American Jews have often articulated their ethnic identity in relation to African Americans. At times—such as during the socialist movements of the 1930s or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s—this has manifested itself through Jewish identification with the oppressed status of African Americans and resulted in cooperation between the two groups.¹

Often, however, Jews participated in the subjection of African Americans as a means of making their own claim upon assimilated white identity. One of the most fascinating occurrences related to this phenomenon is the Jewish donning of blackface makeup. In the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy was among the most popular cultural expressions in the country, but at that time, most blackface performers were working-class Irish Americans.² In the twentieth century, however, blackface moved from concert halls and minstrel performances to vaudeville and motion pictures, where most of the entertainers to wear blackface were Jewish.

The most famous Jew to black up was undoubtedly Al Jolson in the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, but George Burns, Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, and the Marx Brothers all donned blackface as well. Michael Rogin convincingly argues that Jewish blackface in the first half of the twentieth century served as a cultural “rite of passage,” transforming the immigrant Jew into an American.³ By participating in the exclusion and stereotyping of blacks, American Jews made themselves white. Rogin explains that for American Jewish entertainers, “[f]ocusing attention on blackness protects [their own] whiteness as the unexamined given.”⁴

By the 1960s, the blackface mask had all but disappeared, and like the N-word and the swastika, it became, in John Strausbaugh’s words, “utterly taboo.”⁵ Since then, Jewish blackface still made the occasional appearance, but it typically took the form of what Strausbaugh calls “virtual blackface” or “blackface as lifestyle,” in which whites adopt the stereotypical mannerisms, fashion, or language of African Americans without literally blacking up.⁶ The best Jewish American example of this sort of “virtual blackface” may be the Jewish hip-hop trio The Beastie Boys, who served an instrumental role in bringing rap music into the cultural mainstream.⁷
Today Jewish blackface is making a surprising resurgence in popular culture. While literal blackface is still rare, many Jewish entertainers, and particularly Jewish humorists, can be seen playing black, rhetorically claiming African American identity or expressing a fascination with the language, style, or music of black culture. An extreme example can be found in the 2003 film *The Hebrew Hammer*, a comic Jewish rewriting of the 1970s blaxploitation genre. This resurgence of Jewish blackface, I argue, suggests a backlash against the assimilationist motives of early Jewish entertainers. By the twenty-first century, American Jews have, for the most part, successfully assimilated into white America and enjoy the privileges of the dominant ethnic group. As Eric Goldstein points out, however, many contemporary Jews feel uncomfortable with this position of undifferentiated whiteness: “many Jews at the turn of the twenty-first century seem particularly conscious of the way that being seen as white delegitimizes their claim to difference as Jews.”

This discomfort manifests itself in a number of ways, one of which is the embracing of African American culture as a means to reassert the minority status of Jews. The major difference, then, between contemporary Jewish blackface and the Jewish blackface of the early twentieth century is that Jewish humorists today use blackface not to hide their Jewishness but rather to highlight and explore it. While Rogin argues that early Jewish entertainers donned blackface as a means to claim white identity, today Jews claim blackness in order to distance themselves from it.

This is not done, however, in an obvious or straightforward manner. The humorists I will discuss—Sarah Silverman, Larry David, and Sacha Baron Cohen—create a series of fictional personas through which they perform or otherwise claim black identity. While the comedians themselves are well aware of the complex racial issues that their humor raises, their personas—which often share similarities with the artists themselves—are ignorant of and insensitive to the nuances of racial and ethnic identity. Their humor, then, often comes across as shocking and politically incorrect, and locating a stable or consistent racial commentary amid this humor is virtually impossible. Nonetheless, all three comedians explore the anxiety that many contemporary Jews have about their place in the multiethnic, twenty-first century landscape.

