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NEW VOICES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Sarah Schulman's *Empathy, Ties that Bind*, and the Possibilities of the Stranger

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In her novel *Empathy* (1992), Sarah Schulman imagines what it means to be caught between the assimilation of Ashkenazi Jewish Americans and the otherness of Eastern Europe. Schulman's protagonist Anna O. traverses many landscapes and, unlike other characters in the novel that work to transcend their stranger identity, Anna O. makes a new life for herself through negotiating what I will call a liminal identity. For Schulman, the task of illuminating the stranger condition that her main character inhabits is a tricky one. While characters of earlier Jewish American texts by writers such as Anzia Yezierska were readily understood as strangers working towards 'becoming American', it is implicitly accepted that Anna O., living in queer 1990s New York City, is already a completely assimilated American. Schulman uses a variety of narrative strategies that culminate in a somewhat messy palimpsest attempting to convey the nuanced experience of the stranger. The resulting textual fragmentation removes any stable point of reference so that scholars and readers of *Empathy* must reconstruct various narrative elements in trying to make sense of Anna O.'s world. One is left to consult volumes of critical work that hardly get to the heart of Anna O.'s Jewish queer experience, to piece them together into a patchwork that may, by its end, accomplish the task of excavating Schulman's postmodern stranger. In this article I argue that inhabiting the position of the stranger allows Anna O. the possibility of creating some sort of coexistence between, and cohabitation of, her queer and Jewish identities. In this way, Schulman constructs the stranger as a subject position replete with possibility rather than as a liability that must be shed in order to acculturate oneself to American life.

Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element.

Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987: 19)

Introduction

Published in 1992, Sarah Schulman's fifth novel *Empathy* weaves together a variety of narrative forms to illuminate Manhattan's queer Lower East Side in the 1990s: a place devastated by AIDS, drugs, and gentrification. Schulman constructs her story around Jewish American lesbian protagonist Anna O., who is expressed throughout most of the novel as two characters—herself and her Doppelgänger, Doc. Despite Doc being a male character who appears initially to be her opposite both physically and mentally, the reader subsequently learns through textual clues that Doc is in fact Anna O. herself. While Anna O. has suffered economically and socially by being designated a stranger due to her inability to assimilate into white womanhood, Doc has been praised all of his life for his intellect and personality and his body has gone unscrutinized. Whereas Doc understands that mainstream white America has room for him but he'd rather not join, Anna O. is barred from full entrance.

Anna O. and Doc are joined through their secular Jewish American culture, which Schulman uses as a temporary point of reference and a common lens through which other elements of identity can be made visible, compared, and understood. Both characters are the children of Freudian therapists and, despite their Jewish heritage, consider Freudianism the religion they were born into (Schulman, 1992: 10, 53). By framing Freudianism as a 'religion', Schulman constructs her own language to attempt to examine secular Jewish American culture and its equivalents to liturgy and ritual. Doc, for example, develops his own method of therapy: one that pays homage to the founding analysts of psychoanalysis whilst also dismissing a good number of their premises and ideas. Meanwhile, Anna O. attempts to dismantle the harm she feels that Freudian psychoanalysis, and secular Jewish culture more generally, has wrought in her life, particularly as a result of her subject position as a queer Jewish woman.

In this regard, Anna O.'s experience might be said to articulate some of the ambivalences seemingly experienced by Schulman herself as a lesbian Jewish writer. John Charles Goshert notes that although 'Judaism and Jewish history are rarely cited explicitly', Schulman's novel 'is saturated in the perceptions and experiences of American Jews, primarily the novel's protagonist, Anna O' (Goshert, 2005: 56). Despite this saturation, he observes, 'Schulman has long occupied a tenuous position not only in treatments of lesbian literature at large, but also in surveys of contemporary Jewish American lesbian fiction' (Goshert, 2005: 53). Ludger Brinker similarly notes that Schulman is among those lesbian writers who 'choose not to be publicly identified as Jews' and whose work is 'not very specifically Jewish in content' (Brinker, 1994: 81). Schulman's absence from scholarly discussions of Jewish American literature, and the lack of explicit references to Jewish culture in her novels, raises the question of to what extent her texts might be said to represent Jewish identity – implicitly, or otherwise. Goshert argues that while Schulman's problematizing of Jewishness challenges 'the horizon of religious, ethnic and cultural resolution', this does not remove her work from the realm of Jewish experience that she critiques. Rather, it calls for 'a different sort of critical apparatus that might assess the significance of her Jewish referents in a truly problematic rather than static sense' (Goshert, 2005: 53).

