile mainstream. A particularly poignant example of this was the ideological socialization “Downtown Jews [sic]” received from their “Uptown” Jewish peers about the importance of hyper-materialism in American society, a logic that many of the Eastern European-American Jewish persons had never known. As one religious scholar of the time bemoaned, “Downtown Jewish persons were forced to “delve relentlessly into the practical world...[and] sink up to their necks in a torrent of present-day banalities and material possessions, just like the rest of their Jewish brethren in this city and land” (Sarna 61). In many cases, the results of this “embrace of [Gentile] American ideology of individual self-fulfillment and uplift” were catastrophic, as the suicide of famed “Downtown” Jewish author Rose Cohen illustrates; Cohen’s attempt to circumvent racialization by abandoning her “working-class Ashkenazi Jewish identity to fit into a mold of [Gentile] white, middle-class life” proved ultimately to be existentially unbearable for her (Silverman 150).

Throughout the Great Depression and World War II, public opinion polls indicated that American Jewish persons were blamed for the economic downfall and military involvement of the country and reviled on par with the most paradigmatic victims of “white racism,” Black Americans (Wertheimer 50). Indeed, recent historical scholarship has provocatively shown that American scientists were heavily involved in founding and engaging in the more fully fledged eugenics research of the time whose inspiration, and ultimate appropriation in the Nazi

holocaust, can be traced to the European racialization of Jewish persons as a genetic “problem” requiring genocidal elimination. Such research ties were only one of several economic, intellectual, and political links between the powerful forces of antisemitism in America and Europe at the time, including the political affinities of Nazi leaders and Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh, two of the “greatest heroes” in U.S. history (Wallace). In fact, 500,000 copies of Ford’s infamous “International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem” pamphlet circulated across America during the 1930s and ‘40s, as did several more hundred thousand copies of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, an imported European antisemitic forgery outlining a Jewish worldwide conspiracy to gain global domination and subjugate all Gentiles to slavery (Sigel). In fact, the racialization of American Jewish persons was so inextricably intertwined with the Nazi holocaust raging across Europe at the time that the U.S. State Department refused to allow entry to Jewish refugees seeking asylum from the horrors in Europe, many of whom were documented to have later perished in concentration camps (Wyman).

As could be expected given these structural conditions, an even greater resolve to try and minimize racialization through assimilation characterized the American Jewish experience of the interwar and World War II era. In the words of one scholar, American Jewish persons, particularly those who had lived in the country for several generations, “more readily insisted on the Americanness of their lives and cultural undertakings...Integration became a paradigm of American Jewish daily life – for some, the equivalent of a creed” (Shandler 343). One way American Jewish persons tried to assimilate through de-racialization was to accentuate a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant “Americanness” by engaging in divide-and-conquer practices of casting new Jewish immigrants, or, for that matter, any Jewish persons whose ability to assimilate was structurally obstructed in any way, as “marginal” to American society generally and the

American Jewish community specifically. Indeed, studies of the “Jewish ghetto” and other social science research, often conducted by American Jewish persons themselves, racialized non-assimilating American Jewish persons with great fervor during this period (Wirth). And the domestic antisemitic racialization of the time has been linked to the relative silence on the part of nascent American Jewish political lobbying organizations with regard to the Nazi holocaust overseas (Hertzberg 298-300). Fearing the prospects of further racial persecution, there was only so much these groups would dare do publically.

The end of World War II has often been used as a historical landmark for when American Jewish persons began to transcend racial identification in the U.S. and became a cultural group of “white ethnics.” However, as critical scholars of race have noted, such an overly simplified discourse fails to account for the “double processes” of de-racialization and re-racialization that in fact took place for American Jewish persons (Bar On and Tessman 1). The post-war era reflected the newly established dominance of U.S. national capitalism over the global political economy. Two mutually reinforcing social forces emerging out of this historical context were an increased demand for material production and consumption as well as an ideological belief in the promises of science and technology. As such, racialization in the U.S., a process still controlled by the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemonic majority, began to eschew traditional, “Old World”-inspired notions of race with the supposedly more fluid, advanced, and uniquely American conflation of racial classifications with different groups’ “political loyalty to the state and to capital” (Silverman 164). It is important to note that the proximity of racial minorities’ interests with those of the state and economy, and thus their racial identity within this new framework of racialization, was still thoroughly mediated by materially based markers like class status and physical appearance. Nevertheless, new government and commercially-sponsored

institutions and programs seeking to expand the exploitable labor force and stimulate consumer demand catalyzed a semantic de-racialization of racial minorities into seemingly more politically neutral classifications like culture, ethnicity, and nationality. Of particular relevance to this discussion were the “affirmative action programs for white males,” including the G.I. Bill and federally funded home-loan programs, all of which undergirded the upward educational and occupational mobility, as well as suburbanization, of American Jewish persons (Brodkin 42). By institutionally classifying American Jewish persons, particularly American Jewish males, as “white,” a new process of racialization had begun which had as its goal not the erasure of racial identity, but rather a re-inscription of race with social class (Wilson).

Given these social structural conditions, it is not surprising to see the dialectical synthesis of antisemitism and assimilation that took place in post-WWII America. Antisemitism became less of an ontologically *sui generis* form of “white racism” that could be analytically separated from assimilation, and instead became embedded completely within the structurally conditioned process of assimilation itself to promote an even more “fractured sense of identity” for American Jewish persons in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s (Blakeslee 219). Like all forms of racialization, this antisemitic assimilation, or assimilatory antisemitism, depending on which of the two coterminous social forces is to be semantically highlighted, manifested both materially and ideologically. Politically economically, younger generations of American Jewish persons, particularly the progeny of the Eastern European “third wave” immigrants, were structurally pushed in droves to the suburbs, forced to leave behind the urban Jewish enclaves, trade occupations, and working class lifestyle that had previously marked American Jewish persons racially in the U.S. Two important byproducts of this suburbanization were an exponential increase in intermarriage rates between American Jewish persons and Gentiles as well as the

lowering of birthrates of American Jewish persons (Sharot). In many ways, then, the new, seemingly benevolent forms of American Jewish racialization characterizing this time period were actually responsible, however indirectly, for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century “vanishing” of American Jewry whose profound, arguably even genocidal, effects were noted by social scientists only several decades later (Dershowitz).

With these shifting material conditions came fundamental changes in conceptualizing American Jewish racial identity. As relocated American Jewish persons found a suburban “niche within the pervasive post-immigrant matrix of middle-class habits and values, voluntary organizations and selective retention and redefinition of cultural and/or religious rituals” (Weinfeld 78), American Jewish identity underwent a major ideological transformation from being explicitly acknowledged as racial in nature to being misrecognized as a “civil religion” of Jewishness (Woocher). In this sense, the logic of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant-dominated late industrial capitalism, including the dualist binary between public and private spheres of reality, took hold in the racialization of American Jewish persons, who were less and less classified as Jews [sic] qua Jews [sic], but rather as cultural, ethnic, and/or religious practitioners of Judaism (Glazer). Put simply, a historically developing but newly hegemonic ideology emerged which framed American Jewish identity as “a private pursuit” and a matter of “consent” rather than a publicly racialized category tied to descent (Shandler 349). This “voluntary” notion of “being Jewish” cannot be equated with the de-racializing of American Jewish identity, if for no other reason than that it emerged from the longstanding Christian model of identity as “personal” and “elective” in the U.S. (Herberg). Indeed, one American Jewish religious scholar of the time described the ideology of de-racialized American Jewish identity as a “pathology,” since it produced and reinforced social psychological denial and ignorance on the part of American

Jewish persons, as well as the general populace, to the unchanging fact that “among Gentiles one is [still considered] a Jew [sic]” (Neusner 136). The political consequences of this ideology were most evidently on display during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and ‘70s. While synagogues were being bombed in the South, American Jewish persons “would focus on [the civil rights] of anyone *but* Jews [sic]; they [would] join every progressive struggle and tout the importance of having pride in one’s racial identity and fostering racially based communities—except... Jews [sic]” (Bar On and Tessman 6). In short, then, the most sinister and problematic effect of the ideological de-racialization of American Jewish identity was its occlusion of the ways that American Jewish persons were being re-racialized through the fusion of antisemitism and assimilation.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the political economy in the U.S. has been defined by the rising prominence of a global neoliberal capitalism (Robinson). These political economic shifts have manifested in a post-industrial American society that materially consumes far more than it produces despite having to devote more and more of its time to wage labor (Poll). As a result, the racialization of American Jewish persons has undergone its own changes leading up to, and including, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Specifically, the now even more inextricably intertwined processes of antisemitism and assimilation have become further embedded into U.S. social institutions and structures, resulting in newer forms of American Jewish racialization. Three examples of these contemporary dynamics of American Jewish racial identity are the divide-and-conquer racial politics of the “new antisemitism,” the growing popularity of postmodern discourses of race with regard to American Jewish persons, and the marketing of American Jewish racial identity.

The political economic context for the apparent “new antisemitism” in the U.S. stems from the class-based, supposedly “de-racializing” assimilation of American Jewish persons that took place over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The results of this historical process, in the succinct words of one scholar, are that “Jews [sic] are much more successful economically than other...racial groups in the United States” today (Burstein 209). As can be expected, such “success” has manifested in the Gentile hegemonic majority racializing American Jewish identity through “philosemitism,” a racial essentialism regarding the supposed superior intelligence and financial prowess of Jewish persons, a development that “may prove to be more injurious to the future continuity and vitality of American Jewry than antisemitism ever was” (Blakeslee 39). There are at least two reasons for trepidation regarding philosemitism: firstly, it is a throwback to the type of “Old World” European antisemitic biological essentialism found in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and second, it promotes an identity politics of divide-and-conquer which alienates and estranges American Jewish persons from other racial minority groups in the U.S. (Berman).

Not surprisingly, given this context, recent studies have shown that “non-white” minorities, particularly Black Americans and Latina/os, hold the highest rate of explicitly anti-Jewish views in U.S. society (Dinnerstein 55), a predicament that has been reformulated into the ideology of a “new antisemitism” emerging in America. Countless books have been written on this subject, all with the same basic underlying thesis: the greatest threat to American Jewish persons is not the antisemitic assimilation propagated by the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemonic majority and in which American Jewish persons are structurally conditioned to participate, but rather an antisemitic “vigilantism” on the part of groups that are equally, if not more explicitly, racialized and marginalized by the hegemonic majority than American Jewish

persons themselves (Laquer; Chesler). These “new faces of antisemitism” include the Nation of Islam, anti-Zionist leftist political activists as well as Arab and/or Muslim Americans, and increasingly impoverished rural “white ethnics.” Indeed, the tragic irony here is that American Jewish persons have been so structurally conditioned to misrecognize their own racialization in the U.S. that some have even joined in a national renaissance of “white supremacy” (Swain 235-9). Ultimately, it is precisely these divide-and-conquer inspired conflicts between American Jewish persons and other racialized minorities, particularly the racial “Other” *par excellence* in American history (i.e., Black Americans), that reinforce the philosemitic racialization of American Jewish persons as a supposedly “de-racialized” group of disproportionately successful “white ethnics” (Gibel Azoulay).

An equally important development is the growing popularity of postmodern conceptions of American Jewish racial identity. Paralleling the emergence of the strong form of “post-race” theory has been the increasingly accepted idea that American Jewish persons can no longer be understood as a race, but rather as a “post-assimilationist” cultural, ethnic, and/or religious group who have been erroneously socially constructed as racial in nature (Stratton). Often citing results from recent genetic research, such accounts of American Jewish racial identity claim that it is epistemologically invalid and axiologically unwise to view American Jewish persons through the “unscientific” lens of race (Kahn). Instead, using postmodern notions of hybridity and performativity, most contemporary scholars see American Jewish persons as “increasingly content to enact their difference and to be seen as different in [a] public sphere...[characterized by] the seemingly limitless spectrum possibilities that American freedom and prosperity afford” (Shandler 352). In other words, misrecognition of the structural forces involved in racialization has led to an overly agential understanding of American Jewish identity, in which American

Jewish persons freely construct their Jewishness in a supposedly vacuous and open-ended U.S. society.

Indeed, what characterizes much of the contemporary scholarship on American Jewish racial identity is the discourse of “choice.” Specifically, American Jewish group identity is now thought to be a matter of “consent” rather than “descent,” reflecting a “choosing” rather than a “chosen” people (Kornberg Greenberg). At the same time, American Jewish identity politics are increasingly described as emphasizing the “cultural” over the “social,” given that the latter lends itself to a racial consciousness that is thought to be untenable for American Jewish persons today (Schoenfeld). Even those works that focus explicitly on the contemporary racialization of American Jewish identity belie an acknowledgment of social structure by highlighting the “political choices” that American Jewish persons are supposedly free to make regarding their racial identity in the U.S. (Tessman). Hence the subjective agency involved in constructing American Jewish racial identity has been taken to an extreme, with such identity now thought to be a matter purely of group choice rather than having any dialectical engagement with structural determination. This discourse ultimately reinforces the antisemitic assimilatory ideology that American Jewish persons have been “de-racialized” and, as a result, can now experience the boundless multicultural freedoms afforded to those with a “white” racial identity.

Perhaps the clearest connection between the neo-liberal political economy of U.S. society and contemporary American Jewish racialization, however, has been the increasing marketing of American Jewish racial identity. Within today’s neo-liberal “Total Market,” all social relations, including those relating to race, are subsumed within the logic of capitalism, with its principles of commodity fetishism, unbridled competition, and the cash-nexus (Hinkalemmert). Thus there are structural demands for American Jewish racial identity to be increasingly commoditized for

consumption by a largely Gentile audience (Halter), a social phenomenon that has had significant impacts on the racialization of American Jewish persons.

As a result, American Jewish persons have begun to conceptualize their racial identity as “a serious business” with “products and memberships that must be marketed” (Zahavy 236-7). And to help explain American Jewish “success” in the U.S. racial marketplace, a growing number of scholars have reframed American Jewish racialization as a material resource helping to produce “human” and “social” capital (Burstein). Even the antisemitism that American Jewish persons continue to face has been recast as a financial opportunity for “moral entrepreneurship” as evidenced by competition between American Jewish non-profit organizations engaged in political lobbying and community advocacy (Zahavy). Indeed, there have been calls for these organizations to “reengineer” themselves to better “target specific segments of the American Jewish community (their consumers)” (Zahavy 237). Of particular benefit to these organizations are issues that have “traction” with a supposedly “de-racialized” American Jewish populace, including Holocaust remembrance and the state of Israel. Such cynical appropriations reveal the extent to which neoliberal ideology has occluded the historical dynamics of American Jewish racialization in the U.S. When seen through such a lens, American Jewish racial identity is competing in the “Total Market” with all other racial minorities in the U.S., as opposed to thoroughly embedded within racialized power relations.

In this section, the historical dynamics of American Jewish racialization have been traced from the antisemitism facing the first Sephardic Jewish migrants to land in New Amsterdam to the supposedly assimilated, “de-racialized,” “white ethnic” racial identity of American Jewish persons today. The three emergent social phenomena relating to contemporary American Jewish racialization – the divide-and-conquer political hostility between American Jewish persons and

other racial minorities, the supposedly postmodern nature of contemporary American Jewish identity, and the “Total Market”-ization of American Jewish racial identity – will prove to be important for contextualizing contemporary American Jewish cinematic representations. Therefore, it is necessary to lay out the historical racialization of American Jewish identity onscreen, with an emphasis on how these dynamics have paved the way for the persistence of American Jewish racial stereotypes in film, the subject of my study.

### **American Jewish Racial Identity Politics Onscreen**

The racialization of American Jewish identity in U.S. cinema has a somewhat unique history given the disproportionate role American Jewish persons have played in both the creation and astronomical growth of the film industry in this country. Indeed, all but one of the first movie production companies were founded by American Jewish persons, particularly progeny of the German “second wave” of American Jewish immigration as well as “third generation” American Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and their offspring (Gabler). Nevertheless, while American Jewish filmmakers themselves have been responsible for much of the racialization of American Jewish persons onscreen, it is important to recognize “the larger civil society” in the U.S. as a structural context within which these filmmakers produced representations of American Jewish racial identity (Rosenberg 4). Specifically, the dialectics of antisemitism and assimilation, detailed in the section above, have played a significant role in shaping the historical processes of racialization of American Jewish identity in U.S. movies, including the mutually reinforcing trends of portraying this identity as a “a curse, an illness, or...a source of shame” (Schoenfeld 111) and a commensurate “de-Semitization” of this identity onscreen (Schrank).

It is important to point out that the social fact of a disproportionately American Jewish presence in the beginnings of the U.S. film industry was not the result of a calculated scheme on

the part of American Jewish persons to control mass media production in this country. The popularized expression that “Hollywood is run by Jews [sic]” is in fact one of the more prolific “chapters in the history of modern American antisemitism” (Brackman) and a derivative of antisemitic conspiracy theories like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that portray Jewish persons as plotting for global domination. Instead, there was a historically grounded elective affinity between American Jewish persons, particularly those engaged in a more *petit bourgeois* socio-economic lifestyle, and the rise of the film industry (Bial; Carr). This elective affinity reflected several socio-historical factors including the fact that Jewish persons had a cultural-religious predisposition toward public forms of entertainment, particularly as compared to Anglo-Saxon Protestants whose Puritanical ancestors had prohibitions against public theater; the disproportionate presence of Jewish persons in urban centers where new forms of mass media technology like the motion picture developed; and the political economy of the time, which structurally limited the labor opportunities of overtly racialized immigrant groups (including American Jewish persons as well as Irish and Italian American persons) and thus conditioned their willingness “to humiliate themselves” in the performing arts industry (Bial 7).

The first American Jewish studio heads, who exerted a nearly “despotic control” over the content and production of their production companies, began creating and distributing films during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a context where American Jewish persons were racialized in highly overt antisemitic ways. Specifically, American Jewish racial identity in the U.S. at the time was tied to “the mainly Yiddish-speaking East European Jews [sic] living as a ghettoized minority among other immigrant minorities, in large urban areas, often in conditions of severe poverty, pursuing small-scale entrepreneurship and trades” (Rosenberg 8). Such a racialization clashed considerably with the Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemonic majority, and only heightened

the assimilatory desires of German and Sephardic Jewish immigrants in the U.S., including American Jewish filmmakers themselves. Therefore, it is not surprising that these filmmakers portrayed American Jewish persons onscreen as an overly racialized “Other.” During these “primitive years” (Rosenberg) of “alienation” (Samuels) and “silent stereotypes” (Erens), American Jewish identity was racialized in film through European imported antisemitic Jewish characters like “the pawnbroker,” “Christ killer,” and “money-lender” (Rosenberg 8) as well as “sadistic misers exploiting Christian widows” and “crafty arsonists burning down a clothing store for the insurance proceeds” (Brackman 10).

And despite these American Jewish filmmakers’ attempts to assimilate through the proliferation of antisemitic imagery of American Jewish racial identity for a mostly Gentile public, there were many in the “white” Anglo-Saxon Protestant mainstream who began to target the Hollywood film industry as an arena where Jewish “popular-cultural entrepreneurs” and “entertainment merchants” were “unleashing libidinal impulses” on a supposedly innocent and unsuspecting U.S. society (Brackman 2). This antisemitic political movement reached a feverish frenzy during the 1920s, when Henry Ford’s newspaper *Dearborn Independent* offered a series of diatribes against American Jewish filmmakers as representatives of “that race” for whom “moral filth” is “so natural” and conflating American Jewish identity with that of African American persons, another victim of white racism in the U.S. (Brackman 2).

This socio-historical context explains the political interests undergirding these American Jewish filmmakers’ production of “profoundly assimilationist” characterizations of American Jewish persons in Hollywood film alongside the overtly antisemitic American Jewish cinematic representations they were already producing in this era of movie history (Rosenberg 13). Again, it is important to point out that such assimilatory portrayals were to be expected given the social

location of these filmmakers as upwardly mobile representatives of the “American Dream” (Rosenberg 10-14). Hence it is not surprising at all to find their films featuring American Jewish immigrant characters whose identity was defined not by a racialized “Jewishness”, but rather by “entrepreneurial zeal,” intermarriage, and the “fabled decency” of mainstream Gentile racial identity (Rosenberg 13-17). The production of American Jewish onscreen representations by these filmmakers thus reflected the ambivalence and tensions that characterized the racialization of American Jewish persons in U.S. society in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A powerful and well-known example of this assimilatory trend in American Jewish cinematic representations of the time was *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Bros., 1927), one of the first motion pictures to transcend the silent era with actual audible dialogue onscreen. The film’s narrative of an American Jewish cantor’s son in New York torn between his emergent mainstream Broadway career and his traditional religious obligations to the American Jewish community was symptomatic of the painful divisions that the contradictory social structural forces of antisemitism and assimilation wrought upon American Jewish identity. However, arguably more revealing about the racial identity politics of American Jewish persons at the time was main character Jake Rabinowitz’s (Al Jolson) appropriation of “blackface” in the film, a “badge of belonging in the United States” that attempted to display overt allegiance with the American structures of white racism even as it left a “stain of shame” on the racialized minorities, like American Jewish persons, who donned it (Rogin).

Structural changes in the U.S. political economy beginning with the Great Depression and World War II had a massive influence on the racialization of American Jewish identity in Hollywood film, reflecting the further dialectical enmeshment of antisemitism and assimilation. The “nativism” that swept across the country in the 1930s and ‘40s undergirded two antisemitic

government institutions that were created to curb the supposedly “excessive influence” of American Jewish filmmakers on American popular culture: the Hays Office’s Movie Picture Production Code and HUAC, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (Rosenberg 19). The Hays Office regulations censored the portrayals of racial minorities onscreen, and most American Jewish filmmakers responded by relegating the American Jewish onscreen characters they produced to “comic relief” so as not to incite the ire of these morality police (Brackman 11). At the same time, antisemitic HUAC public hearings, where American Jewish filmmakers were racially targeted for supposedly being “subversively interventionist” and the “greatest danger to this country” due to their “mongrelizing [of] America” (Brackman 5) structurally conditioned an assimilatory “timidity,” “fright,” and “self-consciousness” in these filmmakers’ portrayals of American Jewish racial identity onscreen (Rosenberg).

Specifically, starting in the 1930s and continuing through the 1960s, racially identifiable Jewish characters were essentially purged from the screen in a desperate attempt by embattled American Jewish filmmakers to “de-Semitize” Hollywood amidst the contradictory social forces of Cold War antisemitism and class-based assimilatory “acceptance” American Jewish persons faced (Samuels). Indeed, American Jewish characters, most often non-Jewish actresses and actors, were portrayed as “de-racialized” through their participation in the “American civil religion,” perhaps best exemplified by *Gentleman’s Agreement* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1947), whose title symbolizes the racial identity politics for American Jewish persons at the time (Rosenberg 22). As one study of the cinematic racialization of the American Jewish nose reveals, an epidemic of rhinoplasty among newly middle-class American Jewish persons during the 1950s and ‘60s was directly linked to the attempted “erasing” of American Jewish racial identity onscreen, a phenomenon the author describes as “Hollywood passing” (Schrank). In short, then,

the fusion of antisemitism and assimilation that characterized the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century manifested in an attempt by to “de-racialize” American Jewish identity in Hollywood film. As one set of scholars puts it, “although [American] Jewish executives, producers, writers, performers, and directors dominate[d] the American film industry, [the films they produced]...almost totally ignored [American Jewish identity,] one of America’s most prominent minorities” (Desser and Friedman 1).

The 1960s was a watershed decade, a historic time period characterized by large-scale social movements, radicalized identity politics, and relative socio-economic security in the U.S., as well as the corporatization and commensurate fragmentation of control within the Hollywood establishment, including the rise of independent production companies and studios as well as the loss of American Jewish moguls’ monopoly over content and production in U.S. cinema. At the same time, government institutions like the Production Code were being revised to permit “a new frankness in language, sexuality, and story line” in U.S. films (Rosenberg 25). These social structural changes, coupled with the increased geopolitical significance of the state of Israel following the Six Day War (Nitzan and Bechler), encouraged filmmakers, particularly a younger generation of American Jewish persons, to “flaunt Jewishness” in more overtly racialized American Jewish cinematic representations (Baskind 6). Hence the “Self-Conscious Sixties” gave way to the “Self-Centered Seventies,” and a plethora of highly visible American Jewish characterizations appeared onscreen, most notably in a number of memorable performances by Barbara Streisand and Woody Allen (Rosenberg). However, these portrayals were “by no means free of stereotype” (Rosenberg 27-32). In fact, American Jewish filmic displays over the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been thought to reflect a “re-racialization” of American Jewish identity, with the 1990s in particular signaling a “Jewish ‘renaissance’” of “a certain brand

of...American Jewish cinematic expression,” namely more overtly stereotypical imagery of American Jewish racial identity (Itzkowitz 240).

Since the 1980s and ‘90s, American Jewish onscreen representations, and their study in academia, have mirrored the political economic and social structural dynamics relating to the racialization of American Jewish identity more generally. Specifically, the three issues discussed at the end of last section – divide-and-conquer racial identity politics and the “new antisemitism;” extreme “post-race” conceptualizations of American Jewish identity; and the commoditization of American Jewish racial identity in the “Total Market” – have all emerged in American Jewish filmic portrayals over the past couple of decades. While the term “race” has almost disappeared in recent research on American Jewish filmic identity, with most scholars opting instead to use the vernacular of culture and ethnicity, their work belies the specific modes of racialization that operate in American Jewish cinematic representations today.

The divide-and-conquer racial identity politics with which American Jewish persons have increasingly had to contend in neoliberal capitalist times have major impacted the interpretation of American Jewish representations onscreen. As one scholar puts it, the current study of American Jewish racial identity in film reflects the wider trend in film studies in which a more race-oriented “political agenda geared to white supremacy’s massive deployment” is sacrificed for research that focuses on “the discrete histories and political projects of specific identity sites,” particularly culture and ethnicity (Wiegman 156). Within such a context of fragmented racial identity politics, it is not surprising that scholars of American Jewish cinematic identity have moved away from identifying and critiquing the ways in which American Jewish identity continues to be racialized in movies today. Instead, there have been renewed efforts by scholars

of American Jewish cinematic identity to blame fellow victims of racialization, particularly Black American filmmakers, for what they see as “new antisemitism.”

For instance, studies that call out the antisemitic practice of Gentile government officials railing against the “Hollywood elite” (a “euphemism or code phrase” for the historically popular practice of racially targeting American Jewish filmmakers), are being overshadowed by concern for “African American Anti-Semitism [sic],” considered to be the “newest attack on Jewish Hollywood” (Brackman 7). Indeed, the outrage over racialized American Jewish cinematic stereotypes in U.S. film appears to be loudest with regard to Black American filmmakers like Spike Lee, whose portrayal of American Jewish club owners in *Mo’ Better Blues* (Universal, 1990) was compared to “anti-Jewish poster[s] from Hitler’s Germany” (Horowitz). Even criticisms of American Jewish performers’ historical appropriations of “blackface” have been reframed by scholars as evidence of Black American “impatience” with assimilation and its supposed fruits (Brackman 13). Once again, the “new antisemitism,” this time thought to manifest in Black American filmmakers’ representations of American Jewish characters, is, in typical divide-and-conquer fashion, linked to other racial minorities rather than the subjective agencies and social structures of racialization still operating in the U.S. today.

Some contemporary scholars of American Jewish representation in film have also argued that “Jewishness” onscreen has become less a “problem” and more of “a natural component of a wider social landscape [in the U.S.],” an example “of difference without otherness” in a newly “multi-ethnic America” (Rosenberg 30). Reflecting strong forms of the “post-race” theoretical paradigm, such accounts of American Jewish identity describe assimilation as “mov[ing] in two directions,” with “the mainstream...incorporating [racial minorities’] historical experience and in this way gradually com[ing] to look more like them” (Rosenberg 35). This “post-assimilationist”

perspective posits that American Jewish onscreen portrayals have not only been “de-racialized,” but in fact reflect “a cultural hybridity marked by a wide range of eroded and transgressed boundaries and the mix-and-match identities that such transgressions produce” (Schrank 38).

It is in this sense that American Jewish filmic identity has increasingly been thought to reflect “the quintessential *postmodern* identity,” “defiantly elusive” and “complicat[ing] the project of identity-making entirely” (Itzkowitz 240). Hence the overly agential and ideological “post-race” discourse of “choice” discussed last section is found to be operant in studies of American Jewish cinematic representations as well, particularly misrecognition of the power relations and social structures of racialization, with some scholars even assuming a political vacuum in which “the post-assimilationist subject performatively constructs her/his own difference” (Johnston 210). Only amidst such contradictory logic could claims of a supposed American Jewish “renaissance” onscreen appear simultaneously with critiques that “[American] Jewish characters [have become] practically nonexistent’ in U.S. movies, with studies indicating that American Jewish persons appear less frequently than every other minority, whether religious, racial or sexual” (Rich).

And finally, the “Total Market” of neoliberal capitalist globalization has certainly found its reflection in U.S. cinematic portrayals of American Jewish persons. Indeed, Hollywood filmmakers, operating within a political economic institution that is inextricably intertwined with the social structures in broader U.S. society, have increasingly found it “useful to commodify diversity,” and thus produce racialized American Jewish onscreen portrayals that can appeal to “style-conscious customers in the cosmopolitan marketplace where nearly everything is for sale” (Schrank 41). As scholars have pointed out, this social context of a “commodified, self-indulgent buffet of ethno-racial styles” structurally conditions filmmakers, including those who

are American Jewish, to appropriate filmic imagery of “Jewishness-otherness,” most notably historically popularized cinematic stereotypes, as a “trendy accessory” for profit-making (Itzkowitz 239).

Indeed, the material-economic pressures of today’s “commercial intertext” (Brook) an endless product line of commoditized mass media racial representations, mutually reinforce an agential and ideological “indifference to difference” on the part of filmmakers, including those who are American Jewish, with a commensurate commercial demand for “authentic inauthenticity” (Brook) ultimately producing a dialectic of social forces that encourage the perpetuation of American Jewish cinematic stereotypes. Thus if the American Jewish “preoccupation with the dilemmas and difficulties of being marked,” as reflected in the question of racialized American Jewish stereotyping in U.S. film, is to be understood as “postmodernism’s Jewish question” (Itzkowitz 240), it is perhaps less of a defining, timeless, and essentially “Jewish problem” and more of a symptom of the historical materialist conjuncture of global neoliberal capitalism in which filmmakers, particularly of big-budget Hollywood movies, currently operate.

In short, then, the historical trajectory of American Jewish racialization has paralleled the racialization of American Jewish representations in U.S. film. And as one scholar points out, the processes of “assimilation and Americanization” that American Jewish racial identity has undergone, both in the “real world” as well as “onscreen,” have not come without “hidden costs” (Buhle). Most notably, the supposed “de-racialization” of American Jewish identity broadly speaking has produced a proclivity for film studies scholars to misrecognize the ways U.S. cinema still serves as “a device to maintain the status quo of white privilege against the recognition earned by these previously suppressed others” (Vera and Gordon 4). And while

more nuanced research on the intersections of gender, sexualities, and age in American Jewish filmic representations has emerged recently (Friedman; Furnish; Michel), there has been a paucity of methodologically rigorous and systematic 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship on the onscreen racialization of American Jewish identity through traditional cinematic stereotypes. My study hopes to contribute to the study of American Jewish racial identity, as well as the scholarship of race in film more generally, by filling this gap in the academic literature.

### CHAPTER 3 “MEDDLING MATRIARCHS”

This chapter will discuss the first of four racialized typologies found through analysis and interpretation of American Jewish characters from more than 50 feature-length U.S. films since the year 2000. The specific onscreen racialization addressed here is that of the “meddling matriarch,” from the historically constructed mass filmic stereotype of American Jewish mothers as loud-mouthed, nitpicky, overbearing, overprotective, domineering (in both a physical and behavioral sense, especially with respect to their husbands), and pushy (particularly with regard to their sons’ romantic lives). And while the 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish characters from my study are strikingly similar in many ways to past racialized representations of American Jewish mothers onscreen, the “meddling matriarch” cinematic stereotype seems to have evolved in several significant ways, paralleling recent social changes in American Jewish family life and gender roles.

Specifically, the socioeconomic reality in the U.S. has been changing since the beginning of the 1960s, with a middle-class living standard increasingly requiring at least two wage earners per household (Poll 30). This social fact has been mutually reinforced by the hyperbolically growing numbers of American Jewish women participating in the labor force, particularly in professional careers (DellaPergola). With women’s “greater commitment to the work force” (Poll 30), the traditional gender norms associated with American Jewish family life have been significantly affected, as evidenced by “an unprecedented erosion in the convention roles of marriage and child-bearing” (DellaPergola 219). Specific changes to American Jewish marriage and family patterns have included the delayed timing of marriages, higher rates of intermarriage with Gentile persons, growing numbers of permanent non-marital partnerships and cohabitation, higher divorce rates, lower birthrates, higher numbers of openly lesbian/gay/bisexual

relationships, and increasing numbers of single-parent households headed mostly by women (DellaPergola 219). Amidst this marital and familial flux is the additional demographic issue of the overall aging of the American Jewish population, with “baby-boomers” representing the largest American Jewish age group in many local contexts (Sheskin). These social trends appear to have translated into an expanded racialization of the American Jewish “meddling matriarch” in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film, broadening the traditional cinematic stereotype to include newer characters ranging from the sons of elderly American Jewish parents to American Jewish women whose co-workers are involved in lesbian relationships.