**THE SARAH SILVERMAN PROGRAM**

Of recent Jewish comedians, Sarah Silverman not only provides the most explicit exploration of blackface in recent years, but she also draws a direct connection between the blackface mask and American Jewish identity. On *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2007-), Silverman plays a fictional character
also named Sarah Silverman. The fictional Sarah is an unemployed, insensitive, unintelligent loafer who lives off her sister. The show often deals with African American themes, but the season two episode “Face Wars” is the most important for our discussion. In the episode’s opening scene, Sarah is not allowed into a WASP country club, and she assumes that she is being discriminated against because she is Jewish. An African American waiter overhears her complaining to her friends that being Jewish is harder than anything else, and he asserts that being black is actually more difficult. Sarah and the African American man then agree to change places for a day in order to decide which group suffers more.

Sarah then engages a makeup artist to transform her into an African American. The black makeup, however, is simply a layer of dark brown grease smeared over her face, and it is clear from her white neck and arms that Sarah is white. To top off the costume, Sarah ties a bandana around her head, and she becomes the offensive image of a minstrel “darker.” When Sarah goes out into the world to try on her new black identity, she is berated by the public for her offensive appearance. Ignorant as always, Sarah assumes that people are yelling at her for being black, not for wearing blackface, and she concludes that it is indeed harder to be black than Jewish. The African American man with whom Sarah had made the bet undergoes a similar transformation, for his Jewish costume consists of a plastic strap-on nose, a kippah [skull cap], side locks taped to his face, and a t-shirt that reads “I Love Money.” When he meets Sarah again, he concedes that it is more difficult to be Jewish than black. Sarah and the black man agree to disagree.

Behind the patent absurdity of this storyline, there lurks a fascinating reversal of the received logic of Jewish/black relations. Sarah’s blackface mask not only invokes the long history of discrimination against African Americans, but it also makes no attempt to hide the Jewish complicity in that discrimination. At the same time, however, Sarah also invokes the history of prejudice against Jews. This begins with the scene in the WASP country club (clubs of this sort were notorious throughout much of the twentieth century for both their exclusionary practices and their blatant antisemitism), and it continues with the collection of offensive images that make up the African American man’s Jewish disguise. While Sarah’s contest with the black man over which group suffers more is both ridiculous and potentially offensive to both groups, the important point is that Silverman uses the blackface mask as a means to highlight Jewish identity and distance that identity from an undifferentiated (read: WASP) whiteness.

As the episode moves forward, Jewish identity is seemingly eclipsed by
an extended treatment of black/white relations. The black man—and his Jewish costume—are never heard from again, but Sarah’s blackface getup starts a trend: whites all over town begin donning blackface as well, and Sarah is seen as a heroic race crusader. In one scene, a crowd of Sarah’s devoted blackfaced followers demands the right, through a repetitive chant, to explore racial issues in America “through the use of postmodern irony.” This turn of events moves the episode into the realm of highly self-aware metacomedy. While Sarah remains ignorant and insensitive, Silverman demonstrates her knowledge of not only the racist history of the blackface mask but also contemporary debates about the possible uses of that mask in contemporary culture. African American filmmaker Spike Lee, for example, explores the very issue of “ironic blackface” in his 2000 film *Bamboozled*. While Silverman never posits a precise racial commentary, the moment in which Sarah’s ignorance makes her a race crusader anticipates the politically correct backlash that the episode was likely to receive and provides a knowing wink—or, depending how we look at it, a satirical jab—to audience members who are attuned to contemporary discussions about race and its representations in popular culture.11

Beneath these layers of knowing irony and tongue-in-cheek humor, I contend that this episode reflects a genuine anxiety about the role that Jews play in multicultural America. For after its exploration of the uses of blackface for racial commentary, the episode reverts to its original preoccupation with Jews and Jewish persecution. At a blackface rally, Sarah is accidentally shot in the arm by an inept police officer, and in the hospital, her sister begins to wipe away the black makeup. She is interrupted, however, by the WASP woman who had denied Sarah entrance to the country club in the opening scene. The only makeup left on Sarah’s face when she greets the woman is a small patch just above her lip: a Hitler mustache. Sarah, from behind her Hitler mustache, asks the woman from the country club if she “had hated any Jews lately.” The woman admits that she had not let Sarah into the club because she was Jewish but explains that when she saw Sarah on TV in blackface, she realized that “it could have been a lot worse.” She tells Sarah that she is welcome to play tennis in the club any time not “during peak hours.”

