PART 2: CASE STUDIES
Amy Schumer’s image dominated West Hollywood’s Sunset Strip in the weeks before the debut of her October 2015 HBO comedy special. Gazing seductively from a skyscraper-sized billboard, Schumer sips a glass of whiskey and holds a cigar between her fingers. She wears a grey three-piece suit with a tie; next to her face, the text reads, “She’s a lady.” The ironic blend of the text and her masculine attire and accoutrement is comically overdetermined. But anyone who knows Schumer’s work—and by 2015 she had become ubiquitous on the big and small screens—understands that the humor behind the “She’s a lady” text points not just to her appearance on the billboard but to her overt sexuality, her pleasure in talking about pleasure, and her openness in joking about bodily functions. These characteristics come together with the billboard image to make Schumer appear most un-ladylike. At the tail-end of her year of many accomplishments, which included an Emmy for her comedy sketch series Inside Amy Schumer, a Golden Globe nomination for her performance in Trainwreck (a film she also wrote), her gig as host of the MTV Movie Awards, and her appearance as the opening act for Madonna’s “Rebel Heart Tour,” Schumer’s apparent refusal to behave
like a “lady” may be the key to her success as a writer, actress, and stand-up comic. But Schumer has also won acclaim from fans as more than just an entertainer; she has emerged as a feminist icon.

As a woman in the public eye, Schumer’s looks are fodder for much discussion: Is she too fat to be beautiful? Too beautiful to be funny? Schumer’s comic brilliance surfaces when she pre-empts these types of sexist critiques on her show, skewering both her own looks and those who think that the way they look at her should matter. The most poignant example of this preemptive maneuvering came when Schumer’s series meticulously recreated the classic jury-trial drama, “12 Angry Men.” On trial in this parody was Schumer’s attractiveness—whether she was “hot enough” to appear on television. Replete with a high-profile cast that included Paul Giamatti and Jeff Goldblum, the men delve into impassioned debate about everything from whether the use of sex toys is an indication of a woman’s attractiveness, to whether women can be funny, to whether sexual attraction is subjective. The parody calls out every kind of hypocrisy and sexism, based at least in part on actual comments Schumer has received from critics or anonymous online commenters. The sketch demonstrates that Schumer knows exactly what she looks like, exactly how much it matters to some (quite a bit), and exactly how much she cares (she’s ambivalent).

Schumer’s performance (both how she looks and how she acts) is at once sexy, classy, ugly, and raunchy. Or, to quote an Instagram post she shared featuring a nude photograph of her taken by Annie Liebowitz, Schumer is “Beautiful, gross, strong, thin, fat, pretty, ugly, sexy, disgusting, flawless, woman” (amyschumer). One adjective Schumer leaves off this descriptive list is “Jewish,” a fact that she and many of her fans elect to ignore or maintain in the realm of the parenthetical. Schumer is not alone in her parenthetical Jewishness, or, as she once described herself, in being “Jewish-ish” (SwaysUniverse).

A cohort of similarly “Jewish-ish” comedians have achieved substantial success in the past decade alone. Lena Dunham, Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, Jenny Slate, and Rachel Bloom, and before them, Sarah Silverman, have brought a fresh blend of self-proclaimed feminist, raunchy humor to the forefront of American comic consciousness. Even as some of these women may deny the significance of their Jewishness either to their comic personae or in their personal lives, their Jewishness—and its parenthetical quality—has deep roots in the history of American comedy, a history that itself cannot be extracted from Jewishness. Jewish male comedians from the earliest days of Vaudeville to the present have regularly and overtly referenced their Jewishness.
as a kind of hilarious vulnerability. From Henny Youngman to Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld to Jon Stewart to Seth Rogen, Jewishness and its attendant anxieties in a gentile world offered an unending stream of punchlines. Jewish women comedians, from what Sarah Blacher Cohen called the “unkosher comediennes” of the twentieth century (Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Totie Fields, and Joan Rivers) to Amy Schumer and her cohort, reference their bodies and sexuality and keep the Jewish jokes to a minimum. When they do reference their Jewishness, it lacks the anxiety-laden humor of their male colleagues. Jewish men make Jewish jokes. Jewish women make women jokes.

Looked at one way, Schumer and her cohort can be justifiably viewed as part of a revolution in feminist performance in their embracing of women’s sexuality and pleasure without euphemism, in talking openly about how they feel about their bodies, and in calling out the misogyny that often targets them directly. Looked at another way, these comics also clearly stem from a long line of vulgar Jewish comediennes. While their jokes lend toward the recent “bare it all” trend in American popular culture, their bawdy comedy is both particularly Jewish and not particularly new. This essay is a meditation on these two ways of looking at the Schumer phenomenon, the parenthetical and the traditional, arguing that the specificities of Jewishness in America make both readings of her and her cohorts’ performances possible. What is it about the particularities of being Jewish women that allows for audiences to make this kind of choice: A choice that does not appear to apply to performances by Jewish male comics?