Quantitatively speaking, of the 53 films included in my study, almost half (25, or more than 47%) featured characters whose racialized traits were identifiable as those of American Jewish “meddling matriarchs,” with 21 of these films (or 84%) having a significant American Jewish creative influence in their production (i.e., American Jewish persons as directors and/or writers). Although certainly a significant amount of films, this is a smaller number of films than at least two of the other American Jewish cinematic stereotypes in my study, an interesting fact especially when considering the overall aging of the American Jewish population and thus the seemingly growing importance of parental figures in the American Jewish community. Possible reasons for this contradiction as well as discussion of the disproportionate number of “meddling matriarchs” emerging from the work of American Jewish filmmakers will be offered in Chapter 7.

Out of these 25 relevant films, a total of 35 characters were racialized as “meddling matriarchs” (28% of the 125 characters in the total sample), whether such characters fit all aspects of the traditional stereotype or reflected the expansion of this stereotype mentioned above. And of these 35 characters, 31 (almost 89%) were explicitly identified in their respective

films as American Jewish, indicating that there was relatively little inference necessary on the part of the researcher to identify “meddling matriarchs” for the purposes of my study. Even more startling is the rate of “meddling matriarch” imagery among the characters in the overall sample that were explicitly identified in their respective films not only as American Jewish females, but mothers as well; 100% of these 15 maternal characters exhibited “meddling matriarch” traits to varying degrees. Finally, a relatively large number of the 35 total “meddling matriarch” characters (15, or close to 43%) were featured in films classified as “independent” cinema in my study, a figure that will be discussed in Chapter 7 as well.

Several characters in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film embodied the historically constructed “meddling matriarch” cinematic stereotype to the tee. One such character is Vivian Feffer (Michele Lee) in *Along Came Polly* (Universal, 2004), a racialized caricature of American Jewish motherhood *par excellence*. Vivian is married to a husband, Irving, whom she physically overshadows and does not allow to speak (there are several jokes throughout the film relating to Irving’s muteness), and she is terribly overprotective of her adult son, Reuben, who confesses that his mother has “made [him] afraid of everything.” Indeed, Vivian’s racialization as a “meddling matriarch” is so emphasized that her character includes no positive attributes, as her presence in the film is purely that of a domineering American Jewish mother.

Vivian’s overbearing nature is on display from the beginning of the film: when Reuben returns to work from a disastrous honeymoon in the Caribbean (during which his newlywed wife left him for a scuba instructor), he finds that Vivian has already called his boss, Stan, to inform the latter (and apparently everyone else at Reuben’s place of employment) about the fiasco. As the audience learns more about Reuben, it becomes evident that his pronounced neuroses are due, in large part, to his mother’s over-involvement in his life, including his choices of romantic

partners (Vivian consistently tells Reuben that he will be “making the right choice” only if he ends up with Lisa, the American Jewish wife who left him in the Caribbean). And leaving little doubt of whether her character is a racialized stereotype of the American Jewish “meddling matriarch,” Vivian is loudmouthed and pushy, demanding that Reuben and his new love interest Polly (who are on their second date) join her and Irving when the four bump into each other at an Indian restaurant. The shock and discomfort Reuben and Polly must endure is only heightened by Vivian’s own racial insensitivity, rudely requesting a table for 4 in a childish, slowed-down English dialect to a male server of South Asian descent whom she labels a “Native American.” To top things off, Vivian spends the dinner providing details to the two budding romantics about the escapades of Reuben’s ex, Lisa, who apparently is “doing wonderful” on the Caribbean island upon which she stayed to shack up with her scuba instructor. In fact, Reuben is freed from the tyranny of his “meddling matriarch” only when Irving breaks his silence to deliver an inspiring monologue about seizing the day and living life to its fullest. Vivian is left speechless, and Reuben runs off to find his true love Polly in a symbolic gesture of escaping the shackles of his mother.

There are other American Jewish maternal characters in my study who exhibited highly racialized “meddling matriarch” traits similar to Vivian Feffer, but with biographical differences that relate to the shifts in American Jewish marriage and family mentioned above, differences that ultimately manifested in their idiosyncratic representations of the “meddling matriarch.” For instance, Mrs. Carver (Nora Dunn) in *The Hebrew Hammer* (Comedy Central, 2003) is another obnoxious American Jewish mother whose sole purpose in life appears to be controlling and manipulating everyone around her, most notably her adult son. In fact, Mrs. Carver is so concerned with Mordechai’s wellbeing that she will not let him get up from the dinner table

without finishing his food, fearing that he will be malnourished. However, Mrs. Carver differs from Vivian Feffer in that she seems to be a single mother, as no mention is made in *The Hebrew Hammer* of Mordechai's father. Whether symbolic hyperbole of the "meddling matriarch" stereotype (i.e., Mrs. Carver is so domineering that she has annihilated Mordechai's father) or simply a reflection of the growing rate of single-parent, female-headed American Jewish households mentioned above, Mrs. Carver's American Jewish maternity manifests in unique ways on-screen.

In particular, Mrs. Carver is far more sexually explicit, materialistic, and eccentric than Vivian Feffer. When Mordechai brings his love interest, Esther Bloomenbergensteinenthal (Judy Greer), home for *shabbas* dinner, Mrs. Carver demands that Esther give Mordechai "blow jobs" to relax him from his stressful work life. Mrs. Carver also chastises Mordechai throughout the dinner for his career choice (Mordechai is a private investigator), complaining vociferously that his job's money and prestige do not meet her standards. The real showstopper in this scene, though, is Mrs. Carver's overzealous coddling of her elderly cat, whom she outfits with a diaper and whose bowel movements she investigates and smells. Eventually, Mrs. Carver's "meddling matriarch" antics rub off on Esther, who upon becoming Mordechai's wife at the conclusion of the film, arranges a honeymoon in the same location where Mrs. Carver longs to retire: Boca Raton, Florida. In other words, "meddling matriarch" traits are shown here to be a racialized, intergenerational, and matrilineal legacy, or burden, of American Jewish women.

*Keeping the Faith* (Touchstone, 2000) is as much a film about American Jewish "meddling matriarchs" as anything else. Hip rabbi Jake Schramm is inundated with pushy American Jewish mothers desperately seeking to set their daughters up with him. In fact, one such mother goes so far as to fax her daughter's resume to him as an ice-breaker. But the

standout of the “Kosher Nostra,” as Jake refers to these “meddling matriarchs,” is Bonnie Rose (Holland Taylor) who not only does her daughter Rachel’s public relations, but uses that position to arrange for a date between Jake and Rachel. Jake himself, however, is no stranger to this sort of maternal over-involvement, as his own mother Ruth (Anne Bancroft) is a “meddling matriarch” of the Vivian Feffer and Mrs. Carver variety, albeit with a twist that harkens to the new social reality facing many American Jewish women today.

Ruth is a neo-Bohemian divorcee who enjoys Kabala, thai-bo, and gardening, and yet despite these seemingly healthy hobbies, like all the other “meddling matriarchs,” Ruth seems to have a very unhealthy lack of boundaries with her adult son: she kisses him on the lips, badgers him about his love life (“I’ve had more dates than Jake!”), and bemoans how hard it is “to see [Jake] as a man.” Ruth also poses an Oedipal tinged question to Jake’s Gentile love interest Anna Riley, asking Anna if Jake is a good kisser; this inappropriate probe is made worse by the fact that up to that point Anna and Jake’s relationship had been kept a secret. The couple kept it secret due to Ruth’s overbearing nature: she cut all ties with Jake’s brother Ethan because he married a Gentile. But Ruth claims that she cannot help it since it is her “G-d given right,” as she puts it, to obsess about Jake; even during a moment of silent meditation shared by her, Anna, and Jake, she feels the need to cry out “You’re not breathing, Jake! I can’t hear you breathing!”

Like Jake, the lead character and namesake of *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Fox Searchlight, 2001) is completely surrounded, both literally and figuratively, by “meddling matriarchs.” In this film, however, the maternal characters are faced with circumstances that are a testament to another shift in American gender identity politics over the last few decades, specifically the “queering” of American Jewish female sexuality (Johnston), as for most of the movie, Jessica is a lesbian. The first scene in the entire film features Jessica sitting with her mother Judy (Tovah

Feldshuh) and grandmother Esther (Esther Wurmfeld) in a jam-packed synagogue service while the latter two noisily debate Jessica's love life. Judy wonders aloud why Jessica is not dating the American Jewish men Judy has recommended from the synagogue, while Esther offers judgmental criticisms of these men. The scene climaxes with Jessica shouting out loud for the two to stop, interrupting the rabbi's sermon and causing the entire congregation to gawk at her. These maternal pressures regarding romance are just as overwhelming when Jessica is at work, as her older, married, and pregnant colleague Joan (Jackie Hoffman) stands at Jessica's cubicle and distracts Jessica by obnoxiously reading her personal ads. Jessica decides to discreetly answer one of the ads, which happens to be written by a woman, and finds herself head-over-heels in a secret lesbian relationship, all of which raises the "meddling matriarch" antics of Judy, Esther, and Joan to new heights.

Joan's nosiness knows no bounds as she rallies the troops at work with her suspicions that Jessica "is *so* seeing somebody" (presumably a man) and aggressively confronts Jessica every chance she gets about the budding romance (including leaving three voice messages for Jessica in one weekend). Judy, for her part, unwittingly but quite forcefully interrupts Jessica's planned hotel rendezvous with her new girlfriend Helen, demanding that the latter join the Stein family for *shabbas* dinner. At dinner (during which Jessica's father, in stereotypical fashion, says next to nothing), Judy forces Jessica to open the meal by singing a *kiddush* prayer against her will, attempts awkwardly to set Jessica up with Stan (a family guest Judy has invited for ulterior purposes, along with Jessica's boss Josh whom she has invited to court Helen), and corners a terrified Helen in the kitchen, urging her to "keep [Judy] posted" on the ins-and-outs of Jessica's love life. When a thunderstorm finally signals the conclusion of the dinner, Judy decrees that all guests will be staying the night, setting up an anxious moment for Jessica and

Helen, whom Judy unsuspectingly commands to sleep together in a small bed in Jessica's childhood bedroom.

The obnoxiousness of these “meddling matriarchs” continues when Jessica is forced to reveal the nature of her relationship with Helen. Joan, who runs into the two lovebirds shopping together at a local Manhattan grocery market, conducts a sustained interrogation until Jessica admits to her lesbianism, a declaration that prompts a scream attack and overly intrusive questioning by Joan about what “the sex” is like. Judy, in a private chat with Jessica that includes infantilizing nostalgia about Jessica's fifth grade school play, announces that she is privy to Jessica's relationship with Helen and offers her blessing (importantly, with no mention or concern about a paternal blessing). Indeed, Jessica's brother's wedding becomes a “coming-out” celebration for Jessica and Helen, with grandma Esther complaining openly about “flat-chested” Helen and Joan bombarding Helen with another litany of questions about lesbian sexuality. After the wedding, when Jessica and Helen decide to move in together, Judy (possibly fearing a loss of control over Jessica) inserts herself even more feverishly into the cohabitating couple's life, making dinner reservations for them and leaving constant voice messages. Tragically for Jessica, Helen is not able to stomach the strain and breaks the relationship off. The racialized take-home message for the audience, then, is that no relationship, not even one that appears to have fate on its side, can withstand the pressures of American Jewish “meddling matriarchs”.

Two immigrant mothers, the Israeli-American Jewish Ruth Kraditor (Isabella Rossellini) in *Two Lovers* (Magnolia, 2008) and the Belarusian-American Jewish Sonia Teichberg (Imelda Staunton) in *Taking Woodstock* (Focus Features, 2009) provide an important contrast to the American-born Jewish “meddling matriarchs” described above, differences that can be attributed

to a global demographic “time lag,” or the uneven development of the gender role changes discussed above among Jewish persons worldwide (DellaPergola). Even though the films are set decades apart (*Two Lovers* is set in contemporary times, while *Taking Woodstock* relives the summer of 1969), both of these American Jewish maternal characters are less affluent than Vivian Feffer, Ruth Schramm, Judy Stein, and even Mrs. Carver. In fact, unlike the characters previously examined, much of these immigrant mothers’ lives appear to be consumed by homemaking activities, whether unpaid in the case of Ruth (whose husband owns a neighborhood dry-cleaning store in Brooklyn) or remunerated indirectly in the case of Sonia (who, along with her husband Jake, owns and operates a desolate bed-and-breakfast motel in upstate New York). These are women whose lives are far more mundane than the American Jewish “meddling matriarchs” discussed above: there are no fancy dinners at chic New York restaurants, no Manhattan apartments, and no extravagant weddings in synagogues. However, a closer look reveals that the lives of both mothers, like the others mentioned above, still revolve around their respective adult sons Leonard and Elliot, albeit in different ways. Ruth is a passive-aggressive matriarch who rules her household with quiet efficiency, while Sonia is so loud and pushy that she is referred to as a “a fucking battalion.”

In *Two Lovers*, Leonard Kraditor returns to his parents’ small apartment after years of living on his own, only to find his mother Ruth lying on the floor outside his closed bedroom door trying to eavesdrop on his activities and conversations. Similarly, when Leonard makes secret plans to fly across the country with his *shiksa* love interest Michelle, Ruth goes online and checks the Internet website from which Leonard purchased his plane tickets and confronts him in the hallway as he tries to sneak out. Missing the point of Leonard’s attempt to break away from what he feels is a suffocating family environment, Ruth kisses him on the forehead and advises

him that he “can always come home.” Ultimately, this “meddling matriarch” emerges victorious, as Leonard, fresh from being rejected by Michelle, plods back into the Kraditor apartment during Ruth’s annual New Year’s Eve extravaganza. He is left to live out his life with his girlfriend and “meddling matriarch” surrogate, Sandra Cohen (Vinessa Shaw), who promises to “take care of [Leonard]” in a manner reminiscent of Esther in *The Hebrew Hammer* and, of course, Ruth herself. In short, then, despite Leonard’s efforts to fly away, Ruth’s coop remains intact and under her control, even if indirectly (i.e., through Sandra).

Sonia Teichberg does not speak, she screams. In fact, every line she utters in *Taking Woodstock* is an irate command or complaint. When the bank refuses her a loan, she loses control and begins shouting at the loan officer about his supposed antisemitism, and when a traveling troupe of hippie theatre performers shed all their clothes at the town talent show, she charges onto the stage with a broom to physically sweep them off. But most of her energy is directed at Elliot, who is trying desperately to establish himself as an independent adult while clearly fearing his mother’s reaction to such efforts. Sonia is adamant that Elliot, a talented designer and businessman, continue working as a “permanent stiff” at the family motel despite his dreams of moving to San Francisco. To reinforce her control, Sonia calls Elliot her “little baby,” yells at him to eat at the dinner table, and declares that he cannot leave the house “dressed like that.” And when, on behalf of his unsuspecting parents, Elliot turns away a Woodstock partygoer’s offer of marijuana-laced brownies, Sonia chastises Elliot for being selfish in not attaining one for her. It is no surprise, then, that Elliot hides the fact that he is gay from his mother and runs away from the family motel at the end of the film without saying goodbye to the “meddling matriarch” who is the cause of his discontent (he does, however, say goodbye to his father Jake).

There are several other less central, but nevertheless important, American Jewish maternal characters who exemplify extreme meddling in the lives of their families. In *Anything Else* (DreamWorks, 2003), Paula Chase (Stockard Channing) is the alcoholic mother of Amanda, the live-in girlfriend of protagonist Jerry Falk, and in stereotypical “meddling matriarch” fashion, she breaks all boundaries with her daughter by moving into Jerry’s apartment, sleeping in the living room, and writing songs into the wee hours of the morning on Jerry’s piano. This arrangement reaches its neurotic peak when Paula brings home a drug addict date she picked-up at an AA meeting and proceeds to snort cocaine off Jerry’s dinner table, even recruiting Amanda to join the festivities. Along these lines, grandmother Rose Fiedler (Doris Roberts) in *Keeping Up With the Steins* (Miramax, 2006), who claims to have “been looking” for the past nine years to find her own accommodations and leave her son’s house, sits-in without invitation on important family discussions regarding grandson’s Ben’s upcoming bar mitzvah. Promising to “just...sit here” and urging all those present to “pretend [she]’s invisible,” Rose proceeds to make pronounced sighs, dramatic gasps, and interject unwelcome questions during the negotiations with the bar mitzvah party planner. And *He’s Just Not That Into You’s* (New Line, 2009) Gigi Phillips (Ginnifer Goodwin), whose neurotic nebbishness will be detailed in Chapter 4, cannot get men to call her back after the first date, but there is one person from whom she can always expect (and does indeed receive) a phone call whether she wants it or not: her American Jewish “meddling matriarch” mother (who is never shown on-screen, but whose overbearing presence reverberates in Gigi’s character).

Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn) in *Requiem for a Dream* (Artisan, 2000) presents an interesting case study of what happens when an American Jewish “meddling matriarch” is denied the overinvolvement she so stereotypically craves in her child’s life. The film opens with

a sampling of the kind of unhealthy codependency Sara has with her heroin-addicted adult son Harry. Terrified, she hands over the key to a padlock she has placed on a television that Harry is going to steal and pawn for drug money. As any enabling, overprotective “meddling matriarch” will do, Sara ultimately goes to the pawn shop herself a few hours later and buys back the television set (a cycle in which she has apparently participated multiple times, according to the pawn shop owner who urges Sara to get help for Harry). Isolated in a Brooklyn retirement-home residential building, Sara repeatedly begs shiftier Harry to come home to keep her company following the death of her husband. The few times Harry does stop by, Sara stereotypically nags him about his job, love-life, etc. and believes all his lying answers (both characters revealing deep-seated neurotic defense mechanisms in these scenes). Ultimately, a psychosis begins to take Sara over and she begins to have delusions about becoming a famous television star, incessantly popping speed-laced diet pills and spiraling into a schizophrenic state. It becomes apparent that without her racialized *raison d’etre* (i.e., being a “meddling matriarch”), Sara loses her mind.

With *Meet the Fockers* (Universal, 2004), the hugely successful sequel to *Meet the Parents* (Universal, 2000), we see another example of how the large-scale shifts in 21<sup>st</sup> century gender roles in the U.S. discussed above have affected cinematic portrayals of American Jewish families. Specifically, as women are increasingly represented in the labor force and dual-income couples become the norm, social phenomena like the stay-at-home father or shared household responsibilities have emerged as themes in American Jewish mass media discourses. These socio-historical shifts seem to have broadened the “meddling matriarch” stereotype (as will be demonstrated by Bernie Focker in *Meet the Fockers* as well as several other “meddling matriarch” fathers discussed in films below) rather than negating or undermining it.

From the moment the Byrnes parents pull up to Focker Island, Miami in their RV, with daughter Pam and groom-to-be Greg Focker on board, Bernie and Roz take turns embarrassing Greg (and themselves) with their loud, inappropriate, and overbearing behavior. Bernie, a prototypical example of the new male “meddling matriarch,” welcomes the visitors by grabbing Greg, kissing him spastically, and divulging to the Byrnes (within one minute of meeting them for the first time) that he (Bernie) was able to conceive Greg despite having an “undescended testicle.” He next demands “some love” from the Byrnes macho patriarch Jack, commenting on the “hardness” of Jack’s pectoral muscles while kissing him. These extremely inappropriate and boundary-less introductions continue with Bernie announcing that Pam is “the sexiest second grade teacher [he’s] ever seen in [his] life” while he blows on her neck, making verbally explicit to all that his intent is to give her goose bumps. When Roz appears a few minutes later, having just finished teaching a sex yoga class for seniors, the duo takes turns being obnoxious and overly intrusive. Bernie proclaims to everyone present that he and Roz had sex earlier that afternoon, while Roz begins overly doting on Greg with comments about his looking “thin” and “not eating” enough before interrogating Pam about whether she is still “climaxing regularly” after two years of being with Greg. And thus begins this American Jewish “meddling matriarch” caricature of epic proportions.

That evening, during a dinner of the families, Bernie details his own vasectomy and Roz recounts Greg’s apparently botched *bris* (circumcision) while displaying his clipped foreskin which she has kept in a scrapbook. Bernie goes on to confess to everyone at the table that Greg masturbated and then lost his virginity to the family housekeeper Isabel; he also urges a petrified Jack to discuss his own loss of virginity. Upon the conclusion of this highly uncomfortable dinner, Bernie throws a tantrum when the Byrnes decide to sleep in their RV rather than inside

the Focker house, as he admits to having wanted to place chocolates on their pillows, yet another example of misdirected matriarchal over-involvement. The next morning, Bernie continues to meddle with Jack, this time while the latter is showering, by barging into the bathroom and sitting a few feet away to defecate in the toilet. Roz, for her part, barrages Greg with nosy questions, and when she finally fishes out of him that Pam is pregnant, reacts in a hyperbolically “meddling matriarch” manner by demanding to know details about the couple’s sex life. When the two families later engage in a game of outdoor football, Bernie even invites the “sexual dynamo” Greg (as he is described to Pam by his own mother) to join in a borderline-incestuous celebration “sandwich” hug with Roz as “the cheese.” Eventually Bernie begins to struggle with keeping Pam’s pregnancy secret from her parents given his ridiculously loud mouth, a defining characteristic of the American Jewish “meddling matriarch”. And Roz’s stereotypically overprotective American Jewish motherliness manifests in her feeding chocolates to the Byrnes grandson LJ despite Jack’s explicit instructions against such coddling, and she becomes pushy in her efforts to stimulate the sexual chemistry between Jack and his wife Deena. Bernie and Roz can thus be thought of as a duet of “meddling matriarch” which symbolically testifies to the shared responsibilities of wage-earning and household maintenance in 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish family life.

Perhaps an even more stunning paternal embodiment of stereotypical American Jewish “meddling matriarch” traits than Bernie Focker is Noah Levenstein (Eugene Levy) , the father of protagonist Jim in the two post-2000 editions of the wildly popular *American Pie* series, *American Pie 2* (Universal, 2001) and *American Pie 3: American Wedding* (Universal, 2003). The beginning of *American Pie 2* typifies the inappropriate over-involvement Noah consistently displays in Jim’s life throughout the series. Driving with his wife [who, interestingly, is never

referred to in this or any other *American Pie* film as American Jewish and lacks the stereotypical racial characteristics of American Jewish characters; in fact, she is the one who bakes the infamous apple pie from the original *American Pie* (Universal, 1999), possibly symbolizing her Gentility and thus explaining why she is not racialized as a “meddling matriarch”] to visit Jim on the last day of his first year of college, Noah gushes with excitement over the opportunity to “have a beer” with Jim and discuss what it’s like to be “a man” (despite the fact that Noah consistently infantilizes Jim throughout this and the other *American Pie* films). Noah even convinces Jim’s dorm hall supervisor to unlock Jim’s door so he can surprise Jim, and ends up barging in on Jim having sex with a coed, a shock that causes Noah to drop (and break) the beer bottles. In typical “meddling matriarch” fashion, Noah reacts in a manner that only further intrudes on the two college students’ privacy, as he sits down next to them on the bed and begins a monologue about the importance of “not being embarrassed” given that “sexual debacles [happen] to the best of us,” a speech in which he inappropriately references sexual experiences between him and his wife, including their first sexual encounter. Adding fuel to the fire, Jim’s sexual partner’s parents walk into the dorm room as well, and loudmouthed Noah begins to attempt small talk by reassuring them that Jim knows their daughter’s name. As can be expected, a humiliated Jim ultimately yells at Noah to leave.

This opening scene is one of many “meddling matriarch” antics in which Noah engages throughout the film. Before Jim embarks on a summer getaway to a local lake with his high-school buddies, he receives a phone call from Nadia, an Eastern European exchange student and potential romantic partner of Jim’s, who is visiting New York. Unluckily for Jim, however, Noah answers the phone and proceeds to run into Jim’s room screaming “It’s her! She’s on the phone! New York!” If such over-involvement were not enough, Noah refuses to pass the phone

to Jim, instead instructing Nadia that she must see *The Lion King* on Broadway and not ride the New York subway after midnight. Jim is eventually able to rip the phone away from Noah, but only after the “meddling matriarch” damage has been done. When Jim’s friends swing by the Levenstein house to pick him up for the lake trip, Noah further embarrasses Jim by demanding an intimate hug in front of everyone and wishing all of them off with “Keep it real, homeys!”, an awkward and inappropriate attempt to be part of the gang.

But Noah’s most pronounced “meddling matriarch” moments in *American Pie 2* occur when Jim is rushed from the lake house to the hospital emergency room. In a botched attempt to masturbate to pornographic videotapes using what he thought was lotion, Jim super-glued his hand to his penis (a fiasco that will be discussed later as characteristic of the “neurotic nebbish” stereotype). Noah arrives to the ER waiting room to console Jim, promising in a potentially manipulative fashion to keep the incident a secret from Jim’s mother. The obnoxious and overprotective “meddling matriarch” eventually launches into a verbal tirade directed at an elderly female who is repulsed by the pornographic videotape stuck to Jim’s other hand, chastising her supposed intolerance and announcing to the entire waiting room that Jim has glued his hand to his penis. Noah finishes off his embarrassing outburst by insinuating that the old lady herself “may have a penis!” He continues to meddle in Jim’s affairs without abandon when the latter is finally seen by a doctor, sharing with the doctor, without permission, about Jim’s intentions to be sexual with Nadia at the lake house’s end-of-summer party and interrogating the doctor about whether Jim’s “swollen penis” will be capable of sexual intercourse. After being released from the ER, Jim is dropped at the lake house by Noah, but not without the latter embarrassing Jim one last time by yelling in front of his friends that he should not “forget [his] penis cream.” This harrowing lack of boundaries, wherein Noah attempts to control, monitor,

and speak on behalf of, his son's penis, indicates that Noah, like Bernie Focker, represents a paternal personification of the traditional American Jewish "meddling matriarch" stereotype.

And *American Pie 3: American Wedding* only serves to reinforce this "meddling matriarch" stereotype. In another slapstick opening scene highlighting his dysfunctional over-intrusiveness, Noah rushes to an up-scale restaurant to deliver the engagement ring that Jim will use to propose to his Gentile girlfriend Michelle. Upon arriving at the restaurant, Noah panics that Jim looks unwell, as he does not see that Michelle is under the dinner table performing fellatio on Jim. He goes on to drag Jim away from the table, revealing that the latter has his pants at his ankles and shocking the well-to-do patrons of the bustling eatery. Rather than allowing Jim to rectify the situation himself, Noah once again inserts himself where he is not needed, clumsily trying to put Jim's pants on for him and exacerbating the embarrassment. Later in the film, Noah has a one-on-one discussion with Jim wherein the former shares more inappropriate details about having sex with his wife/Jim's mother, including the fact that "she makes [him] squeal like a pig." Jim confesses to his father that he wants to shave his pubic hair to look sexier for Michelle, which prompts Noah (who, per the "meddling matriarch" stereotype, cannot control his loud mouth) later to divulge this information to Michelle during a private conversation that includes Noah offering Michelle unsolicited advice on menstrual cycles. Interestingly, the audience is given a glimpse of the Levenstein "meddling matriarch" heritage during the lead-up to Jim and Michelle's nuptials, as Noah's mother (Angela Paton) almost capsizes the wedding with her vociferous disapproval of Michelle, whom she labels a "goya" and "not Jewish" in a screaming outburst. Despite the meddling of Jim's grandmother, all ends well, and Michelle ultimately asks Noah to help her write her wedding vows to Jim, a symbolic

gesture indicating that Noah will continue to play the role of “meddling matriarch” in his son’s marriage as well.

Doc Cantrow (Jerry Stiller) in *The Heartbreak Kid* (DreamWorks, 2007) is very similar to Noah Levenstein, although Doc is an American Jewish widower and even more inappropriate in his “meddling matriarch” antics given that his son Eddie is in his late thirties. The loudmouthed and pushy Doc spends much of the film trying to ascertain who Eddie is “booming” and urging Eddie to “crush pussies” (apparently, Eddie has “barely crushed three pussies” to date, according to Doc). Like Noah, then, Doc believes his parental role is to place inordinate pressure on his son to have sexual intercourse as much as possible. In fact, Doc eagerly expects Eddie to join him on a Las Vegas trip where the two will “tag team broads,” a highly inappropriate breach of parent-child boundaries. When, outside a Laundromat, Eddie serendipitously meets a young woman named Lila who accidentally leaves him with her panties, Doc ratchets up his “meddling matriarch” behavior, declaring that “you can tell a lot about a woman from her panties” and telling Eddie that he must pursue Lila. And when Lila visits Eddie at the sporting goods store he owns, Doc (who is also visiting in what appears to be a routine parental invasion of Eddie’s work life) butts into their conversation, revealing to Lila that Eddie has her underwear and “talks about [her] all the time!” Luckily for the embarrassed Eddie, Lila is not terrified of the “meddling matriarch,” and she and Eddie eventually get married. On their honeymoon, when Eddie (in another example of “neurotic nebbish-ness” that will be discussed in Chapter 4) is unable to satisfy Lila’s insatiable sexual appetite, he calls his father for advice and reassurance, only to hear that “when your wife asks you to cock her, you cock her, God damnit!” Hence, like Jim in the *American Pie* series, Eddie’s sexuality is at the mercy of an overbearing

“meddling matriarch” who is more concerned with controlling and manipulating that sexuality than with his son’s wellbeing.

The only thing saving Ben Fiedler in *Keeping Up with the Steins* from the psychosexual abuse Jim Levenstein and Eddie Cantrow must endure from their American Jewish “meddling matriarch” fathers is his age: he is only thirteen. This distinction does not, however, shelter Ben from his father Adam Fiedler (Jeremy Piven) using Ben’s bar mitzvah as an opportunity to play the stereotypical role of “meddling matriarch” in Ben’s life. Like Noah Levenstein, Adam’s wife is not explicitly identified as American Jewish, and when Adam plays a videotape of his own bar mitzvah, there is no reference to her bat mitzvah. In short, then, it appears that Adam, like Noah, is racialized as the “meddling matriarch” in the family, along with his mother Rose (whose antics were described above) given that he is the only parent who is explicitly American Jewish. Adam treats Ben’s bar mitzvah as a means of spoiling Ben, wanting to throw “the biggest bar mitzvah in the history of bar mitzvahs” as a means of exerting more direct control over Ben’s life. Insecure about losing his “meddling matriarch” status in the family given Ben’s coming-of-age, Adam monopolizes all decisions about the bar mitzvah while manipulating Ben with statements like “you know I’ll always be there for you.” Adam’s overbearing relationship with Ben reaches its peak when Adam hires a reality TV show production team and camera crew to film Ben’s every move and announces that the video will be shown on the Jumbotron at Dodger Stadium, where the bar mitzvah is scheduled to take place. The irritated Ben offers up whatever resistance he can to this ridiculous invasion of his privacy orchestrated by his father, slamming the door shut on the camera crew when they attempt to follow him into his own bathroom. Ultimately, it is revealed that Adam’s neuroses may stem from issues he has with his own father Irwin, an issue that will be discussed later with regard to “meddling matriarch” adult children, and though

the film concludes with Ben achieving some independence, Adam's problematic parenting has already taken its toll on the entire family while reinforcing an American Jewish stereotype for the film's audience.

There are several other paternal American Jewish "meddling matriarchs" in my study's sample of films. In *The Wackness* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2008), Luke Shapiro's father (David Wohl), who is portrayed as a "neurotic nebbish" (hence his inclusion in Chapter 4), also appears to be married to a woman who is not characteristically American Jewish and hence not a racially reliable source of "meddling matriarch" antics. Instead it is the explicitly identified American Jewish father who interrupts the late adolescent Luke masturbating in Luke's own bedroom, barging in to ask for help with a crossword puzzle, another example (albeit indirect and unwitting) of sexuality playing the medium through which the paternal "meddling matriarch" intrudes and establishes control in the life of his child.