Like the rest of the episode, this final scene is ridiculous on the surface. Beyond the silliness, however, an ambiguity about Jewish persecution in America emerges. The implication behind the WASP woman’s comment is that the American Jew stands in a midway point in the black/white racial binary.12 As a Jew, Sarah is not as “bad” as an African American, but she is still not fully white. It is thus presumed that, while Sarah is allowed to go to the country club in the off hours, an African American would not be allowed to go there at all. The statement undermines Sarah’s original position that Jews in
America suffer more than blacks (not that anyone took that position seriously to begin with). But the elephant in the room during this conversation is Sarah’s Hitler mustache. Even while the episode mocks the idea that contemporary American Jews suffer more than blacks, it also reminds viewers of the very real and serious persecution of Jews in recent history. While the blackface mask signifies centuries of racism directed at African Americans, the image of the Hitler mustache similarly connotes the Holocaust and centuries of European antisemitism. Silverman thus transforms the blackface mask into a Jewish one and reasserts the American Jew as an ethnic minority.

CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

While Sarah Silverman literally applies black makeup, Larry David, the star and creator of the HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000—), provides a more subtle version of Jewish blackface, one that reflects a similar anxiety about Jewish identity. Like Silverman, David portrays a fictional, crass, insensitive version of himself. As in real life, the fictional Larry David is a wealthy Jewish TV mogul, famous for being the co-creator of the hit TV series *Seinfeld* and the basis for the nebbish character George Costanza. Aside from his abrasive personality and his habit for getting himself into embarrassing situations, the key difference between David and his on-screen persona is that the fictional Larry is married, throughout most of the series, to a gentile woman and David’s real-life now ex-wife is Jewish. This change highlights the fact that one of David’s primary preoccupations on *Curb* is the exploration of Jewish identity in contemporary America. As Simcha Weinstein asserts, *Curb* is “one of the most openly Jewish comedy series ever.” This Jewishness manifests itself in a series of plotlines that develop around David’s struggles with his shiksa wife and his goyish in-laws. Despite being married to a gentile, Larry often expresses an anxiety about being seen as a fully assimilated white. For example, in the season three episode “Mary, Joseph, and Larry,” Larry objects to having a Christmas tree in his house because he is afraid that God might think he’s “switching.” In addition, in the pilot episode, he admits to his manager that he has “a tendency to nod to black people” to let them know that he is not “one of the bad ones.”

One of Larry’s methods of dealing with his anxiety is by identifying or forming bonds with various cultural minorities, especially African Americans. We see this in the opening scene of the season three episode “Krazee-Eyez Killa.” At an outdoor barbecue, Larry finds himself in conversation with an African American hip-hop artist named Krazee-Eyez Killa. Krazee-Eyez raps the obscene lyrics of a song and asks Larry for feedback. Larry, skeptical at first,
smiles appreciatively and offers some minor suggestions. Krazee-Eyez expresses his gratitude, saying, “You my dog. You my nigger.” Larry responds, “I am your nigger, absolutely.”17 This moment, in which Larry accepts the label of black identity and claims it as his own, is a subtle form of Jewish blackface, and it suggests that, like Krazee-Eyez, Larry is an outsider from mainstream white America.

