



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

---

## New Voices in Jewish-American Literature

**How to Cite:** Skinazi, K E H 2017 Are Head Coverings the New Black? *Sheitels* and the Religious-Secular Culture Wars in Twenty-first-century America and its Literature. *Open Library of Humanities*, 3(2): 12, pp.1–27, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.138>

**Published:** 08 November 2017

---

### Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

### Copyright:

© 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### Open Access:

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

## NEW VOICES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

# Are Head Coverings the New Black? *Sheitels* and the Religious-Secular Culture Wars in Twenty-first-century America and its Literature

Karen E. H. Skinazi

University of Birmingham, UK  
[karen.skinazi@gmail.com](mailto:karen.skinazi@gmail.com)

---

In 1896, when Abraham Cahan's collection of new Americans encouraged his greenhorn Gitl to remove her wig—which sits on her head as the metonymic symbol of religious ritual and thus Old World shame—readers of *Yekl* were offered an account of twentieth-century American progress, rendered necessary (if painful). Just as Yekl/Jake shaved his earlocks and beard, so Gitl must give up her Jewish wig and stand before the world in her 'own hair'. But we might imagine the necessity of such a sacrifice has become obsolete in twenty-first-century America, particularly as we see that what the grandmother doffed, the granddaughter comes to don. Beginning with a revival of religious themes in the 1980s, heralded by Cynthia Ozick, Jewish American literature is now rich with narratives centered on secular characters becoming Orthodox; on the inner-worlds of insular Orthodox communities; and on reimagining the potential of Orthodoxy within the context of Americanness. Interestingly, most of these narratives have been written by women, and it is the experiences of Jewish American women—the latter-day Gitls—that are foregrounded.

Despite the proliferation of such narratives, it is important to recognize that the choice to embrace religion (made visible through wigs and shpitzels, turbans and kerchiefs) continues to be fraught. The increasingly popular 'off-the-derech', or ex-Orthodox, memoirs of the twenty-first century identify the Jewish *sheitel*, like the Muslim veil, as a symbol of oppression, and the act of uncovering (like unveiling) a tale of feminist triumph.

Still, looking at a range of fiction, including Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998), Nathan Englander's short story 'The Wig' (2007), and Naomi Ragen's satire, *The Saturday Wife* (2007), we find the multivalent appearance and complexity of Jewish American women's head coverings in recent literature suggest a different and varied signification, and a more nuanced negotiation between religious and national values. This is significant because it allows readers to see how seemingly comprehensive religious communities, which could be marked as a form of 'counter-cosmopolitanism' in the words of Kwame Anthony Appiah, actually engage with the broader

spectrum of American culture, which in turn is able to both accommodate the communities and alter itself through the accommodation.

---

'Here everything is so different'.

She colored deeply.

'They don't wear wigs here', he ventured to add.

'What then?' she asked, perplexedly.

'You will see. It is quite another world'.

—Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* (1896)

Should she wear a wig, the only one she owned, a long, blond number purchased for exactly such an occasion, or a stylish hat in which most of her own hair would show? Or should she wear one of those horrid hair snoods so popular in Boro Park? . . . She had one in her closet, purchased to wear to the ritual baths if she wanted to shampoo her hair before she got there, saving time. It was black with little silver sparkles, hugging her head like those towel turbans in the shampoo ads, making her look like an Italian film star in the forties. The wig, on the other hand, made her look like Farah Fawcett when she was plastered on the bedroom walls and lockers of every horny teenage boy in America. She finally chose the hat, which, though it showed most of her long hair, still looked the most respectable, with its cool white straw, band of apricot silk, and large apricot bow.

—Naomi Ragen, *The Saturday Wife* (2007)

## Article

In 1896, Abraham Cahan's collection of new Americans, using (an absent) Yiddish and heavily accented English, encouraged the greenest of greenhorns, Gitl, to remove her wig. This wig sat on Gitl's head as the metonymic symbol of religious ritual and thus Old World shame. Through the cajoling of these new Americans, and transformation of Gitl into one of them, readers of *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) were offered an account of turn-of-the-twentieth-century American progress,

rendered necessary (if painful).<sup>1</sup> Just as Yekl-cum-Jake shaved his earlocks and beard and adopted (and corrupted) English phrases, so Gitl must give up her Jewish wig and stand before the New World in her 'own hair'.

We might imagine, however, that the necessity of such a sacrifice has become obsolete in twenty-first-century America, particularly as we see that what the grandmother doffed, the granddaughter comes to don. Beginning with a revival of religious themes in the 1980s, heralded the previous decade by Cynthia Ozick,<sup>2</sup> and fulfilled early on by such writers as Naomi Ragen, Rebecca Goldstein, Anne Roiphe, Tova Riech, and Faye Kellerman, Jewish American literature is now rich with narratives centred on secular characters becoming Orthodox; on the inner-worlds of insular Orthodox communities; and on reimagining the potential of Orthodoxy within the context of Americanness. Interestingly, many of these narratives have been written by women, and it is the experiences of Jewish American women—the latter-day Gitls—that are foregrounded.

