Jenny Schecter and the Strange Case of the Present Absent Jewish American Woman on the Queer Screen: The Ghostly Failures of Jewish American Assimilation

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I seek to avoid the problem of hierarchies of suffering by working, as it were, horizontally rather than vertically, extending a wide embrace beyond the immediate site of suffering to look at the experiences of those who are feeling its effects even if they are removed from it (whether historically or spatially). In looking at emotional responses that are tangential to trauma yet that still touch on it, I am arguing not that they are the equivalent of trauma but that they help illuminate its emotional dynamics. The nuances of everyday emotional life contain the residues that are left by traumatic histories, and they too belong in the archive of trauma… They can make one feel totally alone, but in being made public, they are revealed to be part of a shared experience of the social.

- *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich

1 Jewish American assimilation is currently understood to be a completed, and highly successful, project. Yet the persona of the young queer Jewish American woman (whether real or fictional) in popular culture who is maligned or caricatured problematizes this notion of completed Jewish assimilation into whiteness, such as Jenny Schecter on *The L Word*.[1] What proves most interesting and revealing about such personae (and to some extent, the writers who created the fictional iterations) is that they have all been deeply influenced by post-WWII ideologies of Jewish American identity. Not only have they absorbed the notion that they are assimilated, and thus cannot acknowledge the omnipresent 'ghost' of the

[1] I use the term *persona* to emphasize that both fictional characters and real women (especially those presented to us through the media) are understood through cultural understandings of specific kinds of identities, as well as the fact that even real women are known only as they are mediated through news or entertainment venues. The persona is an image, of course, but is also more than that to the extent that readers or viewers develop "relationships" with characters (perhaps especially so in TV and film, in which there is a face to go with the personality). Finally, the concept of "persona" also addresses the blurring of actor and character, (such as with Jerry Seinfeld as Jerry Seinfeld in *Seinfeld*, Fran Drescher as Fran Fine in *The Nanny* or Roseanne Barr as Roseanne Conner in *Roseanne)* and the way that news and social media create a "character" out of anyone in the spotlight, such as Monica Lewinsky as explored by Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan's *Our Monica, Ourselves*. NYU Press, 2001.

process of assimilating, but they have also been deeply influenced by stereotypes of Jewish American women created and reiterated by various aspects of popular culture.[2] Rather than coming to terms with traumatic Jewish historical ghosts as the personae of young Jewish American men often do, the personae of the queer Jewish American woman is concerned with the struggle to maintain normalcy (e.g., a WASP-like whiteness), the struggle of living as a stranger, or both. While Jonathan Safran Foer, a secular contemporary Jew in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, goes to the Ukraine to try to find remnants of his family from after the Holocaust, the characters/personae examined here cannot afford to spend much time listening to the whispers in the walls, although they are troubled by the ghosts that they sense are there.

2 I contend that the myriad stories being told by queer Jewish American women artists, particularly in cinema and television, are important and complicate the standardized notion of completed Jewish American assimilation. I focus here on the story that Jewish American lesbian television producer and writer Ilene Chaiken tells in *The L Word* of a California queer/lesbian women's community in which the queer Jewish American woman still inhabits the tenuous, fragile position of the stranger. contradicting the portrayals of assimilated Jewish American females such as the Monica Geller character on *Friends*, those personae who are relegated to being strangers—such as Jenny Schecter on *The L Word*—serve to illuminate the failures, problematics, and questions left in the wake of supposedly completed and closed inclusions. To that end, I will examine the persona of Jenny Schecter, a highly marked and yet highly invisible queer Jewish American character on Showtime's *The L Word*. Jenny Schecter is clearly marked as Jewish by her explorations of her Jewish

[2] Alexander Portnoy's mother in *Portnoy's Complaint* and Harry Block's disapproving, whining Zionist sister in *Deconstructing Harry*. Roth, Philip, *Portnoy's Complaint*. Vintage International, 1994. And *Deconstructing Harry*. Directed by Woody Allen, performances by Woody Allen, Judy Davis, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Fine Line Features, 1997.

history and present in numerous story lines, yet her Jewishness (or her Jewish matters, as I call them, evoking Avery Gordon's "ghostly matters") is ignored by the other characters on the show creating the paradox that the persona of the Jewish female stranger may be highly visible and invisible at the same time. Ghostly matters, according to Avery Gordon, are those manifestations we can feel haunting—particularly in theory this can manifest as a feeling—a feeling that something is being left out, that there is some 'matter' that hasn't been attended to, that there is something one cannot put one's finger on though one knows it is there. She addresses how slippery this becomes in academic scholarship where we are taught to only validate that which can be expressed in terms and frameworks with which we are already familiar. The persona of Jenny Schecter disrupts the notion that all Jewish Americans are completely assimilated though this remains a ghostly matter within *The L Word*.

