

Ethnic Encounters in 1930s Jewish American Childhood Novels of New York

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Abstract

A number of childhood novels by Jewish American writers of the 1930s, although disparate in terms of literary aesthetics – from Gold's openly "proletarian" Jews Without Money (1930) to Henry Roth's "ethnic" modernism in Call It Sleep (1934) – share a concern on how the autobiographical Jewish boy characters regard (and are regarded by) ethnic Others. This essay will trace "ethnic encounters" in three Jewish American novels of the period, highlighting passages which reveal popular notions and prejudices on ethnicity, as regards the "place" of Jews vis-à-vis Italians, Irish, or other immigrant Gentiles, noting paradoxical conceptualizations of the Jew's "whiteness" drawn from mainstream American culture.

Keywords: Childhood novels, New York, ethnic 'others', Jewish identity, immigrant neighborhoods, 'whiteness'

The portrayal of American cities as sites where characters become acutely aware of ethnic identity, due to the geographical proximity among neighborhoods of various ethnic, cultural or religious compositions, is a relevant feature of 1920s and 1930s American urban fiction, particularly in *Bildungsromane* or childhood novels with a strong autobiographical component. Such awareness was necessarily reinforced by the specific features of the immigrant process in turn-of-the-century America, whereby natives of Italian, Irish or Eastern European villages and towns relocated collectively to tenement blocks, streets and neighborhoods, thus configuring urban sectors which were homogenous in terms of language, culture and creed, but at the same time were in close proximity to sections which were entirely alien. Although this holds true for other novels of the period set in other cities, New York's Lower East Side, in literary and cultural terms, epitomized this American urban mosaic of ethnic variety in the first decades of the century (Gittleman 123–7).

This is particularly applicable to New York Jewish writers, such as Michael Gold or Henry Roth – writers who grew up in this neighborhood and, as the children of an immigrant generation, perceived their relationship to the city simultaneously as singular – given their population impact on the East Side – but also as necessarily shared with other immigrant ethnic groups, notably Italians and Irish. Even in certain novels which are not centrally about childhood or the East Side, such as Daniel Fuchs’ *Summer in Williamsburg* (1934), this awareness comes to the forefront in one of the storylines. Conversely, certain passages in these works occasionally reveal conflicting racial conceptualizations of urban Jews, derived from mainstream attitudes of the period, such as the attempt to “place” the Jew – as both ‘white’ and culturally ‘other’¹ – within the American preestablished discourse of black/white ethnicity, as noted by Eric Goldstein in his recent study, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity*.

From the beginning, both Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930) and Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934) highlight the contrast between David Schearl’s and Mikey’s Jewishness and that of other children they come in contact with in their neighborhoods. The ethnic divide is consistently seen along the lines of religious belief by non-Jewish characters – Jew vs. Christian – but not necessarily so by the Jewish children, whose perception of the multiethnic city operates also in terms of nationality, just as much as it does on the level of perceiving the Gentile as collective Other. Again, here, *Call It Sleep* is a more complex work, in the sense that even while it may show David as victim to anti-Semitic attitudes it also explores the potential of a friendship with a non-Jew, whereas in *Jews Without Money*, Gold conveys that there is no space for Mikey’s socializing beyond the world of his own Jewish family and gang².

In Gold’s novel, awareness of Jewish distinctiveness in the urban context is first brought to the forefront through the narrator’s hateful memories of school, specifically embodied by the anti-Semitic public school teacher who, the narrator implies, was unable to bridge the gap between her own, presumably WASP, milieu and the slum conditions of East Side Jewish immigrant life:

...it was a torture to you, Ku Kluxer before your time, to teach in a Jewish neighborhood.... I knew no English when handed to you. I was a little savage and lover of the street. I used no toothbrush. I slept in my underwear, I was lousy, maybe. To sit on a bench made me restless, my body hated coffins. But Teacher! O Teacher for little slaves, O ruptured American virgin of fifty-five, you should not have called me “LITTLE MIKEY.” ...Nigger banged you on the nose for that. I should have been as brave. It was Justice. (37)

Beyond the teacher’s anti-Semitism, the allusion to Mikey’s best friend as “nigger” is also indicative of a certain “inside” assimilation of Jews to a binary black/white racial discourse, which, as social historian Eric Goldstein has noted (43-5), was present in 1900s America through certain low-brow publications and pseudo-scientific treatises on race and physiognomy: Mikey later describes his school-mate, in tacitly Negro-like terms, as “squat and solid... [with] the contemptuous glare of the criminal and genius. His nose had been squashed at birth, and... his black hair and murky face made inevitable the East Side nickname [Nigger]” (42).