Despite the proliferation of such narratives, it is important to recognize that the choice to embrace religion, made visible through modest clothing and attendant head coverings, is still fraught today, particularly for women. Although the 2016 burkini ban happened on French shores, it is indicative of a larger trend among modern, Western countries, with their continued drive for secularization and homogeneity, and fear that religious restrictions are inherently sexist. There are many Americans that see women's head coverings as a sign of injunction, not choice; of oppression, not liberation. As scholars Judith Butler, Gillian Whitlock, and Julie Rak have demonstrated, narratives by and about Muslim women took up the trope of the veil in the early 2000s and were used as propaganda to manipulate readers into reading Islam as archaic and misogynistic (justifying war against Iraq and Afghanistan and the 'unveiling' of their women) (Butler, 2004; Whitlock, 2005; Rak, 2013). Similarly, there has been a proliferation of 'off-the-derech' (ex-Orthodox) Jewish memoirs that

---

<sup>1</sup> On *Yekl*'s use of local color dialect and the genre of Realism, see Wirth-Nesher (2001).

<sup>2</sup> In her 1970 talk, 'America: Toward Yavneh', Ozick invoked the image of the shofar as the symbol of new Jewish writing, arguing that 'a liturgical literature has the configuration of the ram's horn: you give your strength to the inch-hole and the splendor spreads wide' (Ozick, 1970: 280).

denounce Orthodoxy, stories that in many ways echo these Muslim captivity tales and demand large-scale liberation. In these Jewish stories, we see an extension of the fictional treatments of Orthodoxy—in the late twentieth century, treatments marked by ‘hostility’, as literary critic Andrew Furman notes in his study of Jewish American literature, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: Return of the Exiled* (Furman, 2000: 84).

Yet, against this trend, we also find the multivalent appearance and complexity of Jewish American women’s head coverings in recent literature, signifying a more nuanced negotiation between religious and national values. Such writers as Allegra Goodman, Nathan Englander, and Naomi Ragen have used *sheitels*—the wigs worn by married Orthodox Jewish women—to imagine the possibilities of self so characteristic of American literature and culture. This is significant because it allows readers to see how seemingly comprehensive religious communities, which could be marked as a form of ‘counter-cosmopolitanism’, in the words of Anthony Kwame Appiah (Appiah, 2006), actually engage with the broader spectrum of American culture, which in turn is able to both accommodate the communities and alter itself through the accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

## I. Tales of Oppression and Liberation, or OTDs

It is impossible for a scholar of contemporary Jewish American literature to ignore the current preoccupation with ‘off-the-derech’ memoirs: memoirs that tell of individuals (usually women) who go off the expected/righteous path (or *derech* in Hebrew) of Orthodox Judaism, where they have been kept semi-illiterate, near-imprisoned, and abused emotionally or physically or both. More often than not, the escaped ‘off-the-derech’ individuals (OTDs) then fall into a swirling pot of trouble (usually including self-harm or other violence, sexual abandon, and drug use) before coming to terms with the secular (free, modern) world. In 2014, *Tablet Magazine* declared ‘Ex-Frum [pious] Memoirs’ to be ‘New York Publishing’s Hottest New Trend’ (Ross, 2014: n. pag.). Soon after, *The Jewish Daily Forward* followed with ‘Ex-Hasidic

---

<sup>3</sup> This article is a part of a larger study. See Skinazi (2018).

Writers Go Off the Path and Onto the Page', a long article on these memoirs (Gliner, 2014). Actually, although it is primarily made up of memoirs, the genre, by my reckoning, includes fictional and semi-fictional accounts of Orthodox communities and their abandonment, as well. In the wake of Shalom Auslander's 2007 inaugural memoir, *The Foreksin's Lament*,<sup>4</sup> these narratives began flooding the market. Judy Brown (writing under the pseudonym Eishes Chayil), a Ger Hasid, published *Hush* (2010), her semi-fictional account of sexual abuse and suicide in her community. Deborah Feldman published *Unorthodox* (2012), her much-discussed memoir of abandoning a repressed life in the Satmar community, after years of writing a popular blog. The same year, another ex-Satmar writer, Anouk Markovits, published her novel, *I am Forbidden*, imagining the fates of two women of the community: one who stays and suffers, and one who leaves and is free. Frieda Vizel, an ex-Satmar blogger like Feldman, only one with a different approach, depicted her departure from Satmar life visually in *Oy Vey Cartoons* (2012–14).<sup>5</sup> Leah Vincent ensured that readers recognized it was not only among the Hasidim that Orthodox Jewish women suffered in her memoir of life among the Yeshivish and subsequent challenges of freedom in *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation after my Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (2014). After years of blogging on *Unpious.com*, Shulem Deen took on such issues as poor education, poverty, and unemployment in *All Who Go Do Not Return* (2015), his heartfelt memoir about breaking with the Skverer Hasidim in Brooklyn and New Square. Leah Lax described both entering and leaving Lubavitch Hasidism in *Uncovered* (2015), a book touted as 'first ex-Chasidic gay memoir' (Dreyfus, 2015).