Empathy necessitates a different kind of critical apparatus to evaluate these Jewish referents. Schulman herself writes that the book is made up of '... eight different forms: screenplay, short story, play, recipe, personal ad, advertisements, term papers, poem ... I did not realize ... the ... multiple forms [were] ... part of the statement ... about the state of lesbian existence' (Schulman, 2006: 196). Readers expecting traditional narrative tactics may at first discard this palimpsest as messy. However, careful reading uncovers the ways in which Schulman's strategy uncovers the nuance of Anna O.'s experience. Continuing, she expresses: 'I had been writing ... directly from my unconscious, facing issues that I was ... not ready to grapple with consciously ... giving myself ... permission to not have clarity ... for so long, was the ultimate clarity able to be achieved' (Schulman, 2006: 197). This writing strategy,

too, is part of the story of Jewish American lesbian experience that Schulman tells, evidencing how difficult it is to delve into the stories no one wants to be told. Perhaps because of this experimentation Schulman reveals that *Empathy* was 'my worst-selling book, the least reviewed ... It has provoked the fewest ... theses, dissertations, and chapters in ... books of any of my work. It is rarely taught ... Maybe this time around, it will make more sense to someone other than me' (Schulman, 2006: 202).

To date, Schulman's work has largely been ignored in Jewish literary spaces. For example, numerous anthologies such as *The New Diaspora: The Changing Landscape of American Jewish Fiction* (ed. Victoria Aarons, Avinoam J. Patt and Mark Shechner, 2015), *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers* (ed. Ted Solotaroff and Ness Rapoport, 1992), *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (ed. Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum and Kathryn Hellerstein, 2001), *Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers* (ed. Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel, 1996), and *Nice Jewish Girls: Growing up in America* (ed. Marlene Adler Marks, 1996) omit Schulman's writing. However, as I will illustrate, *Empathy* offers a way of broadening and deepening the understanding of Jewish voices because it offers insights—however fragmented they may be—into the ways in which Jewish American culture shapes gender (specifically, femininity) and sexual identity, and the forces of assimilation and regulation. Most importantly, however, the text offers a possibility for resistance—and perhaps even recovery—despite starting from a place of relative disempowerment. In *Empathy*, Anna O. does not decide to become a stranger or fashion herself as such, but is assigned to this identity due to her inability to assimilate into American cultural life. However, once assigned to stranger status she refuses to remediate herself. This refusal is not merely about resisting on her own behalf; it also allows the character to refuse to denigrate those who, like herself, cannot assimilate. Anna O. is therefore a character that understands that the process of assimilation, of attempting to become 'normal', has detrimental effects on those who cannot hope to remediate themselves. As the novel develops, Schulman shows that Anna O.'s stance is at once impossible and also the only ethical possibility in resisting the homogenizing effects of cultural assimilation. For Schulman, a life that embraces that which is rendered strange is

more full and allows one to be in solidarity with all those who are marginalized and oppressed, while assimilating engages in further marginalizing the oppressed. Anna O.'s resistance can therefore be read as an act of empathy.

In developing this reading, I will first examine the ways in which Jewish American women's assimilation remains an ongoing project and how this socio-political context helps us to identify Schulman's project in *Empathy* as expressing a politics in which the stranger becomes a figure of necessary resistance to the dangerous homogeneity of assimilation. Then, I will offer a close reading of *Empathy* and Schulman's non-fiction work *Ties That Bind* (2012) in order to determine how Anna O. is established as a stranger and how this outsider position impacts upon the character's own theory of empathy. Lastly, I will consider how the theoretical apparatus offered to us by Schulman might inform our understanding of the possibilities of the contemporary stranger identity.

Establishing the Queer Jewish American Woman: Incomplete Assimilation and *Empathy*

Using multiple scholarly assertions of the incomplete assimilation of the queer Jewish woman as a theoretical lens for *Empathy*, we can see that Anna O.'s anxieties over her gender identity as a Jewish queer woman are as implicated in her Jewishness as they are rooted in her queerness or her femaleness. The text focuses these anxieties on Anna O.'s queerness and femaleness, but the novel's subtext illuminates the ways in which these anxieties are also inextricably tied to her Jewishness. Anna O.'s body, as a Jewish queer woman, is the main site of her constitution as a stranger in *Empathy*. To understand how Anna O. is constituted as a stranger, it is first necessary to attend to the ways in which assimilation has operated differently for Jewish woman and Jewish men.

In *The Jewish Woman in America* (1975), Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman and Sonya Michel examine the formation of identity of Ashkenazi Jewish American women in relationship to assimilation. They hypothesize that 'by western bourgeois standards, Eastern European women seemed "masculine", for they were forthright and aggressive' (Baum, Hyman, & Michel, 1975: 56). Further, they contend that these traits were necessary for survival in the shtetl, and that women who were 'feminine'

by Western standards would not have withstood the challenges of living in Eastern European Jewish communities at the time. In response to this Eastern European Jewish version of femininity, 'German-American Jewish women set up benevolent societies to enculturate their Eastern-European counterparts. They coached women on walking, talking, volume of speech, language, and how to avoid appearing loose' (Baum, Hyman, & Michel, 1975: 163).

While the assimilation of Jewish American men can be traced fairly clearly through public economic inclusions and uplifts, Baum, Hyman and Michel suggest that Jewish women's assimilation is murkier (1975: 207). In order to establish a representative picture, they looked at both fictional and factual accounts. 'According to fictional accounts', they assert, 'Jewish women who did not want to stand out began going regularly to beauty parlors, tried to diet, polished their English and even tried to change their voices and inflections' (Baum, Hyman, & Michel, 1975: 207). Jewish women, they argue, felt obligated to divest themselves of Jewish appearance, behaviors and mannerisms to blend in better with predominantly gentile standards of gender. This compulsion was based on a realistic assessment that 'the woman who has not become completely assimilated threatens the security of the Jewish community's acceptability to other Americans ... by continually reminding the gentile world that Jews are, after all, different' (Baum, Hyman, & Michel, 1975: 249).