JEWS AND (JEWS)
I adapt the notion of the “parenthetical Jew” from Naomi Seidman who uncovered a handful of queer and feminist theorists who quite literally put their own Jewishness into parentheses in their writings. These thinkers struggle to lay claim to their Jewishness, or at least to foreground it, preferring instead to identify their queerness, their gender identities, or their activist agendas as the driving factors of their subject positions. Recalling a history of American-Jewish political activism on behalf of “other Others” as part of the Jewish investment in American multiculturalism, Seidman lays bare the parenthetical Jewishness of these activists and begins to theorize how their downplayed Jewish identities actually formed a key component of their ability and desire to stand up for other marginalized groups.
Writing nearly twenty years ago, Seidman described her multiculturalist moment and the suspicion that followed parenthetical Jews who stood up for causes not quite their own.

In a culture that equates the battle for representation and rights with political progressivism, the Jew who resists a straightforward identity politics in exchange for participation in the struggle of “someone else” opens herself up to the charges of assimilationism, self-hatred, and parasitism. (Seidman 266)

In other words, even as these (Jews) fight for progressive causes, their failure to identify as Jews first and foremost becomes an invitation for derision from seeming political allies. “In an environment that celebrates marginality,” Seidman continues, “the Jewish politics of the vicarious is a marginal position that has yet to find its champion.” In Seidman’s equation, parenthetical Jewishness, like the reviled category of the fag-hag, amounted to its own kind of marginalization, one that had yet to achieve the chic underdog status of other marginalized identities within American multiculturalist tendencies.

The feminism of Schumer, Dunham, and the other comedians I explore here may not carry the sophisticated theoretical underpinnings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Judith Butler, nor do they elide their Jewishness as completely as these scholars. But their Jewishness operates in similar ways. In fact, Schumer, Dunham, Bloom, Jacobson, and Glazer may be the very champions Seidman missed in the late 1990s. Part of the reason these women have obtained their cachet owes precisely to the ways they keep their Jewishness strategically within parentheses. They neither deny it nor completely ignore it. Instead, as the following examples demonstrate, they engage with it purposefully without ever allowing it to eclipse the other components of their humor or personae.

Consider, for example, the *Broad City* stars who release a series of web shorts between seasons of their half-hour-long Comedy Central show. In the first episode of Season 3 of “Hack into Broad City,” Abbi and Ilana (Jacobson and Glazer’s fictionalized onscreen personae) are attempting to fast for Yom Kippur. The women chat with each other on Skype as they lie in bed, each with a large sandwich next to her computer. “I don’t get Yom Kippur, it sucks!” bemoans Ilana. Abbi responds; “it’s like, how is me waiting until the sun sets to eat this bacon, egg, and cheese gonna cancel out the time I laughed in that hot dude’s face about his weird-shaped nipples mid-coitus? It’s not!” Abbi’s joke is predicated on the well-known Jewish practice of fasting for Yom Kippur; but the real gag, and the key joke for the entire three-minute webisode is Abbi and
Ilana’s self-centered immaturity and their questionable ethics. The two go on to list “all the bad shit we’ve done this year.” To be sure, they are “bad Jews,” to which Abbi’s brazen reference to her bacon sandwich attests. But more than “bad Jews,” they are “bad girls”—their list of “bad shit” includes stealing a neighbor’s magazines and giving tourists the wrong directions. They are petty and selfish, but honest and loveable; their list of sins includes behaviors only slightly more extreme and absurd than the average person’s white lie. They conclude by deceiving themselves into believing that the most righteous (Jewish?) thing they could do is eat their sandwiches right then and there, hours before the sun sets. While Yom Kippur sets the precedent for their hunger and their confessional behavior in the episode, Jewishness is not the punchline. Instead, the joke is about two twenty-something friends, stoner millenials, whose actions and conversations are designed to feel warm and recognizable at the same time as they are made to feel outrageous and hilarious.

The elephant in the room when it comes to any discussion of Jews and humor is the question that causes so many scholars to throw up their hands in frustration—what makes comedy so Jewish? One self-described “shiksa” interviewer posed this question directly to Schumer: “Why are all the best comedians always Jewish? . . . It just seems like . . . there’s always been a Jewish dominance in comedy. . . . Is it something about the ethnic identity that lends itself to so much hilarity?” (Richardson 2011). Schumer tries at first to deny that “all the best comedians are Jewish,” but cannot avoid the preponderance of successful Jewish comics. “I guess it’s the sense of self-importance and entitlement and being unapologetic, . . . ” she ventures. Schumer goes on to describe her personal experiences with antisemitism growing up, the way she was regularly “apologizing for being Jewish.” She continues, “for me . . . I’m pretty good with the crowd and I can handle hecklers, so I think that comes from me having to be defensive.”

Jewish male comedians cannot be described in the same way. Their approach to Jewishness is neither unapologetic nor parenthetical. Take, for example, an anecdote from Jewish actor and comedian Jason Segel.

Segel recalled explaining his bar mitzvah to his Christian classmates as a pivotal moment that pushed him away from his peers and toward acting. “This is when you become funny. . . . Little 13-year-old Jason Segel standing there like, ‘On Saturday I become a man,” he said, imitating his adolescent voice breaking. “It’s literally a direct cut to getting punched in the face.” (Tobin 2015)
For Schumer, negative Jewish experiences fostered the self-assuredness at the root of her comic persona. For Segel, negative Jewish experiences are in and of themselves the joke. Both find a way to credit their Jewishness for their comedy.