3 This disruption continues a curious historical flip-flop observed by multiple scholars. Joyce Antler notes that in the first half of the twentieth century, "popular culture representations of Jewish life became increasingly masked, indirect, and invisible as opposed to the full-bodied representations of the preceding half century," and contends that this invisibility continued throughout much of the twentieth century (Antler 247). "American assimilation was closely allied to the modern distinction between the public and private sphere," writes Jon Stratton (152). Partly due to this distinction (and an assimilation imperative amplified by there being no 'home' to return to), Stratton posits that "in the fifties and sixties Jews are portrayed as assimilated whites in Hollywood films" (145). However, as Vincent Brooks contends, "the period from 1989 through the early 2000s has seen an unprecedented upsurge in American television featuring explicitly Jewish protagonists (e.g., *Seinfeld*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Nanny*, *Mad About You*, *Friends*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Will and*

Grace)" (1). Rather than reading this expanded depiction as evidence of Jewish American assimilatory progress, however, Brooks argues that "the trend also points to a renewed crisis in Jewish identity formation, which, in turn, reflects a broader struggle over incorporation and diversity in U.S. television and society" (2).

4 Karen Brodkin also recognizes this struggle when she observes that Jewish Americans have been shuttled back and forth between being white and non-white for most of the twentieth century, and frames this malleability as inhabiting the position of the stranger (175). Following Zygmunt Bauman, unlike the assimilated Jew who poses no threat to the status quo, the stranger is dangerous because she has the ability to masquerade as an insider until her movements begins to seem stilted, her speech too precise and careful, and a hint of something foreign emerges suddenly and irrevocably. At that moment, the solidity of category and identity is dislodged in a way that disturbs both the insider and the outsider, often with dire consequences for the stranger (Bauman 59). In some cases the stranger has the ability to mediate her position by positioning herself in opposition to designated outsiders or attempting to align herself with insiders. In other cases there is no choice but for the stranger to make a home in this homeless state. I will work to show how the stranger, exemplified here by Jenny Schecter, is often ousted to discipline insiders and outsiders alike, and how sometimes strangers attempt to make homes in stranger spaces only to find that there, too, lies a normal body with whom the stranger will be compared and disciplined. In this topography, the stranger is as important as the insider and the outsider in creating and maintaining punitive systems of hierarchical order, and Jenny Schecter inhabits this necessary stranger space throughout the duration of *The L Word* series.

5 Stratton continues, "in the 1980s Jews begin to become racialized subjects again and this is troped as performance" (145). In this re-ethnicization, "in film, as in life, markers that

are thought to signify Jewish phenotypic difference are bound together with cultural differences" (149). Indeed, the actor who portrays Jenny Schecter, Mia Kirshner, has a biography that reads similarly to Jenny's storyline. The grandchild of Holocaust survivors—her father is reported to have been born in an internment camp—tells of a childhood in which she was a strange, 'dark' child with the history of the Holocaust imprinted in her paternal grandparents' cells, and displacement and diaspora written into her Bulgarian maternal grandparents' hearts" (Pfefferman). She tells of Shabbat dinners where "I would watch my grandfather vanish. His eyes dark slits, mouth open in mute horror. Sometimes, he would stop talking for days…. Now my father likes to travel; they never want him to leave. Hysteria accompanies his departures, my father repeating his itinerary over and over again" (Pfefferman). Kirshner, here, suggests that her appearance that was read as ethnic and her inherited Jewish matters through her grandparents as third generation holocaust survivor made her a kind of stranger herself.

6 The tale told by Ilene Chaiken is a sad one in which the queer Jewish woman is, at any given moment, made invisible, disciplined and reformed, or excised from the group of friends — and indeed, Jenny's eventual murder at the hands of an unknown individual decidedly excises her from the community forever. In the rare moments when we are privy to Jenny Schecter's 'private,' unspoken thoughts, we are told ghost stories of unutterable and unreachable memories of abuse and violence, both her own and her grandparents' Holocaust narratives—experiences doubled or mirrored by the actor playing Schecter. Further, the group response to Jenny Schecter on the show allows us to understand the positionality of being both a highly visible and yet also invisible stranger and serves as an illumination of the current crisis in visibility/invisibility of Jewish identity in popular culture identified by Joyce Antler, Jon Stratton, Vincent Brooks, and others. The particular crisis for the queer Jewish

American woman (exemplified here by Jenny Schecter) is that her story has no viable way to be illuminated through the narrative lens of white femininity, despite the notion that she is seamlessly white, and yet it is the queer Jewish woman whose strangerhood illuminates some of the failures of Jewish assimilation. While Jenny cannot be read as a simple caricature fitting into the role of the Yiddishe Mama, overbearing mother, or JAP, she also cannot be read as a fully fleshed-out, nuanced character; her psychic pain cannot be made manifest in any meaningful way, because her presumed assimilated whiteness precludes her queer Jewish matters from becoming visible, even to the viewers who watch her gruesome story unfold.[3]