Assimilation thus became an internalized mechanism of Jewish American culture as well as a pressure toward moderation and modulation from a gentile mainstream. In the twenty-first century, Melanie Kaye Kantrowitz has continued the project of examining Jewish American assimilation in *The Color of Jews* (2007), which corroborates the continuing pressure upon Jewish women to remediate their appearance to try to assimilate in the United States. This observation confuses the presumption of a completed Jewish American assimilation that insists the only vestige of Jewish difference is the actual religion. She writes:

When I was growing up in Flatbush, every girl with a certain kind of nose—sometimes named explicitly as a Jewish nose ... wanted a nose job ... What

was wrong with the original nose, the Jewish ones? ...Tell me again Jewish is just a religion. (Kantrowitz, 2007: 30)

Kantrowitz continues, positing: 'ethnicity and culture is confused, even for many Jews ... How do we challenge what we have no language to discuss?' (Kantrowitz, 2007: 30).

Unsurprisingly, sexuality further complicates the pressures of assimilation and positions queerness as strange—perhaps doubly so, because of the way queerness intersects with gender. In Daniel Boyarin's edited collection *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (2003), several theorists examine the intersection of queerness, femaleness and Jewishness. Ann Pellegrini writes that 'although the work on the correlation between the homosexual and the Jew has largely focused on maleness, what the Jewess and the female sexual invert both shared was their alleged excess' (Pellegrini, 2004: 5). Further, '[t]he manliness and self-promotion with which the female sexual invert was charged also featured in some of the stereotypes of the "Jewess", who was sometimes portrayed as pushy, unladylike in her entry into and activity in the world of paid labor' (Pellegrini, 2004: 5). In an essay titled 'Barbra's "Funny Girl" Body', Stacy Wolf similarly notes that the Jewish woman need not even be queer (sexually) because she is already rendered strange (Wolf, 2004: 247).

While the completed Jewish assimilation narrative imagines all strangerhood is in the past for Jewish Americans, other young contemporary Jewish American women theorists and writers examine the reality of inhabiting a strangerhood similar to Schulman's protagonist Anna O. Writing about her experience growing up Jewish in the Midwest, Vered Hankin describes the ways in which she attempted to remediate herself to become an insider instead of the stranger. She writes: 'I observed how to be a nice midwestern American ... My difference was insinuated with comments ... like "Where are you from?" or "Your hair is so *black*", or "Your personality seems so *prominent*"' (Hankin, 2003: 62, emphasis in original). Echoing these sentiments, another young Jewish American woman writer Daveena Tauber similarly recalls that '[m]y alienation from the mainstream white culture took its

toll ... I began to dislike my ethnic features ... white men would ask where I was from ... They guessed ... Latina American, Indian ... They almost never guessed Jewish' (Tauber, 2003: 192, 196). Both Hankin and Tauber express that their physical and behavioral 'differences' leave them alienated from the assimilated spaces that the Jewish American assimilation story presumes is their home.

Assimilation continues as a pressure because there are no entirely viable alternatives; being a stranger is an enormously difficult position. In his work on Eastern European Jews, Zygmunt Bauman develops his reading of the stranger figure. According to Bauman:

The threat he (the stranger) carries is more horrifying than that which one can fear from the enemy. The stranger threatens the sociation itself ... because the stranger is neither friend nor enemy: and because he may be both. And because we do not know ... which is the case. The stranger is one ... member of the family of *undecidables*. (Bauman, 2003: 55, emphasis in original)

Bauman explains that while 'oppositions enable knowledge and action; undecidables paralyze them. Undecidables brutally expose the artifice ... They bring the outside into the inside and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos' (Bauman, 2003: 56).

Shane Phelan, continuing the work of Bauman and others, suggests that the stranger invokes more anxiety from those around them than the outsider because he/she troubles the border between 'us' and 'them' (Phelan, 2001: 5). Citing sexual minorities as strangers, she writes: 'The stranger's strangeness may be formally denied in liberal regimes, but her distance from cultural membership makes her continually prey to renewed exclusion, scapegoating, and violence' (Phelan, 2001: 5). Like Schulman proposes in *Empathy*, Phelan calls not for a striving towards assimilation but, instead, 'hope[s] to help imagine and enact a postmodern citizenship of solidarity from the insider out, in which many bodies, many passions, many families, many workers, find a place' (Phelan, 2001: 8). For, she warns, 'the more the stranger attempts to become "like us" the more threatening he/she

becomes, and the greater the potential for betrayal as ... boundaries are seemingly crossed the stranger's attempt to become "like us" reaffirm the superiority of the dominant group' (Phelan, 2001: 31). If Phelan and Schulman are correct, then the costs of striving for assimilation are the further marginalization of those who are unable to escape their stranger status.