Schumer's depiction of Jewishness as embodied in performances of self-importance, entitlement, and being unapologetic describes performances by Dunham, Abbi and Ilana, and Silverman. Her depiction also captures the comedic stylings of the earlier generations of “unkosher comedienes” beginning with Sophie Tucker, “the pioneer flaunter of taboos, who made illicit laughter more comfortable” (Blacher Cohen 106). Like the Jewish women performers who followed, Tucker’s body was a focal point of her act. Nearly a century before Schumer’s rise to fame, Tucker’s comedy acknowledged how the audience saw her body, exaggerated any qualities that ran counter to conventional standards of beauty, and then joked about her insatiable desire for sex. Like their comedic progeny in the 2010s, Tucker and her cohort—especially Belle Barth and Totie Fields—never apologized for their bodies (they played up being “fat”) or their Jewishness (using Yiddish to drive home punchlines). Their comedy confidently made demands of Jewish men to fulfill both their sexual and financial needs. In one song, Tucker takes on the character of a pregnant, unmarried woman:

Mistah Siegel, Mistah Siegel, in my boich is schoen a kiegel
(In my belly is already a noodle pudding.)
Mistah Siegel, make it legal for me. (Blacher Cohen 108)

This character can handle her circumstances and knew what she was getting into when, “Something happened, accidently.” Instead of a polite request, she self-assuredly demands the man fulfill his responsibility for this “accident” by marrying her.

Decades before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Tucker, Barth, and Fields already relied on Yiddish-inflected body humor to expose women’s sexual desires. As their careers progressed, they continued to push the comic envelope. In the 1970s, Fields controversially joked about rape in a way that “would infuriate today’s feminists” (Blacher Cohen 113). “I’m so tired of being everybody’s buddy,” she joked, “Just once to read in a newspaper, Totie Fields raped in an alley.” The joke is on Fields’ extreme lustful desperation, but it also destabilizes the latent power structures that make women into victims—how can you victimize a woman who wants so badly to be ravaged? When the joke is performed, its Jewishness comes through clearly in Fields’ phrasing, “just once
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to read.” Hers is the radical precursor to Sarah Silverman’s (in)famous one-liner: “I was raped by a doctor. So bittersweet for a Jewish girl.” Here, Silverman’s persona likewise refuses to play the victim in her joke. She undermines the expected desires of Jewish women (namely, the JAP stereotype) to “land” a doctor, by imagining that doctor as a violent sex offender, even as she exposes, as Fields did, her taboo desire to be desired by that kind of man. These women are not only unapologetically libidinous; they are also unapologetically offensive. “Who’s going to complain about rape jokes? Rape victims?” Silverman muses. “They barely even report rape.” While Jewishness plays a role in Silverman’s punchline, the joke is on American rape culture, not on Jewish women. Just as Schumer and Dunham call out unreasonable standards of beauty by skewering their own bodies, Silverman calls out the culture of silence among rape victims by skewering her own joke. She dares her audience to be offended, forcing those who enable silence to examine their complicity in rape culture.

ENGENDERING LAUGHTER

Jewish men’s comedy in America—known to most simply as “comedy”—may be rooted partly in an Eastern European past, but there is no methodological need to reach that far back. Jews dominated American comedy circuits first by performing mostly for each other in Yiddish Vaudeville and as the resident entertainment at Jewish summer resorts in the Northeast known as the Borscht Belt. The jokes they made at that time ranged from physical comedy to word play to a tradition of one-liners made at the expense of (Jewish) women (the most infamous being Henny Youngman’s signature line, “Take my wife . . . please”). In the mid-twentieth century, dialect humor reigned supreme as the children of immigrants (most notably, Mickey Katz), mocked the accents and manners of their parents. Borscht Belt comics (e.g., Milton Berle, Sid Cesar, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, among others) emerged as mainstream successes, reaching beyond the majority-Jewish audiences of the Catskills in the postwar period. On their heels, other Jewish comics achieved broad appeal in the 1980s and 1990s, namely Jerry Seinfeld, Paul Reiser, Richard Lewis, and Garry Shandling, among others. By the end of the twentieth century, Jews dwarfed other ethnic minorities on television sitcoms even as they made room for black, Latino, and much later, Asian comedians to achieve similar success among white mainstream (read: Christian) audiences. While Seinfeld and
Reiser’s television personae made attempts to mask their Jewishness to reach the widest possible network audience, the Jewishness of Seinfeld and Mad About You remained unmistakable. In addition to a few overt references to Seinfeld’s Jewishness on the series, everything about his character’s milieu screamed “New York Jewish” even without addressing it (the fact that he played a version of himself, a stand-up comedian, provides only one of a myriad of codes for his Jewishness). On both Reiser’s and Seinfeld’s shows, the loud, over-involved Jewish mother figured predominantly in fashioning their sons’ Jewishness as did their characters’ relationships with WASPy women. With the rise of other ethnic comedians and perhaps in response to Seinfeld’s reserve about his own ethnicity, men like Jon Stewart, Seth Rogen, and Adam Sandler made a habit of regularly pointing directly to their own Jewishness as a means to confide in their audience and generate trust (Stewart), to express a charming but “funny” vulnerability (Rogen), or to point ironically to Jewish powerlessness (Sandler’s “Chanukah Song,” for example).