Jenny Schecter And Her Jewish Matters

7 While the show focuses primarily on the sexuality of its characters, I posit that Jenny's ongoing strangerhood is tied simultaneously to her queerness and her Jewish ethnicity, and the lingering traces of trauma that stem from it. Jenny first appears as a stereotypical straight white woman, with long hair and a boyfriend, as a new neighbor and a recent graduate of the renounced Iowa Writer's Workshop. Over the course of the series, layers of her persona are peeled back to show those elements that make her a stranger—her Jewishness, her family trauma, her tormented private dreams, her complicated and hard to define sexuality. Addressing the construction of the character of Jenny Schecter and how she came to understand portraying her, actor Kirshner says, "I was attracted originally to the naiveté and innocence of Jenny, she was sort of this very classic character who was a blank slate. I had no idea what I was getting into. Every year I sort of had a different character for Jenny, that's how I approached it because she's so radically different each season" ("Preview

[3] Identified caricatures in U.S. television identified by theorists such as Joyce Antler.

for Season Six"). While Jenny could conceivably be read through multiple lenses, it is her Jewishness that functions to tie many of these elements together and make her a stranger rather than an outsider, and that best illustrates that Jewish assimilation into whiteness is still far from complete or unproblematic even in the queer white world of *The L Word*.

8 As Jon Stratton explains, "For Jews to be fully accepted as white, as differentiated from American, meant to be thought to have Anglo-American culture, an achievement made possible by the assumption of what, following Brodkin, we could call prefigurative acquisition" (145). For Jenny Schecter, this acquisitive assumption of Anglo-American culture is a recent one, according to the third season opener, in which we find ourselves in Jenny's childhood home and first discover that her parents are Orthodox Jews. Throughout this episode—the first we have seen her parents—we learn that Jenny has grown up in an enclosed community in which she was expected to marry a "nice Jewish boy," and her introduction to non-Jewish communities occurred only when she went away to college. Jenny's Jewishness is both known and unknown; she is explicitly identified as Jewish, yet none of her friends seem to know just *how* 'Jewish' her upbringing actually was (only as viewers are we privy to the private scenes between her and her parents in Skokie, Illinois). Nor do they know how personal the Holocaust is to her with her grandmother having been a survivor of Auschwitz. The profound markers of her ethnic Jewish identity are visible only to the viewer, yet the kitschy markers of her 'Jewishness' are thrown around the group with witty repartee (of rather poor taste), such as when Jenny is campily dubbed the "Jewish star" ("Lone Star"). It is disorienting to the viewer, who is left to connect, disconnect, or reject these private scenes from Jenny's public appearances.

9 Jenny is clearly aware of her status as a stranger. In "Left Hand of the Goddess," the last episode of Season Three, Jenny confronts Max (who she is dating, and who is

undergoing female-to-male gender reassignment) explicitly about identity and belonging. In a dramatic scene set in a lavish hotel, Jenny attempts to dance with a stranger, another feminine appearing woman in a room full of older, wealthy, conservatively dressed people. Moira/Max tries to stop her by reminding her that the two women dancing may cause these conservative straight people discomfort. Jenny retorts with one of the last utterances of the last episode of the season, and says angrily:

> You're great the way you are and the way you were. And you know what happens when you walk into this room (looking back at the straight people dancing on the dance floor and then looking back into his eyes, this time the camera shooting from above so we can see Jenny looking up into Max's face)? They start watching you, looking at you closely and then they begin to feel uneasy because they realize that you're not. You're always going to be one of the others (Max shakes his head, Jenny pauses). You're like us. ("Left Hand of the Goddess")

In this statement Jenny sums up how she is first received as an insider in almost every situation until the way she embodies and enunciates herself betrays that she is in some way 'passing.' However, she is never completely an outsider, either. Jenny first dates a cisgendered man, then later begins dating Moira—who then transitions to being Max. Sexually, she is thus never fully an insider in the lesbian group because of her attraction to masculinity, but not really an outsider, either, inasmuch as dating Moira/Max also prevents her from being a straight outsider. Jenny even becomes obsessed with helping Max transition (going as far as calling it what they are doing) because she has no outlet for openly cultivating and perfecting her own ethnic passing. Currently there is no transmittable discourse to explore Jenny's passing as a queer Jewish American woman attempting to live in a white Christian L Word so Jenny necessarily becomes obsessed with Max's transition because there is a language to describe this process that she yearns for. Like Max (whose name is not officially changed from Moira), Jenny risks being 'outed' every time she has to

utter her last name, Schecter. However, unlike Max, Jenny is able to 'pass' even while being 'out'—and this paradox makes for an interesting case in identity politics indeed.