---

<sup>4</sup> The other side of the Atlantic simultaneously saw the publication of off-the-derech novels and memoirs, beginning with Naomi Alderman's novel, *Disobedience* (2006) and Reva Mann's memoir, *The Rabbi's Daughter* (2007).

<sup>5</sup> This blog acts as an interesting afterlife of Vizel's first blog, *Shpitzle Shtrimpkind*, published in 2006–7, while she was still in the Hasidic community in Kiryas Joel. A *shpitzle* (usually spelled 'shpitzel') is another form of religious head covering. In her 'About Me' section, Vizel wrote: 'The "shpitzle" is a religious headgear that is worn by the Chasidic Jewish woman. It is made primarily of a kerchief, foam and synthetic linings fitted between a folded silk scarf that's tied over the woman's shaved head' (Vizel, 2007: n. pag.)

Chaya Deitsch offered a positive spin in her memoir of leaving Lubavitch Hasidism in *Here and There* (2015), by exalting her continued relations with her family.

By the time Deitsch published her narrative, some readers were beginning to find the genre repetitive. Writes a critic in *The New York Times*:

I am still not entirely sure how to feel about this phenomenon. Some publishers are clearly exploiting our prurience, slapping one sensationalist subtitle after another onto these books, as if a great feast of anthro-porn awaits. (See: “Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots” published in 2012, and “Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood”, published in 2014.) ... The emotional arc of these stories is almost always the same: The narrator starts out in a cloistered world of stringent laws and customs, suffers a crisis of faith and eventually summons the courage to break away. (Senior, 2015: n. pag.)

The criticism here is astute, the term ‘anthro-porn’ brilliant. And the reviewer does admit that ‘unless their audience’s sole objective is titillation or condescension, readers can learn lots about a subculture they once knew little about’. But she also wants less *sameness*: ‘there are now enough of these reminiscences sloshing around the market that any new addition must explain its presence in some way’ (Senior, 2015: n. pag.). And I can’t blame her.

So, why the proliferation of these narratives that were and are ‘almost always the same’? One answer is timing. In 2001, Leigh Gilmore described memoir as ‘the genre in the skittish period around the millennium’, and Julie Rak takes up the ‘boom’ in memoir publishing in her 2013 study, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, writing that: ‘Since the 1990s ... the success of memoirs by previously unknown writers [as opposed to celebrity memoirists] is a major reason why memoir is one of the most highly visible and popular non-fiction genres today’ (Gilmore, 2001: 1; Rak, 2013: 9). Rak examines the uproar surrounding the exposure of James Frey’s untruths to illuminate the public’s fascination with and deep *investment* in these life narratives. Of the variety of memoirs, ‘misery lit’ topped the list; in 2007, the BBC

reported that: 'The bestseller lists are full of memoirs about miserable childhoods and anguished families' and that the popular British bookstore, Waterstone's, had an entire shelf devoted to 'Painful Lives' (O'Neill, 2007: n. pag.).

Furthermore, there was another 'boom' happening at the time: the boom of the anti-religious tract. If the twenty-first century was beginning to look like the era of 'post-secularism', not everyone was having it. Anti-religious sentiment—or, the 'New Atheism'—was developing as its equal and opposite force. In *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2005) and again in 'Notes on Post-Secular Society' (2008), Jürgen Habermas writes of the resurgence of 'orthodox ... groups within the established religious organizations or churches ... on the advance everywhere', seeing liberal rule of law and multicultural societies as particularly and necessarily open to change by this resurgence (Habermas, 2008: 18). Yet, according to Habermas, the secularists continue to imagine a foreseeable end to religion despite evidence to the contrary, and 'laicistic' intellectuals, unrealistically, want all matters of religion to be safely tucked into the private sphere. The New Atheists proved unsatisfied with either of these light-touch options: they wanted Reason, without God, *now*. When Auslander emerged with his story, bookstore shoppers and Amazon.com trawlers were likely to be confronted with *The End of Faith* (2004) and/or *Letter to A Christian Nation* (2006) by neuroscientist, Sam Harris; *The God Delusion* (2006) by eminent British evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins; *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006) by philosopher and cognitive scientist, Daniel Dennett; and *God is Not Great* (2007) by the famous, controversial, Anglo-American journalist Christopher Hitchens. They were all blasting religion in every form. Shortly thereafter, the HBO political talk show host, Bill Maher, came out with *Religulous* (2008), which turned out to be the biggest documentary of the year, and almost as irreverent as director Larry Charles's earlier mockumentary, *Borat* (2006).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> This list could go on. Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, and Harris have been called the 'Four Horsemen' of the movement (Gribbin, 2011: n. pag.).