The Jewish vulnerability played up by Stewart, Rogen, and others is part of a tradition of what some have labeled “Jewish self-hatred,” wherein Jews adopt the antisemitic stereotypes lobbed against them, including a general notion of Jewish men being weak or effeminate. As male comics played up their passivity, they also played up an idea of Jewish women as sexually, financially, and emotionally aggressive. This image of the Jewish woman operates in stark contrast to the “weak” Jewish man who in the Old Country devoted his life to Torah study and passed his effeminate tendencies to his male progeny even as they attempted to adopt secular, bourgeois norms of masculinity. This propensity to characterize Jewish men as weak and Jewish woman as aggressive led to a tradition of Jewish performance as a kind of transgendering. Whereas men comics, epitomized by nebbishy figures like Woody Allen, have constructed Jewish personae dependent on being physically slight, “indoorsy,” and effeminate, women like Amy Schumer and Lena Dunham enact their Jewishness by acting like “men.” That is to say, they joke openly and in great detail about sex and their bodies, make extensive use of profanity, and generally make self-confidence a central and implicit part of their comedic personae. This is the phenomenon at the heart of Schumer’s “She’s a lady” billboard.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Jewish studies and gender studies intersected. Scholars generated a library of arguments about the divergent historical, social, and religious paths and possibilities for Jewish women and men. For example, Riv-Ellen Prell’s Fighting to Become Americans makes the claim that tensions between Jewish men and women mirror the broader tensions
between Jewish and gentile Americans, as men deflect the antisemitic accusa-
tions they experience onto Jewish women. In this way, greed, emotional excess, 
and status-seeking become traits of Jewish women, reflected in the stereotypes 
of the overbearing Jewish mother and the Jewish American Princess. Paula 
Hyman made a related claim in her book about gender and Jewish history, 
demonstrating how the processes and outcomes of Jewish assimilation differ 
radically for men and women. In secularizing Western Europe as in the United 
States, men distanced themselves from the responsibility for transmitting 
Jewish tradition to the next generation by placing the onus entirely on women 
and then blaming women for ever-increasing secularization (Hyman 134–70).
In the realm of Jewish comedy—as might be expected of the comedic—these 
processes are inverted. Here, Jewish men embrace the stereotypes they once so 
eagerly eschewed (and adopt new stereotypes), while Jewish women comics 
seem keen to evade such stereotyping. In comedy, Jewish men are the ones to 
proclaim their Jewishness regularly in public, while Jewish women do so only 
selectively if at all.

Men like Jon Stewart rely heavily on Jewishness as part of their act and 
regularly “come out” as Jews as a mechanism to engender laughter. “I’m a Jew,” 
Stewart confessed during an interview with NBA star Charles Barkley, “I can’t 
dunk. So we all have our limitations” (The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, 3 Jan. 
2012). Or, consider the scene from Knocked Up when Katherine Heigl’s charac-
ter compliments Seth Rogen’s curly hair. She asks if he uses any special product 
to achieve the look and he responds, “It’s called Jew.” In both cases, the audience 
already knows the men are Jewish. In both cases, the fact of their Jewishness is 
not on its own funny. But calling it out, especially when contrasted with a 6’7” 
basketball star or a classically beautiful blond actress, draws a laugh from the 
viewer. Sig Altman sums up the power of these kinds of confessions in his book 
on Jewish comedy. Referring to a talk show that aired in the 1960s, he recounts 
an interviewee who,

in the course of a totally serious discussion, made the quite serious re-
mark, “I looked it up in the Jewish Encyclopedia.” There immediately 
followed a burst of laughter from the studio audience, which obvi-
ously sensed a joke about to materialize, or perhaps saw one already 
born. The laughter rather suddenly subsided, however, as the collec-
tive realization apparently dawned that no joke was in fact intended 
at all. Nevertheless, the comic quality of the word “Jewish” in the 
public consciousness had been perfectly demonstrated. (Altman xvii)
As Altman’s work establishes, this confessional comic device dates back at least to the 1960s. While there were a substantial number of successful, popular, Jewish women comedians during the ’60s and ’70s (following Tucker, Barth, and Fields, there were Joan Rivers, Madeleine Kahn, Gilda Radner, etc.), they did not employ this device. They were far more likely, not unlike their descendants in Schumer et al., to joke about the pitfalls of sex, dating, marriage, and womanhood. When these women reference their Jewishness, it lacks the self-derision and confessional quality that characterizes Jewish men’s comedy.

A most striking example of this comes from one of Amy Schumer’s stand-up bits where she talks about growing up as a member of the only Jewish family in her town. She tells the story of the other school children calling her “Amy Jew-mer” and throwing handfuls of pennies at her. The punchline to her sad story is, “excuse me, this is awesome. . . . I was like, make it rain! Such a good summer” (CC Presents: Amy Schumer). She goes on to talk about an evangelical woman attempting to share the “good news” of Jesus Christ. Amy recounts her response:

“Ma’am I’m so sorry, but my people are Jewish.” And she’s like, “that’s ok, your people just haven’t found Jesus yet.” And I was like, “um . . . no, like, we found him . . . maybe you haven’t heard the bad news?”

While there is no denying the Jewishness of these jokes, they are marked by pride and hyper-confidence rather than the vulnerability and self-ridicule of the male comics of Schumer’s generation (and generations past). The “limitations” of Jewishness about which Stewart joked are present in the jokes’ setups—antisemitism, accusations of deicide—but not in the punchlines of Schumer’s comedy. Here, Jewishness is a (potentially naïve) power play wherein Schumer understands something her anti-Jewish interlocutors do not.