10 I start with this late (in the series) scene simply because this is the first time in the entire series that Jenny acknowledges and embraces her position as stranger. Rather than reading Jenny's outburst as an assumption about Max's desire to pass as a cisgender man, I suggest this scene be read as Jenny's acknowledgement that her history makes her a perpetual, palpable stranger. As Avery Gordon writes in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* "And therein lies the frightening aspect of haunting: you can be grasped and hurtled into the maelstrom of the powerful and material forces that lay claim to you whether you claim them as yours or not" (166). In this scene Jenny lays claim to these matters that she has been thrown into, rather than disavowing them in order to assimilate.

11 Jenny's grandmother is necessarily an Auschwitz survivor, just as it is necessary to reveal her parents as Orthodox at the height of the re-emergence of her traumatic memories. If we are to believe that Jenny's trauma lives beyond her own bodily scars, then it is necessary to be offered the trope of the Holocaust survivor, as U.S.-based viewers are generally not familiar with more subtle, nuanced manifestations of Jewish traumatic memories and matters. Further, the coupling of her sexual abuse with her family's trauma is necessary as a mechanism for both characters on the show and viewers to legitimize Jenny, at least for a moment, as worthy of sympathy, because sexual trauma is experienced, albeit differently, by women of all identities and thus can transcend the specificity of ethnic traumatic matters. It is her sexual trauma that will eventually ground Jenny into a character with whom we can sympathize, for a few episodes, when the other characters on the show become privy to her private pain, pushing viewers into considering "the wide range of effects of trauma on those who are not strictly speaking survivors" (Cvetkovich 282).

12 Jenny is also necessarily a writer. In order for the viewer to be granted access to the nuances of Jenny's internal life (inaccessible in her passing as a fully assimilated white woman), we need a lens. Writing is also appropriate for Jenny as a representative of the 'people of the word.' Jenny is the only character who we see alone in almost every episode in the first two seasons, where she writes stories such as one where she is walking around a carnival scene where everyone besides her has a pig face and they all whisper "monstrosity" as she passes by, a stranger amongst the strange, a Jew amongst the Gentiles. As a stranger, she is an observer of both the insiders and the outsiders of the show, serving as a receptacle of confession for the show's insiders when they momentarily find themselves as outsiders, such as Bette, a bi-racial character who is masculinized through racialization, or Shane, who is masculinized through her class and gender identity.

Fictions Speak the Unspeakable Strangeness

13 Writer and producer Ilene Chaiken has stated that Jenny Schecter's story was loosely her own, adding that "there are bits and pieces of me in Jenny and one or two other characters I channel myself through" (Scheir). Like Jenny, when Chaiken moved to L.A., she met an older woman, fell in love, and ceased dating men within a year or so. This is not to suggest we read Jenny as a factual account of Chaiken and her family, but rather as a metaphor for Chaiken reaching to understand and tell 'what happened' (or 'telling the little secrets,' as theorist Janet Burstein might suggest) (Burstein). More important than the similarity of their trajectories is the fact that there are stories that cannot be told directly but rather can only be accessed through fiction, partially because of the difficulty of accessing traumatic memory and partially because these stories must be reached for through the haze

of inherited memory and trauma passed down in code through generations — e.g., through Chaiken's creation of *The L Word*, and Jenny's writing of her stories and memoir.

14 While Jenny attempts many times to transmit to her friends the fragmented memories and residues of inherited traumas coming back to her, her friends are unable to take her seriously, partially because they believe she is seamlessly white with no inherited traumas. However, when she is revealed as a victim of sexual assault she becomes illuminated, and then, worthy of 'remediation' (or normalization, or whitening). As Jenny writes a story in "Luminous," we watch what Jenny is writing come to life before us, accompanied by eerie-sounding Yiddish Klezmer music. An adolescent version of Jenny appears in a blue gingham dress reminiscent of Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*. She begins riding a bicycle out of a garage into daylight where there is a Ferris wheel and a trailer in the background.[4] She rides on into glaring sunlight until she reaches a pink trailer and knocks on the door. A man with dark, thick stubble emerges in a ratty bathrobe. The colors of the scene continue to get brighter and more surreal. She looks confused and looks down again at a piece of paper as if she's made some mistake. She says, "I'm looking for the Venus de Mylar. I was told she lives here" ("Luminous"). The man replies, "I'm her girly," as the lighting gets brighter and more disorienting, mirroring the girl's confusion at how the woman in the poster could also be this bearded man. She looks again at the poster, furrowing her eyebrows in confusion. The Venus de Mylar sighs, waves his hand and closes the door of the trailer.

[4] The Ferris wheel and carnival motif will become prevalent in Jenny's writing as we come to understand that she was sexually assaulted outside of a carnival. However, these scenes almost always have a Jewish element, with klezmer music playing and often Chasid's being portrayed having a holiday celebration underneath a big top tent in the background. A letter to Ilene Chaiken, published on afterellen.com a few seasons into the show, proposes to Chaiken that she should put Jenny on a Ferris Wheel spinning out of control--the proposed Ferris Wheel would kill Max and give Jenny amnesia so she becomes a new and improved, *pleasant* character. This illuminates that what makes Jenny *strange* is her refusal, or inability, to be a pleasant and sweet properly gendered white woman.