Ben Stone in *Knocked Up* (Universal, 2007) turns to his American Jewish father (Harold Ramis) to get advice and wisdom after Ben has impregnated a Gentile woman with whom he had a one-night stand. In contrast to the cold and pragmatic W.A.S.P. mother of the pregnant woman, Ben's overprotective father tries to infuse Ben with unrealistic optimism and exuberance about the situation. Like other paternal "meddling matriarchs," Ben's father uses mildly manipulative tactics (including calling Ben "the best thing that ever happened" to him) and embarrassing confessions (he admits to smoking marijuana constantly) to shelter Ben from the truth, in this case the severity of parental responsibility. It is only later in the film, when Ben begins to realize this truth, that Ben's father admits in a phone conversation that he "know[s] nothing" about the subject of human relationships, having been divorced three times, including to Ben's mother, which explains her absence in the film. Sadly, though, the effects of paternal

meddling linger in Ben, who still ends up begging his father over the phone to “tell [him] “what to do.”

Last but not least, Andrew Largeman’s father Gideon (Ian Holm) in *Garden State* (Fox Searchlight, 2004) utilizes perhaps the most terrifyingly effective “meddling matriarch” strategy of all. A psychiatrist, Gideon makes a teenage Andrew his patient following a tragic accident in which Andrew’s mother is paralyzed, and thus unable to perform her racially stereotypical American Jewish “meddling matriarch” role, because of being shoved by Andrew. Set more than ten years later, at the time of Andrew’s mother’s death, the film opens with a representation of the disastrous consequences of this unhealthy physician-patient/parent-child dynamic, as an adult Andrew opens his medicine cabinet, revealing dozens of psychotropic medications prescribed by Gideon. The film goes on to document Andrew’s attempts to break free from the numbness that he has felt all this time due mostly to his “meddling matriarch” father-shrink.

Another new type of American Jewish “meddling matriarch” character that has emerged alongside contemporary changes in U.S. family and gender dynamics is the adult child caretaker of elderly parents. In a sort of role-reversal, the American Jewish daughter or son who was once the object of overbearing and unhealthy parenting becomes the agent of this sort of meddling, overly involved in the minutiae of parents’ lives, including their romantic affairs. A classic example of this new “meddling matriarch” is Ben Kleinman (Paul Reiser) in *The Thing About My Folks* (Picturehouse, 2005), the adult son of Sam Kleinman (Peter Falk) whose wife Muriel leaves him suddenly one day despite the couple’s advanced age and seemingly happy marriage of over 30 years. While the film clearly indicates that Ben has had to deal with his father’s “meddling matriarch” ways for years (Sam barges into Ben’s family’s apartment late at night to break the news that Muriel has left him, ruins Ben’s negotiations for purchasing a country home

by inserting himself without permission and inquiring about the house's septic tank, and sleeps with his arm around Ben when the two camp outside one night), it is Ben himself who engages in the most striking "meddling matriarch" antics of all. Obviously harboring a host of Oedipal issues relating to his parents, Ben explodes into a verbal tirade wherein he accuses Sam of sabotaging the marriage to Muriel. Indeed, Ben's behavior can almost be seen as a tit-for-tat disruption of child-parent boundaries given Sam's earlier unwelcome intrusions.

Later, however, Ben ratchets up his inappropriateness by begging Sam to describe his first date with Muriel, including all the sordid details of the first time they had sex. The "meddling matriarch" climax of the film occurs when Ben and Sam are at dinner with two Gentile women they have met on a road trip. The women ultimately have to leave the table because Ben and Sam are completely engrossed in their mutual over-involvement. While pushy Sam force-feeds steak into Ben's mouth despite Ben's protests, Ben launches into yet another loudmouthed monologue about Sam not doing "his job" as a father and husband, revealing that "Mom turned to me to get affection that she didn't get from you [Sam]" and ultimately calling Sam a "fucking failure." When Muriel's whereabouts are finally discovered (she is suffering from cancer and has been hospitalized), Ben is still so obsessed with meddling in his parents' relationship that he tries to stoke up conflict between the two, overly aggressively urging a bed-ridden Muriel (who he thinks is still upset with Sam) to "say what she wants to say" and bringing out an unsent, dozens-years-old letter from Muriel to Sam that he found (and saved) as supposed evidence of Sam's romantic ineptitude. A similar scene in *Keeping with the Steins* features Adam Fiedler freaking out when his mother Rose and her runaway husband (his absentee father Irwin) recognize the "connection between them." Adam chugs wine obsessively and demonstratively throughout the scene of his parents' reconciliation, attempting to meddle in their

joy and ultimately shouting about the fact that they are sitting in “his house” (a passive-aggressive poke at Irwin’s financial failures and disappearance from the family when Adam was young). Like Adam, however, Ben must endure the failure of his “meddling matriarch” efforts, as Sam and Muriel Kleinman (like Irwin and Rose Fiedler) make up and enjoy a second honeymoon before peacefully dying, one right after the other, at the conclusion of the film.

Finally, there are a few American Jewish characters who, like Joan from *Kissing Jessica Stein*, embody “meddling matriarch” traits without necessarily being the parent of the object of their overbearing ways. This phenomenon perhaps testifies to how much the “meddling matriarch” stereotype is racialized as part of American Jewish “nature” rather than the outgrowth of particular familial dynamics. In these cases, given the apparent lack of a biological parent or child with whom they can become overly involved, American Jewish characters act out their supposedly innate “meddling matriarch” traits with other important people in their lives. One example is protagonist Barry Egan’s sister Elizabeth (Mary Lynn Rajs kub) in *Punch-Drunk Love* (Columbia, 2002), who, in the absence of the parents of the eight Egan siblings, badgers her brother incessantly about everything (she calls him several times at his workplace to confirm that he will be attending a party thrown by one of the sisters), particularly his romantic life. She even goes so far as to barge into Barry’s workplace unannounced to introduce him to a friend of hers who has expressed interest in meeting him. Elizabeth, like any possessive “meddling matriarch,” eventually becomes jealous of this friend once the latter becomes romantically involved with Barry; Elizabeth reacts angrily when her friend calls Barry “weird,” insisting that she is the only one who knows Barry well enough to make that sort of character assessment.

In *Garden State*, Andrew’s aunt Sylvia (another “meddling matriarch” role assigned to actress Jackie Hoffman, who plays Joan in *Kissing Jessica Stein*) makes quite an overbearing

presence, crooning a loud and obnoxious rendition of “Three Times a Lady” at Andrew’s mother’s funeral and later demanding that Andrew try on a shirt she has made for him lest he not “be back for another nine years,” a passive-aggressive and manipulative ploy to produce guilt in Andrew (as mentioned in Chapter 1, the “pressures of guilt” are a hallmark of the “meddling matriarch” stereotype).

And “pampered princess” Sookie Saperstein (Claire Danes) in *Igby Goes Down* (MGM, 2002), a character who will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, does her best to play the “meddling matriarch” in the lives of two elitist, upper-East Side W.A.S.P. brothers, having maternally tinged sexual relations with both after attempting to “rescue” each from what she considers to be their respective crises. She is particularly overly involved with the younger of the two, Igby, whom she describes as “a furious boy,” setting-up an appointment for Igby to take the GED high-school equivalency exam, unbeknownst to him, and accompanying him on his trip to take the test, all after continuously nagging him about the direction his life is going.

There are American Jewish male characters too who embody “meddling matriarch” traits in relationships that extend beyond the parent-child bond. *Adaptation* (Columbia, 2002) protagonist Charlie Kaufman’s alter-ego twin brother Donald (both characters are played by Nicholas Cage) acts as a sort of proxy stereotypical American Jewish mother in Charlie’s life, constantly interrupting Charlie’s screenwriting efforts with loudmouthed musings and updates about his own script. Donald even explicitly invokes the twins’ actual mother, with whom he is apparently conversing quite frequently (she “provides structure” to Donald’s writing), by announcing to Charlie that “Mom said my script was psychologically taut.” The notion that Donald may be an imaginary “meddling matriarch” projection of Charlie’s feelings about his real

mother is given credence in the climatic ending of the film, as Charlie, who survives a car accident that has killed Donald, sobbingly calls his mother before the credits begin to roll.

The aging Boris Yellnikoff (Larry David) in *Whatever Works* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2009) acts as the controlling and pushy American Jewish “meddling matriarch” vis-à-vis his romantic love interest, a Lolita-esque teenage runaway and former beauty pageant winner from Mississippi named Melody who uses Boris’ apartment for refuge. Constantly berating her with nihilistic/paternalistic lectures about the ills of society and the meaningless of existence, Boris’ suffocating grip on Melody’s life is so complete that he will not let her listen to anything but classical music LPs on his record player.

*Superbad*’s (Columbia, 2007) Officer Michaels (Seth Rogen), a relatively rare American Jewish police character, becomes overly involved in the life of high school student Fogell, risking his job to chauffeur Fogell all across town in search of a house party and ultimately barging in on Fogell when Fogell is having sex with a female student at the party. Michaels responds to the sexual incident in a stereotypically overprotective and overly intrusive fashion, blaming himself for having “block[ed] [Fogell’s] cock” and promising to “guide [Fogell] in” to the genitals of women in the future, another example of the kind of “meddling matriarch” misogyny described above with regard to Doc Cantrow and Noah Levenstein.

And finally, Harry Goldenblatt (Evan Handler) from *Sex and the City* (New Line, 2008), an otherwise “neurotic nebbish” American Jewish male who will be chronicled in Chapter 4, meddles irritatingly in the lives of his wife Charlotte and her close friend Carrie. When Charlotte stops jogging upon learning she is pregnant (a seemingly rational decision), Harry inexplicably calls Carrie to worriedly inquire about possible reasons for this lifestyle change, and

later in the film, inserts himself unnecessarily in Carrie's romantic affairs, pushily requesting that she forgive her ex-fiancé (a man who stood her up at the altar earlier in the film).

To summarize, then, 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film features a significant number of American Jewish characters that embody the historically constructed "meddling matriarch" stereotype. While there are several characters who exemplify the American Jewish "meddling matriarch" in her traditional racialized form (i.e., a mother who is overbearing of her nuclear family), this stereotypical cinematic representation also appears to have been expanded to include a wider variety of male and female characters, a phenomenon undoubtedly connected to several larger-scale shifts in American Jewish family life. Whether the end result of this broadening is a larger pool of stereotypical American Jewish "meddling matriarchs" on-screen, or a subversion of the "meddling matriarch" stereotype itself, is a topic that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. Also, Chapter 7 will address the startlingly disproportionate rate of American Jewish filmmakers involved in proliferating this stereotype, linking these persons' subjective agencies to larger political economic interests. Chapter 4, however, will focus on another racialized American Jewish character stereotype that has not only survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but appears to be thriving in U.S. cinema today: the "neurotic nebbish."

## CHAPTER 4 “NEUROTIC NEBBISHES”

By far the most prevalent and pronounced American Jewish stereotype found in my study of 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film was that of the “neurotic nebbish”, or the historically constructed, racialized image of the American Jewish male as effeminate, emasculated, insecure, passive, unsure of his sexual identity, and/or romantically obsessed with Gentile women. “Neurotic nebbishes” are featured in almost every movie with American Jewish characters that was screened for my study, and these characters’ ineffectuality, particularly with regard to intimacy, love, romance, and sex, creates a highly racialized portrait of pathological American Jewish masculinity, relational capacity, and self-esteem. And like the “meddling matriarch” stereotype, the portrayals of “neurotic nebbishes” in U.S. film today seem to have been affected by broader social changes in gender and sexuality norms, manifesting in a wider diversity of American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” characters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century class-based assimilation of American Jewish persons in U.S. society detailed in Chapter 2 (Burstein) appears to have its cinematic equivalent in the quantity and prominence of the traditional male “neurotic nebbish” stereotype found in my study, for in the words of one scholar, these characters, often “caught in the most bourgeois of dilemmas,” may serve as a reminder of the comfort, safety, and normalcy American Jewish persons, including American Jewish filmmakers, feel they have attained in the “White, middle-class, heteronormative world” of U.S. society (Itzkowitz 244-5). At the same time, the shifts taking place with regard to American Jewish gender identity politics seem to resonate with the emergence of female “neurotic nebbishes” found in my study, as the “JAP” [sic] (a cinematic stereotype to be discussed in Chapter 5) has now been transformed into “the female schlemiel” (Johnston). In other words, with increased prominence in professional careers and the labor

force, American Jewish women can be expected to have an increased presence in their cinematic representations; however, in this case, they seem to be subsumed within an expanded, traditionally male racialized “neurotic nebbish” stereotype rather than embodying a unique onscreen identity all their own. And the disproportionate leadership roles of American Jewish men within sexuality-based political movements since the 1960s as well as the increasingly visible presence of “out” gay men within the American Jewish community itself (Friedman), along with the issues these phenomena have raised about American Jewish masculinity (Boyarin), are possible sociological factors undergirding the expansion of the “neurotic nebbish” stereotype to include a significant number of gay and/or homosexualized American Jewish characters discussed in this chapter.

Numerically, “neurotic nebbish” characters were nearly ubiquitous in my study sample of films, with 47 of 53 movies (almost 89%) featuring an American Jewish character who displayed some form of the traits mentioned above; 37 of these films (almost 79%) are the creative products, at least in part, of American Jewish persons (a strikingly high percentage which will be addressed in Chapter 7). In fact, more than half (70, or 56%) of the entire sample of 125 characters in my study can be classified as “neurotic nebbishes” of varying types and degrees, with 69% (48) of such characters explicitly identified as American Jewish in their respective films (constituting nearly 55% of the 88 explicitly identified American Jewish characters in my study sample). The fact that more than 30% of the “neurotic nebbishes” were not explicitly identified as American Jewish in their respective films can be viewed either negatively, as a potential infusion of researcher bias, or simply as a testament to the overwhelmingly obvious racialization of such characters as American Jewish even without being explicitly identified as such in their respective films’ narratives. And the rate of “neurotic nebbishes” in “independent”

films was much smaller than the commensurate rate of “meddling matriarchs,” as only 16 of the 70 total “neurotic nebbishes” (or 23%) were featured in movies with budgets under \$10 million.

Arguably more so than any of the other three American Jewish cinematic stereotypes, the “neurotic nebbish” is racialized through highly defined physical characteristics, visual cues that sometimes even cut across gender lines. Male “neurotic nebbishes” almost invariably display highly pronounced, relatively undesirable physical features that have been historically linked to American Jewish racial identity (imports from European antisemitism), including frailty, small stature, large noses, eyeglasses, dark hair, curly hair, and small penises, while “neurotic nebbish” women (who share these unflattering physical attributes except for the non-applicability of penis length) have additional means by which they are made to appear unattractive, whether by having a body type which is portrayed as heavier-set than their Gentile counterparts onscreen or by donning attire that is considered grossly unfashionable. Regardless of the specific combination of these physical racialized characteristics embodied in any one specific American Jewish “neurotic nebbish,” the underlying message is the same: these characters are aesthetically unpleasant, which seems to contribute heavily to their ineffectuality and lack of success in most, if not all, of their endeavors (particularly intimacy, love, romance, and sex).

Given such a disproportionate emphasis on racialization through visual appearance, it is no surprise that certain highly recognizable studio actors and actresses who embody these stereotypical physical features play multiple American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” in post-Y2K Hollywood film, including Woody Allen [David Dobel in *Anything Else* (DreamWorks, 2003) and Ray Winkler in *Small Time Crooks* (DreamWorks, 2000)], Jason Biggs [Jim Levenstein in *American Pie 2* (Universal, 2001) and *American Pie 3: American Wedding* (Universal, 2003) as well as Jerry Falk in *Anything Else*, Dustin in *My Best Friend's Girl* (Lionsgate, 2008), and

Darren Silverman in *Saving Silverman* (Columbia, 2001)], Anne Hathaway [Emma Allan in *Bride Wars* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009) and Andy Sachs in *The Devil Wears Prada* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2006)], Adam Sandler [Henry Roth in *50 First Dates* (Columbia, 2004), Dave Buznik in *Anger Management* (Columbia, 2003), George Simmons in *Funny People* (Universal, 2009), Chuck Levine in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Universal, 2007), Barry Egan in *Punch-Drunk Love* (Columbia, 2002) and Charlie Fineman in *Reign Over Me* (Columbia, 2007)], and Ben Stiller [Reuben Feffer in *Along Came Polly* (Universal, 2004), White Goodman in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2004), Alex Rose in *Duplex* (Miramax, 2003), Eddie Cantrow in *The Heartbreak Kid* (DreamWorks, 2007), Rabbi Jake Schram in *Keeping the Faith* (Touchstone, 2000), and Greg Focker in *Meet the Fockers* (Universal, 2004) as well as *Meet the Parents* (Universal, 2000)]. All of the characters played by these actors and actresses have a racialized spotlight shined upon their supposedly deficient and unattractive American Jewish physical traits, whether those traits relate to stereotypically masculine issues of height and strength (along with hyperbolically large noses and curly hair, all of the characters listed above that are played by Woody Allen, Jason Biggs, Adam Sandler, and Ben Stiller are shorter and physically weaker than most, if not all, of the other characters in their respective films), or equally stereotypical feminine questions of fashion sense (as is the case in the two characters played by large-nosed and dark-haired Anne Hathaway, both of whom are portrayed as having a natural inclination toward wearing unappealing clothing). In this sense, the passivity of the “neurotic nebbish” can be understood to be mutually reinforced by both the characters’ behaviors on-screen and the objectification of these characters by the audience, who is working with the racialized visual imagery of these characters and historically constructed stereotypes about such racialized imagery.

Take, for instance, the American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Focus Features, 2004), who, for all intents and purposes, embodies otherwise desirable Gentile physical features, including being tall, dressing in trendy “young professional”-chic attire, etc. And yet, the most pronounced aspect of Joel’s physique in the film is his demonstrative slouch, a quite unmanly hunch-backing posture that testifies to his many emotional and psycho-sexual insecurities discussed later in the chapter. Similarly striking are the apparently timeless American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” physical qualities of *Everything is Illuminated*’s (Warner Independent, 2007) Jonathan Safran Foer (played by the very short Elijah Wood) who is portrayed with über-nerdy parted hair, enormous “Coke-bottle” glasses, and a penguin-like suit-and-tie throughout his life, as both a child (in flashback scenes) and adult. And, finally, there is title character Norah Silverberg (Kat Dennings) from *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist* (Columbia, 2008), whose otherwise normal body is discursively constructed throughout the film as problematic for being overly-voluptuous at best and downright “fat” at worst, especially relative to her overly-thin and unhealthy-looking Gentile adversary Tris. Indeed, Tris mockingly taunts Norah about “looks,” and Norah references her own body negatively when confessing that she “could floss” Tris in her teeth, ultimately resigning to the fact that she “cannot compete with” Tris when it comes to physical attractiveness.

Beyond physical appearance, American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” characters are defined by actions and behaviors that reinforce the notion that they are vulnerable and weak. A specific motif in my study’s films is the bullying of “neurotic nebbishes,” most often by physically larger or more attractive Gentile characters, but also in some cases by characters that would appear not to be able or expected to engage in such bullying. One bullied “neurotic nebbish” is Saul Silver (James Franco), the American Jewish, drug-dealing co-protagonist of *Pineapple Express*

(Columbia, 2008), who is beaten-up and “bitch-slapped” (according to one onlooker) by several characters in the film, including a female police officer about half his size. Barry Egan in *Punch-Drunk Love* is not only physically assaulted by a gang of Aryan-looking goons, but whimpers “ouch, ouch” just before he is punched in the face by one, an anticipatory reaction that leads the audience to believe that this may not be the first time Barry has been the victim of such physical bullying. *25<sup>th</sup> Hour’s* (Touchstone, 2002) Jacob Elinsky (Philip Seymour Hoffman) tries to breakup pending fisticuffs between his two “best friends” (who are both Gentiles), an attempt at mitigation that highlights his “neurotic nebbish” tendency toward conflict avoidance and pacifism, only to be yelled at by both to “shut up” and ultimately socked in the face himself. Accountant Leo Bloom (Matthew Broderick) in *The Producers* (Universal, 2005) receives similar, albeit seemingly more playful, treatment by his song-and-dance mates in several musical numbers, being elbowed in the stomach by co-conspirator Max Bialystock (more on Max as a “scheming scumbag” in Chapter 5) as well as pushed around by neo-Nazi playwright Franz Liebkind. *Taking Woodstock’s* (Focus Features, 2009) Jake Teichberg (Henry Goodman) is not only beaten up, even while armed with a baseball bat, by a pair of extortionist mobsters who have come to the Teichberg family motel (thus undermining Jake’s ability to live up to traditional patriarchal expectations about the masculine responsibility of physically protecting one’s family, home, property, etc.), but it is his wife, Sonia, the “meddling matriarch,” who must come to the rescue and fight off the mobsters on his behalf. Another Adam Sandler character, Henry Roth in *50 First Dates*, is physically overwhelmed by his amnesiac Gentile love interest Lucy, a petite woman who soundly beats Henry up when she is unable to remember who he is. Other examples of “neurotic nebbishes” being physically bullied include *Beerfest’s* (Warner Bros., 2006) Charlie Finkelstein (Steve Lemme) being duct taped onto playground monkey-bars

by macho fraternity brothers after Charlie is unable to withstand high-levels of alcohol and marijuana consumption at a college party; Luke Shapiro's father (David Wohl) in *The Wackness* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2008) revealing cut and scratch marks across his face from the physical abuse he has incurred from his wife; and a third Adam Sandler character, George Simmons in *Funny People*, getting pummeled mercilessly by Clark, the current husband of George's ex-girlfriend, while offering little resistance to the onslaught. In all of these cases, the racialized physical frailty of the emasculated "neurotic nebbish" is on display, with each of these American Jewish characters demonstrating a pitiful lack of ability and willingness to defend himself.

Aside from physical violence, the bullying of American Jewish "neurotic nebbishes" takes place in a wide variety of metaphysical ways as well. One common bullying tactic in my study's sample of films was verbal belittlement, particularly effective given that most of the American Jewish "neurotic nebbish" victims fail to meaningfully challenge or resist this mode of bullying. A common and highly racialized type of verbal bullying found among these films was other characters' malicious use of the American Jewish surnames of the "neurotic nebbishes." In *The Wackness*, for instance, protagonist Luke Shapiro (Josh Peck) is repeatedly called "Shapiro" (usually mockingly or dismissively) with impunity by Justin, a wealthy Asian-American peer who is overtly disrespectful toward Luke on several occasions. Luke is also flippantly addressed by his last name by Stephanie, Luke's apparently Gentile love interest in the film who appears to have a penchant for such racialized name-calling. Indeed, throughout the film, Stephanie also calls her American Jewish "neurotic nebbish" stepfather (who is also Luke's psychiatrist) Dr. Jeffery Squires (Sir Ben Kingsley) "Squires." Similarly, Greg Focker becomes the all-too-obvious serial butt of jokes in *Meet the Parents* and *Meet the Fockers*. Not only does Greg's fiancée's father Jack consistently deride Greg by calling him "Focker" (even inquiring

about the origins of this “interesting” name, as Jack describes it) in both films, but in the first film (in which the setting is the Byrnes’ suburban home), Jack recruits the entire extended family (including future in-laws) to join in a rousing chorus of laughs at the expense of a dejected and retreating Greg when the latter has his birth-name of Gaylord revealed by an airline luggage delivery courier (the brother of Greg’s fiancée Pam adding insult to injury by blurting out, “His name is Gay Focker!” amid his laughter). Indeed, *Meet the Fockers* begins with Greg helping to deliver a baby for an immigrant couple who vow to name their child after Greg, only to swallow their words when they see Greg’s full name on his hospital nametag. Another Ben Stiller character, Reuben Feffer in *Along Came Polly*, also allows his name to be used in a bullying manner, with his hyper-masculine Australian business executive client constantly calling out “Feffer!” as though Reuben were a pet dog being fetched. Finally, the defenseless, dejected, and disillusioned Andrew Largeman (Zach Braff) in *Garden State* (Fox Searchlight, 2004), an actor struggling to make it in Los Angeles, travels back to his hometown in New Jersey to attend his mother’s funeral, but in the process is forced to endure and relive all of his friends from childhood and adolescence disrespectfully referring to him as “Largeman” as though Andrew were still in high school. A final example of American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” bullied through the use of his own surname is Charlie Finkelstein in *Beerfest*, who willingly allows his Gentile drinking buddies to nickname him “Fink,” an antisemitic slur.

Interestingly, this name-bullying is not perpetrated exclusively by Gentile characters against American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes.” In the case of at least two films, American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” disrespect one another through this practice. In *Anything Else*, Jerry Falk and his mentor David Dobel refer to one another by their last names, possibly an internalization of the name-calling they have received by Gentile outsiders throughout their lives.

Also, *Superbad*'s (Columbia, 2007) Seth (Jonah Hill) consistently invokes Fogell's (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) name in a derogatory fashion despite both characters clearly sharing traits of American Jewish "neurotic nebbishes." Seth even goes so far as to call Fogell "Fag-ell," a homophobic taunt. Also important to note is that the bullying of American Jewish "neurotic nebbish" characters often takes place in the form of childhood teasing, whether shown explicitly onscreen or referenced to in the narrative. For example, Benjamin Bazzler (David Krumholtz) in *Sidewalks of New York* (Paramount Classics, 2001) admits in a faux on-camera interview that he "got beat-up a lot as a kid," his eyes glancing downward in a non-verbal cue of embarrassment and shame. Similarly, aspiring stand-up comic Ira Wright (Seth Rogen) in *Funny People* confesses to his ailing boss George Simmons in a candid bedside conversation that Ira had to change his surname of Weiner because of the severe taunting he received throughout his formative years. *Anger Management* opens with a flashback scene of Adam Sandler's character Dave Buznik as a skinny child on roller-skates having his pants pulled down by a much larger boy in front of his entire New York neighborhood block while trying to kiss a girl for the first time. Another opening scene of "neurotic nebbish" childhood harassment is in *The Hebrew Hammer* (Comedy Central, 2003), which features a childhood flashback of Mordechai Jefferson Carver (Adam Goldberg) being victimized with antisemitic name-calling and slurs by a Gentile teacher at school and by his Gentile classmates after school. In all these scenes, American Jewish "neurotic nebbishes" are bullied from a very early age, experiences which can condition these characters to become almost accepting of such bullying for the rest of their lives.

Finally, there are several poignant examples of "neurotic nebbish" bullying that do not fit into the traditional forms of victimization. The characters played by Anne Hathaway (schoolteacher Emma Allan in *Bride Wars* and executive assistant Andy Sachs in *The Devil*

*Wears Prada*), for example, offer insights into how American Jewish female “neurotic nebbishes” are bullied. Emma’s weakness is highlighted by her inability to withstand the relentless abuse she receives from a colleague who sadistically delegates professional and extracurricular responsibilities, including classes, pep squad, after-school detention, etc. onto Emma. Even Emma’s controlling fiancée Fletcher calls her “a Paula” (in reference to the *American Idol* judge Paula Abdul, who is thought to be overly kind, deferential, and accepting of bullying). Andy is also flagrantly mistreated by her overly demanding and under-appreciative boss, the fashion magazine editor Miranda, who initially calls Andy “hopeless” before eventually “softening-up” to refer to Andy (whose physique is dangerously thin already) as “the smart fat girl.” All the while, Andy responds to these verbal taunts by redoubling her efforts to please Miranda, even as she is attacked and insulted by jealous coworkers who snipe at her attire (“Do you know what you look like?” utters one, sarcastically right to Andy’s face). But Alex Rose in *Duplex* may represent the most intriguing example of a bullied American Jewish “neurotic nebbish,” since the perpetrator of his bullying is none other than his geriatric Irish American widowed neighbor Mrs. Connolly, who he claims has “manipulated” him into being her own personal assistant/errand boy. An author with a pressing deadline on his next novel, Alex allows Mrs. Connolly to sweet-talk him into an endless series of chores on her behalf, including moving furniture, taking out the trash, and shopping for groceries. The lesson here is that American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” characters are so weak (both physically and metaphysically) that they can even be bullied by a solitary, frail, elderly woman.

Moving away from the subject of bullying, it is important here to discuss the various neuroses that afflict 21<sup>st</sup> century “neurotic nebbishes,” beginning with those characters whose psychological dysfunctions are most dangerously pronounced. Boris Yellnikoff (Larry David) in

*Whatever Works* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2009) exemplifies the “neurotic” in “neurotic nebbish.” The film opens with him breaking down the proverbial “fourth wall” (i.e., speaking directly into the camera for an “audience” that, according to all the other characters in the film, does not exist), recounting his persistent bouts with nihilistic depression, overriding anxiety, and emotional instability, all of which culminate in incapacitating panic attacks and two failed suicide attempts. Ironically, Boris is such a “neurotic nebbish” that even his attempts to kill himself are ineffectual. *Two Lovers*’ (Magnolia, 2008) Leonard Kraditor (Joaquin Phoenix) also attempts suicide at the beginning of the film, jumping into a river only to be rescued by several bystanders. Indeed, it is later revealed that Leonard is taking large doses of psychotropic medication to alleviate his bipolar condition which has literally scarred him (he has scar tissue on the inside of his wrists, evidence of past attempted suicides). Dr. Jeffrey Squires in *The Wackness* is described by other characters as everything from “a weird old-aged guy reliving his high school years because he fucked them up” to “a lunatic,” and has attempted suicide three times. Another highly dysfunctional “neurotic nebbish,” Andrew Largeman in *Garden State*, lives in a state of complete numbness, a “white room” existence akin to the Nazi experiments of the same name (Andrew’s bedroom is completely barren and colorless) that is only palatable given the dozens of anti-depressants and other prescription drugs he ingests. In fact, Andrew feels comfortable only when in the waiting room of a psychiatric hospital, where he is to be seen by a neurologist for “headaches” (“lightning flashes that last about a second”) he consistently suffers. And all three of the American Jewish protagonists in *Requiem for a Dream* (Artisan, 2000) [Harry Goldfarb (Jared Leto), Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn), and Marion Silver (Jennifer Connelly)] display a harrowing lack of ability to control their use of narcotics, especially when compared to Tyrone, a Gentile character who is portrayed as far less obsessive with his drug use.

These three American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” spiral downward into oblivion, with Harry having to have his infected arm amputated as a result of injection drug use, Sara undergoing electroshock therapy due to the psychosis she suffers after becoming hooked on speed-laced diet pills, and Marion participating in sickening sex orgies to earn money to feed her addictions.

Turning to more sociopathic or outwardly violent neuroses, Adam Sandler’s character Charlie Fineman in *Reign Over Me* is unable to handle having lost his wife and children in the 9/11 terrorist attacks and engages in an entire spectrum of psychologically unstable behaviors, including total detachment from society and intimacy (he has quit his job as a dentist and become a reclusive hermit), obsessive-compulsive attachment to remodeling his apartment kitchen and purchasing music LPs (of which he has amassed over 5,000), and regression into a childlike stage of playing video games all day long. His mental state is so far gone that the latter half of the film involves legal battles over his custody after he is jailed and hospitalized for grabbing a policeman’s gun from its holster and threatening to kill the policemen and himself. Similarly, *Anything Else*’s David Dobel, an ex-psych ward patient, suffers from such acute paranoia that he goes on shopping sprees for armaments for what he imagines to be a second coming of the Third Reich. David constantly badgers Jerry with comments about living in “perilous times” and insists that Jerry arm himself against 98 antisemites who “conspire against” the two of them as American Jews. Ultimately, David confesses to Jerry that he is fleeing town, given that he has shot a state trooper who he believed was making antisemitic remarks after pulling him over. And Barry Egan in *Punch-Drunk Love* has frightening fits of rage, shattering the glass patio door at his sister’s house with his bare hands when the anxiety of a family gathering gets to him (just after admitting to his brother-in-law, a dentist, that he has uncontrollable weeping episodes and begging the latter to help him find a therapist), and later, on his first date with a Gentile woman,

smashing up the restaurant bathroom after their conversation veers in a direction he finds uncomfortable. These racialized portrayals make clear that American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” suffer from neuroses so extreme as to be mortal dangers to themselves as well as others, thus requiring institutional intervention or medical attention (and possibly legitimizing the bullying of these, and other, American Jewish characters into submission).