The parenthetical Jewishness of Schumer’s comedy, more so than the scholars Seidman discusses, allows explicit Jewishness to come to the fore from time to time. But Jewishness itself is not the butt of the joke as it has been for male comics for decades. In fact, male comedians have become so accustomed to using Jewishness as a punchline that critics have begun to question whether the joke still works. A critic from Vulture magazine described the passé quality of the ongoing Jewish joke in his review of the 2015 holiday movie, The Night Before: “There’s a lot of stuff about [Rogen’s character] being Jewish, because apparently that’s still funny—or maybe it’s just funny because it’s not funny anymore” (Ebiri). The weak or vulnerable Jewish male joke has achieved so broad a reach that even contemporary non-Jewish comedians rely on this mode
as well. Josh Lambert writes about Eddie Murphy, Steven Wright, Anthony Jeselnik, and Louis CK all “killing” with “non-Jewish Jew jokes” (Lambert). Because the Jewish jokes of Jews like Stewart have become so mainstream, or, in Altman’s terms, “the comic quality of the word ‘Jew’” has become so deeply engrained in American comic consciousness, these non-Jewish comedians found their own way in to laughing with (or occasionally at) Jews. Beyond that, non-Jewish comedians have adopted the “weak Jewish man” act and applied it to their own ethnic backgrounds. Louis CK is the twenty-first century’s master of non-Jewish self-derision, joking at the expense of his Catholic upbringing, and regularly referring to himself as “an asshole.” Newcomer Aziz Ansari created an entire series out of his act of being romantically, charmingly self-deprecating and the child of Indian immigrants (Master of None).

UNAPOLOGETICALLY (JEW)-ISH
While contemporary non-Jewish men comics have adopted what might be called “classic” Jewish humor, the latest Jewish women comics are taking Jewish comedy in ever-new directions. Rachel Bloom’s character Rebecca Bunch on Crazy Ex-Girlfriend peppers her dialogue with Yiddish terms and references her New York Jewishness on occasion, especially to create contrast with the middle-class inland suburb of Los Angeles where she lives in the show. In one memorable scene, Rebecca’s mother (played by Tovah Feldshuh) comes to visit her and sings a glorious Broadway-inspired ballad filled with passive-aggressive insults called “The Jewish Mother Song.” While Rebecca’s character struggles mightily in her love life, her Jewishness is not a source of insecurity for her. She holds her ground confidently against her overbearing mother as the woman challenges every one of her life’s decisions. Likewise, in one of the series’ first episodes, Rebecca’s boss hires her to be his personal divorce lawyer. When he describes his wife’s lawyer as, “one of those real smart Jewish guys,” Rebecca quickly interrupts with “I’m sorry, I’m Jewish.” In spite of her rhetorical apology here, Rebecca is unapologetically Jewish. Her boss ends up being quite excited that “my Jew went to Harvard and Yale!” Rebecca concludes the exchange with, “Let’s circle back about the Jew thing because that’s a conversation that we need to have” (“Josh Just Happens to Live Here!”). The particularities of Jewishness offer an opportunity for generational conflict with the mother, and for comic awkwardness with her new boss. But the joke is never
on Jewishness itself. For Rebecca, “Jewish identity is a non-issue” (Zaltzman). In other words, Jewishness plays here as it does in Broad City and Schumer’s stand-up, as a basis for a joke and an unexpected opening for foregrounding these women’s unabashed confidence.

One of Schumer’s other notable (and viral) sketches featured some of the most successful, multiple award-winning actresses of the past thirty years. In “Last Fuckable Day,” Patricia Arquette, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Tina Fey are having an elegant picnic to celebrate Louis-Dreyfus’s reaching this moment: “in every actress’s life, the media decides when you finally reach the point where you’re not believably fuckable anymore.” The joke here lies in the ridiculous reality that leading-lady roles diminish exponentially for women as they age, whereas male actors regularly maintain their statuses as sex symbols well into their sixties. But the joke also lies in the unmistakable beauty of Dreyfus, who, after decades of television success may just now, at fifty-five, be reaching a new career peak as the star in her HBO hit, Veep. Schumer’s sketch calls out a system that places arbitrary demands on women’s youth and beauty. But at the same time, in showing the women celebrating their arrival at this stage of their lives, Schumer undermines the perceived value of “fuckability” as a worthy goal to which all women should aspire.

This is Schumer’s double move: a beautiful, successful woman spotlighting the unjust standards surrounding women’s beauty while also undercutting ideas about women’s desires to meet these standards. Or as one writer described it, Schumer “poke[s] just as hard at young single women, in their blinkered vanity, as she does at the toxic messages that surround them” (Nussbaum). This maneuver lies at the core of Schumer’s feminist humor and the humor of many in her cohort. Lena Dunham, the creator of HBO’s Girls takes a similar approach in preempting public critique of her body by displaying it shamelessly on-screen. “The nudity is a confrontation,” writes Paul Schrod of Esquire Magazine. “Why are some appalled by it? Why does she flaunt it? What does she think of it? The show projects our insecurities back at us, makes us deal with them.”