A mug full of misery memoir, then, mixed with a dash of religious oppression, could not, at that moment, have offered a more perfect brew. In fact, Auslander was not unique in his recipe: from the turn-of-the-twenty-first century on, everyday people (mostly women) who had left religious communities were daily airing the proverbial dirty laundry of their former faiths and adherents. Much discussed among scholars, for example, is *Persepolis* (in English, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, 2003 and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*, 2004), Marjane Satrapi's brilliantly successful graphic novel about leaving Iran, originally published in four parts in French over the years 2000–3. It is a book that is no doubt nuanced in its examination of life under Islam, or, metaphorically, 'under the veil'. Whitlock notes, for example, that the movement between (fundamentalist) East and (liberal, secular) West lacks the dramatic contrast readers come to expect, as readers see the narrator go from the veiled women of austere Iran to the veiled women of an austere convent in Austria (Whitlock, 2007: 192). Still, as Rak points out, the publication of the English-language editions of the book fit nicely into the genre of women's liberation narratives. It appeared first, excerpted, in *Ms. Magazine*, the liberal feminist magazine founded by Gloria Steinem and other second-wave feminists. Furthermore, though Whitlock notes the failure of contrast between East and West, Rak argues that English readers would not know of this failure at the conclusion of the first book:

*Persepolis 1* and *2* were published together as *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. This is an important detail, because the change of title means that readers of the 2003 English-language version of *Persepolis* were not made aware that the book was part of a longer series. English-speaking readers would not know, and did not seem to know at the time because reviewers did not remark on it, that Satrapi's story did not in fact end with Marji escaping Iran and traveling to Europe. Instead it was possible for readers of *Persepolis* to imagine Europe, and western cultures, as part of the 'happy ending' for Satrapi as she leaves her war-torn, intolerant, fundamentalist country of origin. (Rak, 2013: 165–6)

*Persepolis*, then, functioned to tell the story America and other Western countries already wanted to believe: there was no greater misery than oppressive (patriarchal, misogynistic) religion, and no greater memoir than a religious one. And it was not only tales of the far-flung religious communities that Western readers were consuming—foreign (mostly Muslim) women’s liberation autoethnographies were interspersed with American (defamiliarized) ones.<sup>7</sup>

As in many of the religious groups treated by the other memoirists, Orthodox Jewish writers had and have a good deal of ground to cover. Answering her own question of why there are so many ex-Orthodox Jewish memoirs, Senior tells of a conversation with Deitsch, who explained: ‘It was a lapsed Bobover who told me that other Hasidim barely consider Lubavitchers Hasidic’ (Senior, 2015: n. pag.). Senior concludes: ‘And therein lies the case for Ms. Deitsch’s book. Despite their core similarities, no two memoirs in this unlikely category are alike’ (Senior, 2015: n. pag.). She develops this point further: ‘Outsiders may look at Hasidim and see an undifferentiated blur of men and women armored in stern attire, but Satmars are not Skverers, who are not Breslovers, who are not Lubavitchers’ (Senior, 2015: n. pag.). This is true, but perhaps belies the bigger issue at stake in the collective Orthodox identity, which is insularity. Yes, Lubavitch Hasidim interact with secular and non-Jewish communities, whereas Satmars are far less likely to, but both still practice their rituals with a degree of privacy and segregation that the general public finds alienating—and discomfiting. In the age of reality TV, everyone wants to know what’s going on with everyone—in their homes, in their beds, and, in the case of Orthodox women, under their wigs.

And it is the wig—or *sheitel*—(though it is sometimes the turban or kerchief or *shpitzle*)—that is the visible marker of the Orthodox woman’s difference.

And by difference, most people read: oppression.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Martha Becks’s *Leaving the Saints: How I lost Mormons and Found my Faith* (2005); Carolyn Jessop’s *Escape* (2007); Jayanti Tamm’s *Cartwheels in a Sari* (2009); and Saloma Miller Furlong’s *Why I left the Amish* (2011).

## II. Veiled Best-Sellers and Their Sister *Sheitel* Tales

'You've never seen anything like *Persepolis*—Marjane Satrapi may have given us a new genre'.