There were also instances among my study’s films of less extreme “neurotic nebbishes” who still display idiosyncratic neuroses. Leo Bloom from *The Producers* has an exaggerated form of Oedipal separation anxiety, as he whips out a small blue blanket from his childhood and rubs it all over his face and head to comfort himself whenever he feels “extremely nervous.” One such infantile panic attack in the film features Leo recoiling into the corner of the room in hysterics, saved only by co-protagonist Max Bialystock’s soothing, motherly reassurances, including references to Leo as “[his] little accountant.” *Everything is Illuminated*’s Jonathan is nicknamed “the collector” for his obsessive-compulsive collecting of material objects relating to his family heritage, everything from postcards and pictures to used condoms, underwear, and dentures. Jonathan carefully places each object into a clear plastic zip-lock bag and hangs all the items on the wall of his room, which doubles as a meticulously organized family-tree (this neurotic pastime is such a part of Jonathan’s identity that he considers “collect[ing] things” to be his existential purpose). And a pair of Ben Stiller characters, White Goodman in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* and Reuben Feffer in *Along Came Polly*, offer two more clear examples of American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” dysfunction, with each portraying acute, albeit different, issues. While Globo Fitness owner, operator, and founder White prides himself on having sculpted his muscular physique out of a formerly 600 lb. body, this physical transformation has come with a heavy psychological price, as White has become totally obsessed with maintaining

his new body, whether that means masochistic workout regimens in which he screams that he is the “bitch” of his personal trainer or self-induced electroshock conditioning in which his nipples are singed whenever he attempts to eat a donut. The culmination of this food neurosis is a scene where White masturbates with a pizza slice. Reuben, on the other hand, is a risk-assessment expert whose self-proclaimed job is “to worry.” Indeed, he is so overly concerned with “managing risk” by avoiding danger at all times that he refuses to eat mixed nuts at bars due to their perceived germ content and runs an actuarial software program to determine which of the two love interests in his life is the “right one” for him. Other American Jewish characters’ neuroses worth noting include Mordechai Jefferson Carver in *The Hebrew Hammer* who goes on several *schvitzing* (verbalized anxiety attack) tirades given what he feels are the overbearing responsibilities he faces in saving Chanukah, and Jessica Stein (Jennifer Westfeldt) in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Fox Searchlight, 2001) who admits to not being able to “sit still and breathe for long” given that she must “keep moving” to cope with her overwhelming perfectionism and related anxieties. Jessica claims to have “too much on the agenda” with her therapist, despite the fact that she admits to not telling her therapist anything “private” about herself. In fact, Jessica’s neurotic quirks are too many to recount, but they include hypercompetitive jogging through Central Park, a refusal to use email, and a fixation on goals and work-related success. The more nuanced neuroses of these American Jewish characters described above, although not necessarily lethal in nature, are still indicative of the stereotypically flawed psyche of the “neurotic nebbish.”

The most profound and prolific of all “neurotic nebbish” traits, however, relates to the ineffectuality of American Jewish characters in love, romance, and sexuality. The plethora of characters showcasing these issues can be divided up according to specific aspects of “neurotic nebbish” amorous ineptitude. First and foremost, American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” are

woefully codependent due in part to their frighteningly low self-esteem regarding intimacy and love. A trio of Jason Biggs characters represent exemplary case studies of this facet of the racialized “neurotic nebbish” stereotype. “Pathetic nice guy” Dustin in *My Best Friend’s Girl* is portrayed as completely smitten by every single woman who offers to date him. While waxing on poetically about how his current love interest, coworker Alexis, is his “soul-mate” and “angel,” Dustin’s best friend Tank interrupts Dustin with a dose of reality, telling him that he has had “a lot of angels.” To woo Alexis, Dustin will go to any lengths imaginable: he brings coffee to her apartment at 5:15a.m., trains with her to run a marathon, eats with her at a steakhouse despite being vegan himself, arranges donuts in a smile formation for her at work, and announces after five weeks of dating (and before the two have had sexual relations) that he wants to move in with her. So codependent is Dustin that he proclaims openly and proudly that he cares more about Alexis than about himself. During the steakhouse dinner, Dustin announces to Alexis that he not only loves her, but the way she eats, the fact that she eats, and watching her eat. All this smothering ends in stereotypical fashion for this American Jewish “neurotic nebbish,” who is unsurprisingly dumped, leading to him to take a sabbatical from work and ultimately accept a marginalized role as Alexis’ “friend.” Similarly, *Saving Silverman*’s Darren Silverman, who constantly obsesses about what he perceives to be his fate to “never... find a girl” given that “there’s nobody out there for” him, enters into an unhealthy relationship with Judith, a Gentile psychologist who controls every aspect of Darren’s life down to the smallest minutiae. Not only does Darren begin to dress in the super-preppy clothing that Judith has mandated for him to wear, but he allows her to manipulate him into having a gluteus-implant surgical procedure, regularly waxes her legs, and sees her for six hours a week of “relationship counseling.” Despite numerous failed attempts to have his affection reciprocated by frigid Judith (in one scene, he

buys her jewelry for their six-week anniversary, only to have her disregard the gift by slamming the jewelry box shut), Darren sinks further and further into a master-slave dialectic, with Judith pronouncing to Darren's childhood buddies that she is "the puppet master" and "in complete control" of Darren, her "puppet." By the end of the film, the two are going to be married in a Catholic wedding, with Darren prepared to take Judith's last name as his own (an emasculating reversal of patriarchal matrimonial traditions). He is "saved" only by a second codependent relationship with his former high school crush Sandy, with whom Darren commits to marriage and family after just one reunion lunch. And Jerry Falk in *Anything Else*, a self-proclaimed "nice square Jewish boy" who "prefer[s] psychoanalysis over real life," confesses to the camera his inability to "leave anybody" and his fear of "sleeping alone," lavishing favors and gifts on his live-in girlfriend Amanda to try and win over her otherwise empty heart (she has already left him once before and the result was his fantasizing about death in his dreams), and staying with an exploitive agent simply because Jerry is unable to deal with the guilt of telling the agent that "it's over." Even when his apartment is overrun by Amanda and her mother despite his need to work from home, Jerry can only meekly muster up that he "works best in the mornings" as a passive-aggressive clue that he needs space, a codependent groveling that leads to Amanda's mother declaring him a "G-d damn prissy" who is "never up for anything."

There are countless other examples of codependent American Jewish "neurotic nebbish" males, including several aforementioned characters. Reuben Feffer in *Along Came Polly*, who, after being abandoned by his wife on their honeymoon, becomes immediately infatuated with another woman (the title character Polly) for whom he is willing to eat spicy ethnic food despite a hyperactive case of irritable bowel syndrome (Reuben admits to having vomited 19 times in 48 days eating-out with Polly). Reuben explains his self-punishing behavior by exclaiming that he

does not “want freedom” but rather “to be married.” Another character mentioned above, Joel Barish in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, admits in his self-loathing voiceovers to being “incapable of making eye-contact with women [he] doesn’t know” and “falling in love with anyone who gives [him] the slightest bit of attention” only to become fixated with, and wait on beck-and-call for, Clementine, an overly impulsive young woman who verbally taunts him (calling him “boring,” “pathetic,” “wimpy,” and “apologetic”), leaves him, and ultimately has her memory of their relationship erased from her mind through a science-fictional medical procedure. The bullied Benjamin Bazzler in *Sidewalks of New York*, who is consistently rebuffed by his ex-wife (the only woman with whom he has ever been romantically involved) despite waiting for hours outside her apartment to beg her to take him back and explaining that he “can’t live without” her given that he has lost 15 lbs from crying and not eating since their separation a year earlier, eventually becomes obsessed with a coffee-shop waitress whom he says he will marry even though they have never dated. And Luke Shapiro from *The Wackness*, despite all of his otherwise aloof and macho posturing as a drug-dealer, reveals an American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” codependent core with regard to Stephanie, whom he thanks after a first kiss and with whom he falls in “love” after spending one afternoon together, a reaction that Dr. Jeffrey Squires instructively psychoanalyzes as “latching on to the only girl who gives [Luke] attention because [he] is afraid of being alone.” All these characters reinforce, then, in their own pathetic ways, the racialized stereotype that American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” are incapable of setting healthy boundaries with regard to love and romance, opting instead for either total over-absorption or the reverse, self-detachment, when involved in an intimate relationship.

And the severely dysfunctional nature of “neurotic nebbish” intimacy is not limited to males; there are several American Jewish female characters who display unhealthy codependent

habits as well. *Keeping Up with the Steins*' (Miramax, 2006) Rose Fiedler (Doris Roberts) is a "meddling matriarch" with regard to her son Adam's family, but she is also a "neurotic nebbish" *par excellence* when it comes to love and romance, still calling Irwin, the man who abandoned her and Adam 26 years ago, "her husband," and chastising herself for his abandonment of her. When Irwin and Rose have a heart-to-heart discussion in Adam's kitchen, Rose claims that Irwin's departure was her own fault, citing the fact that she was supposedly "not supportive of him" and thus taking-on a disproportionate amount of the burden for their failed relationship (a point that is not lost on Irwin, who jokes that Rose would be kicked off any trial jury she participated in since she would insist that she was the one who is guilty of the crime). Gigi Phillips (Ginnifer Goodwin) in *He's Just Not That Into You* (New Line, 2009) is an even more pronounced "neurotic nebbish" mess than Rose Fiedler, unwittingly putting on a clinic for the audience of how to scare men away via desperation. In fact, although Gigi is never identified as American Jewish in the film, her pursuit for love in all the wrong places, along with her physical appearance (dark hair and unfashionable attire), are so stereotypically "neurotic nebbish" that her character was included in my study's sample. Right from the film's opening scenes, Gigi's overly clingy, needy, and smothering manner is portrayed in caricature-like hyperbole, as she becomes instantly obsessed with Connor after the two go on a blind date, checking her voicemail compulsively to see if he has called her and stalking him by going to a bar he frequents to possibly run into him. In a futile attempt to calm her anxiety, Gigi ends up calling Connor, leaving him a ridiculously awkward message only to later find herself, leg twitching, next to her phone again waiting breathlessly for a return call. The rest of the film is a broken record of such "neurotic nebbish" fare, with Gigi verbalizing to a different man, while the two are kissing, that she "cannot wait to do this again" since "the second date kiss is when [things] are intimate."

Gigi even announces herself to be the “co-host girlfriend” of a male bartender friend (unbeknownst to him) when she is invited to his apartment party, cleaning all of the trash, cooking for the guests, and getting jealous of any women with whom the host talks, only to find out he is not interested in her after she tries to kiss him and proclaims that “the best relationships grow out of friendships.” Another codependent American Jewish female “neurotic nebbish” is Sandra Cohen (Vinessa Shaw) in *Two Lovers*, who tries to guilt protagonist Leonard Kraditor into having sex with her by explaining that “most guys” reject her, yet ultimately finds herself consistently rejected by Leonard throughout the film despite her tireless efforts at playing a surrogate mother role for Leonard. And Emma Allan in *Bride Wars*, who constantly denies her own desires and wishes in order to please her fiancée Fletcher, excitedly offers to leave a wedding party with him to watch his favorite shows on Tivo and accepts his overly harsh and abusive criticisms of her (after comparing her to *American Idol*’s Paula, Fletcher goes on to manipulatively declare that he wants to “marry [him] some Paula”). In short, then, codependency appears to be a racialized feature of the stereotypical American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” that is not limited to men.

An overwhelming number of characters display another stereotypical feature of the American Jewish “neurotic nebbish”: the ceaseless and obsessive longing for a romantic relationship with a Gentile. In fact, almost without exception, every American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” male character in my study’s sample made a Gentile female his primary love interest or spouse. For example, in *Sex and the City* (New Line, 2008), Harry Goldenblatt (Evan Handler) has a Gentile wife Charlotte. And Boris Yellnikoff in *Whatever Works* and Leo Bloom in *The Producers* also become amorously involved with women who are visibly “shiksa,” a blonde teenage runaway beauty queen from Mississippi in the case of Boris and a Swedish model-

actress who not only towers over her “little Leo”, but also leads when the two dance. Finally, Henry Roth in *50 First Dates* is not only smitten by a Gentile amnesiac named Lucy, but all of his sexual exploits in the film’s opening scenes are also with women who are clearly not American Jewish.

What is striking beyond the sheer quantity of American Jewish characters who display a steadfast attraction to Gentiles are the number of these “neurotic nebbishes” who do so while openly shunning American Jewish romantic alternatives, in many cases because the latter are portrayed as less desirable, given that they embody, often hyperbolically, traits from at least one of the four racialized American Jewish cinematic stereotypes. In fact, the contrast between the Gentile and American Jewish love interest is so much in the foreground of my study’s films that it is sometimes the central narrative conflict. One such example is the aptly titled *Two Lovers*, wherein “neurotic nebbish” Leonard Krador is constantly making choices between his own “two lovers”: Sandra Cohen, an overly nurturing American Jewish “meddling matriarch” proxy, or Michelle, his Gentile neighbor whom he describes as “the most beautiful woman in the world.” Never mind that Michelle consistently rejects Leonard in one form or another, since Leonard, as a stereotypical American Jewish “neurotic nebbish,” allows these blows to his already-damaged self-esteem to entice him to pursue his Gentile goddess Michelle even more aggressively. Leonard even purchases an engagement ring for Michelle, as the two have made whimsical plans to run away across the country together, only to have Michelle ultimately decide that she wants to stay in Brooklyn and continue in her role as the mistress of a wealthy lawyer. The dejection with which Leonard returns back to his family’s apartment to settle for Sandra, his second fiddle, is so palpable that the audience can only assume that an existential dream for Leonard (i.e., marriage to a *shiksa*) has been crushed. Similarly, *Keeping the Faith*’s Rabbi Jake

Schram spends much of the film deciding between the American Jewish women from his congregation who seem drawn to him like moths to a flame and Anna Riley, his Gentile dream woman. He had a “crush” on Anna when the two were childhood buddies and this longing grows when upwardly mobile single professional Anna returns to New York. Jake employs an entire gamut of strategies in an attempt to win Anna over, and in the end (like his brother, who has married a Gentile), Jake risks his entire professional career to be with Anna. And in the case of two other “neurotic nebbish” characters, Norah Silverberg in *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist* and Reuben Feffer in *Along Came Polly*, their American Jewish romantic alternatives are portrayed in such a negative way that the audience cannot help but root for the two to end up with the Gentile love interests they so covet. Norah’s ambivalence about her on-again/off-again American Jewish boyfriend Tal is no match for her obsession with the Gentile title character Nick, with whom she falls in love by picking through the trash at school and finding the mixed CDs he has compiled for his own Gentile object of affection Tris. So deep is Norah’s infatuation with Nick that she goes to all of his band’s concerts, staring at him longingly while he is on stage and ultimately inviting him into her most personal of spaces (her father’s recording studio in Manhattan) so she can achieve her first ever orgasm through the touch of his seemingly magical Gentile hands. Along these lines, Reuben is cheated on by his American Jewish wife Lisa Kramer only to find “true love” in Polly Prince, his Gentile ex-classmate from middle school, for whom he is willing to do anything, including challenging his most deeply-ingrained fears of danger and risk. The film ends with Reuben symbolically breaking free from the supposed American Jewish entrapment that Lisa represents and running through the streets of Manhattan to be with his “soul-mate” Polly. In these cases, then, American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” are

shown to be so romantically drawn to “shiksas” that they will completely disregard all romantic interest in fellow American Jewish characters.

Even when American Jewish amorous alternatives are not available to “neurotic nebbishes” (or such alternatives are not highlighted in the film’s narrative), these characters will go to amazing lengths of self-deprecation to try and win over their beloved Gentile. *Garden State*’s Andrew Largeman is so enthralled by his Gentile love interest Sam that he is willing to dismiss his American Jewish identity when in her presence. When Sam exclaims, “You’re, like, so Jewish!” during an initial encounter between the two, Andrew quickly responds, “I’m not Jewish; no one I know is really all that Jewish” and proceeds to denigrate the American Jewish community with disparaging comments about their supposedly counterfeit religiosity (“they only go to temple on Yom Kippur to repent”). In the end, Andrew foregoes not only his identity but also his professional life, leaving behind his acting career in Los Angeles to stay in New Jersey with Sam, a “shiksa” woman he has known for two days. Equally self-sacrificial is the American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” Ben Stone (Seth Rogen) in *Knocked Up* (Universal, 2007), whose undying affection for Allison Scott, a Gentile woman he impregnates during a one-night stand, knows no bounds. Despite living his entire adult life in a house with other slacker stoners and being rejected by Allison for this lifestyle, Ben puts all his energies into assimilating to the W.A.S.P. upper-middle-class persona that Allison demands of him, moving into his own apartment, getting a 9-to-5 job, reading parenting books, purchasing baby items, lying to his former friends, and waiting on Allison hand-and-foot when she goes into labor. Finally, Ben Stiller’s characters Eddie Cantrow in *The Heartbreak Kid* and Greg Focker in *Meet the Parents* and *Meet the Fockers* all epitomize the “neurotic nebbish” proclivity to do anything for the love of a Gentile. Eddie not only willingly attends his Gentile ex-fiancée’s wedding in the film’s

opening scenes, a ceremony in which he is lambasted during a toast by the bride's father and repeatedly teased by a pair of barely pubescent boys, but later in the film he risks his life several times trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in pursuit of another Gentile woman with whom he becomes smitten while on a honeymoon with his wife, a third Gentile woman (the film concludes with Eddie having a fourth Gentile love interest, a local Mexican woman, as his second wife). The border-crossing scenes are graphic, with Eddie's tattered and weathered body showing the signs of acute dehydration, rat bites, and border patrol beatings. Meanwhile, the "neurotic nebbish" Greg Focker engages in his own set of antics across two films to gain the approval not only of his Gentile fiancée Pam Byrnes, but also of her entire family. Greg buys gifts for them and constantly tries to accommodate their desires, willing to compromise all his morals and values in the process. In the first film, Greg agrees to say a Christian grace prayer before dinner at the Byrnes house despite being Jewish. Later, he becomes ultra-competitive in a Byrnes family game of pool volleyball even though he was raised to shy away from such a win-at-all-costs mentality (the Gaylord Wall of Fame, which is displayed in *Meet the Fockers*, features ribbons and trophies for 10<sup>th</sup> place finishes). And in the second film, there is reference to Greg going duck-hunting with Byrnes patriarch Jack despite the fact that the Fockers are staunchly opposed to such activities on the grounds of animal rights (Greg's dad Bernie makes this point quite clear in the film). Ultimately, then, the message these characters deliver to the audience is that Gentile women are worth American Jewish "neurotic nebbishes" doing anything for them, including completely trying to remake themselves through "de-racialization."

The American Jewish "neurotic nebbishes" in my study are not only racialized as codependent and romantically servile, especially in relation to Gentiles, but also repeatedly portrayed as sexually dysfunctional, impotent, and perverted as well. Two adult characters in

particular exemplify this “neurotic nebbish” propensity for sexual neurosis: Jacob Elinsky in *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* and Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage) in *Adaptation* (Columbia, 2002). Jacob, a totally uncharismatic and uninspiring English teacher at a Catholic high school in New York (his students continually ask to go to the bathroom during class and race out of the room when the bell signaling the end of the class period rings), becomes totally engrossed with one of his female students who happens to take a liking to the literature the class is reading. When the student approaches Jacob in the teacher’s lounge about a grade she has received on one of her papers (she first asks whether she is allowed into this space, to which Jacob answers that he “won’t squeal on” her), he attempts to manipulate her by asking a series of inappropriate personal questions and ultimately refusing to change her grade. Later in the film, Jacob confesses to his friend Frank that he is “obsessing over” the student, a dilemma that becomes all the more real when Jacob is confronted with a fantasy-like situation: the student, who bumps into Jacob and his friends out on the town, goes into a nightclub with the group and ends-up flirting with him. The result is a classic example of “neurotic nebbish” sexual inadequacy, as Jacob storms into a bathroom stall and tries to kiss the student, only to have her pull away uninterested and leave him consumed with fear about losing his job.

As problematic as Jacob’s love life appears, Charlie Kaufman’s is arguably worse. Charlie is hopelessly insecure around women, unable to reach over and kiss a British woman who makes obvious her desire to do so several times on dates with Charlie. A voice-over narrates Charlie’s thoughts during this moment of psychosexual crisis: “I’m such a chicken. I’m such an idiot. I should have kissed her. I’ve blown it.” Given the “panic and self-loathing” that are the self-proclaimed “two pillars of [his] personality,” Charlie chronically masturbates to various fantasies about women he meets, including a waitress at a local coffee shop who while

on-duty casually chatted with him about orchids (the subject of his next screenplay). When Charlie actually asks the waitress out to an orchid show he will be attending, she is disgusted and tells her coworkers that he is creeping her out. Charlie does indeed attend the orchid show, alone, and ends up sexually fantasizing about various female attendees.

A prominent dimension of the sexual ineffectuality of the “neurotic nebbish” is frigidity or immaturity, expressed to various degrees by several characters. For instance, Barry Egan in *Punch Drunk Love* calls a phone-sex line only to engage the woman on the other end as though he were a prepubescent child, giggling and proclaiming that “This is funny.” Later in the film, after having his first kiss with Gentile love interest Lena, Barry exclaims “That was really good!” and greets her for their romantic rendezvous in Hawaii with a handshake while cowering in fear. A possible cause for Barry’s psychosexual neuroses, namely an unresolved Oedipal crisis, becomes evident after Barry and Lena have sex, as he lays his head on her shoulder like a child would with a mother. Jessica in *Kissing Jessica Stein* also exhibits a profound fear of sexuality in her lesbian relationship with Gentile Helen, an outrageous example being when Jessica brings stacks of lesbian sexual literature and pamphlets to the couple’s second date as “information materials.” Indeed, the trajectory of their relationships is almost a comic-strip reel of aggressor Helen trying to break down the sexual resistance of prudish Jessica. Indeed, it is Jessica’s aversion to sex that in large part causes the couple’s eventual dissolution. And finally, there is *The Heartbreak Kid*’s Eddie Cantrow, who is portrayed as wimpy not only in everyday life but also in the bedroom, particularly on his honeymoon, where he is shown to be woefully inadequate in meeting the sexual needs of Lila, his insatiable wife. Not only is Eddie uncomfortable with the dirty talk Lila wants, but her assortment of sexual positions give him cramps. A thoroughly distraught Eddie is ultimately displayed to be curled-up in a fetal position,

wearing a female robe and shaking with fear at Lila's requests that he "jackhammer," "pile-drive," and "cock" her.

Adolescent and young adult American Jewish characters thought to be in their physical prime also reveal paralyzing neuroses with regard to sexuality. Jim Levenstein (who ages from first year college student in *American Pie 2* all the way to 20-something groom in *American Pie 3: American Wedding*) can be summed up in the words of his high-school buddy Steve Stiffler, who describes Jim as "the only guy... whose dick needs an instruction manual." Indeed, Jim's sexual follies are the narrative heart-and-soul of the film series, as he even labels himself "rump-roast" as compared to "filet mignon" in the arena of sexual prowess. For starters, Jim's mishaps include a blabbering anxiety attack when preparing to engage in sexual relations with a college co-ed (he even admits that "this is the first time since [his] first time"), using his eventual wife Michelle to practice foreplay (his neuroses lead him to ask her if the direction of motion matters when groping breasts), masturbating to pornography with super-glue (his hands eventually become affixed to both his penis and the pornographic videotape), and dry-humping Michelle's parents' dog (he was already infamous for fornicating an apple-pie). All of these escapades result in Michelle announcing to the guests at the couple's wedding that Jim is her "little perv[ert]," a title befitting an American Jewish sexual "neurotic nebbish" of epic proportions. The recent high-school graduate Luke Shapiro in *The Wackness* mirrors Jim's sexual ineffectuality, albeit in a less slapstick fashion. While Luke shares the hopeless desires of many "neurotic nebbishes" to be a sexual Casanova (he has an elaborate daydream/fantasy rap video sequence on a subway where he envisions himself dirty-dancing and sexually engaging a female passenger), in actuality he is a virgin who suffers from erectile dysfunction when his love interest Stephanie and he try having sex, only to ejaculate prematurely (upon first vaginal penetration, in

fact) and, in turn, begin crying out of embarrassment and shame. Finally, youth is not unkind only to American Jewish male “neurotic nebbishes,” as Norah Silverberg from *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist* suffers from her own well-publicized sexual misfortunes, as adversary Tris announces that the “word on the street is that [Norah has] never had an orgasm”, a reality that is only altered when Norah finds the “magic touch” of her Gentile sexual savior Nick.

Of all the rampant sexual neuroses found in my study of American Jewish characters, however, none is perhaps more striking than the issues male “neurotic nebbishes” have with the penis, particularly the size (or lack thereof) of their own. Andrew Largeman in *Garden State* awakens from passing out at an old friend’s house party only to find his body covered with teasing comments his bullying friends have written on him with a marker, the most poignant being “Hollywood pussy” and “Small! Look!,” the latter serving as a caption for an arrow pointing at his penile region; the sum total of these genitalia-related markings is the symbolic castration of Andrew. Similarly, when American Jewish adolescent Seth (Loren Berman) in *The 40-Year Old Virgin* (Universal, 2005) attends a parent-child workshop on sex education at a local health clinic and asks for extra large condoms, his father (Jeff Kahn) blurts out in front of the entire workshop that Seth has no need for such condoms given that Seth has “a tiny penis.” According to his wife, *I Love You, Man*’s (DreamWorks, 2009) Barry (Jon Favreau) lacks the penile size to be a threat for committing adultery, as she describes him to all her girlfriends as having “a small dick.” Finally, Dave Buznik in *Anger Management* and Reuben Feffer in *Along Came Polly* have the relative smallness of their respective American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” penises made quite clear to them by others. Dave, who agonizes over a bullying episode from his youth, hear an old woman who apparently saw the incident exclaim that she can still remember how small Dave’s penis was once his pants were pulled down. Later, Dave stands awestruck at a

urinal next to his girlfriend's best male friend, given the apparently monstrous size of the latter's penis (furthering Dave's own insecurity about his own). Along these lines, Reuben's wife Lisa cheats on, and leaves, him during the couple's honeymoon in the Caribbean because of the overwhelming penis size of Claude, a scuba instructor who, in the nude, approaches the newlyweds while the latter are sunbathing on the beach. In explaining her decision to sleep, and ultimately stay on the island, with Claude, Lisa cites "love at first sight," a double entendre referring to the supposed irresistibility of Claude's phallus vis-à-vis Reuben's apparently smaller one.

Even when American Jewish male "neurotic nebbishes" do not hear remarks about their penis sizes, they still appear to have internalized a sense of phallic anxiety. *Funny People's* George Simmons, for instance, badgers Ira Wright, his personal assistant, throughout the film to show him his penis, and saturates his entire stand-up comedy routines with phallic humor. A possible reason why George has this seemingly inexplicable fetish is revealed when he remarks to his ex-girlfriend Laura that her hands always "make [his] penis look small," a comment clearly emerging out of phallic insecurity. White Goodman in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* takes penile preoccupation to another level, using an air-pump to create the appearance of a gigantic bulge in his pants. And Jim Levenstein from the two *American Pie* films demonstrates his own concerns about his phallus, joking defensively about having "gigantic balls" in front of a large amphitheatre audience at Michelle's band camp in *American Pie 2* and shaving his pubic hair (including those covering his scrotum) just before his nuptials in *American Pie 3: American Wedding* to make his penis appear bigger for the honeymoon. But perhaps the most intriguing examples of "neurotic nebbish" phallus obsession are two characters in *Superbad*: Officer Michaels (Seth Rogen) and Seth. The officer, who describes operating a handgun as "like

having two cocks,” finds it appropriate bar-talk to discuss his fantasy of “a world covered in semen,” while Seth admits to having gone through years of psychotherapy because of a childhood compulsion to draw penises anywhere and everywhere. Seth’s neurosis explains his comments at the beginning of the film about being uninterested in pornography that does not feature phallic intercourse: “A vagina by itself? Not really for me.” For all these characters, the penis (whether its size or psychoanalytical function) plays a central role in their racialized identity as American Jewish male “neurotic nebbishes.”

A possibly related theme found in my study was the homosexualization of American Jewish male “neurotic nebbishes,” particularly as a form of emasculation and feminization vis-à-vis these characters’ Gentile counterparts. First, American Jewish male characters were often referred to using homophobic slurs and/or other verbal cues connecting them to homosexuality, often by those closest to them (whether family or romantic interest/partner). Examples include *25<sup>th</sup> Hour*’s Jacob Elinsky, who has a sexual obsession with one of his female high school students. She claims to have thought he was “into showtunes” when the two run into each other at a hip nightclub in Manhattan, a not-so-subtle homophobic stereotype used to call Jacob’s masculinity into question). Then there is Dr. Jeffrey Squires in *The Wackness*, whose stepdaughter tells him she assumes that he and patient Luke Shapiro are “gay” lovers, given the amount of time the two American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” spend with one another. Joel Barish in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is called a “f-ggot” [sic] by his girlfriend Clementine, a slur she screams out in the middle of the street while Joel attempts to chase her down after an argument. *Knocked Up*’s Ben Stone is called “Gabe Ruth,” the “gay brother of Babe Ruth” by his girlfriend’s brother-in-law. The sisters of Barry Egan in *Punch-Drunk Love* endlessly recount (even at dinner parties) a family story about calling him “gay boy” during their

youth. *The Heartbreak Kid*'s Eddie Cantrow is ribbed constantly by two barely pubescent twin boys for supposedly being "gay" (they give Eddie a verbal test to "check" his sexuality, a test he apparently fails).

In the case of other American Jewish male "neurotic nebbish" characters, unsolicited homosexualization occurs indirectly. For instance, Dave Buznik in *Anger Management* is forced, by court order, to undergo an intensive anger management therapy program with a specialist named Dr. Buddy Rydell, only to have the latter move in to Dave's apartment and sleep in the nude with him. In fact, Dave wakes up being cuddled in Buddy's arms in the feminine position. Buddy later solicits a cross-dressing male sex worker for Dave, assuming that Dave would be interested. Despite being spurned romantically by Alexis in *My Best Friend's Girl*, Dustin still agrees to accompany her while she shops for dresses for her sister's wedding, only to find that the outing has an ulterior purpose of setting him up with another bridesmaid's gay "shopping buddy." And *Sex and the City*'s Harry Goldenblatt is one of three men in protagonist Carrie Bradshaw's wedding procession, the other two being gay (including a stereotypically effeminate wedding planner).

Still other "neurotic nebbishes" embody homosexuality or internalize their homosexualization by others; what is particularly interesting about these characters is their seemingly default positioning, both physically/sexually and identity-wise, as effeminate or anally receptive. *Beerfest*'s American Jewish scientist Charlie Finkelstein, whose sexuality is never made clear in the film, though he appears to derive great pleasure from stroking lab frogs' gonads, offers money to a male sex worker after being pinched in the rear-end, indicating the possibility that he was aroused by this act of homosexual aggression, and exclaims later to his friends that he wants a tasty beer to "put its dick in [him]." Leo Bloom in *The Producers* is also

hit on repeatedly by gay men at the home of Broadway director Roger Debris. Leo eventually begins to partake in the festivities, rubbing his gluteus against those of the other gay men in the dance routine and donning a crown and fedora when returning home from the Debris residence. And *Pineapple Express* features a recurring latent homoeroticism between Saul Silver and his Gentile buddy Dale, with Saul initiating all such activity, from statements about giving Dale a “hand-job” and feeling glad that he “dipped [his] pen in [Dale’s] ink” to sleeping with his head on Dale’s chest and shoulder (again, fulfilling the traditional feminine role with regard to body positioning). There are also infamous homoerotic scenes in *American Pie 2* involving “neurotic nebbish” extraordinaire Jim Levenstein, including one where he mouth-kisses buddy Steve Stiffler to impress two lesbians, apparently “liking it” given that he reaches his hand up to play with Stiffler’s hair, and a second where Michelle shoves her trumpet up Jim’s rectum, an act of anal receptivity that he does not resist (in fact, he appears to enjoy it). Even the supposedly über-macho Chuck Levine in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* is consistently labeled, both explicitly and implicitly, as “the girl” in his faux gay marriage to co-worker and platonic buddy Larry, a legal union meant to help Larry be eligible to pass on his health benefits to his children. Larry’s daughter considers Chuck her mother, and a special-edition calendar features shots of Chuck being held by Larry. Finally, two self-identifying gay male “neurotic nebbishes,” designer Elliot Teichberg (Demetri Martin) in *Taking Woodstock* and mob boss heir Yitzchok (Michael Rubinfeld) in *Lucky Number Slevin* (MGM, 2006), also take on stereotypically feminine sexual roles, with Elliot courting a hyper-masculine electrician who is working on the Woodstock concert stage and Yitzchok being nicknamed “the Fairy” for his flowery and ornate attire as well as his submissive demeanor.

The sample of films in my study offer bountiful examples of the stereotypical American Jewish “neurotic nebbish.” While much about this racialized cinematic stereotype has remained the same as its presence within the canon of 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. film (i.e., “neurotic nebbish” physical appearance, emasculation, ineffectuality, and obsession with Gentile women), there are subtle differences which reflect the shifting family, gender, and sexuality identity politics of American society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among these changes is the increasing presence of female “neurotic nebbishes” as well as the explicit homosexualization of male “neurotic nebbishes,” both of which can be traced to the growing socioeconomic and political prominence of women and gay men in U.S. society and the American Jewish community. Chapter 7 will address possible reasons for the persistence of this stereotype as well as its highly disproportionate production by directors and/or writers who are American Jewish. Also, Chapter 7 will attempt to account for the relatively large number of characters identified in my study as “neurotic nebbishes” who are not explicitly identified as American Jewish in their respective films. Chapter 5, though, discusses the “pampered princess”, another American Jewish cinematic stereotype that has been historically gendered and yet seems to have expanded in post-Y2K U.S. cinema.