In these examples, the women’s (comically exaggerated) confidence is not explicitly Jewish. But if male comics’ repeated references to their own weaknesses read as Jewish, then as these women gain visibility, their occasionally absurd displays of sexual or emotional or professional confidence begin to read as Jewish, too. Put another way, their feminism, even when not placed within a Jewish context, may be inextricable from their Jewishness, just as Seidman demonstrated of the parenthetically Jewish feminist scholars.
Part of what makes these women’s performances feminist is the way they stand in contrast to the trend in stoner-slacker comedies made popular by the prolific director/producer Judd Apatow. Jewish actors Adam Sandler, Seth Rogen, Jason Segal, and Jonah Hill have played clumsy, unattractive, unambitious all-around immature Jewish “schlubs” who refuse to succumb to the demands of the adult world. In so doing, they also manage to attract unlikely goddesses played by gorgeous women like Katherine Heigl, Drew Barrymore, and Emma Stone. So commonplace in the beginning of the twenty-first century as to become its own genre of romantic comedy, these neo-schlemiel comedies received some backlash from feminists, including one famous occasion from one of the film’s stars. Feminists wondered why successful, attractive women would adore such clumsy, videogame playing, unkempt, porn-obsessed boys.

Interestingly, the critiques that label Apatow a misogynist have been undermined by his more recent work with woman-run comedies. Beginning with the blockbuster *Bridesmaids*, Apatow appears to have abandoned screwball boy comedies in favor of feminist television and filmmaking. He is the producer behind Schumer’s film *Trainwreck* as well as Dunham’s series *Girls*. Both Schumer and Dunham speak of him with great affection (as a feminist, too), belying the earlier feminist critique. If Apatow’s films like *Knocked Up* and *Anchorman* depended on the (goyish) women characters being the mature, nagging foils to juvenile-acting Jewish men, then Apatow’s feminist turn with *Girls* and *Trainwreck* may lie in his willingness to showcase (Jewish) women behaving childishly. “I just like immaturity,” Apatow is quoted as saying, “I like to show people struggle and try to figure out who they are” (Zakarin). In using his success with these earlier projects to bring *Girls* and *Trainwreck* to wide audiences, Apatow has been heralded as “the unlikely feminist” (Rapkin).

Apatow’s Jewish boys use their Jewish vulnerability to comic effect; Apatow’s (Jewish) women use their hyper-confidence in the same way. In *Knocked Up*, for example, Rogen’s character did not need to be expressly Jewish for the storyline to operate, but his Jewishness added a dimension of humor to the film and punctuated the unlikeliness of the romance that blossomed between his and Heigl’s characters. When the women in Apatow’s worlds are Jews, their Jewishness, as with Seidman’s feminists, is relegated to the parenthetical. In *Trainwreck*, for example, Schumer’s character is marked as coming from an Irish Catholic family (owing partly to the actor who plays Amy’s father in the film, Colin Quinn). In Apatow’s oeuvre alone, Jewishness consistently serves as a punchline for men and a (parenthetical) premise for women.
The marginality of Jewish women's Jewishness is intrinsically related to the marginality of Jewish women generally. Historically excluded from the central locales of Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe—*cheder, yeshiva, bey medresh*—ashkenazic women instead occupied gentile, or at least not explicitly Jewish, realms. As breadwinners, women worked in the marketplace, necessitating knowledge of non-Jewish languages. But by the nineteenth century, while Jewish girls’ education continued to observe the dictum that they not engage with Torah study, the education many received followed the custom of Western Europe’s aristocracy rather than the more functional business lessons of an earlier era. Jewish girls took piano lessons and learned to speak German and French.

Iris Parush writes, “unlike the strictness which characterized the education of boys, the education of girls was marked by neglect on one side and manifest permissiveness on the other” (74). Although writing about Jews in Poland and Russia in the nineteenth century, the attitudes toward Jewish women Parush describes are made manifest among Jewish women entertainers of the 2010s. With a handful of notable exceptions, female comedians have historically been one step removed from the mainstream; producers tended to see women’s filmmaking as niche (directed toward women). Men’s comedy is for everyone, women’s comedy is for women—this unspoken contract in the entertainment world is a reflection of how men and women are seen. Men, specifically straight white men, are neutral, unmarked. Women are marked. In comedy, Jewish men are marked as Jewish. Jewish women are marked first as women and only secondarily, parenthetically as Jewish.

**NEGLECT AND PERMISSIVENESS**

That women’s comedy has only in the past fifteen years become both mainstream and highly desirable recalls the kind of neglect Parush described. It was only after twenty-five years on air that *Saturday Night Live* employed a woman as a head writer: another feminist comic (albeit not a Jewish one) Tina Fey. She and *SNL* co-star Amy Poehler then went on to head up massively successful sitcoms, which led to the newest generation of young women-centered network comedies: *New Girl* (Fox), *The Mindy Project* (first on Fox, now on Hulu), *Jane the Virgin* (CW), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (CW), among others. Then, of course, came the cable and streaming hits: Schumer’s series (Comedy Central),
Dunham’s *Girls* (HBO), *Broad City* (Comedy Central), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix), and so on.

As was the case for Jewish girls and women in nineteenth-century Europe, this neglect may partly serve to explain the permissiveness that followed. These women comedians play boldly with television convention. *Jane the Virgin* bucks the half-hour sitcom format in favor of an hour-long comedy/telenovela; Schumer’s show is a bizarre combination of sketch comedy and on-the-street interviews; *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* seamlessly transforms the Broadway musical genre into an award-winning television series; *Broad City* converts a web series to a half-hour comedy without suffering from gratuitous modifications to the characters who made the web shorts so popular.