This is the context in which Schulman's Anna O. finds herself. Anna O. invokes this paralysis in her family and amongst those intent on assimilation throughout *Empathy* precisely because she refuses to remediate herself into a more acceptable assimilated Jewish American status. Despite the suffering she endures for inhabiting this strange body, Anna O. continues to see societal expectations (for all oppressed and unassimilated people) as the problem, rather than her own body. However, the price Anna O. pays for being a stranger would be dangerous to overlook even as she attempts to live in the space allotted her body and all of its manifestations.

Encountering the Stranger

Anna O.'s experience of herself as a stranger starts in childhood. In the prologue of *Empathy*, Anna O. details the contrast between her lived experience and what is imagined to be her experience as per the narrative of successful Jewish American assimilation. She recalls the bright future she was promised, and asks: 'What happened to the world that I was promised back in first grade in 1965? ...not only had she been promised successful middle-class romance ... but other treats had been mentioned as well' (Schulman, 1992: 7, 8). As a 31-year-old, queer, Jewish woman looking back on this unfulfilled promise, Anna O. begins to emerge as a counter-narrative to the narrative of completed, successful Jewish American assimilation.

When Anna O. first meets Doc, she gives him a paper she wrote in college that was her attempt to apply Freudian dream analysis to one of her own dreams.¹ In the dream, Anna O. is having an affair with her best friend. She imagines herself as being more feminine through the symbols of being very thin with long hair. In her analysis, Anna O. reasons that she feminized herself because she feels like she will

¹ The paper is one Schulman herself wrote in college, adding another layer of 'revelation'.

be a more acceptable lesbian (woman) if she is more feminine (Schulman, 1992: 27). Unsaid, though equally glaring, is Anna O.'s understanding that she is viewed as 'too masculine' also because of her Jewish ethnicity.

In contrast to the physical descriptions of Anna O., Schulman describes Doc as a handsome young man with the world at his fingertips. Schulman writes: 'This doctor was a young one. He ... had clear brown eyes that exhibited a distracted kind of caring. He passed his hands over his small, fleshy body ... The world was his this chilly morning. He could be ... inadequate, and still have it all' (Schulman, 1992: 9). The moment Anna O. and Doc encounter each other for the first time is written to emphasize the difference between the way in which Anna O. is seen and treated in the world as opposed to how Doc (also Anna O.) is hypothetically seen and treated. She writes: 'She reminded him immediately of himself as a girl. She was a little too pudgy, a little too soft' (Schulman, 1992: 30). During the textual moments Anna O.'s body is coded male as Doc, he can be 'human, inadequate, and have it all', while Anna O.'s body, when read as female, is quite literally too much and therefore unsatisfactory.

Schulman continues to build the parallels between Anna O. and Doc as she leads up to the revelation that they are the same person. She writes: 'Anna came from the same kind of middle class that "Doc" knew oh-so-well. The kind that could pass up just as easily as down' (Schulman, 1992: 30). Here, not only do we understand Doc and Anna O. to be nearly identical but also illuminated is one of the many moments within the text where Jewishness is coded. Doc's recognition that Anna O. is also a secular Jew like him, raised by a family for whom 'Freudianism' served as a surrogate religion, is coded in language about passing and movement between identities. The 'kind that could pass up just as easily as down' is similar to Karen Brodtkin's theory of Jews being 'shuttled back and forth' along racial and ethnic lines, belying the ways in which they are both coded as Jewish (Brodtkin, 1998: 27).

While Doc is described as wearing whatever he wants with no consequences, Anna O. is described as 'clumsy in her clothes' (Schulman, 1992: 31). Although this may seem trivial, it is important in understanding the ways in which Jewish men's bodies have largely been assimilated as 'acceptably white' (and therefore 'unmarked') whereas some Jewish women's bodies are still in a precarious, strange,

hovering space. Anna O. tells Doc why this matters, saying: 'Doc, I find these clothes so humiliating. These stockings are so expensive. Your toenail becomes your worst enemy' (Schulman, 1992: 31). Here, Anna O. expresses the way in which the status of her economic and social life are based on her appearance and that her clothes must always be impeccable to make up for her inability to perform an acceptable version of white femininity.

Doc immediately observes that: 'They looked so much alike. Doc noticed that there was practically no difference except that Anna O. had to wear clothes that she hated and he could wear whatever he liked' (Schulman, 1992: 31). In this moment, Anna O., 'seeing herself' through the lens of Doc, reckons with the reality of existing as a stranger. Further, as they learn that Doc is also Anna O., readers are pushed to examine their own assumptions about Anna O. and Doc—which character inspired their sympathy? Which one evoked their judgment?

The ways in which Anna O. and Doc are differently understood by the world is not only exemplified by the ways in which their bodies are perceived. While Anna O. describes a progressive shutting down of her world and its possibilities as she grew up, Doc describes the ways in which his world widened as he grew. He reflects how: 'At the age of six her mode of inquiry had already been rejected. Doc's ... experience had been ... the opposite ... in high school ... he suddenly became quite grandiose and unleashed some kind of ... power. The other kids gave him their attention' (Schulman, 1992: 57). Doc discovers in this moment that his straight male privilege as a Jewish American renders him more human than Anna O.