A more extended treatment of Jewish/black relations occurs throughout the ten episodes of season six, in which Larry becomes a virtual member of an African American family allegorically named the Blacks. Larry and his wife take the Black family, who has been displaced by a devastating hurricane, into their home. The family is made up of Loretta Black, her two children, her aunt (named Auntie Ray), and her brother Leon. When Larry first encounters this family, he cannot help but comment upon their last name: “Now let me get this straight; your last name is Black? . . . That's like if my last name was Jew, like Larry Jew.” After an awkward pause, Larry goes on to explain: “Cause I’m Jewish. . . . Don’t you see? You’re black; I’m Jewish!”18 It is important to note here that Larry could just as easily have suggested the name “Larry White,” but he attempts to form a bond with the Blacks—and by extension with all African Americans—by explicitly connecting his own Jewishness to the Blacks’ blackness. Since Larry openly asserts his Jewish identity, this is not truly blackface, but it does show the opposite impulse of Jewish blackface entertainers in the early twentieth century. Larry turns to black identity to accentuate rather than hide his Jewish identity.

Throughout season six, Larry repeatedly offends the Blacks with his peculiar behavior. With each transgression, however, the Blacks ultimately accept Larry back into the fold. One could argue that this is only because Larry helps them financially. Larry himself, however, willingly plays a large role in their family, driving the children to school, attempting to help Loretta get a job, and setting aside space in the yard for Auntie Ray’s garden. Moreover, in a manner that resembles his friendship with Krazee-Eyez, Larry becomes particularly close to Loretta’s brother Leon, and at times they seem to be symbolically joined. They carry identical cell phones, for instance, and in the episode “The Rat Dog,” they mistakenly ruin important calls for each other. And in “The Anonymous Donor,” a complex series of events causes them to wear identical baseball jerseys. Dressed identically, the two men sit on the couch together playing cards, and they appear to mirror each other. Throughout all of these episodes, Larry continues to alienate himself from the wealthy whites and assimilated Jews who make up his own social milieu. His identification
and friendship with an African American thus suggests a symbolic distancing from mainstream white culture.

This separation from white America reaches a climax in the season’s final episode, titled “The Bat Mitzvah.” Larry’s wife Cheryl leaves him midseason (paralleling Larry David’s real-life divorce from wife Laurie David), and nearly all of Larry’s friends—primarily whites and assimilated Jews—side with Cheryl and abandon him as well. This alienation from white society causes Larry to become even closer to the Blacks. Feeling alone and abandoned, Larry invites Loretta Black to attend a Bat Mitzvah with him because he knows Cheryl will be there with her new boyfriend.

The Bat Mitzvah itself is a lavish affair, and it resembles the notorious “sweet sixteen” parties that rich whites throw for their daughters. Larry is ostracized by the guests, and Loretta is simply ignored. In a room full of assimilated Jews and white Christians, both Larry and Loretta are clearly outsiders. For in siding with Cheryl and dismissing Loretta, the Jewish guests affirm their own claim to assimilated white identity. Larry has no community of his own left, so he turns to the Blacks.

In the final scene, Larry fully embraces his outsider status and asks Loretta to dance. As they dance, both viewers and guests at the Bat Mitzvah become aware of a romantic connection. The camera then cuts to Larry and Loretta waking up in bed together as Loretta’s children run into the room and jump on the bed. What follows is a hilarious montage of Larry and the Blacks living as a family in Los Angeles: going to the movies, attending soccer games, and arguing with the neighbors. The final image of the episode, and the season, is a card with a photograph of Larry and the family that reads, “Happy Holidays from Larry and the Blacks.”19 The virtual blackface in this moment is clear: unable to adhere to white identity, Larry literally becomes a Black.

**BORAT AND DA ALI G SHOW**

Among the three artists under discussion, British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s use of Jewishness and blackface is the most puzzling. Cohen is famous for his television series *Da Ali G Show* (2000) and for his feature-length films *Ali G Indahouse* (2002), *Borat* (2006), and *Brüno* (2009), all based on characters created for *Da Ali G Show*.20 In all of these works, Cohen assumes one of his bizarre fictional personas—wannabe British gangster Ali G, Kazakhstani reporter Borat, or Austrian fashionista Brüno—and interacts with unsuspecting victims, often causing them to embarrass themselves on camera. Since none of Cohen’s fictional personas are either Jewish, black, or American, his
work does not easily fit into discussions of African American or Jewish identity. Nonetheless, both African American culture and Jewishness are major preoccupations in his humor.