## CHAPTER 5 “PAMPERED PRINCESSES”

A third American Jewish character stereotype that emerged from analysis of more than 50 post-Y2K movies in the U.S. is a relatively predictable one given the popularity of this antisemitic caricature in late 20<sup>th</sup> century conventional wisdom and popular parlance: the “pampered princess,” or young, non-maternal American Jewish female who is racialized as whining, materialistic, small-minded, averse to sex, and obsessed with shopping. Despite the disproportionate number of males in my study’s sample, and the comparatively short history of the “pampered princess” cinematic stereotype, there were still a significant number of American Jewish characters racialized in this manner. At the same time, given the increasing diversity of gender filmic representations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century found in the “meddling matriarch” and “neurotic nebbish” stereotypes discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, it is not surprising to see that the “pampered princess” stereotype appears to have expanded as well to include young boys and male bachelors.

As discussed in Chapter 1, these racialized depictions of American Jewish femininity owe a great deal to the massive consumerism that has characterized the U.S. political economy since the 1970s (Prell). Conceived as “Jewish-American Princesses,” or “J.A.P.s” [sic], the relatively recent Hollywood tradition of portraying younger, non-maternal American Jewish women in an unflattering fashion can thus be linked to the class-based assimilation which American Jewish persons have undergone over the past several decades. Indeed, the racialization of “pampered princess” as spoiled, entitled brats is direct testimony to the larger-scale changes taking place in U.S. middle-class family dynamics, including American Jewish families, where an increased emphasis by parents on materialism has begun to supersede more traditional forms of intimacy (Poll). In other words, as American Jewish parents, like those of

all middle-class families in the U.S., devote a greater part of their waking lives to professional careers in order to maintain their standards of living, more and more of their means of demonstrating love for their children will be through material spoiling.

At the same time, however, the financial independence that an increasing number of American Jewish women are enjoying as a result of growing participation and influence in the labor force (DellaPergola) appears to have impacted the “pampered princess” stereotype, as evidenced by both the relative lack of traditional “pampered princesses” among the 125 American Jewish characters in my study, as well as the presence of several “career women” who are discussed in this chapter as newer forms of the “pampered princess” stereotype. In addition, the blurring of gender roles related to middle-class consumerism, including the increasing prominence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of “metrosexuals,” or males who embody traditionally feminine forms of materialism (Tuncay and Otnes), seems to manifest in the expansion of the racialized “pampered princess” cinematic stereotype to include American Jewish male characters.

Quantitatively speaking, American Jewish characters who displayed at least some degree of stereotypically “pampered princess” traits appeared in 23 (or approximately 43%) of the 53 films comprising my study’s sample, with 19 (almost 83%) of these films produced by creative teams that included American Jewish persons. Hence like the other traditionally feminine stereotype associated with American Jewish onscreen racialization (i.e., “meddling matriarchs”), “pampered princesses” are not featured in nearly as many films as the two cinematic stereotypes historically associated with American Jewish men. Of the relatively small number of “pampered princesses” in my study sample of 125 characters (28, or more than 22%), 18 (or just over 64%) were explicitly identified in their respective films as American Jewish. Thus over 1/3 of the characters in this chapter were interpreted by the researcher as embodying “pampered princess”

traits despite having an otherwise ambiguous racial identity, a relatively large percentage of non-explicitly identified American Jewish characters which will also be addressed in Chapter 7. Like the “meddling matriarch” stereotype, however, when one calculates the rate of “pampered princesses” among only the population historically racialized as “J.A.P.s” [sic] (i.e., younger, explicitly identified American Jewish female characters who are also explicitly and/or implicitly identified as non-maternal), the numbers are striking; roughly 86% (18 out of 21) of these characters embodied the “pampered princess” stereotype in some shape or form. Interestingly, all of these female “pampered princesses”, save one (17 out of 18, or more than 94%), appear in films set in New York City, reinforcing the racialized notion that the Big Apple is the established home of the “J.A.P.” [sic] (Prell). Finally, 9 (or roughly 32%) of the 28 “pampered princesses” in this chapter were featured in “independent” films.

The quintessential “pampered princess” from my study’s sample of films was Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) in *Sex and the City* (New Line, 2008), an iconic character in American popular culture (*Sex and the City* was also an award-winning hit television series) about whom numerous articles and books have been written. Before detailing her “pampered princess” traits, however, it is important first to discuss Carrie’s racial/ethnic identity on-screen; is she American Jewish or not? This fundamental question has wrangled many a mass-media analyst, but my study will follow the lead of a Boston Globe piece which stated quite simply: “Carrie Bradshaw is JAP-py [sic]” (Newhouse). In fact, even the creative brain trust behind Carrie was quoted as saying that she “in many ways can be considered a Jewish character” (King). Ultimately, then, despite conveying a “complex persona”, including the embodiment of “a mythical universal WASP wannabe” (Byers and Krieger 46), Carrie can be seen also as the

consummate racialized representation of stereotypical American Jewish “pampered princess” traits.

The film begins with a Carrie voice-over explaining that she has always been “in search of [clothing designer] labels and love.” This opening existential statement is quite revealing in that it links Carrie to what scholars describe as the two core elements of a “pampered princess” identity: hyper-materialism, particularly with regard to objects of self-adornment (like clothing), as well as a deep-rooted dependency on male breadwinners, whether fathers or potential husbands, who are the assumed providers of these material objects (Prell 98). Indeed, as the film begins to unfold, the audience is presented with Carrie’s biographical context, all of which confirms these “pampered princess” suspicions: she is a fashionista who lives in Manhattan with a decidedly older, father proxy boyfriend known simply as “Mr. Big” (in the aforementioned opening voice-over, Carrie confesses to have been “looking for something ‘big,’” which although certainly open to phallic interpretation, becomes increasingly obvious as a financial statement as the film unfolds). Interestingly, while Carrie is a successful professional (i.e., a romance columnist for *Vogue* magazine), she is rarely, if ever, shown working. Hence despite much hoopla about the supposed independence she displays as a career woman with seemingly unlimited purchasing power (Byers and Krieger), Carrie’s actual everyday life revolves around three mutually-reinforcing, stereotypical “pampered princess” motifs: her relationship with Mr. Big, fixation with material possessions, and self-obsession.

Carrie’s romance with Mr. Big, which is the film’s central love story, is clearly a paternal one, with Big serving as a surrogate father-figure who must shower her with attention and, more importantly, expensive gifts. This is a particularly poignant issue if one factors in that Carrie is never shown to have her own father, or family-of-origin, at all. The narrative absence of Carrie’s

biological father does not contradict her racialization as a “pampered princess,” however, as she is portrayed at several points in time acting desperately and obnoxiously in an effort to ensure that her quasi-daughterly needs are met by Mr. Big: she whiningly commands him to tell her that she is “the one” for him (an issue that later leads to a hasty marriage proposal between the two), childishly interrupts his bedtime reading by stealing his glasses and demanding that he read her library book (a collection of love letters written by famous figures in Western history), and selfishly disrupts his work by insisting that he write his nuptial vows. When Mr. Big pays to remodel Carrie’s bedroom closet, turning it into a ridiculously palatial shrine to Carrie’s wardrobe, the ultimately symbol of her hyper-materialism, her response is to exclaim that he has “done [her] proud,” adding in a “Mr.” just for paternal emphasis. And like a spoiled child, Carrie taunts her friends regarding her engagement to Mr. Big, only to later throw a very public tantrum when he is a no-show on the couple’s wedding day. This “runaway groom” plot development has ramifications later in the film when Carrie blames her friend Miranda for supposedly “ruin[ing] [her] marriage,” the latter being guilty only of having made a passing remark in Mr. Big’s presence disparaging marriage. Upon this revelation, Carrie not only screams at Miranda while the two are at dinner, eventually storming out of the restaurant, but goes on to screen Miranda’s phone calls and refuse the latter’s offerings (which include flowers, emails, etc.) of reconciliation. Ultimately, however, all is cartoon-like bliss once again when Mr. Big and Carrie reunite in the closing scenes of the film, underscoring how dependent Carrie as a “pampered princess” is on her “Prince (or King/Father) Charming.”

Arguably even more glaring is Carrie’s obsession with material possessions, particularly those that symbolize opulence and wealth. Beyond her remark at the beginning of the film, Carrie shows an object attachment that borders on romantic obsession several times in the film;

she comments that “finding the perfect apartment in New York City is like finding the perfect partner” and remarks that she has fallen “in love at first sight” when her remodeled closet is unveiled. And just like a spoiled youngster showing off her toys, Carrie explicitly states that she wants her friends to feel “jealous” about the apartment she and Mr. Big have purchased. But Carrie’s ultimate materialist fixation relates to her wardrobe of designer clothing, which she not only models for her friends in an extended scene, but which requires thirty boxes to move from one apartment to another (this even after she discards a large number of her clothes were apparently too unfashionable to keep). Virtually every scene where Carrie is in public, she is wearing outrageously flashy clothing along with equally gaudy accessories, not to mention carrying an assortment of boutique shopping bags, giving the appearance that she has spent all day consuming rather than producing. In fact, when it is actually time for Carrie to sit down and write something for her editor, she utters that “the writing will come” if, and only if, she is able to find and purchase the “right desk.” Not surprisingly, Carrie has so many clothes that she stores some in her oven, a stunning statement about her culinary inability, a “pampered princess” trait she shares with Roz Focker (Barbra Streisand) in *Meet the Fockers* (Universal, 2004), who confesses to not even being able to “fry an egg.” Indeed, Carrie’s proudest moment in the film comes when designer Vivianne Westwood sends Carrie a custom wedding dress to wear for her upcoming nuptials with Mr. Big, as Carrie appears to be fighting tears during this moment of hyper-materialist sentimentalism.

Beyond these other two aspects of “pampered princess” behavior, Carrie is arguably most profoundly characterized by self-obsession. First, Carrie is so self-consumed as to be constantly complaining about the smallest minutiae in her life; even relative to her friends, who all appear to be discontented, neurotic, and self-centered in their own ways, Carrie is framed in the

narrative as the “whiniest” one. One particularly poignant example of this is when Carrie vociferously protests about having a “347” area code for her new cell phone number, stating aloud “How awful is that?!” since apparently “pampered princesses” are entitled to always have a phone number with a “fashionable” area code. Carrie’s self-centeredness also manifests in her being rude and tactless, two other stereotypical behavioral traits of American Jewish “pampered princesses.” Not only is she the only one out of her circle of friends who repeatedly talks with her mouth full at the table, but Carrie also refuses to acknowledge others’ thoughts and feelings, redirects all conversation back to her own supposed problems, and is sarcastic and snide with her friends, including laughing at Charlotte’s bout with diarrhea in Mexico and poking fun at Samantha’s “gut” when the latter arrives to New York. And when Miranda enlists the help of this circle of friends on the topic of sexuality, Carrie (in an ode to the stereotypical “pampered princess” aversion to sex) is the only one who refuses to truly open up about the frequency and nature of her sex-life; instead she appropriates Miranda’s moment of misery as an opportunity to brag rather ambiguously that Mr. Big “rarely stays in the lines”. Last, but certainly not least, Carrie seems to be utterly helpless, appearing almost infantile in her self-insufficiency. When it is time for her to move apartments, she recruits all her friends to do the actual packing, and as mentioned, Carrie selfishly opts to model clothing for her friends while they labor on her behalf for three days. And when the wedding with Mr. Big falls through, Carrie requires round-the-clock supervision from her friends, whom she takes with her on the Mexico honeymoon that never was, needing to be literally spoon-fed breakfast-in-bed by Samantha. In fact, while on the trip, Carrie awakes one morning to find that Miranda and Samantha have taken care of an entire laundry list of responsibilities for Carrie, including buying back her apartment and moving her stuff back. Finally, upon returning from Mexico, Carrie fulfills the dream of all self-obsessed

“pampered princesses” by hiring a Black-American “mammy” personal assistant named Louise who does everything for Carrie, from writing emails on her behalf to unpacking the 30 boxes worth of wardrobe that her friends had assembled. So uneven is the distribution of labor between Carrie and Louise that Carrie wonders aloud, more literally than symbolically, what she will do without Louise when Louise decides to head back to St. Louis (possibly, in part, because of the exploitative nature of her working relationship with Carrie).

In *Bride Wars*’ (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009) Liv Lerner (Kate Hudson), one sees a replica in many ways of the American Jewish “pampered princess” *par excellence*, Carrie Bradshaw, particularly with regard to hyper-materialism, romantic immaturity, and selfishness, character traits that racialize her despite the lack of any explicit racial identification for her in the film’s narrative . Like the *Sex and the City* protagonist, there is little to no family presence in Liv’s life, save her younger brother. In Liv’s case, however, the reason for this is that both of her parents are deceased, while Carrie’s family situation in *Sex and the City* is left totally unexplained. Liv too is a successful, über-fashionably attired young professional woman living in Manhattan, described as the “best associate” at her law firm given that she “won’t settle” (an indication of her purely self-interested orientation to the world at large). Like Carrie, however, work is not Liv’s forte, as the handful of scenes set at Liv’s law firm are comprised primarily of her bossing around her personal assistant (a male version of Louise) to the absurd extent that the latter walks alongside Liv and lint brushes her clothes while she storms about the office. Ultimately, though, such details are simply background fodder for the film’s narrative centerpiece: the feud between Liv and best friend Emma Allan over who gets to have their upcoming wedding at the most showy of all venues, the Plaza Hotel. This conflict, with all its nuances, highlights Liv’s

character traits in all their glory, features that can only be described as those of a “pampered princess.”

It is important to note here the juxtaposition made throughout the film between Liv and Emma; the former is quite explicitly framed as the spoiled “pampered princess” vis-à-vis her overly-compliant “neurotic nebbish” best friend. The film opens with flashback scenes of the two playing a game of dress-up as girls and a young Liv proclaiming that she “always play[s] the bride” despite the fact that Emma wants to play that role too. Hence “it never occurs to” Liv to “think of others” (in her own words), while selfless thought and action appear to be all of which Emma is capable. Liv’s engagement fiasco offers clear testimony to her “pampered princess” ways as well. Finding a ring in boyfriend Daniel’s closet (this invasion of his privacy being a testament to her sense of entitlement and self-righteousness), Liv immediately assumes that it is for her to receive in an upcoming marriage proposal, and given her hyper-spoiled and impatient temperament, charges into Daniel’s workplace two days later to demand that the latter propose to her, bursting through his office door exclaiming that he should “just marry [her] already.” If such “obnoxious” and “overbearing” (in Daniel’s words) behavior were not enough, Liv’s inability to “know how to wait” for the proposal can be viewed as extraordinarily selfish since the rush appears to be, at least in part, motivated by jealousy of Emma, whose boyfriend has popped the question in the interim. Evidence of this jealousy is quite visibly on display during a luncheon the duo have with their friends in which Liv screams out that she is engaged, effectively stealing all of Emma’s thunder and monopolizing the attention of the group and the entire restaurant.

As the calamitous capers between Liv and Emma escalate in this pre-nuptial deadlock, subtle but no less important aspects of Liv’s “pampered princess” character are also revealed.

She is vain, particularly with regard to money and her hair: there are several references to Liv trying to “impress people with how much she spends,” and when Emma sabotages Liv’s hair-coloring appointment, sneaking blue dye into the coloring mix, Liv seems to undergo an emotional crisis of existential proportions. Liv also appears to be lazy and needy vis-à-vis Emma, as Liv walks for exercise rather than keeping up with the marathon-esque jogging regimen of Emma. Alongside this relative lethargy, whiny Liv complains that she needs an iPod to keep her entertained while working out. This fetishistic attachment to consumer goods, which harkens back to Carrie’s hyper-materialism in *Sex and the City*, is further corroborated by Liv’s eating issues; throughout the film, much attention is paid to the fact that Liv is unable to control her intake of sweets, a nod to the spoiled nature of this “pampered princess.” Indeed, Emma uses Liv’s sweet-tooth to her competitive advantage by sending Liv a wide array of dessert pastries as a ploy to plump the latter up before the wedding date. Even her boyfriend Daniel is shown offering Liv a piece of cake as collateral for dancing with him at a friend’s wedding near the beginning of the film. Hence, like Carrie, Liv is a multidimensionally racialized “pampered princess,” unable to control her insatiable appetite for over-indulging herself with stereotypical “J.A.P.” [sic] forms of self-gratification, whether designer clothes or comfort foods.

Several other films feature highly stereotypical American Jewish “pampered princesses” who are racialized as “daddy’s girls” in a more direct fashion than either Carrie Bradshaw or Liv Lerner. One such movie is *Requiem for a Dream* (Artisan, 2000) in which drug-addicted Marion Silver (Jennifer Connelly) is portrayed as the spoiled daughter of a garment industry magnate (her father is never shown, but his wealth and social standing are referenced repeatedly). She rarely, if ever, smiles, and when she does, her eyes belie a smile that is distant at best and disingenuous at worst. This coldness is equally reflected in Marion’s vanity, announcing to her

boyfriend Harry Goldfarb that she's been told "many times" that she's beautiful. Marion has also perfected the "pampered princess" art of using her father's money, living jobless in an all-expenses-paid Manhattan loft and misappropriating (for drugs) the funds he gives her to see a psychiatrist, all the while dreaming whimsically of becoming a fashion designer (once again, the "pampered princess" motif of obsessive preoccupation with clothing-as-self-adornment is introduced here). Marion is also emotionally volatile and impetuous, particularly toward Harry, when withdrawing from her (all-too-frequent) drug highs. Not only does Marion at one point scream that Harry is "a fucking loser," but also in several scenes yells at him to "do something" to relieve her self-induced suffering. These sort of temper tantrums are classically "pampered princess" in that Marion appears to want her life to be magically taken care of for her by a surrogate paternal figure (in this case, Harry). Ultimately, Marion devolves into sex work to score drugs, a lifestyle shift that nods, somewhat paradoxically, to a strong aversion to sex: she performs sex acts in a totally detached, utilitarian manner that suggests she is unable or unwilling to view sex as enjoyable.

Another "pampered princess" whose father plays a considerable role in her life (although, like Marion Silver, her father is never actually shown in the film) is Norah Silverberg (Kat Dennings) in *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (Columbia, 2008), a character referenced frequently in Chapter 4 as a female "neurotic nebbish." Norah is described by her rival Tris as "a [sexually?] frigid jealous J.A.P. [sic]," a statement that explicitly racializes Nora for the audience. The impetus for Tris' proclamation is the fact that Norah's "daddy is famous" (in Norah's own words), as he owns Electric Lady Recording Studios in Manhattan. Indeed, Nora describes herself as "rock and roll royalty" given her father's status in the music industry and the fact that he has a prestigious "job lined up" for her when she graduates high school. An

underage Norah is even shown admitted into trendy nightclubs without having to wait in line. All of these may appear to be relatively innocuous aspects of Norah's biography, but Norah's heiress fame and fortune does have more obvious "pampered princess" consequences as well. Despite her romantic obsession with Nick, Norah makes fun of Nick's modest automobile, a Yugo, and later actually crashes the car after driving it haphazardly (possibly revealing a lack of concern for his personal property, given how materially spoiled she herself is). Norah also complains incessantly, becoming extremely pouty and overly sensitive when playfully teased by other characters for her "pampered princess" antics. In bratty fashion, Norah lashes out, in disproportionate fashion, at the culprits, calling them a "fistful of assholes." And, of course, it is suggested throughout the film that Norah is the only character who has yet to experience an orgasm, a testimony to her possible sexual frigidity. All in all, then, despite her best effort to appear humble, including downplaying her father's influence, Norah ultimately succumbs to the default state of being an American Jewish "pampered princess."

*The Devil Wears Prada's* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2006) Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway), another "neurotic nebbish" character, also has a father who spoils her. Her (apparently financially well-off) dad flies to New York from Ohio to pay her rent, take her to the Broadway musical "Chicago," and urge her to quit her highly sought-after fashion magazine personal assistant job since he believes she is "too good for" it. This sort of paternalism has its impact on Andy's character: despite having a journalism degree from a prestigious university (Northwestern), she appears to be unable or unwilling to take notes for her boss and whines vociferously to several characters about the unfairness of her life, only to be called out by co-worker Nigel for "want[ing] a gold star and kiss on the forehead for doing [her] homework." Even Andy's relationship with her boyfriend resembles that of the other "pampered princesses,"

as she throws dish-breaking temper tantrums in their apartment, completely misses his birthday party, breaks up with him on a selfish whim, and agrees to reconcile with him for laughably childish and petty reasons (i.e., his proclivity to cook grilled-cheese sandwiches for her). And, of course, as a “pampered princess” Andy ultimately cannot help but become overly self-indulgent amidst all of the chic designer clothing with which she is occupationally surrounded. In fact, despite being portrayed as the supposedly unattractive “neurotic nebbish” when first entering her job, Andy eventually becomes an all-too-stereotypical American Jewish “pampered princess,” lusting after Chanel boots and bragging about having slimmed her body down to a size 4.

Two final examples of paternally spoiled American Jewish “pampered princesses” are Sandra Cohen (Vinessa Shaw) in *Two Lovers* (Magnolia, 2008), who has convinced her father, a highly successful dry-cleaning franchiser, to orchestrate a corporate takeover of a family store just so she can have the potential of romantic involvement with the storeowner’s son Leonard, and *The Hebrew Hammer*’s (Comedy Central, 2003) Esther Bloomenbergensteinenthal (Judy Greer), whose helplessness leads to her own kidnapping and the need for her dad, the chairman of the Jewish Justice League, to authorize the unprecedented use of “Jewish guilt,” the JJJ “secret weapon,” in an effort to rescue his “little girl” (he refers to her this way despite her being an adult). In both characters’ cases, it is important to note how such paternal spoiling informs their naïve ideologies of love and happiness with respect to their partners. Sandra dreams about watching *The Sound of Music* with Leonard in a middle-class nuclear family fantasy world of traditional values and sociological ignorance. Similarly, Esther is aroused not by sexual activity (not surprisingly, given the stereotypical “pampered princess” aversion to sex) but rather by the “dirty talk” of boyfriend Mordechai Jefferson Carver, who whispers that he will have a “stable career” to ensure that the two of them have “lots of children” who receive “private schooling,”

take “music lessons,” and ultimately “go to Stanford.” Such fetishistic attachments to financial security and worldly comfort are thus shown to preoccupy the hearts and minds of American Jewish “pampered princesses,” whose entire lives have been coddled and sheltered by materially spoiling father figures.

Other American Jewish female characters also reveal their “pampered princess” traits most starkly in their romantic endeavors. In *Keeping the Faith* (Touchstone, 2000), Rabbi Jake Schram is inundated by American Jewish “meddling matriarchs” who desperately seek to pawn their “pampered princess” daughters onto him. Two relevant case studies of the folly that ensues are Jake’s trysts with Ali Decker (Lisa Edelstein) and Rachel Rose (Rena Sofer), two highly stereotypical “pampered princess” characters who display “J.A.P.” [sic] tendencies in their own respective ways. Ali, who is cartoonish in her obnoxiousness, stupidity, and vanity, invites Jake into the posh apartment she admits is subsidized by her father (yet another example of paternal spoiling), only to shrilly announce in a ridiculously nasal voice that exercising to her “Crunch” gym tapes is her “religion.” This sort of bodily self-absorption has no bounds for Ali, as she commands Jake to punch her abdominal muscles (in an effort to prove how strong they are), even yelling at him to do so when he refuses. Their dinner date, not surprisingly, is disastrous, as Ali hits a homeless beggar with her designer purse, adding insult to injury by shouting that any money given to him would “only be spent on booze,” indicating that socio-economic inequality is not high on Ali’s list of personal concerns. Rachel, on the other hand, is a cold and calculating broadcast news journalist whose “pampered princess” qualities manifest in an arrogant and pompous persona. Her overwhelming self-importance is on display during a dinner double-date in which she announces to Jake that she writes her own reports because she “couldn’t trust anyone with that” task. Later, when her pager goes off during the dinner and she announces that

she must fly to Baghdad to cover a story, Rachel patronizingly responds to Jake's curiosity by urging another tablemate to "explain it to him." This uptight manner spills over into the goodnight kiss between Rachel and Jake, a passionless peck which suggests Rachel's aversion to sex. Juxtapose such iciness with Ali, who displays a sexual over-eagerness at the end of her date with Jake that indicates desperation and romantic inexperience. Taken together, then, these two characters reflect the two sides of the "pampered princess" coin: one totally engrossed with her body, the other totally absorbed inside her own mind.

Combining traits from both Ali Decker and Rachel Rose, Sookie Saperstein (Claire Danes) in *Igby Goes Down* (MGM, 2002) displays a narcissism that is both physical and metaphysical. Sookie puts her "pampered princess" behavior on display from her very first appearance in the film. Working as a caterer for a socialite event in the Hamptons, she rudely denies the smitten title character Igby's request for a clove cigarette and instead waxes whiningly about how she needs a semester off from Bennington College to "recuperate" from "cookies, beer, diet pills, tensions, and life." Later, when she and Igby meet up again on the streets of New York and decide to smoke marijuana together, Sookie pontificates about "roll[ing] perfect joints" and being "vegetarian for purely moral reasons." She also claims, in a cynical tone, that "marijuana is not a visceral experience" for her, while "sex is" (an unconvincing statement given Sookie's propensity for sarcastic bravado). Accepting Igby's invitation for ice cream (she is a major sugar junkie like Liv Lerner), Sookie presumptively and self-righteously declares that he has a "huge crush" on her before using him (and eventually his brother) to fulfill her psycho-sexual needs for control (one example being her demand that Igby stop breathing while the two lie together in bed). And, finally, in one of the more ironic moments from my study's entire sample of films, Igby chides Sookie for being what he calls a "nymphomaniacal, pseudo-hippy

J.A.P. [sic],” only to have her respond, in an emphatic, bratty voice, that she is “*not* a J.A.P. [sic]!” as she smears his face with ice cream he has bought her. Hence, even Sookie, a highly-educated American Jewish female character who appears to have the ability to engage in critical self-reflection, cannot come to terms with her own “pampered princess” identity.

*Anything Else*'s (DreamWorks, 2003) Amanda Chase (Christina Ricci) resembles an exaggerated alter- ego of Sookie Saperstein. The film revolves around Amanda's “pampered princess” antics vis-à-vis her boyfriend and “neurotic nebbish” extraordinaire Jerry Falk. From the opening scene, the audience is introduced to Amanda's total disregard for anyone other than herself. She arrives hours late to an anniversary dinner with Jerry (Amanda's unpunctuality is a recurring motif), demanding that he pay her cab, having eaten already without him (in fact, she complains to a starved Jerry that she over-ate), and neglecting to bring him a present (she claims to have lost her temper while trying to wrap it). In fact, almost all of Amanda's lines in the film are delivered as complaints in a histrionic manner, gesticulating and whining as though the world were about to end. Longing childishly to be an actress or a singer, Amanda (who has no job) uses Jerry for his apartment, even inviting (without Jerry's permission) her mother to stay with the couple. In fact, Amanda is shown (in a flashback) breaking up with Jerry and moving out of his apartment, only to return within a couple of weeks with her bags and announce self-righteously that she's “back!” while standing at Jerry's door. Amanda's “pampered princess” ways are highlighted in the games she plays with sexuality: she refuses to have sex with Jerry (at one point, he explains that it has been six months since they last engaged in sexual relations) and when the two get a hotel room in an attempt to have sex, Amanda has a panic attack (including tears, hyperventilation, etc.) as soon as Jerry begins to touch her (the entire scene being a hyperbolic example of her stereotypical aversion to sex). Interestingly, despite all of the anxiety

with which she is supposedly overcome at the hotel, Amanda has her “pampered princess” wits about her enough to obnoxiously demand that Jerry order caviar and tip the bellman as well as the maid during the couple’s all-too rapid shift from checking in to checking out. After this farcical episode, Amanda tries to explain her frigidity by explicitly linking Jerry to her own father, telling Jerry that he reminds her of the paternal “good parts” which cannot be reconciled with her libido. This self-psychoanalysis can be taken with a grain of salt, however, since Amanda is later caught cheating on Jerry with her father-like acting teacher, an act of infidelity that she laughably tries to spin as “for the [betterment of their] relationship” given that it proves to her that she can “have an orgasm.” It is thus clear that Amanda is a “pampered princess” who has no scruples about acting exclusively for her own selfish gain, even sexually. Like all “pampered princesses,” she is absurdly spoiled, and shows a total lack of concern for the thoughts and feelings of others.

Two other “pampered princesses” choose the game of love as their arena for displaying repugnant and self-centered tendencies: Lisa Kramer (Debra Messing) in *Along Came Polly* (Universal, 2004) and Anna Marks (Scarlett Johansson) in *He’s Just Not That Into You* (New Line, 2009). Both of these characters play to the worst possible racialized stereotypes that audiences have about young American Jewish females with regard to romance, particularly the notion that such women are cold, materialistic, fickle, and spoiled. Lisa Kramer, described by *Along Came Polly* protagonist Reuben Feffer as “a cold, heartless bitch,” commits one of the more selfish and heartless acts imaginable by cheating on her newlywed husband Reuben during the couple’s honeymoon on a Caribbean island. To make matters worse, Lisa is unable to provide any adequate explanation for her behavior to Reuben when he walks in on her having sex with a local scuba instructor named Claude, opting instead to mumble that “it just

happened.” Her callous disregard for Reuben’s feelings illustrates how self-consumed Lisa is. Returning back to New York when her relationship with Claude sours, “pampered princess” Lisa immediately seeks out Reuben and pushes obnoxiously for reconciliation, once again revealing her delusional sense of entitlement. She sends him gifts with manipulative “Miss you” notes, arrives at Reuben’s doorstep with her packed bags (like Amanda Chase), describes the residence that Reuben had purchased for the couple pre-adultery as “our house,” and pushily asks Reuben to “grab a bite to eat” despite the latter being involved with a new love interest, Polly Prince. Lisa appears to show very little, if any, remorse for her infidelity, testifying to her “pampered princess” lack of accountability.

Equally, if not more, problematic is Anna Marks, who plays the role of ultimate home-wrecker in *He’s Just Not That Into You*. Another aspiring musician (it seems that the financial security that “pampered princesses” enjoy because of paternal spoiling allows for these sort of celebrity fantasies), Anna meets a married man, Ben, in the check-out aisle of a market and immediately sets her sights on romance with him. Not surprisingly, Anna monopolizes this first conversation with all sorts of details about herself (including her fears that she will end up like her “meddling matriarch” mother). And during a pedicure session in which she rudely ignores the presence of the Asian-American woman toiling on her toes, Anna blabs nonstop with a friend about her designs to pursue Ben (using language and an orientation that harkens to the fetishistic object attachment other “pampered princesses” display towards clothing or food). This self-absorption is repeated later when Anna and this same friend are shopping at a CVS drugstore, as Anna totally ignores her friend’s troubles, instead fixating on shampoos and delivering the message that if the discussion topic is not about Anna, then it does not concern Anna. As if her consistently shameless seduction of Ben is not bad enough, Anna copes with Ben’s ambivalence

about having an affair by exploiting Connor, a third party who is clearly smitten by this “pampered princess.” Anytime Ben rejects Anna, she calls Connor, barges into his apartment, demands that he rub her feet, insists that he tell her how “funny,” “smart,” “sexy,” and “cute” she is, and manipulates him into washing her hair. Ultimately, as can be expected when dealing with a “pampered princess” like Anna, Connor is rejected anytime he tries to expand his role in Anna’s life beyond that of a doormat, as Anna screens his phone calls, bails on him several times by claiming to have “something to do” that is more important, and in a climactic final scene, proclaims that she “cannot do any of this” when he offers the opportunity for the two to move in together. In short, then, hyper-spoiled “pampered princess” Anna has no qualms about using people like the pedicurist, her friend, and Connor for ego massages, particularly when her ego is bruised by not getting exactly what she wants (i.e., Ben) when she wants it.