In understanding this rendering of 'different' childhoods for Anna O. and Doc, despite their being the same person, we must suspend our belief systems about narrative linearity and possibility. There are several ways in which we can understand this description of a childhood that we know never to have happened. First, we can simply understand Doc's rendering of his childhood as Anna O.'s imagination of what her life would have been like had she been born a straight Jewish male. Second, we can understand this childhood portrayal as Anna O. truly believing, at the moment she is speaking, that Doc exists. Third, and perhaps most compelling, we might understand the rendering of Doc's childhood as the only way in which Anna

O. can attempt to describe the queer/lesbian experiences of her own childhood. If the experience of being a stranger is 'unimaginable', and Schulman is left to conjure narrative devices that might fully enunciate Anna O.'s experience in its entirety, then Doc is a clever receptacle for the parts of Anna O.'s experience that are 'unreadable' on her body. For instance, how can Anna O. explain that as a child she started understanding people were listening to her less and trivializing her more as she grew up while also describing the experiences she had with other strange children? However, those experiences, described through Doc, become absolutely believable in a global sense (when if attached to Anna O., the 'listener' might imagine her to be exaggerating).

Through therapy with Doc, Anna O. grapples with her status as a stranger. While Anna O.'s story will deal more with oppression and relationality, Doc will attempt to explain and understand his philosophy for living. Combining the two narratives, as we are instructed to do by the revelation that these characters are the same person, allows us to understand Anna O. as a fully fleshed-out human being. Schulman shows us this is necessary by the ways we understand Doc and Anna O. separately and when they are revealed to be the same person. Through Anna O.'s story, we can see the ways in which the self becomes fragmented when only pieces of the whole are welcome in the room, as well as the ways in which the transformation of traumatic matter may help build tools of empathy.

'Freudianism'—Religion for Secular Jews

Although Anna O.'s therapy with Doc is a technique to engender empathy in the reader, Schulman offers a scathing critique of Freudian therapy and its potential to extend the same kinds of injuries as the project of assimilation. Schulman begins *Empathy* with a standoff between herself and Freud, something not at all surprising if one reads Freud as a stand-in for secular Jewishness. Before the text even begins we encounter the epigraph—a quote from Freud's 'A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman' (Freud, 1920). She quotes:

Some of her intellectual attributes could be associated with masculinity: for instance her acuteness of comprehension and her lucid objectivity, insofar as she was not dominated by her passion ... It signified the attainment of the very wish, which, when frustrated, had driven her into homosexuality—namely, the wish to have a child by her father ... Once she had been punished for an over-affectionate overture made to a woman, she realized how she could wound her father and take revenge on him. Henceforth she remained homosexual out of defiance against her father. (Schulman, 1992: Epigraph)

Schulman frequently reminds readers of her distaste and skepticism for Freudianism and its inspired therapies, just as she frequently reminds them of the injuries inflicted by the project of assimilation. However, just as the critique of Jewishness does not remove Schulman's work from that Jewishness, nor can her critique of Freudian thought exist entirely outside it.

Anna O. shares her name with the pseudonym for the Austrian Jewish Bertha Pappenheim, the first patient of psychoanalysis. Further, by extension Doc stands in for Doctor Freud as well as Freud's mentor, Josef Breuer, who treated Anna O. However, Schulman's Anna O. is an extension of both Anna O. (the case) *and* Bertha Pappenheim (the patient). 'In writing about this first psychoanalytic patient', Lisa Appignanesi writes, 'there are two stories to tell ... the story of Bertha Pappenheim ... and, second, the story of Anna O.—what Freud made of the story Breuer told him and how her case became the founding myth of psychoanalysis' (Appignanesi, 2005: 73). In later years, Pappenheim spoke out about her experience, and not in altogether positive terms. Like her predecessor, Schulman's Anna O. is very wary of Freud, psychoanalysis, and pathologizing and, like Bertha Pappenheim, finds the helpfulness of psychoanalytic therapy almost entirely dependent on its practitioner's ability to listen—and empathize. Anna O. discovers that her father, a Freudian psychotherapist, is deficient in his ability to listen and empathize, and the distance created by these deficiencies is what allows him to engage in her shunning. Similarly, Bertha Pappenheim critiqued the practitioners of psychotherapy. In one of Pappenheim's

rare references to psychoanalysis, she declared that '[p]sychoanalysis in the hands of the physician is what confession is in the hands of the Catholic priest. It depends on its user and its use, whether it becomes a beneficial tool or a two-edged sword' (Appignensi, 2001: 80). Therefore, while Schulman critiques Freud, Freudianism, psychotherapy, and contemporary therapies, it is less the therapies themselves that come under fire than the ways in which they are shaped by the societal biases of their practitioners, which she takes to task in *Empathy* and in her later work *Ties That Bind*.