15 From behind the closed door we hear moaning and banging, things falling down around the trailer. Finally, he emerges with a pink beehive wig, red painted toenails and high, clear stiletto heels. He throws his hands out to the side and says, "That better?" ("Luminous"). The girl smiles and he walks over to her, puts his hands on her shoulders, towering over her, and says, "So, what's your name, little girl?" ("Luminous"). "Didi. Didi Steinberg" she replies ("Luminous"). "Victor Bernstein" he shrieks in surprise, grabbing Didi's hands in both of his own and shaking them profusely, saying, "It wouldn't fly in Peoria" ("Luminous"). In this moment, both characters are revealed as Jews and Bernstein assesses that their Jewishness, coupled with their strangeness (read as gender/sexual queerness), in the context of a Middle American town, just wouldn't "fly."

16 Bernstein/Venus de Mylar asks Didi Steinberg why she wants to join the circus and what her story is, to which she replies, "I don't belong anywhere else, everybody in my family thinks I'm a freak because…" trailing off at the end of her sentence. He shrugs this aside, wanting to know if besides being a freak, or stranger, she has any talents. The scene ends with Didi lifting up her skirt and Venus de Mylar/Victor Bernstein saying, "Holy Jesus, that is special, but it'll never fly in Peoria!" ("Luminous"). Viewers are led to believe Didi Steinberg has shown Bernstein seemingly 'strange' genitalia, symbolic of her latent queerness and worthy of being included in a circus freak show.[5]

17 It is significant that we are watching a scene in which Jenny is *writing*, creating a fictional vision of her younger self, showing how she is left to turn to fiction to grapple with the strange excesses and remainders that do not fit—first her queerness in Skokie, then her Jewishness into the white, queer world of *The L Word.* Here we are given a window into

[5] This is clearly reminiscent of enslaved women of color who were forced into traveling freak shows to exhibit genitalia that was understood to be abnormally large and "grotesque"—always in reference to an absent and "normal," demure white woman's genitalia. See

Jenny's previous life in the Midwest, where she is eager to get away and join the other strangers like Victor Bernstein. This is one of the first moments where we engage with Jenny's life before Los Angeles, albeit through a distorted, fictional lens, and we can begin to imagine that both her Jewishness and her (then latent) queerness troubled her seamless assimilation into Midwestern white straight cultures, as well as her queerness troubling her inclusion in the Orthodox spaces from which she emerged. It is also important to note that many of Jenny's stories include a Jewish presence and thematic, as did the first story we find her writing in the first season that takes place at a Jewish funeral. Why then, we must ask, do we never see any mention of her Jewishness other than when she is writing her stories, alone? Clearly the matter troubles her mind and consequently contributes to her queer/stranger status, and yet there is no reckoning with what is troublingly unearthed in her stories, either within the show with other characters or any of the scant criticism that has emerged about the show.

Trauma, Memory and Confrontation

18 One of the most troubling moments in which Jenny confronts her ghostly Jewish matters occurs midway through the series after she discovers that her roommate Mark has been secretly taping her and Shane in every room of their house. She steals his camera and begins her own video project, as well as her demise into what will be framed as a nervous breakdown. In "Land Ahoy" we find Jenny with the camera in her hand, with pictures of religious Eastern European Jews in the 'old country' in front of her. We hear Jenny's voice and see her hands manipulating the pictures, but we do not yet see her face. She begins to speak, saying:

> Hi mom… I would like to know if Zayde lost his mind when he began to transcribe the Torah (Klezmer music rises in the background) by hand or did that cause him to lose his mind? Do you remember the day they took him away? And then I wanted to ask you questions about Grandma. Grandma, if you're watching this, I wanted to ask you questions about your experience in Auschwitz. I wanted to know if when you arrived in Auschwitz did they separate you from your daughter? And I wanted to know if you remember the name of the Unterscharfuhrer who took your arm and branded you with that tattoo? Do you remember his eyes? Do you remember if he used a steel plate or did he use a needle? ("Land Ahoy")

Here, Jenny begins to re-enter traumatized spaces that she has tried, desperately, to distance herself from—removing herself physically from the Skokie community in which she was raised, removing herself from marking herself as an Orthodox Jewish woman as she morphs into expressing her strangeness (or 'ethnic excess' beyond the parameters of white femininity) as a manifestation of her queerness.