In order to fully appreciate Cohen’s Jewish blackface, one must read his personas (particularly Borat and Ali G) in conversation with each other. Cohen additionally relies on his viewers’ prior knowledge of his own Jewishness in order to get the full import of his humor. For instance, whenever the antisemitic Borat is supposedly speaking Kazakh, Cohen actually uses Hebrew instead. The use of Hebrew acts as a wink to audience members who are in the know and provides an ironic counternarrative to Borat’s Jew-hating ignorance. In fact, one of the major themes of Borat, both in his segments on *Da Ali G Show* and in the feature-length film, is antisemitism in the contemporary world. Borat’s antisemitism is an exaggerated stereotype form that is often associated with uneducated and superstitious Eastern European peasants. For instance, in his film Borat relates that in Kazakhstan a favorite local pastime is known as “The Running of the Jew,” in which locals wear giant masks with stereotypically Jewish features and chase Kazakh children through the streets. In his travels throughout America, Borat continues to spout his antisemitic rhetoric, often causing white Christian Americans to reveal their own anti-Jewish sentiments. A famous example occurs in an episode of *Da Ali G Show* where the patrons of an American country-western bar sing along to Borat’s song “In My Country There Is Problem” with lyrics such as: “Throw the Jew down the well / So my country can be free / You must grab him by the horns / Then we have a big party.” A similar preoccupation with Jewish persecution occurs in Cohen’s Brüno segments, where the Austrian fashion expert decides which celebrities, due to their outfit, can “stay in the ghetto” and which must take the “train to Auschwitz.”

Even though his characters themselves are not Jewish, Cohen’s emphasis on Judaism and Jewish persecution firmly establishes him as a recognizably Jewish comedian and makes *Da Ali G Show* one of the most explicitly Jewish television series since the turn of the century. This Jewishness, I suggest, informs our understanding of Cohen’s virtual blackface persona, Ali G. Ali G comes from Staines, a working-class suburb of London, but his clothing and language suggest an affinity with African American culture. Ali G is extremely ignorant of the world around him and seems to understand little beyond hip-hop music, fast food, and designer clothes. In one sketch, for example, Ali G claims that movies about slavery are “racialist” because they always have black actors portraying the slaves. Therefore, while Ali G’s skin tone (like Cohen’s) is consistent with white ethnicity, his appearance, language, and personality
embody some of the most malicious stereotypes about African Americans. Ali G himself, however, claims to be black.

Taking all of this into account, Ali G seems to be constructed as a deliberate racial conundrum. Critics have speculated that he is from Asian, Turkish, or Jewish descent, but most consider him a white, wannabe “gangsta,” enamored with African American culture even though he has but a superficial understanding of it. However, with Ali G’s sunglasses, hat, and most of his body covered with loose-fitting clothing, it is too difficult to see enough of him to make out any discernible ethnic features. This lack of ethnic specificity often drives the character’s humor, especially when Ali G is interviewing unwitting celebrities. For example, in an interview with the 60 Minutes pundit Andy Rooney, Ali G repeatedly exasperates the curmudgeonly Rooney with mistakes in verb conjugation that are consistent with Ebonics. When Rooney claims he has had enough and gets up to leave the interview, Ali G asks, “is it ‘cause I is black?” Ali G then goes on to accuse Rooney of being “racialist.” Rooney, visibly confused, looks at Ali G and asks, “you’re black?”

Ali G’s indeterminate ethnicity thus forces his interviewees (and viewers) to reevaluate their understanding of racial categories.