Even American Jewish female characters from relatively modest backgrounds are portrayed as stereotypical “pampered princesses.” One example is *Confessions of a Shopaholic*’s (Touchstone, 2009) – Rebecca Bloomwood (Isla Fisher), who is shown in the film’s opening scene as a young girl dreaming of being able to afford designer shoes while her voice-over describes a family financial situation that precluded such purchases. In fact, Rebecca’s parents, who make an appearance later in the film, are humble in their appearance, dressed in rather pedestrian clothing and speak in a working-class vernacular. If anything, however, such monetary limitations seem to have only encouraged Rebecca’s obsessive materialism (noted in the film’s title), for as a young adult, she seems to display nothing but “pampered princess” traits. Wearing outrageously colorful and showy dresses and armed with “If I Were a Rich Girl” (a “pampered princess” remake of a song from *Fiddler on the Roof*) as her cell-phone ringtone, Carrie Bradshaw-wannabe Rebecca spends every day shopping at

department stores and boutiques, constantly rationalizing her compulsive need to purchase objects of self-adornment through a myriad of ridiculously stereotypical “pampered princess” voice-overs. In one, she associates the romantic feeling of “warm butter sliding down toast in your heart” with how she feels when she sees a store. Later she is even more explicit in blurring the line between her relations with humans and objects, claiming that “a man can never treat you like a store” (which can also be interpreted to reveal a stereotypical aversion to sex on Rebecca’s behalf) and describing “the joy you feel when it’s just you and what you’ve bought” as incomparable. Obviously, commodity fetishism like this has serious consequences for a “pampered princess” like Rebecca who is not paternally spoiled with wealth. Specifically, she has amassed credit-card debt to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars (ironically, in the flashback opening scene of the film, Rebecca describes the awe she felt as a young girl seeing women pay for their purchases with a “magic card,” only to find herself completely over her head with 12 of them as a young adult!). Indeed, much of the film’s narrative focuses on Rebecca’s struggles to free herself from this debt despite her inability to withstand the addictive nature of her shopaholism. In several scenes, she shirks personal and occupational responsibilities (a running joke throughout the film is that Rebecca works as a writer for “Successful Saving” magazine) to attend “multi-designer sample sales” and the like since, in her own words, “the world gets better” when she shops. Despite resorting to all sorts of childish antics to hide from her creditors, including using her friends and lying to her boss/love interest, Rebecca is, in stereotypical fashion, saved from having to pay too dearly for her mistakes by her coddling parents, who pay off her debt by selling the RV in which they have invested their life savings. The message for audiences, then, is that American Jewish “pampered princesses” like

Rebecca always require (and most often receive) rescue from their own immaturity and small-mindedness.

Like Rebecca Bloomwood, Frenchy Winkler (Tracey Ullman) in *Small Time Crooks* (DreamWorks, 2000) does not come from a well-off family. In fact, she met her husband Ray when she was an exotic dancer nick-named “Frenchy Fox.” Indeed, in many ways, Frenchy is a classic throw-back to the “pampered princesses” of 20<sup>th</sup> century film, with garish attire, badly-permed and grotesquely-dyed hair, an exaggeratedly large and crooked nose, and off-putting blue nails. As she constantly makes loud and obnoxious wise cracks at Ray’s expense, her passion is immersing herself in tabloid journalism about the lifestyles of the rich and famous (in this case, she idolizes real-life Princess Diana because the Princess has more than 200 pairs of shoes). However, when the Winklers’ cookie-business scheme turns out to be a wild, albeit ironic, success, Frenchy’s orientation to her newfound wealth is totally in line with the rest of the “pampered princesses” in this chapter. Frenchy’s stereotypically nouveau riche attitude toward materialism is revealed in her claim that there is no good in “having dough” unless one is willing ‘to spend it’, and true to her word, she wastes inordinate amounts of money redecorating her business office and home with absurdly gaudy leopard-print fabrics, antiques, statuettes, and gold leaf wallpaper. Delusional in her belief that she is “cultured” and “refined” like the royalty she worships, Frenchy ultimately displays the naïveté of an American Jewish “pampered princess” when it comes to the real world, signing off all of her own fortune to the accountants she had entrusted to (paternally) care for her. In the end, however, there is no rescue for this bankrupt “pampered princess” who has effectively sealed her own fate.

“Pampered princesses” do not have to be adult American Jewish female characters either. Beyond several childhood flashback scenes, wherein the family contexts for, or nascent stages

of, a character's "pampered princess" racialized identity are revealed, there are several American Jewish children who are portrayed in this light as well, including *Sex and the City*'s Lily York Goldenblatt (Alexandra and Parker Fong) and Ashley Grunwald (Brittany Robertson) in *Keeping with the Steins* (Miramax, 2006). Lily, the adopted daughter of highly-successful American Jewish banker Harry Goldenblatt and his Gentile wife Charlotte, is shown throughout the film as a "pampered princess" in-training even at her tender young age (she appears to be 5 or 6 years old), materially spoiled beyond belief by her parents and socialized heavily by Carrie Bradshaw (another key American Jewish character and the ultimate "pampered princess" role model). When lying in Carrie's lap and listening to the latter read the story of Cinderella aloud, Lily urges Carrie to reread the story repeatedly given the former's infatuation with the princess ending. These sorts of aspirations and fantasies are not surprising when the audience sees Harry explaining to Lily, a flower girl for Carrie's wedding, that Carrie is "dressed like a princess." While such language can be viewed as relatively innocuous and "standard" given the social norms of gender socialization in American society, in Lily's case the nexus of "pampered princess" ideology and spoiled material conditions leads to problematic behavior that has real-world consequences. Specifically, in a pivotal scene, Lily picks up Carrie's cell phone as though it were her toy and hangs up on Mr. Big when he calls to discuss his pre-marital cold-feet with Carrie (the result being Mr. Big's dejected no-show on the wedding day). And, although playing a relatively minor role within the narrative of *Keeping Up with the Steins*, Ashley Grunwald still manages to leave quite an impression in the film with her 13-year old "pampered princess" snob act, displaying a coldness with regard to protagonist Ben Fiedler's romantic advances which can be seen as foreshadowing her aversion to sex as an adult. She agrees to attend Ben's bar mitzvah only when she is bribed by Ben's grandfather Irwin, and while in attendance heckles Ben for not

having a flashy-enough “theme” to his party. Such behavior on the parts of both Lily Goldenblatt and Ashley Grunwald certainly racializes them as “pampered princess,” even if both characters are still young girls.

Last but not least, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, my study’s sample of films also featured several American Jewish male characters who exhibit “pampered princess” traits. Given the gendered nature of the “pampered princess” stereotype, it is not surprising that most, if not all, of these male characters were also discussed as examples of the emasculation, feminization, or homosexualization of “neurotic nebbishes.” Also, like most of the female “pampered princesses” discussed above, these male characters are the products of material spoiling by their wealthy parents (particularly fathers). One such example is Jonathan Safran Foer (Elijah Wood) in *Everything is Illuminated* (Warner Independent, 2005), who appears to be so financially taken care of that he does not work, instead traveling all over the world collecting family artifacts to feed his genealogical fetish, a pastime that is not far from the hyper-materialism displayed by female “pampered princesses” with regard to clothing. Jonathan is also shown pouting and whining, albeit indirectly through facial expressions and a soft voice, throughout the film, even wondering aloud (like a spoiled child) if he and his tour guides “are there yet” when searching for his ancestral home in Ukraine. Similarly, *Lucky Number Slevin*’s (MGM, 2006) Yitzchok (Michael Rubinfeld), homophobically nicknamed “The Fairy,” is materially spoiled by his mob-boss father Shlomo to such an extent that Yitzchok is not employed, opting instead to spend his days dressing in outrageously gaudy designer clothing (a “pampered princess” hallmark) and eating at trendy New York restaurants. Given his character’s feminization, it is perhaps not a stretch to consider Yitzchok a “daddy’s girl,” particularly when considering the fact that his father has hired Israeli ex-Mossad agents to serve as Yitzchok’s

bodyguards (Yitzchok even has a “panic button” on a Star of David necklace charm that he can use to alert his bodyguards anytime he is in any sort of trouble).

Other American Jewish male “pampered princesses” in my study include Jacob Elinsky (Philip Seymour Hoffman) in *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* (Touchstone, 2002), whose propensity for complaining is described by another character as the result of Jacob being “a rich Jewish kid from the Upper East Side who’s ashamed of his wealth...[and] walk[s] around unhappy 24/7 because [he is] privileged”; White Goodman (Ben Stiller) in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2004), whose boundless vanity and absolute selfishness are easily attributable to a multi-million dollar inheritance he received from his father; *Funny People*’s (Universal, 2009) Leo (Jonah Hill), whose parental subsidies (including rent payment) enable a completely whimsical and self-interested lifestyle that includes going to parties, making YouTube videos for fun, and performing mediocre stand-up comedy routines; and Andrew Largeman (Zach Braff) in *Garden State* (Fox Searchlight, 2004), whose family riches are juxtaposed with the working-class backgrounds of his old high school friends in New Jersey throughout the film and whose constant struggles with depression can be explained, in part, by self-absorption and material spoiling. Finally, the two bar mitzvah boys in *Keeping Up with the Steins*, Ben Fiedler (Daryl Sabara) and Zachary Stein (Carter Jenkins), can also be understood as “pampered princesses.” Ben expresses unhappiness throughout the film despite living in opulence (including having parents with the means and overprotective desire to get him anything he wants), while the louder and more obnoxious Zach represents a boy “J.A.P.” [sic] through his disrespectful behavior toward others (particularly women, who he routinely sexually harasses), totally carefree attitude (including stealing his father’s liquor), and harrowing narcissism (he cries out that he is the “King of the Torah” when emerging aboard a replica of the Titanic during his bar mitzvah).

Thus, it is important to note here not simply the fact that all of these American Jewish male characters are materially spoiled, but rather the way such spoiling manifests in their “pampered princess” behaviors.

Although the American Jewish “pampered princess” stereotype appears, quantitatively speaking, in fewer characters and films than any of the other stereotypes found in my study, such numerical scarcity has very little, if any, bearing on its qualitative importance. In fact, the perpetuity of “pampered princess” characters in U.S. cinema speaks to just how deeply-ingrained this racialized onscreen stereotype is among filmmakers even today. And while post-Y2K film in the U.S. does reveal some additions, revisions and variations to the historically constructed cinematic trope, including characters who are financially independent professional women and materially spoiled boys, the relative continuity of stereotypical “pampered princess” traits like selfishness, materialism small-mindedness, and aversion to sex indicates that there is still a strong tendency to racialize American Jewish characters (most notably, young non-maternal women) in this manner. In Chapter 7, the numerical scarcity of “pampered princess” characters vis-à-vis other American Jewish cinematic stereotypes, the disproportionate proclivity for American Jewish filmmakers to be involved in the racialized construction of such characters, and the relatively larger number of “pampered princesses” included in my study who are not explicitly identified as American Jewish will be discussed in more detail. In Chapter 6, however, one more racialized American Jewish character stereotype in U.S. film of this decade will be presented: the “scheming scumbag.”

## CHAPTER 6 “SCHEMING SCUMBAGS”

The last of the four American Jewish character stereotypes found in my study is second only to the “neurotic nebbish” in its frequency within post-Y2K U.S. film. The “scheming scumbag” stereotype has historically featured racialized characterizations of American Jewish males as conniving, excessively stubborn, cheating, win-at-all-costs competitive, overly-hard bargain driving, garish, and unmannerly. With the relative economic success and upward class mobility of American Jewish persons vis-à-vis other racial minorities (Burstein), it is not surprising to see that the racialized cinematic stereotype of American Jewish financial obsession continues to persist, with dozens of such portrayals emerging in my study of 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. movies. However, it is also important to note that, like the other American Jewish cinematic stereotypes discussed in Chapters 3-5, the scope of the “scheming scumbag” onscreen racialization has expanded as well.

For example, given the large-scale changes in American Jewish gender roles, particularly the hyperbolically growing number of American Jewish women in professional careers (DellaPergola), the expansion of the “scheming scumbag” stereotype to include several American Jewish female characters discussed in this chapter is to be expected. But it is another profound social change, namely the rise of neoliberalism and its penetration of everyday life with the logic of capitalism and profit, that appears to be linked with a particularly intriguing expansion of the “scheming scumbag” cinematic stereotype. Although “scheming scumbags” have been traditionally portrayed in U.S. cinema as predominantly, if not exclusively, deceitful with regard to financial matters, American Jewish characters (both men and women) were depicted in my study’s sample of films as devious, power-mongering, and untrustworthy with regard to their relationships, love and romance, and sexuality. This may be a result of what a

recent study calls the “commodification of intimacy” in society, wherein interpersonal relations have increasingly become the site of objectification and consumption (Constable). And finally, the increasingly prominent divide-and-conquer racial identity politics described in Chapter 2, specifically the structurally conditioned conflicts between American Jewish persons and other racial minorities, may explain the presence of a large number of American Jewish male “scheming scumbag” characters in this chapter who display insensitive attitudes and behaviors with regard to questions of race, gender, and sexuality; in other words, the divide-and-conquer ideology relating to identity politics in which American Jewish persons are increasingly being socialized appears to parallel the outlook of many American Jewish characters regardless of the particular intersection of identity difference with which they are dealing in the narratives of their respective films. Commensurate with all of these broader social trends, American Jewish persons were racialized onscreen in my study’s sample of films as “scheming scumbags” whose profiteering nature emerged regardless of context, cutting across all other identity differences, including age, class, gender, and sexuality.

Of the 53 films in my study’s sample, 43 (or over 81%) featured at least one American Jewish character who exhibited “scheming scumbag” traits; 33 of these 43 films (almost 77%) were produced by creative teams with directors and/or writers who were American Jewish. This relatively large number of “scheming scumbag” films, as well as the decidedly American Jewish production of such films, will be interrogated more closely in Chapter 7. Like the “neurotic nebbish” stereotype, more than half (66, or almost 53%) of the total sample of 125 characters in my study displayed “scheming scumbag” traits, with 42 (or around 64%) of these 66 characters explicitly identified in their respective films’ narratives as American Jewish (which constitutes almost 48% of the 88 total male characters in my study sample who were explicitly identified as

American Jewish). Only 12 of these 66 “scheming scumbag” characters (roughly 18%) were featured in “independent” films. Again, the question of potential research bias enters here, with a significant number of otherwise racially ambiguous characters included as racialized stereotypes of American Jewish “scheming scumbag” identity. Also, given the historically gendered nature of the “scheming scumbag” stereotype, as well as the popularity (numerically speaking) of male “neurotic nebbish” characters in Chapter 4, it is not surprising to find a great deal of overlap in the characters exhibiting traits of both the former and latter. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of “scheming scumbags” that will be discussed in this chapter were introduced earlier as “neurotic nebbishes.”

Arguably the most obvious and widely recognized racialization of American Jewish persons is the stereotype that they have a cutthroat attitude and relentlessness with regard to money. This racialized imagery of “scheming scumbags” lust for money has clearly survived into 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film, taking particularly explicit (indeed, farcically over-the-top) form in three characters included in my study: White Goodman (Ben Stiller) in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2004), *Snatch*’s (Columbia, 2000) Abraham “Avi” Denowitz (Dennis Farina), and *Tropic Thunder*’s (Paramount, 2008) Les Grossman (Tom Cruise). White Goodman is not only the archetypal villain, but a hyperbolic embodiment of the American Jewish “scheming scumbag” stereotype with respect to material greed. As the “owner, operator, and founder” of the Globo Gym of America Corporation, a monopolizing force in the physical fitness industry that is consistently framed as evil incarnate throughout the film, White is the proverbial ugly face of capitalism personified. A sinister business executive lacking any moral scruples, White uses the advertising slogan “We’re better than you and we know it!” as the corporate mantra for Globo Gym and profits shamelessly from on-site cosmetic surgery staff he

misleadingly describes as “personal alteration specialists.” White apparently even has transnational commercial ambitions, as he gleefully announces the financially salivating prospects of opening up a Globo Gym in Mexico City. In the film’s narrative, however, White’s “scheming scumbag” dreams of boundless market-share expansion are shattered by Gentile heroes, a rather W.A.S.P. “every guy” gym establishment aptly named Average Joe’s that refuses to be another victim of Globo Gym’s “hostile takeovers.” Indeed, the juxtaposition of White’s supposedly insatiable greed with the happy-go-lucky beneficence of Average Joe’s owner Peter, a conflict that eventually manifests in a dodgeball rivalry, forms much of the film’s dramatic tension and represents the context for White’s most prolific “scheming scumbag” antics. In stereotypical fashion, White is consistently shown going to any and all lengths to gain the upper hand on the Average Joe’s fledgling dodgeball team, which enrolls in a tournament whose grand prize includes a hefty cash sum that will keep their gym afloat. White plants a “Trojan Horse”-like spy video camera on the Average Joe’s premises, backdoor deals Globo Gym’s entry into the tournament by leveraging his “close personal buddies” relationship with the Dodgeball Association president, and ultimately tries to bribe Peter on the eve of the final match between Globo Gym and Average Joe’s (offering \$100K for Peter to step away and not participate). It should come as no surprise, then, that White is ultimately unwilling to shake Peter’s hand after Peter leads Average Joe’s to an unexpected victory in the final match. Hence White’s racialized “scheming scumbag” nature prevents him from orienting to the world in any other way but a zero-sum fashion, particularly when money is on the line.

*Snatch* revolves around the avarice of the diamond-smuggling “Avi” Denowitz, an American Jewish “scheming scumbag” character *par excellence*. Known as “a big macher in New York” for his ruthless control of the jewel trade in the U.S., Avi is willing to kill anyone

and anything in order to get his hands on the ultimate prize, an 86 karat stone that was stolen from orthodox Jews (who have long been racially stereotyped as involved with diamonds) in the Netherlands and smuggled into London. It is important to note that while nearly all of the other characters in the film are also chasing after this rock, they are all shown to have extrinsic motivations for involving themselves in the caper, whether basic survival given the promise of getting killed by mobsters if they end-up empty-handed or simply the financial need to pay off debts. Avi, on the other hand, is very rich and thus his covetousness of the diamond appears to reflect the deep-rooted “scheming scumbag” nature of his personality. Indeed, a disgruntled Avi flies across the Atlantic despite proclaiming that he does not “like leaving [the U.S.] unless it’s for warm sandy beaches and cocktails with little straw umbrellas in them,” underscoring for the audience that he is willing to sacrifice anything for his one and only passion, the pursuit of material wealth (in this particular case, a gem). Upon arriving in London, Avi immediately hires henchmen to carry out his no-holds-barred bidding, including numerous scenes of, in his own words, “very effective” torture which he oversees during his all-encompassing quest. Avi even requests that a dog be killed and gutted to find the stone, which they believe the dog swallowed. In the process, Avi inadvertently shoots one of his mercenaries in a scene that exemplifies the heartless prioritization of a “scheming scumbag.” Avi callously explains to the profusely bleeding man that Avi must first find the diamond and “then [he’ll] get [the bodyguard] to a...nice Jewish doctor.” As if this point was not made clear enough earlier in the film through his actions, here Avi is stating explicitly the “scheming scumbag” credo of valuing money over human life. Not surprisingly, Avi ends up with the gem at the end of the film, a final touch that ultimately makes the entire narrative appear to be an elaborate (and disgustingly bloody) scheme that he has executed to perfection. One other concluding observation about Avi that is relevant

to note here is that his Jewish identity is itself a question that is raised early in the film when a voice-over claims that he is “faking” being Jewish to help succeed in the diamond business. While such an accusation, if true, may appear superficially to negate the American Jewish identity of this “scheming scumbag,” an attempted forgery of identity is a scheme all unto itself that reinforces this racialized cinematic stereotype, and thus Avi’s American Jewish identity, quite remarkably.

In *Tropic Thunder*, an over-the-top satire with an ensemble of stereotyped characters, Les Grossman is a hideously caricatured American Jewish “scheming scumbag” studio executive with a massive “\$” charm hanging from his gaudy gold necklace. As if such a blatant physical display of greed was not enough, Les’ behavior throughout the film reveals a calculating, cold, and cutthroat attitude that is unmatched by any other character in my study. While most of the scenes featuring Les in the film involve overt displays of his misogyny and tyranny (two other “scheming scumbag” characteristics that will be discussed later in this chapter), his actions reveal an underlying take-no-prisoners attitude with regard to profiteering. In fact, Les’ staff busily calculates every possible asset and liability related to his movie projects; they hum around him like worker bees, providing him with the latest numbers and figures. Les’ materialism is on climactic display, however, when one of the fictional studio’s top actors of yesteryear, Tug Speedman, “a dying star,” in Les’ words, who is filming an action flick in Vietnam, is held hostage by a local guerilla group. It is the negotiations, or lack thereof, for Tug’s release that offers the audience a naked glimpse of Les’ “scheming scumbag” morality and ethics, or lack thereof. Writing off Tug’s life, Les frames the situation as an opportunity for financial gain using public relations savvy and corporate loophole strategies by unabashedly remarking that, “We’ll set up a scholarship in [Tug’s] name, and way down the road, we will file an insurance

claim.” Indeed, Les even openly ponders the notion of buying-out Flaming Dragon, the guerillas who double as a heroin-smuggling cartel, given his one-track mind which sees the group as offering “huge profit margins.” He perceives Flaming Dragon as engaging in what he describes as a “pan-Pacific power-play” which could potentially cut into his self-proclaimed monopoly over the region (“I own Asia!”). Such crass capitalist cynicism is taken to a new level when Les is forced to deal with Tug’s Gentile agent Rick Pecker, whose loyalty to Tug and good-heartedness are explicitly juxtaposed with Les’ self-indulgence. In an infamous scene involving a hip-hop dance soundtrack, Les offers to bribe Rick in a rather matter of fact fashion with “a G-5 airplane and a whole lot of money” if Rick keeps quiet that Les allowed Tug to die at the hands of the Flaming Dragon. In fact, when Rick appears to express consternation over such obvious bribery, Les sarcastically chides him, telling Rick that he “can grow a conscience in the next five minutes and see where that takes” him. Ultimately, then, Les is nothing but a hyperbolically stereotypical “scheming scumbag” whose callous disregard for the sanctity of human life and friendship underscores his philosophy of financial gain.

There are several other American Jewish “scheming scumbags” whose trademark is their racialized penchant for ruthless business dealings. One of two mafiosos in *Lucky Number Slevin* (MGM, 2006), Shlomo aka “The Rabbi” (Ben Kingsley) is a “backstabbing Philistine” in the words of his counterpart, “The Boss,” leader of an African-American crime syndicate. Shlomo sinks lower in moral depravity with every decision he makes in the film vis-à-vis the Boss, arranging the killing of the Boss’ wife and son as retaliation for the death of one of the former’s henchmen and a competitive leg up in his quest for monopoly control of the New York streets. And when Shlomo is kidnapped by Slevin, “The Rabbi” displays his belief in everything having a price when he offers to pay the latter any amount of money in exchange for freedom.

Similarly, publishing mogul Irv Ravitz (Tibor Feldman) in *The Devil Wears Prada* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2006) is wholly obsessed with maintaining financial dominance in his industry, always strategizing on how to maximize profits, even at the expense of his employees. A “businessman,” as he is exclusively and uniformly referred to by others throughout the film, Irv executes a Machiavellian plot by cutting a deal with the editor-in-chief of his most prized magazine while ensuring that an ambitious employee whom he sees as “younger” and “cheaper” assumes the responsibilities that had been promised a third, long-time laborer in the organization. It is not surprising that Irv’s “scheming scumbag” narrow-mindedness cannot account for the loyalty his workers show to the company, since the only logic with which he operates, in his own words, is “What’s it costing?” In *Two Lovers* (Magnolia, 2008), Michael Cohen (Bob Ari), a dry-cleaning magnate in Brooklyn who owns six stores, is totally engrossed in his business, so much so that he has thoroughly fused his familial responsibilities with his financial endeavors. Michael proverbially gets two-for-the-price-of-one by orchestrating the buy-out of a small neighborhood dry-cleaning store owned and operated by the Kraditor family as a gift to his daughter Sandra (a “pampered princess”) who has a crush on the Kraditor’s son Leonard. In every scene in which Michael appears throughout the film, he only speaks of monetary matters, visiting the Kraditor household to talk of the need to purchase new Italian dry-cleaning machines which are supposedly more efficient (and therefore cost-effective) and inviting Leonard for an interview in which Michael attempts to assess the former’s capabilities as an employee, portraying Michael as a one-dimensional “scheming scumbag.” And *Taking Woodstock* (Focus Features, 2009) features cutthroat financial negotiations between two “scheming scumbags,” Michael Lang (Jonathan Groff) and Max Yasgur (Eugene Levy). Michael, a concert promoter who is described by his girlfriend as “so real if the cash is real,” is attempting to fleece Max, a

local farm-owner, for the use of his land, only to find that Max is playing hardball by demanding “\$75K and not a penny less.” While the excessively-hard bargain driven by Max ultimately wins out, Michael rides away (literally, on a horse) having profited hundreds of thousands of dollars off of the Woodstock festival. In both characters, then, the audience finds embodiments of the “scheming scumbag” *raison d’etre*: the relentless search for monetary riches.

A related, but analytically separable, “scheming scumbag” trait that emerged in my study was miserliness, or the “penny pinching” stereotype associated with Jewish racial identity throughout U.S. and European history. Not only were 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish film characters shown to be overly attached to, and concerned about, their finances, but they were consistently displayed as seeking any and all ways to cut costs and save money wherever possible. Often times, the cheap American Jewish “scheming scumbags” in my study were not as wealthy as the cutthroat barons. Nevertheless, what defines the characters described below is their propensity to squeeze every last bit of financial value from whatever assets they have as well as their tendency to create devious plans for accomplishing their relatively petty monetary ends. This fetishistic possessiveness often appears to override the relationships these “scheming scumbags” have with others, including their romantic partners, while in other cases, stinginess appears as a sort of neurosis that is deeply ingrained in, or inextricable from, the core of the characters’ racialized identity. Regardless, the message audiences receive is loud and clear: American Jewish characters are profoundly tightfisted.

Two characters played by Seth Rogen [Officer Michaels in *Superbad* (Columbia, 2007) and Ben Stone in *Knocked Up* (Universal, 2007)] offer clear-cut examples of the miserly “scheming scumbag”. Both characters are insecure and neurotic: Michaels is a penis-obsessed police officer who displays the exact opposite of professional law enforcement ethics, while Ben

is a slacker stoner whose dreams of developing a semi-pornographic website are dashed when he learns he has impregnated a woman named Allison with whom he had a one-night stand. In either case, the characters take seemingly endless pride in (often intricate) ploys they have created to conserve money to the greatest extent possible. Officer Michaels, a relatively marginal character in the film without many speaking lines, continuously references fringe benefits he enjoys as a result of manipulating others through his line of work, including “free haircuts” and “free beers” at local establishments that seek his assistance. In fact, these seemingly insignificant perks are all that Officer Michaels cites when asked about the positives of his job. In a nearly identical fashion, Ben proclaims proudly (to his girlfriend Allison, no less) that he has been living for years off of a \$14K legal settlement for an automobile accident in which he was injured. Not only does Ben gleefully explain that he has minimized his expenditures by not owning a cell phone or paying taxes in the United States (he is an illegal alien from Vancouver), but he shamelessly accepts maternity gifts from Allison’s sister with aplomb, not thinking twice about Allison’s feelings regarding such matters. In Officer Michaels and Ben, then, one finds the epitome of “scheming scumbag” stinginess, with both racialized characters seeming to derive great contentment from the measly financial savings they are able to secure.

Other examples of “scheming scumbag” misers found in my study include several fellow “neurotic nebbishes” from Chapter 4. *Superbad*’s Seth (Jonah Hill), who, in high school, has his own car and seems middle-class socioeconomically, demands that his best friend Evan pay for Red Bull drinks Seth buys before the two go to class in the morning. He also fantasizes about stealing alcohol from a liquor store despite having \$100 that he was given by a female classmate to buy booze, money to which Seth stereotypically gives primacy over the safety and wellbeing

of his friend Fogell after the latter appears to have been busted by police officers for attempting to purchase alcohol while underage. Eddie Cantrow (Ben Stiller) in *The Heartbreak Kid* (DreamWorks, 2007), who owns his own sporting goods store and has the financial resources to drive a new car and pay for a lavish wedding, reveals his stingy side to Lila, his bride, early on in their Mexico honeymoon trip, wondering aloud “how much this costs” upon first entering the couple’s romantic getaway suite and later reiterating, for no apparent reason, to a heavily-sunburned Lila that the two of them are “liable for damages” given that the hotel has their credit card on file. In fact, Eddie’s first major argument with Lila (despite his previous passive-aggressive attempts at conflict avoidance when her whimsical behaviors were visibly bothering him) occurs after she reveals that she has incurred major debt prior to their marriage and that she works as a volunteer for an environmentalist non-profit group (at which Eddie expresses dismay, given that he thought they were “a dual-income family”). The bliss that these newlyweds should be experiencing is thus spoiled by Eddie’s fixations with cost-cutting and financial security.

*Punch-Drunk Love*’s (Columbia, 2002) Barry Egan (Adam Sandler), owner of a small novelty plunger business, becomes obsessive-compulsive about finding and saving frequent flyer miles coupons from Healthy Choice food products, calling the company several times to inquire about the promotion and spending hours at the supermarket procuring hundreds of these products since he has found a loophole that will guarantee him the purchasing power equivalent of unlimited air travel. In one poignant scene, Barry systematically analyzes which Healthy Choice products will give him the largest return on his investment, and then sends his Latino employee to fill several shopping carts with Healthy Choice pudding, the solution to Barry’s “scheming scumbag” calculations. Similarly, Sonia Teichberg (Imelda Staunton) in *Taking Woodstock*, a “meddling matriarch,” is shown throughout the film as a grotesquely cheap motel owner, attempting to

squeeze customers for even the most meager profits by charging extra for pillows and soap, while proudly “tripling the money” she gets from Woodstock concertgoers by creating three living spaces within one motel room (using sheets to separate bed spaces). Near the end of the film it is revealed that Sonia has been hiding a stash of money for 20 years. When her husband and son find the money in a closet, Sonia has a panic attack, screaming, “Don’t come near my money!” as she jumps onto the floor of the closet in a desperate attempt to protect what she considers to be her most prized possession in life (more important than her own family). After this tirade, Sonia is shown giddily sleeping in the closet with the cash all around her, a symbolic display of her “scheming scumbag” tight-fistedness. And, last but not least, *I Love You, Man*’s (DreamWorks, 2009) Barry (Jon Favreau) is so preoccupied with winning small-scale poker hands with his “friends” that a victory over Barry by newcomer Peter spurs Barry’s explosive outburst, complete with a bullying condemnation of Peter as “a fucking asshole” angry thrusting of poker chips at Peter, and several minutes of paternalistic lecturing on Peter’s lack of skill. In short, then, the message here is that the worst possible outcome for a cheap “scheming scumbag” is to have her or his financial grip compromised in any way.

A subgroup within this stingy “scheming scumbag” category are those American Jewish characters who are racialized as “small-time crooks” (the name of one of the films in my study), petty hustlers who engage in calculated mischief to secure financial gain for themselves. Indeed, the protagonist of *Small Time Crooks* (DreamWorks, 2000), Ray Winkler (Woody Allen) is described by his wife Frenchy as “always on a scheme.” He is an ex-con who has a long history of fraud, racketeering, and associated hustles. At the outset of the film, Ray dreams up a plot to rob a bank by drilling a tunnel underneath it using the store next door as a front for this digging-and-stealing operation. Ray empties out the Winkler’s family savings (\$6,000) as the start-up

money for his scheme, tries to con the old woman who owns the next-door store that he covets, and ultimately settles on an alternative storefront that the Winklers operate as a cookie store. Ironically, what ultimately enriches the Winklers is not Ray's clumsy attempt at heisting the bank, but rather the astronomical sales of Frenchy's cookies (the couple are profiled in a television piece about their meteoric rise to wealth, fame, and success). In a classic "scheming scumbag" moment early in the development of the cookie store, Ray notices that there is popular demand for these baked goods and decides to raise the prices. Yet the most glaring moment of "scheming scumbag" hustling occurs later in the film when a dejected Ray (he and Frenchy have separated) decides to try his luck at stealing an extraordinarily rare necklace from the closet safe of a New York socialite who has invited Ray to her party. Complete with a stethoscope (to break the safe code), an imposter necklace (which he plans to switch for the original) and a look-out (Frenchy's cousin May), Ray is cartoonish in his overly-anxious and ineffectual attempts to abandon the bustling soiree and get his hands on this treasure. In the end, Ray does indeed finagle a necklace, but unfortunately for him it is the imposter one. The point through all of this process, however, is that despite having wealth and security through his cookie business, the "scheming scumbag" in Ray still emerges to such an extent that he is willing to risk all his prestige and status for just one more heist.

Similar in many ways to Ray Winkler is Max Bialystock (Nathan Lane) in *The Producers* (Universal, 2005). In this musical comedy, Max is consistently referred to as "slimy," "sleazy," and "dishonest," all for good reason given his track-record as a "scheming scumbag." Max is a has-been Broadway producer whose shows regularly receive horrific reviews, managing to stay afloat financially only by seducing wealthy widows to bank roll his productions. Max plays gigolo to get his "checkie" (his term for the funds that "hundreds of old ladies" offer him in

exchange for sexual role-playing games), since he abides by a Broadway “scheming scumbag” credo that a producer should “Never put [her/his] own money in the show.” All of these petty hustles pale in comparison, however, to the “creative accounting” scheme that he envisions with his accountant Leo Bloom. A devious Max convinces hesitant Leo to join him in producing “Springtime for Hitler,” a play that will purposely lose money so the two of them can embezzle the start-up funds using a tax loophole that Leo has found. Screaming, in stereotypical “scheming scumbag” fashion, that he “wants that money,” Max goes to any and all lengths possible to see his plot through, using a lousy script written by a neo-Nazi, hiring a crossdressing director, casting a Swedish beauty queen who barely speaks English, and even pretending to be an Irish police officer when the entire heist comes crashing down. In the end, though, Max’s dreams of escaping to Rio de Janeiro and spending his days in Turkish baths are foiled as he is left to hatch new schemes while a prisoner at a state penitentiary. Like Ray Winkler, then, Max is proof that it is impossible for an American Jewish “scheming scumbag” character to shed his racialization as a money-grubber.