19 Clues begin to emerge that part of her ghostly Jewish matter is related to sexual abuse—denoted by stories she writes in which her younger self is being chased by young boys outside of a carnival, connecting to the carnival theme in the Venus de Mylar story—both a clichéd trope and an apt way to get at the ways Jews in United States popular culture are often both queered and made strange/grotesque regardless of sexuality. These matters will be the most illuminated and in some ways, embraced, as something intelligible in the narrative of breakdown and recovery that will extend Jenny some short-lived sympathy from the other characters on the show and critics of the show. However, the images of Jenny being raped in the woods watching Chasids celebrating in a carnival tent will never really be addressed but will instead linger there, ghosting, leaving us to wonder what connections remain uncovered between Jenny's own personal traumas and the larger traumas of her familial history. Scenes in which klezmer music speeds up as Stars of David populate her drawings of men leering at Jewish people with mob hatred will be dropped into the plot and then left there. This leaves viewers to forget these scenes and leads the other characters on

the show to not even notice these moments as they are happening as Jenny continues to intuit the need to privatize these inexplicable and ghostly connections and disturbances ("Loud and Proud").

20 In the tense confrontation Shane and Jenny have after Jenny strips at a seedy club as "Yeshiva Girl," Shane asks Jenny why she is stripping. Jenny responds by saying stripping helps her to feel in control of feelings she can barely explain or understand. She goes on, saying, "it helps me remember all of this childhood shit that happens to me, you know, like, I have to, it's important. Do you remember the shit that happened to you as a child that makes you not want to trust people as an adult?" ("Lacuna"). When Shane responds that she does, Jenny tells her that she is lucky because she can get on with her life. She tells Shane, "You're not dogged down by these horrible childhood memories. You know, you stand a chance of being a normal, productive person" ("Lacuna"). Shane asks if she remembers and Jenny stammers, "I don't know. You know, like I remember things and then I think, is this true? Did this stuff really happen or am I making it up? You know because the older I get, the memory becomes a little blurry and it's like I can't. I don't know, but you just don't know the truth anymore." ("Lacuna"). Jenny refuses a ride home from Shane, gets on a bus, and sits down in a seat next to what appears to be her as a child, dirty from the ground she was pummeled into as she was raped by several boys, and rocks this version of herself back and forth as she cries. The bus seems to have left Los Angeles and entered a world where all of the storefronts bear Hebrew and Yiddish writing and Jewish stars, denoting once again that Jenny's sexual abuse trauma is directly linked to her Jewish matters.

21 Here Jenny describes being dissociated from the traumas her body has experienced and watching them re-emerge in confusing fragments. Later we will learn, in a dramatic

scene at her Orthodox parents home in Skokie, Illinois, that her parents had been silent about Jenny's rape as well as silent about the family's Holocaust past. It is important to consider that dissociation is passed down to her as a survival mechanism from people who themselves have been highly traumatized by history and its events. Even later in the series—when Jenny will have been turned into a complete caricature[6] —in an interview about the movie she writes and directs, Jenny will say that this silence shaped her into the pathological liar she became for most of her early adulthood. It may be useful to reframe this self-designation as not necessarily simply lying, but also as an attempt to find a mask that suitably allowed her to pass into this group of friend's *L Word* insider space. And we begin to understand, though briefly, how Jenny strangely may have no idea how to 'act,' if you will, in this Los Angeles queer white setting, when we meet her parents in the third season opener where she is living as an outpatient to the local mental hospital.

22 Jenny has been hospitalized after Shane found her cutting her thighs with a razor ("Lacuna"). Though we have been getting clues as viewers throughout the season that Jenny is suffering from the re-emergence of collective and personal psychic and ghostly matters, this is the first time in the season that Jenny is granted visibility and sympathy (but not empathy) by the other characters on *The L Word*, in contrast to the depressive without a cause persona of the seasons preceding episodes. However, it is only through the language of pathology, and its subsequent expected remediation, that Jenny becomes a character with whom we may sympathize, for a moment, though she becomes no less strange. It is important that the solution to the ghostly matters Jenny presents to the viewers and *The L Word* characters is to fix her rather than to acknowledge the ghosts to be real and to allow

[6] As the series continues, Schecter will be played as the materialistic JAP figure, the conniving and sneaky Jewish figure, the manipulating and money-hungry Jewish figure, and by the end of the series the murdered villain in a dizzying series of character reincarnations.

Jenny to put them in view as opposed to the private, fictional spaces in which these matters are allowed to emerge. To put it more bluntly, Jenny needs to either shape up or ship out, and since she cannot shape up, or become politely white, she is shipped out to Skokie and only comes back when she has been diagnosed, remediated and medicated, until she becomes an evil stranger again only to be murdered at the hands of one of the other characters in the last season of the show.