—Gloria Steinem, back cover of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003)

'A story that millions can recognize, told with spirit, courage, and honesty'.

—Gloria Steinem, front cover of Leah Lax's *Uncovered* (2015)

Scholars have given particular attention to Muslim memoirs because there is a very persuasive narrative surrounding their production, and because Islam has been at the heart of cultural debates in the West since at least 9/11.<sup>8</sup> Butler, Whitlock, and Rak all agree that the texts function not only to educate, but also, fundamentally, as a form of warmongering. In Whitlock's words: 'There can be no mistake: these autoethnographies are deployed as propaganda to represent and justify a military intervention in the name of (among other things) the liberation of women oppressed by Islamic fundamentalism' (Whitlock, 2005: 56). The proliferation of these narratives coincided with the American invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). The texts 'pull Western readers into this dark and confined space of the *burqa*, to share this discipline of views vicariously at least', and non-Muslims readers feel they are given access to the women's feelings, experiences, and beliefs. This is a (metaphorical) lifting of the (literal) veil: 'The veil or the *hijab* (of which the *burqa* is an extreme form) is an icon that covers this life writing at every turn, a trope which shapes its metaphorical repertoire and which it in turn embraces—sometimes unexpectedly' (Whitlock, 2005: 55). With access, readers can sympathize, and then they can help: through war.

Yet, the 'veil' and its removal form a problematic metaphor, and the 'access' is fraught. Whitlock asks how 'feminists in the West understand the veil, catch

---

<sup>8</sup> Donald Trump, as is well documented, used his Republican presidential nomination candidacy to exacerbate these cultural wars, proposing a 'complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States', calling for increased surveillance on mosques, and citing an apocryphal story of a U.S. general who shot Muslims with bullets dipped in pig's blood as a way of illustrating his point that 'we better start getting tough' (Johnson 2015: n. pag.; Johnson and DelReal, 2016: n. pag.).

its meanings, and use it to fabricate more subtle and perceptive cross-cultural communication? No one can read the veil from a neutral, disinterested space . . . so how then can we read the stories of these women who speak through the *burqa*? (Whitlock, 2005: 55–6). Similarly, Butler questions the narrative read into unveiling by telling a story in *Precarious Life* of visiting a political theorist who had pictures of Afghan girls, whose burqas had been removed, tacked to his refrigerator door. The pictures are positioned ‘right next to some apparently valuable supermarket coupons’, she adds snarkily, ‘as a sign of the success of democracy’ (Butler, 2004: 141). Despite Muslim women arguing for the burqa’s significance in ‘belonging-ness to a community and religion, a family, an extended history of kin relations, an exercise of modesty and pride, a protection against shame’, writes Butler:

According to the triumphalist photos that dominated the front page of the *New York Times*, these young women bared their faces as an act of liberation, an act of gratitude to the U.S. military, and an expression of a pleasure that had become suddenly and ecstatically permissible. The American viewer was ready, as it were, to see the face, and it was to the camera, and for the camera, after all, that the face was finally bared, where it became, in a flash, a symbol of successfully exported American cultural progress. (Butler, 2004: 140)

The gap between the women represented in the images and the consumption of the images appears to loom large. But the American reading of this imagery is culturally and emotionally satisfying, and it is aided by the language of the texts, particularly the titles of the autoethnographies (the term is Pratt’s)<sup>9</sup> of these Muslim women: Cheryl Benard’s book is called *Veiled Courage*; Harriet Logan’s is *Unveiled*; Batya Swift Yagur’s is *Behind the Burqa*.

Western feminism demands women’s liberation—unveiling, uncovering. In contemporaneous Jewish *sheitel* tales, the titles, like *Unveiled*, use the prefix ‘un’ to mark the before and after, the entrapment and liberation: beginning with Hella

---

<sup>9</sup> Pratt writes that in autoethnography, ‘colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in the colonizer’s own terms (Pratt, 1992: 7).

Winston's 2005 *Unchosen* (not a memoir but a sociological book that dwells on the stories of Hasidic 'rebels', offering intimate portrayals of their lives and dilemmas), we also have Feldman's 2012 *Unorthodox*, Lynn Davidman's 2014 *Becoming Un-Orthodox* (here again, a collection of stories), and (offering a very close parallel with *Unveiled*), Lax's 2015 memoir, *Uncovered*. Many of these titles have subtitles explicitly drawing out the break between two worlds. For example, *Unorthodox* is subtitled *The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, and Davidman adds an 'ex' to the 'un' with *Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews*. Other titles suggest this 'before' and 'after' in other ways: Leah Vincent's 2014 memoir, *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation after my Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood*, Shulem Deen's 2015 *All Who Go Do Not Return*, Chaya Deitsch's 2015 *Here and There*.