In a later chapter (“Jews and Christians”), which largely functions as an homage to his selfless immigrant mother, Gold acknowledges the reciprocal nature of ethnic prejudice in the ghetto: “my mother was opposed to the Italians, Irish, Germans and every other variety of Christian with whom we were surrounded” (163) and highlights her apathy toward a railroad accident because no Jews were killed³ (164). Gold roots his mother’s prejudices, however, in the experience of her youth in Hungary, and broadly speaking, the collective transmission of stories about Eastern European persecution and pogroms, combined with beliefs and superstitions regarding the cruelty of the Christian “other” (164). The rest of the chapter essentially rehabilitates her, as a woman always willing to leave these general assumptions aside and help out with the individual tragedies of gentile tenement neighbors, including an Italian woman whose husband is in prison or an Irish woman with a violent husband and a bed-ridden hydrocephalic child. As *Jews Without Money* was explicitly conceived by Gold as a ‘proletarian novel’, his mother’s attitude as a tough anonymous champion of the working classes,⁴ who does not hesitate to put aside ethnic prejudice in her defense of the vulnerable, aptly fits this novel’s aims, while implying also that the shared quality of socioeconomic penury in the East Side tenements should tend to dismantle, or make irrelevant, the processes of ethnic/religious ‘othering’.

One specific chapter, “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah”, explores very monographically the composite identity of the Lower East Side as an ethnic neighborhood. This chapter evinces the peculiar strain between the novel’s reportorial facet and its more personal autobiographical nature. Opening with the lines “What a crazy mingling of races and religions on my street... Germans, Poles, Russians, Armenians, Irish, Chinese; there were always a few of these aliens... among our Jews” (174), the opening five sections itemize Mikey’s memories of various ethnic and cultural presences in the predominantly Jewish Chrystie Street, ranging from the outlandish ultra-orthodox African Jew his father brings home one day, the gypsies who become temporary squatters in an empty store, or a gang of loud Chinese waiters who crowd a tenement flat.⁵ The reportorial part of the chapter reaches a climax with a reflection on the ‘anthropological layering’ of this New York district, from precolonial times to the present: “The red Indians once inhabited the East Side; then came the Dutch, the English, the Irish, then the Germans, Italians and Jews. Each group left its deposits, as in geology” (180). Such a reflection is only partially relevant to the following sections, in which Gold recalls scenes of the Lower East Side which involve confrontations between Jews and Protestants, Jews and Catholics, or even between Jewish atheists and believers, around sacred urban landmarks: a Lutheran Church, a Catholic Church, a synagogue. Gold’s focus here, as a Marxist writer, is not so much on ethnic variety in itself – as the opening paragraph suggests – but instead focuses on moving toward a critique of religious belief as another source of ethnic urban conflict within the neighborhood: “Religion was a fervent affair on the East Side. Every persecuted race becomes a race of fanatics” (181). These pages are all introductory to the crucial event of this chapter, Mikey’s quest into a Gentile street in section eight. Alone, away from his gang, and inspired by a heroic vision of the Buffalo Bill adventure books he reads, he decides to walk to Chinatown by way of Mulberry Street, “. . . the land of the hereditary enemy – the Italians” (186); in *Summer in Williamsburg*, Metropolitan Avenue is a territory envisioned by Davey’s Jewish gang as “the most vicious of all neighborhoods, the Italians” (106). Especially interesting about this section of *Jews Without Money* is Mikey’s appropriation

of the American settlers' pioneering myth in 'frontier territories' to imaginatively chart his route within the New York East Side: "I walked down Hester Street toward Mulberry. Yes, it was like the Wild West. Under the fierce sky, Buffalo Bill and I chased buffalo over the vast plains" (187). Although, as American spaces go, the Midwestern prairies are certainly far removed from the East Side of the 1910s, Mikey's vision is appropriate in that it evokes lawlessness, it represents the desire for the open often highlighted in *Jews Without Money*, and engages an American icon of frontier life.