In some ways, we may imagine this permissiveness in genre and form extending to the brand of comedy these women espouse. They talk about sex and bodies in ways men do not, and not only because they are talking about women’s, rather than men’s, bodies. Consider, for example, one of Schumer’s most frequently quoted punchlines: “I get labeled a sex comic. But if a guy got up onstage and pulled his dick out, everybody would say: ‘He’s a thinker’” (Fussman). Male comedians may joke about the relative merits of a woman’s body, but they rarely joke about the merits of a woman’s performance in bed. Lena Dunham’s *Girls* brings the question of sexual pleasure to the fore by showcasing sex act after awkward sex act—not hesitating to film bodies from unflattering angles or show characters wanting to, but not succeeding in, having a great time. In the very first episode of *Broad City*, Ilana initiates a Skype session with her best friend Abbi in order to discuss plans for the day (“What a Wonderful World”). When Ilana moves the camera, Abbi (and the viewer) spots Ilana’s paramour on top of her and the couple admits they are having sex during the Skype session! Schumer also jokes about which sex acts she has and has not performed, and why. In part, male comics may not have access to the same kind of material for fear of “punching down” or being too dangerously demeaning toward women to be considered funny. In other words, women’s position beneath men in the social hierarchy is part of what permits them to make certain jokes that would be taboo for men. This is not unlike when comedians of color joke about race in ways inaccessible to white comics. To return to Parush’s formulation, women’s comedy is marked by both neglect and permissiveness.

On the flip side of the question of permissiveness in content lies Jewish female comics’ access to traditional Jewish humor. If their Jewishness remains in the realm of the parenthetical, it may not be entirely by choice. Take Lena
Dunham’s 2015 contribution to the “Shouts & Murmurs” comedy section of The New Yorker. In “Dog or Jewish Boyfriend: A Quiz,” Dunham draws upon many of the classic tropes once considered antisemitic, which later became an engrained part of Jewish comedy. The Jewish boyfriend in Dunham’s piece is cheap, asthmatic, and has an overbearing mother. He’s a hairy hypochondriac with a weak stomach. A quick pass over Jon Stewart’s joke work on The Daily Show, Woody Allen’s film repertoire, Seinfeld’s (ambiguously Jewish) George Costanza, and Larry David’s fictionalized version of himself on Curb Your Enthusiasm, even Philip Roth’s early stories and novels, reveals how caricatures of Jewish men as weak, overly frugal, emasculated mama’s boys permeate American Jewish jokelore. In spite of her participation in this tradition of Jewish humor, Dunham was skewered by the Jewish press for her piece. Even the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Jewish anti-bigotry watchdog group, condemned her for writing and The New Yorker for printing such an “offensive,” “insensitive,” and “troubling” essay (ADL Press Release). It may be that Dunham’s parenthetical Jewishness is to blame for the public outrage at her piece. That is, perhaps readers were unaware of Dunham’s own Jewishness, as it was not a hugely explicit part of her comedic persona, and were outraged at the thought of a non-Jew making jokes at Jews’ expense. Or, perhaps it owes to the fact that Dunham is a woman—a fact that may not be extrapolated from her status as a parenthetical Jew. When a Jewish woman employs Jewish men’s humor, she has gone too far. In being “too Jewish” with her humor, she has betrayed her status as a woman. Jewish men make Jewish jokes. (Jewish) women make women jokes. The sexual permissiveness in American Jewish women’s comedy stems in part from the neglect among producers and the public that precedes these women. But once in the spotlight, restrictions emerge that draw out just how different men’s and women’s comedy can be.

In Seidman’s work on parenthetical Jews, she highlights the performative quality of ethnic and gender identities, where Jewish academics and activists put their Jewishness into parentheses in favor of gay/feminist or other religious affiliations. She references one of Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s autobiographical sketches, where she describes dressing up as Queen Esther for Purim. For Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Esther’s bravery in “coming out” Jewish to her king conceals the related ways in which her actions—and their annual recollection in costume by Jewish girls—reinscribe conservative gender roles (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 72; Seidman 262). For Seidman, the young Eve-as-Esther is no more a performance than the biblical Esther; both “are simulacra, (Jewish) drag queens” (Seidman 263). Seidman and Kosofsky-Sedgwick draw out the performative
qualities of gender, sexuality, and Jewishness, but there is an angle of Esther’s story unexplored, one that helps explain why Jewish female comics’ Jewishness is kept in parentheses. Esther, the queen of parenthetical Jewishness, is able to hide her Jewishness in a way a man in her position could not: perhaps because he is physically marked on his body by circumcision, perhaps because he is marked by his Jewish head covering, perhaps even in the way his masculinity contrasts with non-Jewish masculine ideals. Unmarked in these ways, women have the option to keep their Jewishness parenthetical. And while that possibility remains open to them as Jews, they cannot keep their woman-ness in parentheses. Thoughtful critics go out of their way to avoid lumping Schumer together with other women comedians—why must she be considered only in comparison to other women? Gender and sexuality keep trumping Jewishness for women, but never eliminating it. Jewishness surfaces, but it surfaces in parentheses. Or as Schumer articulated it, “[Judaism is] not something that I stay away from on purpose. If a reference pops into my head, I’ll say it” (Handler).