Prominent among 'off-the-derech' narratives cover art are pictures of hair, liberated from *sheitels*, and bodies, free of modest clothing. In *The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, the subtitle of Feldman's book, 'roots' is a pun, referencing both Feldman's (liberation from) family/community and (un/covering of) hair. We instantly recognize this as we look at the book's front cover where Feldman's newly uncovered hair appears adamantly free, flying up behind her, unnaturally, as though there is a fan, offstage, blasting air at her (Feldman's subsequent book, *Exodus*, appears to employ the same invisible fan). Both Vincent and Lax's covers also prominently feature naked hair (along with naked flesh); in none of these pictures do we encounter the face of the woman. If the 'American viewer was ready, as it were, to see the *face* [of the Muslim woman], and it was to the camera, and for the camera, after all, that *the face was finally bared*, where it became, in a flash, a symbol of successfully exported American cultural progress', in the case of the Jewish woman, it is her *hair* that is finally bared in triumphalist photos (Butler, 2004: 140).

There is an American literary history of the *sheitels* of Orthodox Jewish women being read as a symbol of their oppression that long anticipates the *unsheiteling* of contemporary memoirs. As *Yekl's* Gitl cannot be Americanized and liberated until she sheds that 'voluminous' symbol of Orthodoxy in Abraham Cahan's 1896 ghetto tale, so too do all other such religiously-clad female figures modestly creep past the yellowed pages of Jewish fiction of the twentieth century that follow, failing, it would seem, to gain subjectivity while under the weight of their wigs. 'They used to call

her Ivriya the Beauty, and some of the old charm still hovers over her face. All vanity. When she would race, her rich hair blended into the chestnut mane of her favorite stallion', we read of a female religious character in Tova Reich's 1988 *Master of the Return*, imagining a woman, racing against the wind, her beauty drawn as much from her freedom as her features. But without pity, the male narrator continues, telling us of that 'chestnut mane': 'Now it is losing its thickness and shine. What does it matter? She obeys me and conceals every strand under a kerchief, even in bed' (Reich, 1988: 18). The subjugation of this woman is endless: day and night. The commands of the patriarchal husband are absolute. And lest they be insufficient, the commands of the patriarchal god loom above those of the man: 'I remind her of the righteous married woman who, despite her exemplary charity and virtue, once inadvertently allowed a single hair to show, and though at her death she was admitted to the Garden of Eden, she was condemned to be stuck to the door for eternity by that rebellious strand of hair' (Reich, 1988: 18–19). This cautionary tale is of a familiar flavour for Jewish women: another classic story tells of the Jewish woman who, about to be tied to a horse and dragged through the streets until death by Cossacks, sticks pins through her skirt into the flesh of her legs to protect her modesty.<sup>10</sup>

For the most part, the Orthodox woman is absent in the canon of twentieth-century Jewish fiction. No text addressed Orthodoxy in as much detail as Chaim Potok's 1967 *The Chosen*, where the lives of men and boys, both Modern Orthodox and Hasidic, are explored in depth. Here, women are almost entirely invisible but for those who appear as covered wombs: we see them in 'long-sleeved dresses, with kerchiefs covering their heads, many with infants in their arms, others heavily pregnant' (Potok, 1967: 119). That is all for Potok; even these women's children only come in the male variety (we know because the children are 'all', we read, 'with their fringes and earlocks'—hallmarks of male children exclusively) (Potok, 1967: 119). Amongst the best-known writers, we find an even more acute lacuna. No *sheiteled* or kerchiefed women come to the fore in Philip Roth's oeuvre—though a black-hatted

---

<sup>10</sup> With irony surpassing that of Reich, the late nineteenth-century Polish Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz retells this legend in his short story, 'Three Gifts' (1990).

man materializes as the specter of Old World Orthodoxy in his 1959 short story, 'Eli, the Fanatic'.

And when they appear, and are granted a voice, the *sheiteled* or kerchiefed women despair their lot—often by way of their *sheitels* and kerchiefs. 'That awful wig!' cries Batsheva Ha-Levi, the heroine of Naomi Ragen's 1989 *Jephthe's Daughter*, who is trapped in an abusive marriage to a Hasidic zealot. And: 'She took it off and flung it to the floor' (Ragen, 1989: 141). 'I don't even want to wear a wig. I think if all women refused to shave and cover their heads, the rabbis would have to rethink the laws, change them', reports Rachel, the budding feminist heroine of Pearl Abraham's 1995 *The Romance Reader*. 'But I don't know anyone who agrees with me', she concludes (Abraham, 1996: 219). It would seem, in fact, almost *all* the heroines of *all* the tales of twentieth-century Orthodox Jewish women *do* agree. In the world of Jewish American literature, the *sheitel* is anachronistic and oppressive, dehumanizing, and unfeminist. That the *sheitels* need at times to be metaphorically wrenched from these Orthodox women's heads—Gitl resists its removal throughout *Yekl*, and only agrees to it once a hat replaces the wig, finding a hair covering that can signify Americanness and comply with Jewish modesty simultaneously—is seen, at best, as a sign of false consciousness. As is the choice to don one by a woman who grows up outside the community. In Anne Roiphe's 1987 *Lovingkindness*, a mother worries of her daughter who has chosen Orthodoxy: 'Will they cut off her hair and *hide her* under a wig?' (Roiphe, 1987: 87, my emphasis).