Mikey enters the alien, *unkosher* Mulberry Street, where, at the Italian pushcarts, there are "strange vegetables [he] had never seen" (187) and, to his astonishment, "Christians [eat] oysters and clams" while "a pig's head [is] on exhibition in a butcher's window" (187). In *Summer in Williamsburg*, Fuchs presents a remarkably matching description, also from a defamiliarized perspective, of Davey's Jewish gang walking along Metropolitan Avenue: "The gang looked . . . into the strange windows of Italian grocery stores, where green odd-shaped cheeses hung from strings, cans of olive oil bore peculiar labels and pictures, and the vegetables appeared fascinatingly foreign."⁶ (107). In Gold's novel, Mikey, alone and unprotected, is soon surrounded by a gang of Italian boys, "whooping like Indians" (188) who expose him as a Jew from Chrystie Street, and, amid the general indifference of adults, pursue him and attack him at the "ancient cry...Christ-killer!" (188), the anti-Semitic indictment from medieval Europe. Although Mikey tries to envision his adventure in terms of the American pioneering hero ideal, the social reality of the East Side brings him down to earth, to the ethnic prejudice and racial hatred still passed on by immigrant generations. Significantly, the narration of his final, hair-breadth escape from the Mulberry Street gang – covered in muck, injured and bruised – is presented in terms akin to Exodus: "At last I came to the Bowery, and managed to cross it into my own Jewish land" (188): a far cry from Buffalo Bill myth. Inversely to Mikey's imaginative conceptualization of Chrystie Street as figurative Zion in New York, is Davey's more pragmatic realization of the diaspora in *Summer in Williamsburg*, when, learning about an imminent concerted attack on his boys, he directs the Ripple Street gang to join the "Havemayers" and seek "an alliance for the battle. After all, they were all Jews in Golus⁷ together" (200).

Although contacts with Italians are hardly present in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, there is a brief scene in the novel which shares the conflictiveness of the Mulberry Street episode but is converse in terms of urban geography: now the Italian is in Jewish territory. On the first day of Passover, David Schearl joins a group of Jewish kids who are burning 'chumitz'⁸ over a street sewer, when an Italian streetcleaner approaches with a shovel, warning them off. The boys plead with him not to destroy the fire as it is sinful, but the Italian righteously continues with his job, shoveling the embers with the street trash. When a boy calls his father out, a Jewish butcher who tries to obstruct the cleaner, their verbal confrontation escalates into racism, in fragments of broken English, Italian and Yiddish: "Dey no makuh duh fiuh hea!... No? I ken't tell you, ha? Verstinkeneh Goy!... Sonnomo bitzah you! I fix!... You vanna push me? I'll zebreak you het... Vai a fanculo te! Come on! Jew bast!" (244). The fight is forestalled by the butcher's wife, who warns him in Yiddish that all Italians carry knives, a perception which replicates the Jewish gang's apprehension in *Summer in Williamsburg* that "[Italians] went out to hurt and maim... resorting unethically to knives and guns..." (106).

Although commonly broaching the issue of Jewish/Italian (Christian) antagonism, the two passages function in contrasting ways: the Mulberry Street episode in *Jews Without Money* implies an ethnic territoriality zealously possessed and guarded by the Italian kids, whereas in *Call It Sleep* a single, transitory appropriation of the street for a Jewish ritual is quickly overridden by an agent alien to that community, representing municipal priorities. On the other hand, rather than stressing a particular vision of the Lower East Side as a kind of ethnic mosaic of lawlessness – this is not Roth’s agenda – the streetcleaner episode has to be read within the recurring framework of subjectivity, misunderstanding, and cultural-linguistic gapping which influence character relationships throughout the novel (cf. Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Between Mother Tongue and Native Language in *Call It Sleep*”).