Schulman also uses Freud and Freudianism as code for assimilated secular Jewish life. This follows the assertions of numerous theorists who make similar claims as Schulman does in *Empathy*. For instance, Stephen Frosh in *Hate and the Jewish Science* writes:

What this "Jewishness" consisted in was not a religious perspective ... but an approach to ... interpretation established over centuries in which debates over the meanings of texts were the main expression of cultural achievement. The claim is therefore ... also an argument about intellectual history: the *reason* they felt so comfortable was that the psychoanalytic world-view was so much like the Jewish one. (Frosh, 2005: 11, emphasis in original)

Therefore, if the psychoanalytic worldview was so much like the Jewish one and the science originated from secular Jewish thinkers, then it follows that Schulman uses the coding of Freudianism as stand in for Jewish American identity throughout *Empathy*. Schulman can both construct a Jewish American identity different than the expected religious narrative through this coding as well as poke fun at the universalization of Freudian thought when it is so essentially rooted in Jewish cultural identity.

Empathy and Making Home as the Stranger

When Schulman was writing *Empathy*, which is in a sense a manifesto and memorial to survivors and strangers, she was a 31-year-old queer Jewish woman attempting to make a home through the experience of being a stranger. As she goes on to say in *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (2009), this stance was not always successful, and the costs of losing her family were devastating and life-

changing: 'One of my motives for writing this book is so that my nieces and nephew will someday understand what happened in our family and why they do not know me. I hope that when this day comes, I will still be alive and that they will come to see me, so we can talk' (Schulman, 2009: 70). Schulman is a ghost to her nieces and nephew who may, ultimately, she surmises, only know her posthumously for her work. And, yet, she continues to attempt to make a home in this exiled stranger state, leaving a map for her younger relatives to find her, and have recourse to her story.

Schulman uses her personal story and the lack of intervention from her therapists to question the ways in which current therapeutic methodologies, along with therapists untrained to deal with the reality of the lives of queer people, reiterate societal homophobias and further harm the queer person. Further, she posits, the family loses the opportunity to recover from its homophobias because these are rarely addressed and the queer person is forced to learn to put up with the homophobia or relinquish their family. In *Empathy*, Schulman, employs fiction to show what those lost opportunities to recover look like for the person rendered a stranger: Anna O.

Schulman's 2009 book, *Ties That Bind*, contemplates the private ways in which familial homophobia affects queer people, disrupting the idea that inclusion, assimilation, and tolerance have lessened the burden of being queer in a homophobic society. As in *Empathy*, Schulman attempts to express a nuanced experience of being an oppressed person who does not have the respite of a family life in which family members bear the same identity (something that can make queerness different from many other oppression experiences). Throughout *Ties That Bind*, Schulman sprinkles pieces of her own history into the work, though often these 'tidbits' are vague, suggesting the problematics of airing one's own queer laundry in a public forum and the familial repercussions of doing so.

After recounting five separate instances when she was persecuted for being gay (several of which were at the hands of her father, unable to check his homophobia), Schulman complicates matters further by rooting her own familial experiences in the ghosts of a traumatic Jewish history. She acknowledges that her father 'grew up in a household of people who were severely traumatized by war, anti-Semitism, and

poverty' (Schulman, 2009: 65). Schulman's father's sister was adopted after being abandoned by their father and watching their mother and brother murdered. His mother grew up in abject poverty, nearly starving. She continues:

Neither of my father's parents had basic civil rights in their birth countries. They did not have the right to be educated, to own property, or to practice their religion. Clearly my father grew up among the profoundly traumatized, and he needed treatment himself to be able to emotionally reconnect enough to be able to love his lesbian daughter. (Schulman, 2009: 65)

Her mother's background was no better, but here Schulman begins to recognize that one legacy of trauma can be a hardening of the capacity for empathy and compassion. She writes:

My mother also comes from a background of trauma, oppression, and mass murder. Her father also came here alone from Russia. His sister was exterminated in the Holocaust at Baba Yar ... and my maternal grandmother's two brothers and sisters were also murdered in the Holocaust ... As a consequence of anti-Semitism and war, my mother grew up without an extended family and without grandparents. ... I believe that those untreated and unacknowledged traumas made my mother fear difference, fear the disapproval of the dominant culture, which kept her from being able to love her lesbian daughter and my destiny to reproduce the race. (Schulman, 2009: 68)

Ever invested in nuance, Schulman warns against reading this 'understanding' as an excuse. 'I don't excuse my parents, but I loved my father no matter what, and now that he is dead, I still love my mother. I deeply and fundamentally believe in the human responsibility to understand why people do what they do. No matter how cruel what they actually do is' (Schulman, 2009: 69). Schulman urges readers to consider epigenetics and the effects of cultural trauma on the ways in which oppression is carried out in families even as she urges empathy for those who transmit these ghostly matters.

Schulman's response to her own designation as a stranger, the epigenetic traumas of her family history and the pain of her own family's rejection of her on the basis of her queerness, was to seek therapy – a predictable course of action for someone steeped in secular Jewish culture and its 'religion' of Freudianism. Unfortunately, this formal search for help was not always very helpful and in *Ties That Bind* Schulman details a variety of different therapeutic settings in which she found herself re-traumatized by homophobia. The failure of therapy to heal and reconnect leaves Schulman alone in dealing with the experience of being rendered a stranger. In *Empathy*, Schulman's Anna O. conducts therapy on herself through the creation of Doc because of the lack of any literal space in which to grapple culturally with the effects of being a queer Jew. Much like the Anna O. of Freudian fame, she, too, originates her own therapeutic model out of necessity and much like Bertha Pappenheim, experiences further oppression by those who seek to cure her.