Best, like *Call it Sleep's* Genya, to dispose of such apparel before landing on American shores. Even in late twentieth-century retellings of the early part of the century, the impossibility of the *sheitel's* retention seems certain. 'When my grandmother came to this country', Ruthie says in Myra Goldberg's 1993 short story, 'Hair', 'she got married, you know, over there, and all her beautiful hair got cut off, which is what those Jews in Europe did' (Goldberg, 1993: 170). 'But secretly', Ruth confides, 'she knew she was coming here, so she grew it a little under the wig. And when she saw that Statue of Liberty, she took off her wig with her children beside her and threw it into the harbor' (Goldberg, 1993: 170). In his analysis of the feminocentric canon of short Jewish fiction, David Brauner notes the way that

Ruthie 'distances herself from the traditions of orthodox Judaism (she implies that the cutting of the hair of married women is a benighted practice carried out only by "those Jews" "over there")' and sees discarding of the wig as symbolizing, crucially, 'not only the sense of freedom instilled in her by her first sight of the new world but also the journey of a whole generation of Jewish immigrants to America at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries, from the religious tradition . . . of the old world to the assimilation demanded . . . by the new' (Brauner, 2015: 110). To be at the end of the century, then, and still donning it—how could it happen? Why would Batsheva or Rachel want it to?

Unless, perhaps, they see the wig as a tool of seduction. For, ironically, the wig, like the veil,<sup>11</sup> is, at turns, also sensual and appealing, the *sheiteled* woman an exotic, erotic creature. That which desexualizes (of Gitl, we learn that the wig 'made her seem stouter and shorter than she would have appeared without it . . . [and] added at least five years to her looks') sexualizes—always, however, keeping the wearers subject to interpretation by the male gaze (Cahan, 1970: 34). The wig on the rabbi's wife in Leonard Michaels's 1969 short story, 'Murderers', for example, is an alluring, changing beacon to the boys who look upon it. And yet, the woman herself is, no more, nor less, than her wig. Examining the rabbi's wife, Michaels' boy-narrator says:

Today she was a blonde... She had ten wigs, ten colors, fifty styles. She looked different, the same, and very good. A human theme in which nothing begat anything and was gorgeous. To me she was the world's lesson. Aryan yellow slipped through pins about her ears. An olive complexion mediated yellow hair and Arabic black eyes. Could one care what she really looked like? What was *really*? (Michaels, 2007: 97, emphasis in original)

Though she is fornicating as the boys surreptitiously watch her through the window and looks 'very good', making her appear dowdy Gitl's literary obverse, the rabbi's wife in 'Murderers' is in fact Gitl's twin: she, too, lacks individuality, a chance for

---

<sup>11</sup> Many scholars have examined the sexualization of the veil and the Muslim/Orientalized woman (see, for example, Said [1979], Ahmed [1992: 144–68] and Mohanty [2003]).

development, any potential heroism. ‘Could one care what she really looked like?’ is perhaps a greater cruelty from the perspective of a teenage boy than: ‘Could one care what she really is like?’ but it encompasses the latter, as well.

These fictional accounts set the stage, then, in many ways, for the memoirs that were to flood the twenty-first century. The wig had a totalizing effect. Whether it desexualized or sexualized, it was oppressive and obscuring—a denial of personhood. No surprise, then, that feminist icons like Gloria Steinem, who has been very outspoken about saving Muslim women from their patriarchal societies, would become so involved in the liberation of Orthodox womanhood. In the Acknowledgements that follow Lax’s *Uncovered*, Steinem’s conflation of Muslim and Jewish women’s experiences are revealed in Lax’s words of gratitude: ‘Special thanks to ... kind Gloria Steinem, who, on long walks at Hedgebrook, made me aware of the era I missed while *under the veil*’ (Lax, 2015: n. pag., emphasis mine).