There are, however, two events in *Call It Sleep* which point, in more or less explicit ways, to David’s experience of anti-Semitism from other children in the Lower East Side. The first of these is David’s encounter with three Irish boys, covering only a brief chapter (8; Book 3) while the other, more complex and understated, is related to his friendship with a Gentile boy, the “Polish American” Leo Dugova, which Roth extends over eight chapters (7 to 14) of Book 4. The former episode is particularly enlightening as evidencing children’s un/awareness of ethnicity and ethnic boundaries in the East Side. David has been fantasizing at the East River docks, when he perceives three rough-looking boys coming to him from a heap of heavy metal junk nearby. Although they will only be fully identified as Irish when they start addressing each other by name, David’s perception gradually anticipates their identity in both territorial and physical terms: “Three boys, coming from Eighth Street⁹... wore caps cocked sideways, and sweater, red and green, smeared, torn ... Two were taller... wiry, blue-eyed, upturned noses freckled” (249). As they approach and he views them closely, the impression is reinforced by David’s awareness of their potential hostility to him as a Jew: “One glance at their tough, hostile faces... screwed up into malicious watchfulness was enough” (249). Thus far, nowhere is ethnicity actually stated or verifiable by any party, but Roth presents David’s perceptions and thoughts in a way that stresses that an alertness to it, an instinct of self-protection, now dominates his entire consciousness. When he is asked about his absence from school (it is Passover), he barely manages to withhold the truth: “‘Cause id’d, cause – ’. But something warned him. ‘Cause I – cause my brudder’s god measles’” (249). Conversely, the boys, who now begin calling each other by evident Irish nicknames (Pedey, Sweeney) are alerted to the significance of David’s hesitation. Having skirted the religious reference, he answers truthfully their next enquiry, falling into the much simpler trap of regarding proximity to home as a safeguard, naively unaware that it is precisely his address that will expose him as Jewish before the more streetwise Irish kids.

“W’ere d’yiz live?”

“Dere.” He could see the very windows of his own floor. “Dat house on nint’ stritt. My mudders gonna look out righd away.”

Pedey squinted in the direction David pointed.

“Dat’s a sheeney block, Pedey,” prompted the second freckled lieutenant with ominous eagerness.

“Yea. Yer a Jew aintchiz?” (250)

David is still able to deny Jewishness, gaining time with the skilful excuse that his parents are Hungarian janitors and even, when pressed for proof, fabricating a phrase in this language¹⁰. Although the scene seems to build up towards an aggression reminiscent of the Mulberry Street episode, this is in fact defused by Pedey's decision that "he's awri". Led 'im alone" (250), very probably because the cowering David is younger, weaker, and is no match for them. This is grounded in social history, and on evidence from a novel like *Summer in Williamsburg*, which often includes reflections of this kind. In a regular section of the *New Yorker* in the late 1920s, "A New York Childhood", Jewish contributor Joseph Gollomb recalled Irish kids' hostility to Jewish boys at the East River docks, and how this was partly conditioned by a 'coming of age': "So long as he still wore the sexless garb of the toddler no one on the riverfront troubled him... But as soon as he put on kneepants... the young of the wild Irish regarded his trespass differently. The first time thereafter that he showed up at the docks he came home minus kneepants and everything but grimy skin and a bloody nose" (29). Gollomb's memory of the dock area as "Irish territory" hostile to Jewish kids finds a striking equivalent in this description of the facing (Brooklyn) river bank in Fuchs' novel *Summer in Williamsburg*: "Underneath the Williamsburg Bridge there were some improvised playgrounds . . . An excursion here netted a black eye more often than a good time, for the local Irish boys resented sheeny invasion" (105).