There are other “scheming scumbag” small time crooks from my study’s sample of films, including Harvey Wexler (Danny DeVito), “neurotic nebbish” Jerry Falk’s agent and manager in *Anything Else* (DreamWorks, 2003) who tries to market Jerry’s comedy writings as “top quality goods” when meeting with creative production teams. In fact, Harvey goes into monologues comparing Jerry to “quality fabric” during these business meetings. On top of such dehumanizing, hyper-materialist salesmanship, this American Jewish “scheming scumbag” is weasel-like even in dealings with Jerry. Harvey operates using “a sliding scale that slides towards him” and attempts to manipulate Jerry into signing a seven-year contract extension that will guarantee Harvey an unheard of percentage of Jerry’s earnings. Indeed, when Jerry decides

to cut ties with Harvey, Harvey has an overly dramatized mock cardiac arrest in the middle of a restaurant, trying to guilt Jerry into signing the contract; the incident is a hyperbolic example of the depths to which crass “scheming scumbags” like Harvey will sink to hustle a buck. And Sam Kleinman (Peter Falk) in *The Thing About My Folks* (Picturehouse, 2005), the elderly father of the film’s protagonist, claims that “the whole purpose of bullshitting is that you can’t tell whether someone is bullshitting.” Sam also proves to be quite the pool shark, attempting to hustle several hundred dollars worth of billiards winnings from a Gentile patron at a bar only to have to fight the patron with a pool cue once Sam’s scheme is uncovered. Finally, a trio of drug-dealing American Jewish “scheming scumbags” – Harry Goldfarb (Jared Leto) in *Requiem for a Dream* (Artisan, 2000), Luke Shapiro (Josh Peck) in *The Wackness* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2008), and Saul Silver (James Franco) in *Pineapple Express* (Columbia, 2008) – exemplify the small-time crook mentality. Harry is constantly trying to concoct the perfect plan to sell a large amount of cocaine and heroin in the New York City area, with the profits meant to feed his own addictions as well as those of his girlfriend Marion. He is even willing to pimp Marion to various men in order to secure the seed money for his high-quantity purchases of drugs for sale. Luke not only sells marijuana to his psychiatrist in exchange for therapy sessions, but tries to convince his shrink to prescribe him psychotropic medications that Luke can in turn sell on the streets. Luke’s one-track hustling mind can be summarized in an exchange he has with love interest Stephanie, answering Stephanie’s inquiry about his plans for the summer with an emphatic statement: “Making money.” And Saul, another marijuana dealer, peddles his product to pay for his *bubby* (Yiddish for Grandmother) staying at a “nice retirement home.” This noble cause is overshadowed, however, by Saul’s aggressive salesmanship (like Harvey Wexler in *Anything Else*) in which he markets his marijuana as “the trifecta” of weed. In all of these

American Jewish characters, a “scheming scumbag” worldview informs their attempts to secure even the most petty of profits, with most compromising the morality and ethics of the society around them in the process.

While the American Jewish characters described above could easily have been featured in 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. film, another subcategory of “scheming scumbags” exemplifies the 21<sup>st</sup> century expanded racialization of this cinematic stereotype: characters that conceive and hatch underhanded plots to secure objects of desire that are not necessarily directly related to money or finances. And while these characters plan and undertake schemes whose aims range from social prestige to sexual intercourse, a constant is the stubbornness and single-mindedness with which they engage in these quests. One such American Jewish “scheming scumbag” is Alex Rose (Ben Stiller) in *Duplex* (Miramax, 2003), the new owner of an apartment building in Manhattan who wants to evict his elderly widowed upstairs neighbor Mrs. Connolly due to the inconveniences she poses him and his wife Nancy. Beginning in a relatively innocuous fashion with stereotypical attempts to bribe Mrs. Connolly, Alex’s schemes grow increasingly sinister, as he sneaks into the neighbor’s apartment to install a Clapper system that he can operate from his apartment (Mrs. Connolly leaves her television set on all night at a very high volume), tries to infect her with a “killer flu” virus using a handkerchief on which he collected germs from sick subway passengers, carves a massive hole in her apartment through which he hopes she will fall trap-door style, and ultimately purchases a gun and hires a hit man to kill her. While the film is a tongue-in-cheek dark comedy, the audience is left with the clear message that an American Jewish “scheming scumbag” like Alex will use whatever means necessary to achieve his despicable ends.

Similar in their “scheming scumbag” tenacity are the feuding co-protagonists in *Bride Wars* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009), Emma Allan (Anne Hathaway) and Liv Lerner (Kate Hudson). Despite being the best of friends since early childhood, both are willing to engage in cunning and deceitful trickery against one another in a seeming death-match over whose wedding at the Plaza Hotel in New York will emerge as the nuptials of the century. Interestingly, though, each character starts out with a relatively clear objective of spotlighting her own respective matrimonial ceremony, it appears that at some point in the film, the two become locked into a petty battle of stereotypical “scheming scumbag” one-upsmanship that has a life and logic all its own. In the process, Emma, the “neurotic nebbish” who is thought to be unable to hurt a fly, transforms into a vindictive and malicious combatant, sending Liv desserts to fatten her, sabotaging Liv’s hair during a coloring appointment at the beauty salon, planting a highly unflattering high-school yearbook photo of Liv in their hometown newspaper, and crashing Liv’s bachelorette party. For her part, Liv, the “pampered princess” who has always monopolized the attention in this pairing, plots to preempt Emma’s “Save the Date” invitations mailing with her own, hires a fake instructor to ruin Emma’s wedding dance lessons with fiancée Fletcher, sabotages Emma’s skin during a tanning salon appointment, and spreads rumors among their mutual circle of friends that Emma is pregnant (implying that Emma is having a “shotgun wedding”). Indeed, like *Duplex*, this film’s entire narrative revolves around the “scheming scumbag” antics of Emma and Liv, reinforcing the stereotypical notion that American Jewish characters are entertaining if only in their willingness to eschew all decency in plotting against others.

Along these same lines, a trio of “scheming scumbags” in my study’s sample of films – Tal (Jay Baruchel) in *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist* (Columbia, 2008), Harry (John

Billingsley) in *The Man From Earth* (Shoreline, 2007), and Ira Wright (Seth Rogen) in *Funny People* (Universal, 2009) – use others in their selfish ambitions to advance their careers, a goal with obvious, if indirect, financial consequence. Tal, Norah’s on-again, off-again romantic interest, who is portrayed throughout the film in a negative fashion vis-à-vis the Gentile hero Nick, ultimately reveals a conniving ulterior motive for wooing Norah. In a patriarchal and aggressive manner, Tal demands that Norah give her father, the famed recording studio exec Ira Silverberg, a demo CD that Tal has put together with his anarcho-Zionist hip-hop ensemble. As though the cunning of this moment were not damning enough, Tal sinks even lower when Norah, sensing she is but a pawn to Tal, refuses; in shouting back that he has “wasted three years on Ira Silverberg’s daughter!” Tal underscores his “scheming scumbag” disregard for anyone other than himself. Like Tal, Harry is tactless: when John, the protagonist of *The Man From Earth*, reveals in an intimate gathering of colleagues and friends that he is in fact thousands of years old, the “scheming scumbag” first instinct of biology professor Harry is to see if he can experiment on John. This careerist reaction is particularly disturbing when juxtaposed with the other (Gentile) characters in the log cabin that use John’s astounding revelation as an opportunity for critical or existential self-reflection. And finally, fledgling stand-up comedian Ira is so desperate to break through in his career that he steals (and performs) all of his boss George Simmons’ material right before the latter is to go on stage to perform that material at a major event. At the same time, Ira sabotages his friend and roommate Leo’s career by telling George that Leo is “flaky” when George inquires about bringing Leo on board as a comedic writer. Ira’s backstabbing of both George and Leo is indicative of a “scheming scumbag” who is willing to violate those who are closest to him for the pettiest of ambitions. Like Tal and Harry, then, Ira

exemplifies the “scheming scumbag” mantra that one’s self comes first, regardless of the issue or situations.

Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) from *Meet the Parents* (Universal, 2000) and Ben Fiedler in *Keeping Up with the Steins* (Miramax, 2006) display “scheming scumbag” dishonesty with regard to a benign issue like family unity, and though these characters may appear superficially to be well-intentioned, they ultimately reinforce the racialization of American Jewish characters as “scheming scumbags” willing to compromise any and all values in order to actualize even the most righteous of ends. Greg’s longing for acceptance from the family of his girlfriend Pam manifests in a litany of “scheming scumbag” lies and cover-ups, as he fabricates his family history, claiming to have grown up on a farm to try and appease what he assumes are the parochial sensibilities of Pam’s parents. In fact, Greg is so elaborate in his deceit that he even comes up with a laughably unrealistic childhood tale of milking a runt kitten who could not reach her mother’s teat. Such dishonesty is just the tip of the proverbial “scheming scumbag” iceberg for Greg, who spies on Pam’s father Jack (a retired CIA agent who has secret phone conversations, among other covert operations) and attempts to use his observations as ammunition against the latter in front of the entire Byrnes family, only to end up unwittingly revealing Jack’s surprise wedding gift for one of his daughters and her groom. Adding insult to “scheming scumbag” injury is the fact that Greg was hoping that his revelation would absolve him from the embarrassing backfires of his previous plots, which include having lost the Byrnes family cat Jinx and then bought an imposter replacement cat which he painted to appear like Jinx, as well as flushing a toilet that ended up flooding the Byrnes backyard in sewage (Greg blames the incident on Jinx, only to have a hidden video camera reveal during the film’s closing credits that it was in fact Greg who committed the crime). Ben Fiedler, the bar mitzvah boy in

*Keeping the Steins*, is apparently old enough to engage in his own “scheming scumbag” antics, mailing a doctored invitation to his grandfather Irwin so the latter will arrive two weeks early and possibly reconcile with Ben’s stubborn father Adam. Both Greg Focker and Ben Fiedler thus reflect the fact that even the most well-intentioned American Jewish characters are still “scheming scumbags” at the end of the day.

With regard to romance, “scheming scumbags” use a wide variety of ploys to get what they want. For instance, several American Jewish male characters in the study hatched cunning plots to hide their own infidelity and other romantic indiscretions. Aforementioned cheapskate Eddie Cantrow in *The Heartbreak Kid* exemplifies the falsehearted “scheming scumbag,” especially after he falls in love with a Gentile woman named Miranda during his honeymoon in Mexico with newlywed Gentile bride Lila. Eddie concocts a convoluted yarn to explain to Lila his absence for entire days-at-a-time while Lila is recovering from severe sunburn, a “scheming scumbag” tall-tale involving make-believe business dealings, boat expeditions, etc. And proving, once again, that once a “scheming scumbag,” always a “scheming scumbag,” Eddie later lies to Miranda’s family after stalking their family home in Mississippi, saying that he would leave Miranda alone when in fact he attempts to sneak into the home in order to pledge his love for her. The film ends with a final nod to Eddie’s “scheming scumbag” ways, as Miranda’s chance rendezvous with Eddie in Mexico spurs another of Eddie’s cover-ups, as Eddie lies about his encounter with Miranda, but this time he deceives a local woman he has apparently married since his divorce with Lila. Similarly, Leonard Kraditor (Joaquin Phoneix) in *Two Lovers* uses sins of omission and other forms of dishonesty to cover-up his two-timing ways; in particular, he completely neglects to inform his girlfriend, American Jewish “pampered princess” Sandra Cohen, that he is in fact infatuated, having sexual relations, and hoping to run away with his

Gentile neighbor Michelle. And finally, *Keeping the Faith*'s (Touchstone, 2000) Rabbi Jake Schram (Ben Stiller) selfishly disregards the feelings of his mother, best friend (Catholic priest Brian Finn), and rabbinical superiors in trying to conceal his romantic affair with Anna Riley, a Gentile childhood friend. Despite the pain these significant others must endure because of Jake's deceit, the one who is arguably most visibly affected is Anna herself, who is ultimately rejected by Jake upon revealing that she is in love with him and wants to make their relationship publicly known. These "scheming scumbags" demonstrate a cold and callous approach to the romantic feelings of others, leading double lives to avoid dealing with the trust that must accompany real human intimacy.

Taking such dishonesty to an even higher level of flagrancy are a series of American Jewish "scheming scumbag" male characters that design and implement dastardly plots to win over Gentile female romantic interests, often sinking so low as to finagle sexual intercourse. Arguably the most pronounced example of this type of character is *50 First Dates*' (Columbia, 2004) Henry Roth (Adam Sandler), a marine veterinarian in Hawaii who uses an assortment of diabolical schemes to sleep with vacationing women. In the film's opening montage, Henry's exploits include him appropriating false personas, ordering virgin (i.e., non-alcoholic) drinks to "psychologically impair" his victims "without physically impairing them," and bribing a man for use of the latter's jet ski so Henry can escape an awkward situation with one of his victims. However, it is Henry's courtship of Gentile love interest Lucy, an amnesiac who wakes up each morning having forgotten the previous day, that is most profoundly "scheming scumbag" in nature. Henry devises countless schemes to flirt and have breakfast with Lucy, enlisting the help of fake tears (he uses eye drops), penguins, and local townsfolk. Somehow Henry's attempts are able to break through Lucy's memory blocks and the two ultimately fall in love, a romance that

is questionable at best and suspicious at worst given the fact that Lucy must rely on “scheming scumbag” Henry to define her own identity and the nature of their relationship.

There are several other American Jewish “scheming scumbag” males who use deceit in an effort to gain the affection of their Gentile female objects of affection. Another Adam Sandler character, womanizing fireman Chuck Levine in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Universal, 2007), pretends to be gay so he can more easily become friends with, and thus gain more intimate access to, a Gentile woman lawyer named Alex. On a fraudulent “girl’s day out,” Chuck fondles Alex’s breasts, kisses her, and pulls her hair, all while playing up the “scheming scumbag” ruse that he poses no threat given his supposed homosexuality. In a similar fashion, Dr. Jeffrey Squires (Ben Kingsley) in *The Wackness* uses an alias and hides his wedding ring when seeking to have sex with a random young woman he encounters at a bar. Dustin (Jason Biggs) in *My Best Friend’s Girl* (Lionsgate, 2008) hires his roommate and best friend Tank to conduct “emotional terrorism” on Alexis, the love interest who rejected Dustin. He pays Tank to be obnoxious in courting Alexis so that Alexis will realize that she misses Dustin. The dramatic tension in the film arises from the fact that Dustin’s conniving plan backfires, with Tank and Alexis actually falling in love, and under these circumstances, Dustin’s inner “scheming scumbag” emerges even more pronouncedly, as he crashes the wedding of Alexis’ sister (where both Tank and Alexis are present), divulging to all the scheme he and Tank have concocted and admitting that he selfishly wants Tank to “go down” with him in infamy. And White Goodman, the “scheming scumbag” in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*, pretends to read a dictionary to impress his Gentile crush, Globo Gym accountant Catherine. Making matters even worse, despite Catherine’s expressing a clear lack of interest in him, White fires Catherine under the pretense that such action would free her up for dating him. A third Adam Sandler character,

George Simmons in *Funny People*, acts as “scheming scumbag” home wrecker in the life of his ex-girlfriend Laura (who is happily married with two kids). On a visit to Laura’s home while her husband Clark is away on business, George withholds the fact that he has recovered from cancer to manipulate a guilty Laura into having sexual relations with him and does everything in his power to cover up the tryst when Clark arrives home early to the surprise of all. Finally, *Kissing Jessica Stein*’s (Fox Searchlight, 2001) Josh Meyers (Scott Cohen) uses every trick he can to get back together with the title character (who is his ex-girlfriend and employee), snooping through all of Jessica’s belongings at work and inviting himself over to the Stein household for Shabbat dinner. Josh ultimately resorts to even more passive-aggressive schemes, like making crude jokes about Jessica and her Gentile lesbian lover Helen potentially having to raise their kids “interfaith” and engaging in long monologues wherein he chastises Jessica’s perfectionism in front of her. Paradoxically, then, these stereotypical American Jewish male characters engage in “scheming scumbag” duplicity in relation to love, romance, and sexuality, spheres of life that are meant to revolve around honesty.

Even when American Jewish characters in my study’s films were not involved in overt scheming, they demonstrated qualities that can only be described as scumbag in nature. For instance, a series of male bosses were portrayed as slave-driving or grossly mistreating their employees in a variety of ways. One “scheming scumbag” caricature of this type is Mr. Marks (Jon Lovitz) in *The Producers*, a partner in the accounting firm where “neurotic nebbish” Leo Bloom works. Marks’ workers chant “unhappy, very unhappy” as Marks himself walks around them mockingly with a huge cigar in his mouth. Monitoring the employees’ toilet breaks and manipulatively screaming that worker self-esteem is “revolting,” Marks even goes so far as to scare the highly anxious staff as he walks by their desks, yelling “Boo!” and laughing maniacally

when the workers shudder in fright. Indeed, when Leo appears for work six minutes late (according to Marks' count), he is derided by Marks, who calls him "a miserable little worm" and "a nobody" while emphasizing the professional distinction between the two (Leo is apparently a "PA" [public accountant], while Marks is a "CPA" [certified public accountant]). *Along Came Polly's* (Universal, 2004) Stan Indursky (Alec Baldwin), owner of the Indursky and Sons risk management firm where protagonist and "neurotic nebbish" Reuben Feffer works, is portrayed as a more eccentric, albeit equally repulsive, power-mongering boss. Telling dirty jokes at Reuben's wedding and offering to "insure" Reuben's marriage, Stan stereotypically ignores all professional boundaries by massaging Reuben's ear and slapping his bottom in the company restroom. This cartoonish scene also features Stan urinating wildly all over the place while disrespectfully filling the air with his excessively loud flatulence. Arguably most appalling, however, is Stan's matter-of-factness when reporting to Reuben that Reuben must take over all of the office responsibilities while Stan flies to Barbados with his mistress for the weekend. It is this sort of sleaziness, while morally problematic to most, that is made to appear racially apropos for the American Jewish "scheming scumbag" boss.

Other aforementioned "scheming scumbags" also display a tyrannical management style when dealing with their subordinates. Michael Cohen in *Two Lovers* calls Leonard Kraditor into his office for a lunch appointment, only to end up badgering Leonard with an in-your-face interrogation that includes the disquieting question "Are you a fuck-up?" *50 First Dates'* Henry Roth abuses his assistant, an androgynous character whose lack of sexual attractiveness for Henry becomes the butt of his inappropriate and rude jokes. Not only does Henry physically slap his assistant with a fish at one point, but he also commands a walrus to vomit on the assistant under the pretense that she/he ate Henry's sandwich. Another Adam Sandler character,

George Simmons in *Funny People*, yells at and punches his assistant Ira, even joking about wanting to kill Ira. He also refuses to help Ira with Ira's comedy routine and even has sex with a woman Ira was courting since, according to the power-tripping superior George, Ira was "not getting it done" with her. But all of these displays of "scheming scumbag" authoritarianism pale in comparison with those of *Tropic Thunder*'s Les Grossman, whose verbal tirades are shockingly profane and disrespectful. A sample of Les' despotism include commanding a key grip to punch Damian Cockburn (director of one of Les' films) "really fucking hard" in the face, explaining to Damian that he will have his fist so far up Damian's "shithole" that every time Damian "farts," "it's going to have to get past my wedding ring," denigrating a U.S. soldier by ordering the latter to "shut the fuck up," telling his own assistant that "a nut-less monkey" could do the assistant's job, instructing the leader of the Flaming Dragon guerilla group to "literally fuck your own face," and finally threatening to "snap [the] dick off" of Tug Speedman's agent Rick Pecker and "stick it up your ass." While these remarks are inexcusable, they are but a smidgen of the furor of this unhinged "scheming scumbag." Hence, like all the other American Jewish totalitarian supervisors described above, Les is incapable of dealing with his workers in a manner that even resembles decency, reinforcing the racialization of "scheming scumbags" as being singularly oppressive.

A final feature of American Jewish "scheming scumbags" that emerged from my study was the insensitivity these characters show regarding questions of culture, ethnicity, and race. Far from displaying a sense of humility given the American Jewish historical experience with antisemitism and racialization in the U.S., these characters instead engage in commentary and actions directed toward other minority groups that highlight ignorance of such matters. A pair of aforementioned Adam Sandler characters provide useful illustrations of this insensitivity. In a

scene from *Funny People*, George Simmons launches into a set of tasteless jokes railing against the accent and mannerisms of a European physician whose actual nationality is left ambiguous. In fact, despite the fact that the doctor is trying to help cure George, George rudely and ungratefully lambasts Germans and Swedes alike (ignorantly conflating these two very different cultures in the process) right in front of the doctor. And Barry Egan is shown throughout *Punch-Drunk Love* bossing around his Latino assistant, forcing the assistant to go around and physically grab hundreds of Healthy Choice pudding snacks off of supermarket shelves and place them into dozens of shopping carts (a duty that falls well outside the job responsibilities of selling novelty plungers). And when Barry whimsically leaves for Hawaii to rendezvous with his new love interest, he flippantly tells his assistant to run the business while he's away (an unfair abdication of responsibility that appears to be, at least partly, racial in nature). Along these lines, *Knocked Up*'s Ben Stone hangs around with a bunch of American Jewish friends who are equally disrespectful of cultural, ethnic, and racial difference. In a nightclub scene, they engage in a barrage of Islamophobic jokes directed at their Gentile friend who is growing a beard as part of a dare the group of friends have issued him, and later in the film Ben gives a racist description of walking through Los Angeles' Koreatown. Ben Kleinman (Paul Reiser) and his father in *The Thing About My Folks* also cannot help but partake in bigotry, albeit in a more subtle fashion. When attending a local minor-league baseball game in upstate New York, the two mockingly chant the Latino name of player Ramon Asconcela after Ramon is announced over the PA system as the next batter. And Avi Denowitz in *Snatch* offers his own litany of insensitive remarks, referring to Russians as "Cossack sluts" and telling a group of Brits that they "live like animals," while *The Heartbreak Kid*'s Eddie Cantrow also employs a derogatory stereotype

when lying to his wife, covering-up his Mexican honeymoon fling with another woman by saying that he “got behind a Korean couple” while playing golf.

Arguably the most problematic example of “scheming scumbag” cultural, ethnic, and racial insensitivity, however, occurs within the context of the controversial film *Inglourious Basterds* (Universal, 2009), a tale of an American Jewish guerilla unit exacting vigilante revenge against Nazi soldiers during World War II. In particular, the character known as “Bear Jew,” Donnie Donowitz (Eli Roth), who smiles every time Gentile commanding officer Aldo Raine speaks of torturing Nazis, beats a defenseless German soldier’s brains in with a baseball bat and rejoices with a psychotic fit that includes shouts comparing the bludgeoning to “Ted Williams hittin’ one out of the park!” And in the film’s climactic final scenes, Donnie and fellow *Inglourious Basterd* Omar Ulmer (Omar Doom) fire hundreds of rounds of live ammunition indiscriminately at a crowd of Nazi Party officials who are racing for the exits of a burning cinema theater, both eventually finding the dead bodies of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels and shooting a ridiculously large number of rounds into these corpses. At the same time, a third *Inglourious Basterd*, Smithson Utivich (B. J. Novak), is shown giddily scalping the head of a German officer. Despite the moral relativism that can be used to justify these actions, such highlighting of American Jewish thuggish violence against Nazis, when combined with a glaring absence of the opposite kind of violence onscreen, actually reinforces the “scheming scumbag” stereotype by racializing American Jews as vindictive in their targeting of a particular group for punishment and violence.

American Jewish “scheming scumbags” were also displayed in my study’s sample of films as homophobic and misogynistic. The epitome of this stereotypical “scheming scumbag” is Cal (Seth Rogen) in *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (Universal, 2005), an entertainment store laborer

whose sleazy lines in the film are exclusively heterosexist in nature. Whether recounting stories at work of his travels to Tijuana to see “a woman fucking a horse” or accusing his friend Dave of being gay because the latter has chosen to be celibate, Cal is obsessed with talking about gender and sexuality in as crass a manner as possible. Going so far as to advise the film’s protagonist, the naïve Andy, to “punch [Andy’s love interest Trish] in the head emotionally,” the dangerously abusive Cal hires an attractive young woman to work alongside him in the stockroom (presumably for the prospects of sexually harassing her) and compares sexual exploits to growing marijuana, explaining to Andy that the more seeds he planted, the more pot he could ultimately smoke and urging Andy to “wait for [Andy’s budding relationship with a woman] to grow into a plant and then...fuck the plant.” Adam Sandler’s characters Chuck Levine in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* and Charlie Fineman in *Reign Over Me* (Columbia, 2007) follow Cal’s example, both using homophobic and misogynistic slurs like “f-ggot” and “p-ssy” throughout their respective films and heterosexualizing every scene in which they are involved, while Tal, the “scheming scumbag” in *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist*, is mean-spirited in his homophobic attacks on title character Nick’s “gay band” and his patriarchal harassment of Norah (commenting to her face that she is “going to be an amazing mother someday”). *The Wackness*’ protagonist Luke Shapiro and his therapist Dr. Jeffrey Squires enjoy a scene of “male-bonding” at the expense of women everywhere. In a discussion of their respective “beaver hunt[s],” Luke explains that he tried to “fuck” Katie Randall, a 60 lb. classmate of his in middle school after she had drunk a 24 oz. bottle of malt liquor, while Dr. Squires describes his experiences coaxing women to “confide” and “trust” in him so that “when she’d least expect it, I’d stick my tongue down my throat,” both stories bordering on sexual violence. *I Love You, Man*’s (DreamWorks, 2009) resident American Jewish “scheming scumbag” Barry is also portrayed as revoltingly

heterosexist, bargaining sexual relations with his Gentile wife in the crudest manner possible on multiple occasions. At one point, Barry agrees to let Peter join Barry's poker night per his wife's wishes, but only in exchange for her having "sex with the lights on...all night long," later upping the ante (pun intended) when Peter's fiancée (and his wife's friend) Zoe needs to stay at the couple's house by demanding that his wife "dress as a cheerleader tonight for [him]." Such misogyny and patriarchal power plays are also prevalent in *Superbad*'s character Seth, who not only goes to painstaking detail in describing his favorite pornographic website ("Vag-tastic Voyage"), but plans to "fuck girls" from his high school that he considers to have good "dick-taking abilities" by buying and serving them alcohol. Last, but certainly not least, are three American Jewish "scheming scumbags" who sexually harass female employees: Les Grossman in *Tropic Thunder* threatens to "rip the tits off" his female corporate travel agent, White Goodman in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* insists to his corporate lawyer Catherine that the two "should mate," and Max Bialystock in *The Producers* seeks to satisfy his "casting couch craze" by auditioning a young Swedish employee named Ulla to play "the part [of] the producer's girlfriend." In all of these cases, American Jewish male characters display a callous disregard in relation to issues of gender and sexuality, thus reinforcing the racialization of "scheming scumbags" as inherently garish, selfish, and unmannerly.

In this chapter, the key themes and fundamental features of the "scheming scumbag" cinematic stereotype were outlined. While this racialized representation of American Jewish characters onscreen, with roots in 20<sup>th</sup> century film as well as centuries of European antisemitic mythology about the pernicious Jewish threat of Gentile domination), has clearly survived in 21<sup>st</sup> century 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. cinema, it has also expanded to reflect the recent shifts in broader U.S. society. Hence American Jewish "scheming scumbags" were consistently displayed in my

study's sample of more than 50 post-Y2K movies in the U.S. to be obsessed, miserly, devious, plotting, and insensitive to others, whether these characters were male or female, or whether their particular object of attachment was financial or romance-related. Such characterizations are but one of four American Jewish stereotypes in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film that have been discussed in Chapters 3-6. In Chapter 7, these findings will be situated within the broader sociological context of American Jewish identity today, particularly the question of American Jewish filmmakers' overwhelmingly disproportionate role in the production of these racialized cinematic stereotypes as well as any variance in the quantity and representation across these various stereotypes. In short, then, Chapter 7 will serve as an attempt to answer directly my study's research questions in the context of the contemporary social totality.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, the study findings that were presented in Chapters 3-6 will be examined vis-à-vis my study's research questions from Chapter 1. Specifically, this chapter will provide a more nuanced discussion of the persistence of cinematic stereotypes of American Jewish identity in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. movies, as well as discuss the implications of such findings for the academic study of race and film. Particular attention will be paid to the dialectical interplay between structure and agency in the racialization of American Jewish identity onscreen, including such issues as American Jewish filmmakers' highly disproportionate involvement in the production of these racialized portrayals, the numerical dominance and varying explicitness of certain stereotypes vis-à-vis others, and the hegemonic discourses of racialization emerging from a changing and crisis-ridden global political economy. Also, the findings of my study will be compared and contrasted with several other works on 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish cinematic representations, including characters from my study. Finally, my study's limitations will be outlined, and suggestions for future research that addresses the question of racialization in film, whether in relation to American Jewish identity or that of other racial minorities, will be offered.

Given that "the film stereotype is paradigmatically linked to racial discourse" (Wiegman 159), the results of my study indicate that 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish identity, at least as it is represented in U.S. film, appears to persist in being racialized by U.S. filmmakers, even if an especially large percentage of these directors and/or writers are American Jewish themselves. In short, then, my study's primary research question seems to be answerable in the affirmative, as American Jewish filmic characters from a sample of U.S. movies from this decade continue to embody highly racialized traits associated with the four most prominent historical cinematic stereotypes of American Jewish identity. In fact, the specific onscreen representations of

American Jewish persons today are in many ways no different than those that have racialized American Jewish identity in mass media for decades. The “meddling matriarch,” the “neurotic nebbish,” the “pampered princess,” and the “scheming scumbag” continue to be prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. cinema, and although each of these four American Jewish stereotypes appears to have been expanded to include a more diverse range of characters with regard to age, class, gender, and sexualities, the overall racialization of American Jewish identity persists within the 125 characters analyzed in my study.

### **The Dialectics of 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Jewish Cinematic Racialization**

To properly engage the dialectical process of racialization, however, it is important to address the socio-political interests and subjective agency of the creative forces involved in the production of these cinematic representations of American Jewish racial identity. Indeed, the fact that almost three-fourths of the directors and/or writers of the films included in my study identify as American Jewish is a phenomenon that simply cannot be ignored. There are several possible explanations for this unevenness in the identity of the producers of these racialized cinematic portrayals of American Jewish persons, with many of these potential motives specific to each of the four cinematic stereotypes addressed in my study. Although much of what can be inferred about these filmmakers’ subjectivities is speculation, it is still helpful to engage in such inquiry lest my study posit the untenable proposition of racialization without racializers.

One overarching rationale that is important to consider for the filmmakers whose work appeared in my study, especially those involved in the production of big-budget “Hollywood” movies, is the financial incentive to engage in the increasingly profitable endeavor of marketing racial identity as a commercial commodity for the consumption desires of a “white” mainstream audience (Halter). This “commodification of Otherness” is so financially lucrative because the overwhelming majority of consumers see such Otherness as “a new delight, more intense, more

satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (hooks 424). This “manufactured diversity” and “marketing of difference” can be thought of as a mass media form of alienating capitalist commerce, in which media entrepreneurs reduce the “Other” to an “authentic inauthenticity,” which is in turn purchased by “white” mainstream consumers even if ultimately producing a deep-rooted “indifference to difference” among these audiences (Grossberg). The end result on a structural level is the reinscribed racialization of the Other, a “commodity racism” (Hall) even, that locks cultural producers into a self-perpetuating cycle in which they participate in the fetishism of their own racial identity.

It is important to note, however, that a major part of marketing race involves depriving any racialized portrayal of “its substance,” since “any ‘real’ Other is instantly denounced for its ‘fundamentalism’” (Žižek 37). In other words, only an “aseptic, benign form” (Žižek 37) of the racialized “Other” is permissible to mainstream movie audiences, who seek to consume from a safe “self-distance” (Žižek 39) which keeps the hegemonic structures of racialization in broader society intact. This caveat to the “commodification of Otherness” seems to be substantiated by the results of my study given the significantly larger number of explicitly identified American Jewish characters appearing in “independent” cinema versus “Hollywood” movies; in other words, while “Hollywood” seeks to provide mainstream audiences with commoditized stereotypes of American Jewish racial identity without necessarily identifying such characters explicitly as American Jewish, “independent” cinema is more open to featuring American Jewish characters whose racial identity is a central theme in their respective films’ narratives. The point here is that those films that are targeting larger pools of consumers, specifically the big budget “Hollywood” blockbusters, appear to be less apt to have their characters explicitly identified as American Jewish (i.e., a racialized Other), even if the portrayals of such characters are highly

exemplary of historical American Jewish cinematic stereotypes, since such explicit identification could potentially undermine the profitability of commoditized “authentic inauthenticity” given mainstream audience’s desire for stereotypes over race consciousness. In short, “Hollywood” tries to provide commoditized identities without engaging in identification and identity politics, while in the case of “independent” cinema, whose link to the cash nexus is far more tenuous, characters were far more likely to be explicitly identified as American Jewish, with many openly embracing their racial identity.