23 The next season of *The L Word* begins six months after Jenny's breakdown. Midway through the first episode we find her setting Shabbos candles with her mother at her childhood home in Skokie. Her mother's hair is covered, as is her entire body, denoting an Orthodox level of religious piety. While they set the table, Jenny's mother tells her that her father would like them all to go to temple that evening and that her father has invited over a family with a nice young Jewish man for Jenny. Jenny protests, saying that she is a lesbian, while her mother argues with her, asking why her psychiatrist has not fixed her gay problem. Jenny walks out of the room when her mother tells her that obviously her shrink is as sick as she is because he thinks that her being a lesbian is not a problem ("Labia Majora"). Here Jenny is made slightly less strange to the viewer by her mother being framed as reactionary and Jenny, as consequence, the survivor of not just sexual abuse but familial homophobia, perhaps easier matters for the mostly white lesbian world of *The L Word* and its viewers to contend with and relate to. This underscores not only the schism between religious and secular U.S. Jews, but the ways in which Jenny's belonging in the *The L Word* white world, even as a stranger, is dependent on her complicity in seeing her mother as oppressed and beholden to backwards and "old world" ideologies. Jenny, a stranger in her family, her culture, and the *L Word* world is a fragmented character for whom cultural/linguistic tools are unavailable to be clearly enunciated and, thus, she becomes a caricature.

24 Later in the episode, we find Jenny having sex with the very butch Moira (who will later transition to Max) on her childhood bed. Suddenly the door swings open and we meet Jenny's father, a large man in a yarmulke with a big bushy beard. He begins to scream, yelling, "Get up! What the hell do you think you're doing? How dare you treat us this way after we opened our home to you! How dare you bring a man back into this house" ("Labia Majora"). Jenny replies, "I would never do that, Warren. I want you to meet Moira. She lives over in Wilmette" ("Labia Majora"). Her father keeps screaming for her to get out, that he wants her out immediately. Jenny replies:

> Actually, you've wanted me out of this house from the moment I stepped foot in here. [She stalks closer to him.] What is it, Warren? Am I too fucked up for you? Am I too perverted? Look at me. Do I remind you of how messy and out of control your life is? [He begins to walk away, and she follows him.] Warren? I'm just not the girl you wanted me to be.

Her mother attempts to get her to stop, but Jenny only continues, "No, you stop! When are you going to start being an actual person? Not this silent slave to this man?" ("Labia Majora"). Her father tells her to stop disrespecting her mother and throws his hands up, exclaiming, "I don't know what more we can do!" ("Labia Majora"). Jenny retorts:

> Nothing. There's nothing more that you can do for me to make me into the person you're comfortable with, because I'm not going to marry that nice Jewish boy. I'm not going to have those nice Jewish kids. I'm not going to shut up and be subservient. I'm not going to set the dinner table and pretend that things don't happen. Because when you don't talk about them, they get worse, Warren. ("Labia Majora")

Here Jenny is addressing the myriad silences that led her as an adult to not know "the fucked up shit that happened to her as a kid," as well as what happened for her when trauma was passed down but never acknowledged by anyone around her.

25 In these moments, Jenny Schecter is illuminated as a character caught in the challenges of assimilating. Her passing is clumsy and full of seams, and the storyline of *The L Word* rests on attempts to discipline Jenny's body free of these ghostly Jewish markings

that become manifest to the rest of the characters, as well as viewers/critics, simply as strangeness. And, yet, try as she might, she cannot cut these parts of her out.

Writing Ghost Stories

26 Surely, once Ilene Chaiken secured a deal with Showtime to film and air *The L Word,* the characters, including autobiographical characters, were no longer solely in her hands. Perhaps the interventions of the other writers on the show say as much about their perceptions of queer/lesbian female Jewish Americans as the Chaiken-authored storylines might say about hers. Chaiken may not have imagined Jenny would end up as much of a stranger at the end of six seasons—murdered by one of her friends, no less—as she had been when the series began.

27 We watch Jenny Schecter unfold in *The L Word's* six seasons as a character who is shuttled back and forth across what can be read as an ethnic line, made manifest and visible through the consistent trajectory of Jenny as a stranger character who is neither insider nor outsider. Where, then, is there room for Jenny's queer Jewish matters that haunt her throughout the series? Perhaps unconsciously, Chaiken asks where is there room for these stories, both in Jewish and queer/LGBTQI discourses, and what happens if there is no language and there are no listeners? The answer we are given—quite suddenly, as well as quite predictably—is that what happens is that Jenny Schecter ends up dead.

28 At different times, viewers of *The L Word* are given different indications of when Jenny is a friendly stranger and when she is to be read as a malevolent stranger through the way she is dressed, through the way the camera 'views' her as bigger than life or small and vulnerable, through the way she moves her body, whether she is included in group outings, or whether she is acting 'crazy' or 'normal,' as defined by the group's unspoken social

norms. The groups' social norms, to name a few, include being cheerful, not speaking about painful or difficult subjects, maintaining consistency always in sexuality and identity, and surrounding oneself only with those who do not seriously offend heterosexual people or their norms. Jenny's designation as 'crazy' or 'normal' is dependent primarily on Jenny's proximity to other strangers and outsiders. However, even in the moments when Jenny is read as a friendly stranger next door, she must still be rendered strange because it is only through this strangeness that we are able to see and understand the troubling of the assumption of completed Jewish American assimilation in this particular story. Jenny carries remainders of a life tied to soil and memories that her counterparts on *The L Word* cannot fathom, nor does she have the necessary tools to transmit this information. Even if she did, however, we must wonder if the presumed narrative of successful and complete Jewish American assimilation is too powerful for anyone to hear what she would have to say?