Instead of being beaten, the terrorized David is led, under the suspicious promise of seeing "de magic" (250–251), "all de movies in the woil... and de angels" (252) across the metal junk yard to the 10th Street streetcar tracks, and bullied into throwing a strip of zinc between the rails to cause a short circuit. In the course of this anxiety-ridden expedition, Roth completes the contrast between the reserved David and the grossness of the Irish boys by focusing on their witty scatological references, as they joke with one another about "farting... against the law" (251) and pause to "take a piss" (251) a behaviour that causes David to inch away in disgust. Interestingly, the most hostile of the Irish kids, "Weasel", misreads David's refusal to join them in urinating as further proof of his Jewishness, tacitly assuming that David wants to hide circumcision: "'Ye see,' Weasel pointed triumphantly at the shrinking David, 'I tol' yuh he ain' w'ite.'" (251). Weasel's comment on David's "non-whiteness" again reveals his unwitting internalization of the reduction of Jews to the Black/White discourse of this era, a discourse which included notions such as equating Jews to Blacks in their being 'fiercer' and more sexually unrestrained than 'whites'. This is all the more ironic given David's propriety in contrast to the gross Irish boys, but a further underlying irony in Weasel's labelling stems from the notion that Irish immigrants had themselves been submitted to charges of 'non-whiteness' for much of the nineteenth century (Goldstein 43–5, 18, 35). On the other hand, as is characteristic of *Call It Sleep*, where the child's perceptions often exceed his ability to "translate" them effectively into his range of comprehension, David remains unaware of the ethnic implications of Weasel's comment: he is simply a well-behaved Jewish boy who uses the toilet. From beginning to end, the whole exchange of Book 3, chapter 8, becomes a very skillful representation of a conflict between two disparate ethnic outlooks: the inquisitorial, unimaginative worldliness of the Irish boys versus the social and cultural caution of the Jewish David, who is more intuitive but also far more naive.

The ability to transcend ethno-cultural borders within the neighborhood is precisely at the core of the friendship – eventually betrayed – that develops between David and the

Catholic boy Leo Dugova, a street neighbor who defines himself as “Polish American”. Roth sustains this relationship over eight chapters of Book 4, totalling almost sixty pages (299–358) and encompassing three overlapping stages: Leo’s individual appeal to David as a role model for a carefree life (chs. 7–8), David’s fascination with the ‘otherness’ of the Christian world Leo reveals to him (ch. 10), and Leo’s betrayal of friendship in using David to harass his cousin Esther (chs. 12–14). As the critic Mario Materassi has noted in his essay, “Roth’s Shifting Urbanscape”, which draws on Roth’s own comments regarding the accuracy of his representation of the Lower East Side, the inclusion of this character here as David’s street neighbor – an exceptionally extended rendering of a character outside David’s family life – might not be factual, but taken from the later period in the Roth’s life in the mixed, multicultural Harlem: “Many a time . . . [Roth] has insisted that he compounded the East Side with Harlem, creating an American microcosm and placing it in the middle of what he has repeatedly referred to in his interviews and in *Mercy [of a Rude Stream]* as a kind of ‘Jewish minstate’ . . . The available historical evidence neither supports nor flatly disproves Roth’s claim as to the homogeneity of his old neighborhood” (42).

David’s friendship with Leo develops from an unequal footing and will consistently hinge on Dugova’s innate ability to keep David fascinated with what he does and says. Initially, David sees in Leo what he lacks: the freedom to roam the city on skates, self-assurance and fearlessness, and a domestic space which he also dominates, there being no father and a working mother who is absent all day. Beyond this, however, David, who so far has been shown to have no bosom friends even among his Jewish gang, is also tantalized by the simple fact that Leo – and Leo’s home, the first domestic space David visits in the absence of adults – is accessible *in spite of* the difference in terms of religious creed. Leo is even willing to gratify his curiosity about the icons of a Catholic world David knows nothing about: the holiness of the Cross, the Virgin and child, the Sacred Heart (304, 305, 321–2), and to “enlighten” David on the traumatic heritage of Jews as the original “Chris’-killers” (323). In fact, initially their relationship can be read almost as a process of conversion, since parallel to his stern teaching of an apparently cherished Christian tradition runs “Leo’s debas[ing of] the Jewish sacred to the level of profanity” (Sollors 132), tolerated by David for the sake of acceptance in the eyes of his new friend:

And even when Leo had said of the “Mezuzeh” . . . “Oh! Izzat wotchuh call ‘em? Miss oozer? Me ol’ lady tore one o’ dem off de door w’en we moved in¹¹, and I busted it, an cheez! It wuz all full o’ Chinee on liddle terlit paper – all aroun’ and aroun’.” David had not been hurt. He had felt a slight qualm of guilt, yes, guilt because he was betraying all the Jews in his house who had Mezuzehs above their doors; but if Leo thought it was funny, then it was funny and it didn’t matter. He had even added lamely that the only thing Jews wore around their necks were camphor balls against measles, merely to hear . . . Leo’s derisive laughter. (306)

Significant to David’s interest in this friendship, and tragically signaling the extent of his loneliness, is the fact that despite his sensitivity, he chooses to disregard Leo’s blatant racism and complete disrespect for other cultures, voiced not just in his derision of Jewishness, but also more widely, as when he refers here to the Hebrew scroll as “Chinee on . . . terlit paper”, or his scattered references to “Irish mutts”, “lousy micks” (301) and

Italians as “wops” (320). Leo is streetwise, but not cosmopolitan: he evinces an instinctive provincial prejudice of the foreign, even though his own origins belong in the urban immigrant mosaic. Their relationship shifts into a somber mood for David at the end of chapter 10, when he unwittingly reveals the story of a visit to Bertha’s and being asked by his cousin Esther to watch over while she uses the toilet. Instantly alerted to the chance of sexual contact, Leo presses David into visiting his cousins: his true colors start to show when, before David’s instinctive reluctance and forebodings about this visit, he actually voices the cliché “stingy kike” and demands that David stop hanging around him (327). As David is leaving, Leo slyly calls him back with the bribe of an old rosary, “way, way holier” (328) than the scapular David has admired (and coveted) around Leo’s neck, which the Polish boy had earlier admonished was not for him, but only for Catholics (324). For all his assumed gravity on Christianity and contempt of Jewishness, Leo barter freely with the rosary for “a feel” of the “Jew-goils” (326, 327), and later, when David is finally coaxed into skating to Bertha’s with him, he pretends to speak Yiddish – under David’s reluctant cueing – in order to amuse Esther (342, 344): Leo thus actually exploits both cultures and creeds indiscriminately. His manipulative authority over both David and Esther eventually leads to crisis in chapter 14, when, after skating with the girl, the Polish boy orchestrates a visit to the cellar, luring Esther behind them and posting David as a lookout, giving him the bribe rosary in the semidarkness as he leads her into a secluded bin-room. Overawed by the distressing events, at this point David wills himself to recede from audible perception, focusing his thoughts only on the future preservation of the holy beads he is clasping. As Leo’s sexual harassment progresses, and Esther starts calling out in protest, they are discovered by the younger sister Polly, who immediately realizes what is happening. The terrorized David fails to materialize from the darkness as their alibi – as Leo had planned – and the situation becomes nasty as Polly threatens her sister with “telling” (357) and, reverting to ethnic stereotypes, twice calls Leo a “doity Crischin” (356, 357), an insult which reflects her assimilation of the general belief that Jewish families of the period maintained higher moral standards than those of “Christian America”, including Anglos and other ethnic groups: “commentators spoke at length about the purity and stability of Jewish home life... the image of the Jewish woman was sometimes employed to demonstrate that Jewish life had a strong moral side rooted in the home...” (Goldstein 40). Leo, who from the start has voiced his inbred prejudices, exits the scene (and the novel) on a sexist and racist rejoinder, shouting “...Yuh Jew hewhs... [*whores*] Sheenies! Brtrt!... Sheenies!” (357).