In Ali G then, Cohen presents a peculiar sort of blackface. Like early minstrel shows, Ali G represents a recognizable cultural stereotype, but since Cohen does not actually wear black makeup, the stereotype is deflated. Cohen plays at playing black. Early minstrel shows, according to Eric Lott, represented the mixed emotions that whites felt toward black culture: a “dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy.” While whites found the dance, style, and music of African Americans fascinating, they also feared coming into close contact with real African Americans. Thus, the minstrel show provided an outlet for whites to express their fascination with black culture in a safe, all-white environment. By acting black, Cohen mocks this sort of white fascination with and fear of black culture. Since on Da Ali G show segments featuring Ali G are shown alongside the more overtly Jewish Borat and Brüno sketches, viewers are never allowed to forget that behind the Ali G persona, there is a Jewish man. These confounding layers of ethnic identity are part of what drive Cohen’s humor. Sarah Silverman and Larry David seem to suggest that contemporary Jews must choose either to assimilate into mainstream white society or to reject it by identifying with the black minority. The Ali G persona, however, both collapses and rejects this binary, for through it Cohen is simultaneously white and black. Cohen thus superimposes different ethnic identities (Jewish, white, black) on top of each other. This superimposition assumes that racial and ethnic categories are defined not by rigid categoriza-
tions but rather in relation to each other. The result is not so much an anxiety over the Jews’ place in a contemporary multiethnic landscape but an assertion that Jewishness is an integral part of it—not to be subsumed by or removed from the surrounding cultures.

CONCLUSION

What I have hoped to do here is point out a fascinating trend in contemporary Jewish humor that highlights how many Jews have, over the last century, changed the way that they think about and present their ethnic identity. Rather than looking for ways to hide Jewishness and blend into mainstream white society, many Jews are doing just the opposite and turning to blackness to reassert their own minority status. On the one hand, it could be argued that this trend suggests that Jews want to have their cake and eat it too: enjoy the privileges of the dominant ethnic group and simultaneously claim separation from that group. On the other hand, it could be argued that despite the different contexts and intentions, what I have called “the new Jewish blackface” is not so new but is just another example in a long line of whites appropriating black culture for their own ends. It is clear, though, that Jewish comedians today are well aware of the myriad changes occurring both within the Jewish community and in American culture as a whole. Moreover, these comedians are finding ways to adapt the long tradition of Jewish humor to these changes and provide a humor that reflects the complexity of our contemporary, multiethnic culture.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
4 Ibid., 27.
6 Ibid., 314.
7 The stand-up comedy of Lenny Bruce may also serve as an early example of a Jewish “virtual blackface.” Bruce’s humor was inflected by the rhythms and structure of jazz, and his language was infused with an African American vernacular. As Mel Watkins notes, Bruce “conveyed a comic attitude reflecting prominent aspects of genuine black
9 I will use “Sarah” to refer to the character on the show and “Silverman” to refer to the artist.
10 “Face Wars,” The Sarah Silverman Program, Television. First aired on Comedy Central Oct. 17, 2007. All references to The Sarah Silverman Program refer to this episode.
11 “Face Wars” did not receive as much criticism as we might expect. To my knowledge, neither academics nor mainstream journalists have offered any extended discussion of the episode. Some online bloggers, however, did express outrage over Silverman’s use of the blackface mask. See, in particular, username Kevin’s discussion titled “The Blackface Files Return” on the online blog http://www.slanttruth.com. Or see the website http://slanttruth.com/2007/10/23/the-blackface-files-return.
13 I provide an extended discussion of Jewish ethnicity on Curb Your Enthusiasm, without the emphasis on blackface, in my article “Negotiating Jewishness: Curb Your Enthusiasm and the Schlemiel Tradition,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 38:4 (December 2010).
16 Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm, Television. First aired on HBO (17 October 1999).
18 “Meet the Blacks,” Curb Your Enthusiasm, Television. First aired on HBO (9 September 2007).
20 Da Ali G Show originally aired in the United Kingdom in 2000. The episodes were later repackaged, given new titles, and rebroadcast, on HBO, in the United States from 2003-2004. I am using the U.S. titles.
21 Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, Film, Twentieth Century Fox, 2006.
23 Ibid.