29 Jenny can only confront her Jewish matters through fictional writing where she is free to imagine "what might have happened," in both her own life and to her family during the Holocaust, much like Octavia Butler imagines "what might have happened" to the silenced bodies of women slaves in the United States in her novel *Kindred*. There is no other way for her to give voice to the disturbances of mind that plague her and do not only bear the markings of her own individual experiences. She finds, invariably, that even when she speaks, no one can hear her over the stories that precede her of Jewish American assimilation.

30 Jenny Schecter is also used as a symbol of the danger of the stranger. Scheming, manipulative, exotic and seductive, devourer of people's life stories as she writes with no compassion of her friends' foibles, an eventual murderer of a dog in order to get back at a book reviewer who critiqued her novel, *The Sum of Her Parts*. An example of the

untrustworthiness of those not easily identified, Jenny's sexuality is called into question over and over again, first by herself and then by the other characters. Her inability, or refusal, to be boxed into one particular sexuality renders her more queer than her more mainstream *L Word* counterparts, though they are hardly satisfied by what they perceive as her inability to choose or commit to a sexual identity. However, it is not just her sexual identity that is slippery, it is also her ethnic identity as she 'runs out of skills' in trying to 'act white' and her Orthodox Jewish family is outed. Her ethnic identity is privatized and emerges only in the privacy of her creative writing and scenes between her and her religious family, suggesting one of the methods Jenny must use to try to completely assimilate is to sublimate and hyper-privatize her ghostly Jewish matters. And in doing so, she breaks down, showing the fissures, calling in to question her assimilated status as solid, evidencing her identity as more slippery, more in the process of assimilating, more in the process of becoming and failing than anything else.[7]

31 Avery Gordon asserts that, "to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories" (17). Here, I have attempted to tell a ghost story of the Jewish matters that plague Jenny Schecter and *The L Word.* Though other characters perpetrate a variety of offenses, they are never marred and marked by these actions, allowing for somewhat complicated characters to emerge. However, Jenny is indelibly marked as strange, unworthy of empathy, not necessarily because of her fumbles as a character, but because something about her is simply too strange, too slippery, too uncomfortable. I have tried here to show these matters more plainly and to question how the story of completed Jewish assimilation

[7] Jenny's failures, her breakdowns, are reminiscent of other Jewish American women "failures" that have played out in the "real world." For example we might look to the depiction of Monica Lewinsky's Jewishness in the Clinton scandal, or the language used to describe Elizabeth Wurtzel, and her memoir, after the publication of her memoir, *Prozac Nation*. Lewinsky, Wurtzel, and Schecter exemplify the need for some Jewish American women to constantly work on assimilating in order to transcend this strangeness, and the ways in which this work often fails.

may make her psychic matters effectively inaudible. I also echo Gordon in my hope "to draw attention to a whole realm of experiences and social practices that can barely be approached without a method attentive to what is elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there." (26).

32 This is only the beginning of a need to examine contemporary stories by secular queer Jewish American women. Here I've tried to attend to the queer and strange matters of Jenny Schecter, a character raised Orthodox but living a secular life in the queer white world of *The L* Word. The majority of work on Jewish American women in the United States focuses on religious Jewish American women. In *Telling the Little Secrets* author Janet Burstein notes that she chooses to focus on those who claim themselves as Jewish and religious in her literary studies because doing so is far less messy. She suggests that looking at more secular characters who are less assuredly 'Jewish' causes the critic to need to really on inference, reading between the lines, and in some ways supplementing fiction by the author with fiction by the critic. However, I suggest such a project is necessary if we are to more fully understand the ways in which assimilation and assimilating is working for queer Jewish American women, and also if we are to heal the ghostly matters of the past that seem to haunt those of us, like Jenny Schecter, who live liminally, hovering neither here nor there.

33 It is necessary, too, to examine not just the stories (the testimonies of survivors, etc), but the silences, the clues that let us a little closer to those who could not, but still do, speak. We see them in the patterns in behavior of our parents, our grandparents, the feelings that are cultivated, the feelings that are sublimated, the ways we look at each other or do not, in the aftermath of all of this. We must speak of what survives of the past in the present, how to sight these hauntings, and how to listen to those who are haunted by trauma, those who have become the designated receptacles for all the excessive strangeness that did not fit into

the relentless narrative, and project, of Jewish American assimilation. Without this we continue to cultivate Jenny Schecter's, women tortured, so very tortured, and yet dismissed as depressives without a cause. I, for one, am listening.

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