As these novels show, childhood Jewish American fiction of the 1930s in New York can be said to evince a great awareness of ethnic or cultural contrast in the street life of Jewish boys coming into contact with other immigrant children. Such awareness becomes more complex from the perspective of the Jewish children, who view these urban neighbors both in terms of nationality and of the religious Other – the Gentile – who may alternatively command feelings of fascination but also a sense of victimization, in being more streetwise and more assimilating than the Jews within the American urban immigrant mosaic at the beginning of the century. From the opposite perspective, these novels also reflect the tendency of non-Jewish children to circumscribe Jewish boys within a popular – but artificially constructed – binary racial discourse (sometimes even adopted by the Jewish community itself) that gives rise to significant paradoxes. The most notable of these

is, of course, the inconsistent construction of ‘whiteness’ as a racial paradigm to define the Jews’ position within the multiethnic city, particularly taking into account that such a notion was a transference of the desire by mainstream (i.e., WASP) American society to collectively mark a distance from all *its* ethnocultural Others, whether Irish and Italian Catholics, Chinese, or African Americans.

Notes

¹ Socially and culturally, Jews shared traits with white Anglos for which they were favorably regarded, such as strict moral principles, the importance of family life, or a quintessentially American work-ethic. Yet their growing presence in Ivy League colleges, their unwillingness to discriminate against blacks, or their reputation for being money-driven made Jews destabilizing elements for ‘white’ mainstream America (Goldstein 35-50).

² In the novel, Gold grimly emphasizes ‘gang territoriality’ in the East Side to the point that there is even rivalry and violence among Jewish gangs from different streets (47-8). In general, his portrayal of the Lower East Side as a site of ongoing turmoil – usually as a consequence of ethnic, cultural and religious difference – is much more explicit than in Roth’s *Call It Sleep*.

³ The Judaic notion of “chosenness”, to the extent that the Gentile is excluded from Jewish mourning, has been satirized in a later Jewish childhood story, Philip Roth’s mordant “The Conversion of the Jews” (1959), where the boy Ozzie Freedman, trying to come to terms with Jewish tradition, is appalled to discover that his mother mourns only for the eight Jewish victims, out of 58, of a plane crash (102).

⁴ Gold’s 1935 introduction to *Jews Without Money* pays homage to his mother as the central figure of the book, describing her in the concluding paragraphs, as a “heroine”, “a brave and beautiful proletarian woman” whose life and example stand out in response to “fascist liars” (9-10).

⁵ In what emerges as a bitter irony on inner-city multiracialism, Gold includes “. . . even an American on our street . . . Mary Sugar Bum . . . from Boston”, a homeless woman who sells her body for whisky and is instantly taunted by the immigrant children (178-9).

⁶ They later see Italian men “with red faces and big bellies” sitting in cafés, where “calendars and murals [depict] ladies with big, overflowing breasts”, and a “festive-looking funeral [procession]” of a dead child marches by (107), an idiosyncratic Latin/Mediterranean fusion of the sensual and the transcendental.

⁷ *goles* (‘exile, diaspora’) in the *YIVO* spelling standard (*Yiddish Dictionary Online*).

⁸ The remains of the leavened bread, tied in a rag and burnt, to commemorate the beginning of the Passover days, where only *matzo*s (unleavened bread) are baked, as when the Israelites were driven in exile from Egypt (*Exodus* 12:10).

⁹ Writing of historical New York, critic Mario Materassi notes “...10th Street, just one short block north of where young Roth lived... marked the boundary between two neighborhoods, one predominantly Jewish and the other predominantly Irish” (43). Eighth Street, to the south, would have been a Jewish quarter, so Roth may have wanted to convey David’s surprise at seeing them emerge from his own area.

¹⁰ “Abashishishabababyo tomama wawa” (250). This apparently nonsensical utterance, may actually thinly encode David’s fears and maternal yearnings. Broken down in one way, the line reads “A bash is his. Have [*Yid. hab*] a baby[o] to mama.” Drawn out, ‘wa-wa’ onomatopoeically suggests crying noises.

¹¹ Leo's remark on his mother's removal of the *Mezuzah* stresses the ethnic homogeneity of the block as part of a Jewish neighborhood. Since the Leo Dugova section might actually be a fictional compounding from the Roths' later life in Harlem, the writer may have wanted to authenticate this section by stressing the exceptionality of Polish Catholics relocating to David's Jewish street (Materassi 42-4).

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