Schulman creates a world where Anna O. is able to invent Doc and conduct a method of self-therapy to deal with the effects of being rendered a stranger. Through this self-therapy, Anna O. is able to reaffirm her belief that her identities (all of them) are not the problem, but that normalization expectations are a problem causing many effects, such as shunning. For Anna O. (and for Schulman in *Ties That Bind*) this leads to a commitment to living in the interstices (or as the stranger, or the queer) as the ethical choice and position. Rather than work towards assimilation through attempting to empty herself of strange excesses and remainders, Anna O. makes a home in strangeness and endeavors to work to end the shunning of strangers. In this way, writing *Empathy* paves the way for writing *Ties That Bind*. For instance, both *Empathy* and *Ties that Bind* recount traumatizing moments of shunning that Schulman experienced at family holidays, with the fictional accounts echoing the later biographical accounts. In *Empathy*, written many years before *Ties That Bind*, Schulman writes the scenes as one might describe the experience of trauma to a therapeutic listener—through a cinematic lens, a dissociated moment that has become further dissociated in the reenactment of remembering. Years later, in *Ties that Bind*, Schulman is more able to express emphatically why this shunning is wrong, perhaps partly because of the self-therapy of writing *Empathy*.

In *Empathy*, in script/screenplay format, Anna O. describes a family gathering to attend a family friend's funeral—a 'visible' death as opposed to the deaths of Anna O.'s friends dying of AIDS. At this event Anna O.'s mother scrutinizes and berates her lack of femininity, i.e., her lack of adherence to white, middle-class, straight feminine norms (Schulman, 1992: 38). Her brother also subsequently polices, and disapproves, of their younger sister's femininity and Anna O. steps in to defend her without getting any 'defense' in return when she is attacked (Schulman, 1992: 39). When Anna O. says, 'I wish my friends would stop dying of AIDS', her family has the opportunity to acknowledge Anna O. and her community's humanity, to offer compassion and empathy. However, they move on quickly, with no acknowledgement of Anna O.'s experience or pain. Her father proceeds to pseudo-philosophize why secular Jewish families continue to meet for holidays like Passover. He suggests it is 'more a way of ensuring that the family psychology is kept dynamic. We all sit down together and get a good look at each other' (Schulman, 1992: 177). Her father misses the irony that by glossing over Anna O.'s experience he shows that, at least in this family, these gatherings serve instead as a way to check on how well family members are working towards (or maintaining) being normal (assimilated) members of society.²

As the Seder nears its end, Anna O.'s father is called off by a suicidal patient. Anna O. follows him to the elevator, attempting to refute the Freudian claims about lesbianism she knows her Freudian analyst father holds. Anna O. says to her father, 'I realize you believe in Freud and everything ... But I just want to tell you that, despite what Freud says, the reason I am a lesbian is not because of wanting to hurt you. It's not about you in any way. I really love you' (Schulman, 1992: 179). As Anna O. speaks her father interrupts her several times, proving her point that empathy becomes nearly impossible without listening.

This scene shows the ways in which Anna O. is shunned, made invisible, and made to accept others' homophobias and discomforts if she is to have family at all. When Schulman writes about a similar scene years later in *Ties that Bind*, she no

² Perhaps this is a strategy that has been used by not-so-religious (or secular) Jewish families throughout the diaspora for hundreds of years, so in a way is actually a built in mechanism of such gatherings.

longer needs the cinematic/script lens to keep her safe from her family's harm. She states: 'In this incident, my family members excluded me in a host of ways from their world of people whose feelings matter ... Choosing to disconnect from others is either a pathological act of cruelty or a consequence of being on the receiving end of that cruelty' (Schulman, 2009: 127). Years past her 30-something-year-old self, Schulman continues to insist on humanizing the stranger, this time without resorting to the veil of fiction.

In *Ties That Bind*, Schulman describes the ways in which queer people try to cope with this pain of familial homophobia. She describes three different variations, two of which are self-annihilating and one that is self-embracing, difficult, and often unsuccessful. As she writes:

There is also a third intention: choosing to live in the subculture as a place to prepare to force change ... Viewing our subcultural commitments as a way of strengthening ourselves for the task ahead of changing the big structures so that we can live inside them, alongside straight people, without being distorted by them. That is the most utopian, most difficult, and yet most inspiring option. So far, it has not been successful. (Schulman, 2009: 128–9)

However, although this 'third intention' (or living as a stranger) has so far been unsuccessful, Schulman continues to inhabit this space.