Schumer is far likelier to make reference to sex and women’s bodies than to her Jewishness. In fact, when asked to qualify her comedic persona with one word, she chose “slutty.” In this way, she descends, as we have seen, from the “unkosher comediennes,” whose night-club acts, stand-up shows, and albums “challenged the male-centered visions of female sexuality that dominated vaudeville, burlesque, and the Borscht Belt” (Del Negro 156). The overbearing Jewish mothers and Jewish-American Princesses featured in those men’s bastions were replaced by “strong-minded, willful women, always ready to offset their opponent with a cheeky remark.” Whereas the Jewish men comics joked about nagging women, in the acts of Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Totie Fields and others, their over-sized body parts “conspire to ridicule men and render them powerless.” These Jewish women pridefully laid claim to the aggressive caricatures designed by men, while—as Schumer did in her “Last Fuckable Day” sketch—subverting expectations by deeming these features worthy of celebration.

CONCLUSION
A history that locates Schumer and her cohort among the inheritors of bawdy Jewish women’s comedy runs the risk of oversimplifying the newer generation’s context, denying agency, and forcing these women into a heritage they may
well reject. In fact, the younger comics are constantly fighting against a sexist system that compares them only to other women and continues to assert that women cannot possibly be as funny as men (or in the same way). In a 2008 article about some of the emerging female comic stars, Alessandra Stanley writes, “after decades of insecurity . . . women finally feel they can look good and still be taken seriously as comics.” Stanley contends that, “funny women in the old days didn’t try to look their best; they tried to look comical.” Despite this claim of radical change, nearly half a century earlier, in 1970, the New York Times published what amounts to the same article. In “The Funny Thing Is That They Are Still Feminine,” the writer begins, “Time was when a woman comedian had to make herself ugly, cross her eyes, or fall down in order to get laughs” (Klemesrud 82). The article continues, “there is a new breed of funny girl emerging—one who believes that a woman can be both funny and feminine at the same time.” Nevermind that no such article from the past fifty years discusses male comedians in terms of their collective attractiveness. What’s interesting here is the repetition, that women’s comedy has been branded as “new” for the past forty-five years. Whether female comedians can be taken seriously and whether this can happen without taking their appearance into account is a challenge Amy Schumer and Lena Dunham redirect back at their audiences and critics.

In lumping Schumer and company together here, I am guilty of participating in the trend that sees them as female comedians instead of simply comedians. But by interrogating them as Jewish women, I ask if that position allows for access to a certain (at times, limiting) variety of comedy or whether a misogynist system has left them little comedic recourse. It is not just their Jewishness but its parenthetical quality that leads me to analyze them together, as opposed to with Jewish men, whose Jewishness comes across as comically explicit. In line with Seidman, I do not want to claim that the Jewishness of Schumer, Dunham, Abbi and Ilana, or Bloom is “important or coherent in some way she is unwilling to acknowledge” (Seidman 264). But, as Seidman did for the feminist scholars, I only want to “register the pattern and subtlety of such a parenthetical Jewish identity.” And then, I want to interrogate why parenthetical Jewishness appears, for now, to be a variety of marginalized identity reserved for women.
**Notes**

1. See the new introduction to Gina Barreca’s *They Used to Call me Snow White*, for more analysis on Silverman’s rape joke and its consequences for other comedians, especially pp. xxx–xxxiv.

2. Ruth Wisse’s *No Joke* takes the long view, analyzing the history of Jewish humor in its European, American, and Israeli iterations. She offers up a handful of reasons for why humor might be Jewish, but her argument hinges on the prescriptive suggestion that Jews ought to take things more seriously and joke less often in times of trouble. She submits that they might work to teach others to mock themselves, so that Jews are less alone in this unsavory behavior.

3. For a detailed investigation into the potential Jewishness of these sitcoms, see Brook, *Something Ain’t Kosher Here*.

4. Two seminal projects on Jewish self-hatred include Gilman and Reitter. Brook, *You Should See Yourself*, also points to Garry Shandling’s character on *The Larry Sanders Show* having been consciously conceived as a self-hating Jew.

5. See Boyarin’s groundbreaking text on Jewish masculinity.

6. Katherine Heigl infamously called *Knocked Up* “a little sexist” (Bennetts).

7. On Schumer’s lack of Jewishness in *Trainwreck*, see Brook, “A Tale of Two (Jewish) Amys.”
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*Curb Your Enthusiasm.* Created by Larry David. HBO, 2000–11.
*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.* Created by Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg.

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*Jane the Virgin.* Created by Jennie Snyder Urman. CW, 2014–.
*The Larry Sanders Show.* Created by Dennis Klein and Garry Shandling. HBO, 1992–98.
*Master of None.* Created by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang. Netflix, 2015–.
*The Mindy Project.* Created by Mindy Kaling. Fox; Hulu, 2012–.
*New Girl.* Created by Elizabeth Meriwether. Fox, 2011–.
*Saturday Night Live.* Created by Lorne Michaels. NBC, 1975–.
*Seinfeld.* Created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld. NBC, 1989–98.
*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt.* Created by Robert Carlock and Tina Fey. Netflix, 2015–.
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