Nevertheless, these more abstract structural concerns may not resonate with the everyday lived experiences of American Jewish filmmakers, for whom the economic interests of proliferating cinematic stereotypes of American Jewish persons could outweigh the more indirect costs of any reinforced racialization of their own identity. In increasingly tenuous economic times, particularly for the movie industry, the guarantee of box office success, even if it requires the racialization of American Jewish identity, can be too good to pass up for these directors and/or writers. It is also important to situate the creative tendencies of American Jewish filmmakers within the larger historical context of Jewish entertainment, most notably the appropriation of self-deprecating stereotypes as a longstanding practice by Jewish humorists (as observed by such renowned Jewish thinkers as Sigmund Freud and Albert Memmi). It is within such a historical context that contemporary American Jewish self-racialization in popular culture, especially film, can be understood as “masochistic self-criticism,” with an often uncomfortably blurred line between internalized antisemitism and self-conscious satire (Dorinson). In short, then, there are several potential sociological factors that can be linked to the propensity for American Jewish directors and/or writers to create and distribute the types of stereotypical portrayals of American Jewish racial identity found in my study.

In other words, one must account for the possible subjective interests involved in the uneven production of certain American Jewish cinematic stereotypes over others, the question of why certain racialized characters were explicitly identified as American Jewish more so than others, as well as the differing rates of American Jewish character stereotypes in “Hollywood” movies versus “independent” cinema. With regard to the relative lack of “meddling matriarchs,” or parental figures of any kind for that matter, in my study sample vis-à-vis other racialized American Jewish character stereotypes, U.S. filmmakers, especially American Jewish ones, may be engaging in a type of social psychological repression and denial regarding the fact that the American Jewish community is aging. In other words, by showcasing a highly disproportionate number of youthful American Jewish characters (especially men of the “neurotic nebbish” and “scheming scumbag” variety), American Jewish directors and/or writers may be trying to hide from the growing reality that the elderly are quickly becoming the largest population of American Jewish persons in the U.S. This sense of nostalgia for the “good old days” when young adults reigned supreme within the American Jewish community has been discussed in the literature on contemporary American Jewish representations in film (Furnish).

At the same time, there is a more general profit-driven proclivity in U.S. mass-media entertainment, particularly the Hollywood film industry, to produce visual imagery of glamorous young persons, a trend that is reinforced by a celebrity fetishism characteristic of Western post-industrial capitalist societies (Barbas). This social fact would help explain why such a relatively large number of “meddling matriarchs” in my study appeared in “independent” films rather than big budget “Hollywood” films, where older characters are far scarcer generally. And the relatively large number of “meddling matriarchs” who are explicitly identified as American Jewish in my study’s sample may be the result of a different, albeit related, psychological

defense mechanism. In this case, the projection of racial insecurity onto cinematic stereotypes of the older maternal American Jewish women makes sense (Antler), since that demographic group is highly unrepresentative of the actual identities of Hollywood film directors and/or writers themselves. In other words, if there was a particular character stereotype that young male American Jewish filmmakers would feel safest in racializing more overtly, it would be “meddling matriarchs,” as they are the most physically and symbolically distanced from the creative production process itself.

The overwhelming number of “neurotic nebbishes” in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film, as well as the higher rate of “neurotic nebbishes” in “Hollywood” movies versus “independent” cinema, can also be linked to the actual subjectivities of the (disproportionately American Jewish male) filmmakers, especially given that they live at a point in time when they ironically “most fret their individual and collective self-destruction” in a supposedly antisemitism-free U.S. society (Itzkowitz 235). Hence by proliferating stereotypical imagery of ineffectual American Jewish persons, particularly young men, these filmmakers are involved in “domesticating” any “potentially threatening” sense of Jewish racial “liminality,” and as such they strive to “reaffirm the solidity of the American middle-class” to which they had sought assimilation and with which they now increasingly seek affiliation (Itzkowitz 245). Such assimilatory logic would also explain the relatively smaller number of “neurotic nebbishes” who are explicitly identified as American Jewish in their respective films’ narratives. With regard to budget size, “neurotic nebbish” portrayals since these American Jewish filmmakers would want to produce representations of servility without necessarily calling too much attention to their racial identity of these characters. In the words of one scholar, producing films which feature an “aggrandizing but flattening out of Jewishness” in the form of supposedly racially ambiguous “neurotic

nebbishes” is the ultimate “wish fulfillment” for the assimilating American Jewish male director and/or writer, since it offers him the opportunity to exorcise his assimilatory anxieties without appearing to be involved in racialization (Itzkowitz 243).

The relative absence of “pampered princesses” in my study can also be attributed to factors relating to the disproportionately American Jewish racial identity of filmmakers in my study. First, with so many American Jewish women today occupying a more substantial role in professions (DellaPergola), there is less relevancy for racializing them as materially spoiled “daddy’s girls.” Indeed, American Jewish filmmakers seem to be increasingly portraying young, non-maternal American Jewish women not as “pampered princesses,” but as “female schlemiels” alongside male “neurotic nebbishes,” a symbolic nod to the blurring gender roles emerging from closer proximity between men and women in the labor force. At the same time, the growing rates of intermarriage among American Jewish persons (specifically men, in the case of U.S. directors and/or writers) resonates with the paucity of “pampered princesses” since young non-maternal American Jewish women are “doubly displaced” (Johnston 215) by these filmmakers, effectively rendered invisible by the presence of Gentile women (a tip of the hat to the stereotypical American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” obsession with *shiksas*). And the relatively high number of “pampered princesses” included in my study who were not explicitly identified as American Jewish in their respective films, as well as the higher rate of “pampered princesses” appearing in “independent” films, may owe to the fact that often the stars of these films, are not the female characters themselves, but the material objects with which these racialized “pampered princesses” are obsessed. In other words, when creating a film that attempts to highlight and critique the commodity fetishism of contemporary city life (i.e., New York being the setting for the overwhelming majority of films featuring “pampered princesses”), filmmakers will tend to

understate the racial identities of all characters, including American Jewish persons, since identity politics are essentially rendered meaningless amidst a cosmopolitan “Total Market.” And a large number of the films in my study that were representative of “independent” cinema took on such materialism as their main subject matter, whether the highly racialized “pampered princesses” in these films were explicitly identified as American Jewish or not.

Finally, the agential interests involved in the production of American Jewish “scheming scumbags” in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film are in many ways closely related to those governing the “neurotic nebbish” cinematic stereotype. For starters, the relatively large number of this traditionally gendered character stereotype indicates the degree to which the filmmakers in my study, especially those involved in the production of big budget “Hollywood” movies, may be seeking to reproduce images of themselves (at least with regard to gender) onscreen, since these filmmakers are predominantly American Jewish men. At the same time, the creation of “scheming scumbag” characters who control and manipulate others in their dealings (whether financial or otherwise) can be thought of as a psychological reaction formation to the same ineffectuality that prompts these American Jewish directors and/or writers to create “neurotic nebbish” characters. In other words, the hyper-masculine traits of ruthlessness, competitiveness, and insensitivity embodied by “scheming scumbags” can be seen as an attempt to cultivate a renewed sense of virility with regard to American Jewish masculinity, given the racialized emasculation of American Jewish identity historically (Boyarin). The callous romantic relations and flagrant misogyny characterizing many “scheming scumbags” in my study can also be seen as a reaction to the ascendancy of women in the political economy over the past few decades; American Jewish filmmakers may be doing their part in the gender politics of backlash that has characterized the era following the abeyance of women’s rights movements in the U.S. (Michel).

And the relative tendency for these (mostly American Jewish) directors and/or writers to leave the racial identity of “scheming scumbags” ambiguous within their respective films’ narratives makes sense as a learned strategy for averting antisemitism, since one would have to think that the genocidal consequences of the centuries-old mythology of Jewish conspiratorial designs in popular culture is well known among American Jewish filmmakers. All of these social factors would help explain why there is such an extreme paucity of “scheming scumbags” in my study’s “independent” films, as such cinema tends to have a far more critical and nuanced approach to onscreen representations of class, gender, and race (Biskind).

Addressing the more structural aspects of the dialectical process of 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish cinematic racialization, there are hegemonic discourses and political economic conditions which condition these filmmakers’ agencies. One such structural concern is the tripartite structure of U.S. racialization discussed in Chapter 1; American Jewish filmmakers might perceive the reproduction of stereotypical American Jewish characters as a means by which to ensure the maintenance of their status and social location as “colored.” Put concretely, these filmmakers may be discursively conditioned to consistently portray American Jewish racial identity using the stereotypes associated with the “colored” classification, so as to guarantee that they, as American Jewish persons themselves, will not have to face the socioeconomic and political oppression of the “black” category, even if the persistence of “colored” stereotypes ultimately prevents American Jewish identity from being classified as “white.” This motivation can be particularly strong given the contemporary context of divide-and-conquer racial identity politics between American Jewish persons and other racial minorities.

Moving even more into abstraction, there are other structural issues pertaining to the current socio-historical conjuncture, specifically profound political economic shifts in the base of

global society. These shifts include: (1) the development of transnational capital that integrates nation-based capital into a global production and financial system, (2) the rise of a transnational capitalist class deriving profit from global markets and circuits of accumulation, (3) the emergence of transnational state apparatuses, and (4) the commensurate appearance of new power relations and structural inequality in societies worldwide (Robinson 7-8). Far from establishing itself and functioning smoothly, however, this nascent global capitalist system is riddled by “spiraling” contradictions, including an implacable and hyperbolic social polarization of the global polity, structural crises of overaccumulation and surplus absorption, and counter-hegemonic challenges to its legitimacy and authority (Robinson 20).

It is within such a fractured and fragmented political economic context that the power of the emergent ruling class is most tenuous and, commensurately, racialization becomes most reactionary. A particularly relevant example of this was the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, another historical epoch marked by global crises associated with massive shifts in the political economic base of human society. With the emergence of industrial capitalism across the Western world during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “national financial-industrial combines that struggle[d] to divide and redivide [sic] the world amongst themselves through their respective nation-states” produced “inter-state competition, military conflict and war among the main capitalist countries” (Robinson 7). Within such political economic flux, it is not surprising to see that Jewish identity was racialized most explicitly in those countries which had lost the greatest amount of power during such a transition, including the still feudal empires of Russia and Prussia/Germany. Indeed, it was Tsarist Russia where *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* were forged, printed, and widely distributed, propagating antisemitic notions that Jewish persons were responsible for producing “economic crises...by no other means than...withdrawing money from

States” (Bronner 29) and invoking “international rights [that]... wipe out national rights” (Bronner 13). This myth of a transnational network of Jewish money-based “monopolies” that were busy “drain[ing] off from the land both labour and capital” (Bronner 18) helped create a racialized hysteria about Jewish identity that ultimately led to *gulags* and the Nazi holocaust, all of which indirectly helped the emergence and hegemony of nation-state capitalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The point here is not that genocidal forms of antisemitism are necessarily on the horizon, but that taking historical materialist account of today’s shifting 21<sup>st</sup> century political economy, and the hegemonic discourses about racial identity emerging from these changes, can be helpful for understanding the patterns of racialization in contemporary U.S. film. For example, the (predominantly American Jewish) directors and/or writers whose work is featured in my study may be structurally conditioned to produce representations of American Jewish racial identity that “do not challenge the status quo,” but instead “*embody* it” (Itzkowitz 245) through a perpetuation of stereotypes that have been cosmetically altered (i.e., through increased diversity in age, gender, sexualities, etc.) in a way that leaves the underlying power relations of racialization intact. In other words, the agential concerns and subjective interests of the various filmmakers whose works are analyzed in my study are mutually reinforcing of universal issues which manifest, often indirectly, unwittingly, and subconsciously, in the particular forms of American Jewish representation discussed in my study. For example, the portrayal of American Jewish “scheming scumbags” engaging in highly insensitive behavior may reflect a reinvigorated divide-and-conquer identity politics in which “different groups push distinct strategies and tactics or turn to the more immediate pursuit of sectoral interests” (Robinson 20), a critical ideological imperative transnational capitalists must pursue in order to gain hegemony for the

emergent system which seek to put in place. Ultimately, then, American Jewish representations in U.S. film today can be understood as both similar and different to their 20<sup>th</sup> century precursors, with the four traditional cinematic stereotypes of American Jewish racial identity serving new agential interests and ideological purposes within a profoundly shifting political economic context.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century American Jewish Cinematic Stereotypes: Racialization or Not?**

Given the discussion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cinematic racialization of American Jewish identity in the last section, it appears that the nuanced conclusions of my study could only be possible by using a dialectical conceptual framework that accounts for structure and agency as well as material conditions and the realm of ideas. One way to assess the utility and validity of this framework is by considering the differences that emerged between the analysis and interpretation of the four American Jewish cinematic stereotypes in my study versus other recent studies of contemporary American Jewish onscreen representations, including many of the characters included in my study's sample. In the paragraphs below, the findings of some of the latest research on American Jewish cinematic representations, all of which operated from the conceptual frameworks of culture and ethnicity, are compared and contrasted with the findings of my study, in which racialization was the theoretical focus.

Take, for instance, some of the “meddling matriarchs” that were discussed in Chapter 3. A recent article analyzing *Meet the Fockers* (Universal, 2004) claims that the Focker parents, Roz (Barbra Streisand) and Bernie (Dustin Hoffman), “defy” and “subvert” traditional cinematic stereotypes because of Roz's primary breadwinner status in the family, as well as other atypical gender roles the couple embody. The author's ultimate argument is that such “defiant” representations make American Jewish parents appear “cool,” as opposed to problematic. Indeed, the author goes so far as to hail the Focker parents as “cooler than even one of the

coolest performers in Hollywood, Robert De Niro [who plays Jack Byrnes in the film]” (Baskind 4), positing that even though “Jewishness” itself is not cool, “difference” is “trendy,” and therefore the Fockers’ “larger message” of being “Jewish and unassimilated” exemplifies the openness and possibilities for ethnicity, “especially the dark and exotic,” within “twenty-first century American culture” (Baskind 14). Even if “the Jew [sic]...does not really embody cool,” the supposedly “post-racial” social reality of U.S. society today allows American Jewish characters like the Fockers to be “the insider[s]” of “coolness” (Baskind 17).

Contrary to this author’s assertion that Bernie and Roz “exude goodness and functionality as opposed to the Byrnes’ (Gentile) dysfunction” (Baskind 4), however, the Fockers can be interpreted to actually represent a highly racialized American Jewish “meddling matriarch” side of the same coin of extreme family dysfunction as the Byrnes’ aloofness and detachment. In fact, all of the humor in *Meet the Fockers* revolves around juxtaposing these two mutually opposed, but equally problematic, stereotypical families: the “eccentric and...disturbed” American Jewish Fockers and the “tense [and] stilted” White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (W.A.S.P.) Byrnes (Baskind 17). Indeed, the film goes to cartoonish lengths to convey the message that the only fate worse than having one American Jewish “meddling matriarch” parent is having two of them. It is true that the “meddling matriarch” shenanigans of Bernie and Roz ultimately rub off on Jack and Deena, who begin to loosen up and open themselves to the possibilities of a less rigid relationship between one another (including sexually) and greater emotional intimacy with their daughter Pam. However, while the other article’s author interprets “Fockerization” as an indication that “the Focker family has made [the] Byrnes cool” (Baskind 3), it is crucial here to recognize that the Fockers remain staidly dysfunctional vis-à-vis the Byrnes, who are portrayed as willing to improve their family dynamics. In other words, while the American Jewish parental

characters appear self-satisfied and unwavering as “meddling matriarchs,” the W.A.S.P. couple is reflexive, dynamic, and evolutionary in becoming more balanced and well-adjusted marital partners and parents. Hence while Bernie and Roz may appear on the surface to be progressive in their sexual politics and gender roles, they are nothing more than a duet of the American Jewish “meddling matriarch” stereotype, essentialized in their racialization as parents who are “*too Jewish*” (Schwarzbaum).

Along these same lines, another recent work posits that Judy Stein (Tovah Feldshuh) in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Fox Searchlight, 2001) “transcends the stereotype” of the American Jewish “meddling matriarch” by approving of her daughter Jessica’s lesbian relationship with Helen, a Gentile woman. In the author’s words, “the use of understatement” in Judy’s onscreen portrayal “marks [a] departure from the stereotype” and, in so doing, reflects a contemporary social reality in which American Jewish identity supposedly “resists rigid...categories” (Johnston 226). Such analysis also seems to presume that American Jewish identity is indeed “de-racialized.” However, as Judy Stein’s resigned approval of Jessica’s love life can also be interpreted, as it is in my study, not as a departure from the “meddling matriarch” stereotype, but in fact an affirmation of her racialization as a stereotypical American Jewish mother. Specifically, Judy’s “understanding” stance vis-à-vis Jessica’s lesbian relationship with a Gentile can be read as a psychological ploy that helps facilitate her “meddling matriarch” objectives of controlling and manipulating her daughter’s love life by inducing Jessica with guilt that prevents the establishment of healthy boundaries between the couple and Judy.

There seem to be similar disconnects between the findings of my study and published analyses of several “neurotic nebbishes” presented in Chapter 4. For instance, one scholar describes “neurotic nebbish” characters like *Along Came Polly*’s (Universal, 2004) Reuben

Feffer (Ben Stiller), *Punch-Drunk Love*'s (Columbia, 2002) Barry Egan (Adam Sandler), and *American Pie 2* (Universal, 2001) and *American Wedding*'s (Universal, 2003) Jim Levenstein (Jason Biggs) as “new Jews [sic]” whose “unprecedented,” “unabashed,” and “self-confident presentations” of their racial identity owe to “a benign Jewish American [sic] moment” in U.S. racial history, including the virtual disappearance of antisemitism (Itzkowitz 232). This author views the supposedly universal acceptance by U.S. movie-going audiences of the “neurotic nebbish” character as evidence that she/he is “the ideal standard bearer for a new American multiculturalism,” proving that “as much as American Jews [sic] are becoming mainstream, American audiences are ‘becoming Jewish’” (Itzkowitz 236). These “new Jews [sic]” are thought to embody the “celebration...over the capacity to deconstruct identity” in postmodern times (Itzkowitz 240). Going even a step further, another article interprets *Keeping the Faith*'s (Edward Norton, 2000) Rabbi Jake Schram (Ben Stiller) as a symbol of the fact that “assimilation is now eschewed” for American Jewish persons, citing that Jake “ultimately gets the girl—a Gentile who will convert to Judaism for him” and, as such, “does not define himself for what he lacks—access to a larger dating pool...[but instead] revels in his heritage” (Baskind 10). Hence this author sees otherwise highly stereotypical “neurotic nebbishes” like Jake as somehow transcending racialization and exemplifying a “post-race” subjective agency which leaves racial identity unstable and elusive.

Far from deconstructing the question of identity, however, the cinematic stereotype of American Jewish “neurotic nebbishes” was found in my study to be indicative of how racialized American Jewish identity continues to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The myriad “neurotic nebbish” characters played by Ben Stiller, Adam Sandler, and Jason Biggs discussed in Chapter 4 are textbook embodiments of the centuries-old *schlemiel* Jewish stereotype, in which “negative

qualities of weakness...[are] ridiculed” (Wisse 108). Rather than reflecting agential displays of a new, postmodern Jewish identity, these characters reveal the persistence of a “targeted humiliation of the Jewish male lead” (Itzkowitz 241) in U.S. cinema, that dates back well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed it is precisely because audiences find such “supreme pleasure” in the “emasculatation” (Itzkowitz 241) of these “geeks” and “maladroit goofballs” who are “mocked” (Baskind 12) that it is important to situate these “neurotic nebbishes” within the socio-historical processes of American Jewish racialization in the U.S. Along these lines, then, Rabbi Jake Schram’s love life can be reinterpreted not as emblematic of a 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish man’s ability to define himself outside the limitations of the Jewish religion, and thus supposedly his racial identity, but precisely the continued inability of American Jewish “neurotic nebbish” characters in U.S. film to escape the historically constructed stereotype of lusting after Gentiles, with all of the political implications inherent in this racialization of their identity.

Other film studies scholars have identified two developments with regard to the characterizations of American Jewish “pampered princesses” in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. cinema, both of which are challenged by the results of my study. First, while my study indicates that characters like Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) in *Sex and the City* (New Line, 2008) can be interpreted as more “subtle” modes of American Jewish filmic representation due to their seemingly ambiguous racial identity, there are those who argue that this makes their racialization more “difficult to pin down” (Schrank 19). In other words, a “de-racialized,” ambiguous 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish identity is thought to manifest in the racial “elasticity” of American Jewish “pampered princess” characters like Carrie, who suggest the “possibility” and “transgressions” of a cultural/ethnic hybridity rather than the “limitation” of racialization (Schrank 37). Indeed, the “universality” of Carrie’s “face and attitude” are posited as bringing

about “a new aesthetic...to the screen” as far as American Jewish female characters are concerned, one which “reconfigures” the “pampered princess” stereotype into “an active, sexual woman whose adornment is enacted...for her own pleasure and through her own purchase” and whose “Jewish qualities are allowed much greater room to play” (Byers and Krieger 59). Along these lines, scholars have also argued that 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish female characters like Jessica Stein (Jennifer Westfeldt) in *Kissing Jessica Stein* supposedly escape “the binary logic [of race] by resisting containment by the J.A.P. [sic] stereotype,” embodying instead a “non-essentialized” American Jewish “postmodern communal identity” based on “the uncertainty or contingency of truth” (Johnston 226-7). In short, the American Jewish “pampered princess” stereotype is thought to have been transcended by newer representations onscreen that center the fluidity of American Jewish female sexuality, and in doing so, highlight the indeterminacy of these characters’ identity, particularly with regard to race.

However, in my study’s analysis of 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish characters, the racialization of Jewish “pampered princesses” was found to be anything but “subtle” or “non-essentialized,” even for those characters like Carrie Bradshaw whose American Jewish racial identity is not explicitly identified in the film’s narrative. Indeed, the casting of Sarah Jessica Parker ensures that Carrie’s physical appearance will highlight the American Jewish “pampered princess” stereotype in its traditional, racialized form. Any potential ambiguity about Carrie’s racial identity in the film is ultimately overridden by Sarah’s “Jewish nose,” a visual marker used historically by “discriminating gatekeepers” to racialize American Jewish characters in U.S. cinema “based on looks” (Schrank 19-21). Recognizing the dialectical interplay between race as a “social construction” and a “biological reality,” my study argues that certain physical markers like the “Jewish nose” have been racialized in U.S. society (Schrank 26); as one scholar puts it,

“the Jew [sic] remains a Jew [sic] even when disguised...[since] one cannot hide – nose job or no nose job – from the lessons of race” (Gilman 193). In short, however ambiguous her racial identity is made to appear through narrative, Sarah/Carrie’s nose reflects her American Jewish “Otherness” from “the mythical [racial] universal” in U.S. society, i.e., “white, middle-class, Anglo, and secularly Christian” (Byers and Krieger 44). And Carrie’s physical racialization is reinforced by her spoiled, materialistic, and childish behavior, American Jewish “pampered princess” character traits discussed in Chapter 5 that do not transgress this racialized cinematic stereotype at all. In the case of Jessica Stein, while the film’s narrative certainly foregrounds the issue of sexual orientation, Jessica is still thoroughly racialized as a “pampered princess” through her character’s stereotypical aversion to sex and immaturity, features which define her far more than does her character’s bisexuality. Hence while Jessica’s onscreen portrayal may “queer” the “heteronormative definition of...sex, gender, and sexuality” within the American Jewish “pampered princess” stereotype (Johnston 226), her cinematic representation is by no means any less racial. Ultimately, then, the ambiguity and “in-between” characteristics of both Carrie Bradshaw and Jessica Stein serve not as refutations of the logic of race, but rather as new, important elements of the American Jewish “pampered princess” stereotype which continues to be racialized in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film.

Finally, there are film analyses which tend to downplay or ignore the highly racialized and stereotypical “scheming scumbag” traits of several 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish characters discussed in Chapter 6, opting instead to view these characters’ diabolical, manipulative, and racially insensitive actions as emblematic of the self-conscious irony and conflation of identity thought to be inherent in the postmodern condition. For example, one study argues that “the Jew [sic] as money hungry’ typology” which characterizes *The Hebrew Hammer*’s (Comedy

Central, 2003) protagonist Mordechai Jefferson Carver (Adam Goldberg) is not a racialized portrayal of American Jewish identity, but rather an example of the way this particular film “shatters taboos, deflating and deconstructing them in the process” (Baskind 11). The author goes on to declare that Mordechai “exposes conventional stereotypes to normalize them,” his onscreen portrayal less that of a “scheming scumbag” and more a “reappropriation” of antisemitic tropes that ultimately leads to “endearment” with “a Jew [sic] comfortable with Jewishness” (Baskind 11). Even Mordechai’s insensitive parody of the blaxploitation film genre through flippant use of the racial slur “n-gger” and “pimp” attire is described as emblematic of a 21<sup>st</sup> century “cross-cultural position” that “boggles the mind” with a “postmodern pastiche” of “comic reframings” about race (Itzkowitz 248). In this manner, Mordechai’s use of Blackface in “rendering [his] ‘jewface’ [sic] comprehensible” (Itzkowitz 247) is not seen as the latest in a long history of onscreen “scheming scumbag” insensitivity toward Black Americans dating back to *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Bros., 1927). Instead, it is simply testimony to a multicultural America wherein “Black is indisputably cool right now,” and “white kids wear black clothing, listen to hip-hop and rap music, and co-opt stereotypically black speech patterns and slang” (Baskind 5). This same sort of “de-racialized” analysis appears in discussions of *Meet the Parents*’ (Universal, 2004) Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) and *50 First Dates*’ (Columbia, 2004) Henry Roth (Adam Sandler), both of whom are described exclusively as “postmodern [American Jewish] schlemiels” without mention made of their stereotypical depictions as “scheming scumbags” (Itzkowitz 241).

Juxtapose such “post-race” analysis with the findings of my study, which has been informed by the conceptual framework of racialization. To start with, Mordechai’s “self-congratulatory” embodiment of the antisemitic “elements that [have] marked [American Jewish

persons] as Other” (Baskind 11), even when the product of an American Jewish filmmaker, does not change the fact that his stereotypical onscreen portrayal as a “scheming scumbag” is racialized, for even “knowledge of the [sarcastic] inaccuracy of the stereotype...does not forestall the political effect of the stereotype” (Wiegman 163). Analysis that is informed by the theoretical assumptions of racialization would also challenge the proposition that American Jewish characters’ appropriation of “Blackness” is benign and “cool” by highlighting the power relations that have created, and continue to reinforce, divide-and-conquer identity political conflicts between American Jewish and Black American persons. Indeed, Mordechai’s “Jewface/Black face” (Itzkowitz 245) characterization can be interpreted as that of an insensitive “scheming scumbag” who is “eating the Other,” a term referring to the commoditization and consumption of a racial minority group’s identity (hooks). Although Greg Focker does endure “painfully embarrassing encounter[s]” with his Gentile in-laws, he is equally, if not more, defined as a character by the countless stereotypically American Jewish “scheming scumbag” lies, plots, ploys, and schemes he hatches in the process (Itzkowitz 241). And Henry Roth’s journey to become “self-determined” and arrive at “a more normative masculinity” (Itzkowitz 242) comes at the expense of his love interests in *50 First Dates*, all of whom become victims of his “scheming scumbag” manipulations. Thus even if “we want these Jews [sic] to be cool!” (Baskind 12), and despite the fact that such representations are the products of American Jewish filmmakers, there is no escaping the fact that these 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish movie characters are still embodiments of the racialized “scheming scumbag” stereotype of American Jewish identity.

Ultimately, then, despite the apparent attempts by contemporary scholars of American Jewish cinematic representations to jettison “the...formulation of difference as physiological and

racial” (Wiegman 164), the results of my study indicate that such a maneuver is not substantiated empirically, at least with regard to the American Jewish characters in my study’s sample of 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film. Rather than hastily dismissing the issue of cinematic stereotypes, my study addressed the question of racialized onscreen representations directly and found that filmic portrayals of American Jewish persons continue to fall within the same four historically popularized categories of character phenotype and persona. However, while my study appears to have validated the importance of a racialization conceptual framework for the post-Y2K study of American Jewish identity onscreen, there are several important issues that remain unresolved given the limited scope of my study. In the section that follows, these limitations are addressed with an eye toward filling in the gaps in the literature left by my study.

### **Study Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Although my study has contributed to the literature on American Jewish racial identity in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. film through its methodological rigor and theoretical scope, it certainly has its share of conceptual and operational limitations. In particular, film studies of the racialized stereotype have been criticized for (1) “remaining too tied to the level of character and characterization, thereby obscuring other features of a text or ignoring altogether the textual specificities of individual films,” (2) pointing out racialization rather than interrogating it as “a representational or social practice,” and (3) relying on “an empirically based notion of the ‘real’ that both precedes and measures the accuracy of the image” (Wiegman 162).

It is indeed true that by conducting a qualitative content analysis of American Jewish characters, my study may have missed out on a wealth of important data that would have emerged by taking a more nuanced approach toward each of the 53 films included in the study sample. 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. movies are not a monolithic category, and there is as much diversity among different U.S. filmmakers and their works as there are between the different national

cinemas around the world. Therefore, an important initiative for future research would be to further examine the racialization of American Jewish identity through a textual analysis of 21<sup>st</sup> century films, studying not “repetition,” (i.e., the appearance of similar representations “in text after text”) as my study did, but rather seeking to locate “difference” by focusing on how different texts construct different “racial meanings” (Wiegman 162).

Relating to the second criticism, my study pointed out stereotypical characterizations of American Jewish persons onscreen without actually investigating the practices underlying the production of these images. For example, there was very little methodological accounting of the filmmakers’ racial identities despite the fact that it would be important to note exactly what the motives and interests were of American Jewish production teams, and how the subjective agency of these teams differed from predominantly Gentile production teams. Indeed, the question of racialization becomes difficult, if not impossible, to answer completely unless the research involves a more comprehensive connection between the texts and authors. A possible future research project along these lines would be an “institutional ethnography” (Smith) of filmmakers whose work appeared more frequently in my study than others, including Woody Allen, Judd Apatow, John Hamburg, Charlie Kaufman, and Peter Segal (all of whom identify as American Jewish). By closely examining the politics and production practices of these creative forces in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. cinema, a more comprehensive and poignant interpretation could be undertaken of the racialization of American Jewish identity in their films.

And finally, the crucial issue of spectatorship was ignored in my study. By failing to examine the “social subjectivities” and “psychic identifications and disavowals” (Wiegman 162) of audiences who actually watch the films in my study, it is impossible to fully understand the political impact of the onscreen racialization of American Jewish characters. As one scholar

notes, spectator interpretation of racialized representations, including filmic stereotypes, is complex, contradictory, disparate and often ambivalent (Bhabha). Hence an immediate augmentation of my study would be to conduct in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with audiences who have screened the movies included in my study. In this manner, my interpretations, with all their analytical biases and sensitivities, can be challenged, substantiated, or perhaps a bit of both.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David Reznik was born in Detroit, MI, to Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union. After a number of moves across the United States, his family settled in Newport Beach, CA, where David was raised. Upon graduating from Corona del Mar High School in 1995, David attended UCLA and earned his Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communications in 1998. He then spent several years working as a public relations professional for various Internet companies across Silicon Valley in Northern California, before becoming a special-education teacher at Borel Middle School (San Mateo, CA) in 2001. In 2003, David enrolled in the University of Miami's graduate program in sociology, earning his M.A. in 2005. In the fall of 2005, he joined the Ph.D. program in sociology at the University of Florida, and received his Ph.D. in the spring of 2010.

David's current scholarly interests include critical theory, radical political economy, film studies, and the intersectional identity politics of class, gender, nation, race, and sexuality. He has published and presented on a wide range of topics, including education, globalization, medicine, and religion. David has also taught a variety of undergraduate courses, including an upper-division seminar (SYG 4200: Sociology of Religion) at the University of Florida which served as the foundation for the Gator Homeless Coalition, an organization which sought the creation of a student-run homeless shelter in Gainesville, FL. Since January 2009, he has been an adjunct instructor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Santa Fe College.