It is important to understand that all the pieces of Schulman's identity are engaged and matter here, that the treatment Schulman has garnered has been related to her queerness, Jewishness, and femaleness. When she writes, 'what I really want is for the shunning to end so I can stop thinking about how to change myself to make the shunning stop', she is acknowledging the shunnings she has received in all facets of her life that were 'unjustified in the first place' (Schulman, 2009: 131). Through *Anna O.*, we can see that these shunnings are not easily placed into different identities like so many baskets, but weave each other into one coherent experience that produces the subject *Anna O.*, though she is also composed of *Doc.*

Schulman argues that visibility is not necessarily progress, nor something that makes good. This statement can hold true for queer communities that have, as of late, become more visible, as well as for Jewish communities that have seen a resurgence of visibility and representation in more recent popular culture and a serious uptick in anti-Semitic hate crimes. Schulman describes how the cultural portrayal of the gay person is most often presented 'as pathological, lesser than, a side kick ... there to provide ... emotional catharsis' (Schulman, 2009: 6). She continues, illuminating that these representations don't depict 'complex human beings with authority and sexuality, who are affected by homophobia in addition to their other human experiences ... That type of depth and primacy would force audiences to universalize gay people, which is part of the equality process' (Schulman, 2009: 6).

Anna O.'s mother tries to push her into having children because of cultural imperatives to repopulate in light of Jewish genocide, but also because she believes it will normalize her daughter's gender and will make her into a 'good gay' rather than a 'bad queer' (as per Michael Warner's *The Trouble With Normal* [1999]). In *Ties That Bind*, Schulman points out that 'today, in an act of diminishment, gay people use having children as proof that we deserve rights, respect, and representation' (Schulman, 2009: 7). Therefore, choosing this 'third intention' is a dangerous, perhaps frighteningly lonely place. For, to risk being shunned, or to have no choice but to occupy the danger zone, is to risk being dehumanized. Schulman describes shunning as 'the removal of living, breathing people from recognition and representation in daily life. It is a refusal to engage, recognize, negotiate, communicate. It is an exclusion from the conversation' (Schulman, 2009: 11). In this way, Jewish American queer women who do not conform to the image of being 'acceptable gays' have been shunned by the Jewish American assimilation story, even in its recent, lesser-known LGBT interventions, and as a consequence are rendered strangers within every community they are identified with.

For Schulman, as exemplified in *Empathy* and *Ties That Bind*, shunning is pervasive in every area of a queer stranger's life. 'Shunning', writes Schulman, 'is multiplicative ... in one week I can be excluded from a family event, be ignored by a publisher who has never published a lesbian novel, be disrespected by a theater

that has never produced a lesbian play' (Schulman, 2009: 11). With the absence of societal and privatized (private social space) 'third-party' intervention, those relegated to the role of stranger are subject to shunning without many resources to stop the shunning other than self-remediation; if this act is even possible for them. Schulman shows that therapeutic interventions often reify homophobia. She does not examine, explicitly, the ways in which therapy, for her, has reified the idea that Jewish Americans are completely assimilated or the ways that her therapists approached her parents as assimilated Americans with the cultural heritage of white, middle-class Americans. Schulman's therapists do not understand the depth with which her parents fear shunning (because to them, shunning equals death) and thus, subsequently, how life-altering expulsion and exile is experienced by her, the descendant of such understanding of shunning and expulsion.

Ties That Bind thus not only helps readers of *Empathy* understand what happened 'after' the text ended, but also illustrates the realities out of which Schulman was constructing the character of Anna O. Returning from her non-fiction to her earlier fictional work, revisiting *Empathy* can help readers understand the Jewish subtext of *Ties that Bind* and why Schulman may have ultimately excised the specificity of Jewishness from her scholarly text, but not her fictional one.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is the many worlds *Empathy* employs to create the character of Anna O. that has left it relatively unexamined by critics – the messiness of genres colliding inexplicably into each other and becoming indistinguishable in the process. However, sifting through this generic blend and unearthing the palimpsestic quality of homage, ventriloquism, and therapy may lead us to a more interesting story than the one-dimensional narrative of completed and successful Jewish American assimilation in contemporary circulation. Firstly, Schulman offers up a world that even while filled with death, destruction, and drug addiction is also filled with queer strange people attempting to make a go of life in the interstices. Rather than live in a world where she is penalized for being a stranger, Anna O. opts to inhabit the world

of strangers. This experience of exile helps her construct therapeutic theories of uninterrupted listening and empathy, rather than continuing to inhabit her family's world of continuous re-traumatization. However, this only becomes possible for Anna O. through the method of conducting 'therapy' with Doc.

Through the trajectory of Anna O.'s evolution, we can see the possibilities and problematics of living in the interstices for this Jewish American queer woman. We must pay close attention to her 'need' to take on the persona of Doc and to conduct therapy on herself with his ghostly emergence as well as her subsequent discarding of this persona when she no longer finds him necessary for coping with inner and outer experiences of homophobic anti-Semitism. In exploring Anna O.'s story through the lens of Doc Schulman shows us that not only do straight Jewish men (who look 'whiter') have a different relationship with assimilation, but that in order to have a fuller picture of the workings and failings of assimilation processes these counterpoint voices must be accounted for and explored. Schulman's work reminds us that it is not enough simply to tack on queer and women's perspectives within an expanding a body of scholarship like Jewish Studies. Rather, the discipline must begin to challenge its most basic assumptions of what 'has been happening to us' since we got here: where some of us have been relegated to, how we have lived as outsiders, and how we learned to call such strange spaces home.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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