### III. The Return of the Repressed

Ultimately, it would seem that if the narratives of oppression and liberation—of women trapped under the *sheitel* and free in their ‘own hair’—have become prominent, they are being met with narratives in which women thrive under Orthodoxy and their



**Figure 1:** Cartoon by Frieda Vizel. Reproduced with permission.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Many thanks to Frieda Vizel for permission to reprint her cartoon here.

wigs. Or, if they are not thriving, they are also not demanding liberation. Perhaps they don't need or want to be saved by (patronizing) Western feminism; perhaps are figuring things out for themselves.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Orthodox characters have become a staple in turn-of- and early-twenty-first-century American Jewish literature, and as such, they are diverse and nuanced. Eli the Fanatic's Orthodox doppelgänger is no longer a rare thing of fear and loathing. We find guest and starring appearances of Orthodox characters in a plethora of genres: in Ayelet Waldman's mommy-track mystery, *The Big Nap* (2002); Michael Chabon's critically-acclaimed tome, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007); Barry Deutsch's graphic novel series, *Hereville*; Talia Carner's historical fiction, *Jerusalem Maiden* (2011); and Julia Dahl's crime fiction, *Invisible City* (2014) and *Run You Down* (2015), among others. And we find a number of Orthodox (former and current) women taking up their own metaphorical pens to write about Orthodoxy: Pearl Abraham, Tova Mirvis, Ruchama King Feuerman, Faye Kellerman, Rochelle Krich, and Libi Astaire, for example, write for widespread audiences, and scores of other Orthodox women authors write exclusively for their own communities.<sup>14</sup>

And there is no question that the wig, Gitl's great albatross, is as significant as ever in an era in which religious attire is a source of constant attention as a symbol of adamant difference, a refusal to acclimate to national norms.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> We continue, I think, to fall into the trap that Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns of with regard to 'Western' feminist writing about the 'Third World Woman': the co-opting (or discursive colonization) leading to a 'suppression' of 'heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question', and the 'production of a singular monolithic subject' (Mohanty, 2003: 333). Judith Butler reiterates Mohanty's claims in *Precarious Life* and concludes: 'Mohanty's critique is thorough and right—and it was written more than a decade ago' (Butler, 2004: 47). I would add that this thinking is *still* contemporary and critical, and as relevant to the women of the fringe communities of the 'First World' as those of the 'Third'.

<sup>14</sup> A number of Orthodox women's magazines—*Ami*, *Mishpacha*, *Binah*, prominent among them—provide a forum for shorter fiction and non-fiction, and *Menucha* and *Targum* are presses that publish books for Orthodox readers. Occasionally, writers are launched from these internal spheres to the wider world. One example is 'Malka Zipora' (a pseudonym), whose 'stories from a Hassidic household' became something of a publishing sensation in Quebec (see Skinazi [2015]).

<sup>15</sup> Although it is France that receives continuous media attention for its politicians' attitudes and policies regarding Muslim attire, this classically 'laicistic' country is hardly alone, and the *niqab* played a large role in the 2015 Canadian federal election, ultimately touted, with the defeat of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, by outspoken feminist and progressive leader of the Liberal party, Justin Trudeau, as a victory for multicultural values.

Several texts are worthy, I believe, of discussion with regards to their strategic deployment of Jewish women's head coverings, but I will focus briefly on three that I think suggest a range of contemporary engagements with their signification: Allegra Goodman's critically-acclaimed novel, *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998); Nathan Englander's short story collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (2000); and Naomi Ragen's satirical examination of Modern Orthodoxy, *The Saturday Wife* (2007).<sup>16</sup> Goodman's text, the earliest, boldly suggests that that which impeded the Americanization of late nineteenth-century Gitl facilitates the Americanization of late twentieth-century Elizabeth; Englander's imagines the wig as a road to freedom; and Ragen's reclaims the sexuality of the wearer from its viewer.<sup>17</sup> What they all demonstrate is a negotiation of values and a rethinking of the role of the wig for maker, wearer, and observer—*not*, as readers have come to expect, a flat denunciation of Orthodox Judaism's patriarchal, oppressive laws.

In what is probably the most positive rendering of Orthodoxy in mainstream fiction to date, *Kaaterskill Falls*, Goodman introduces us to an Orthodox world almost devoid of gothic villains. It is a strange place. Yes, the rabbi makes decisions that are more about a need to reinforce his authority as community leader than his parlaying of wisdom; for all that, he never falls into the category of evil Orthodox man we find in contemporaneous productions like *A Price Above Rubies* (1998).<sup>18</sup> And yes, we see ways in which the religion is not, at least in its living form, a place of equality for men and women. But Elizabeth Shulman, who struggles with the (idiosyncratic) rabbinical strictures of her religion, shows no strong interest in leaving the 'derech'. And just as she loves the fairy tale 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses'—'the idea that there are secret forests where you can become someone else'—so too does she love using her

<sup>16</sup> The novel serves as a departure for Ragen, usually committed to poking barbs at ultra-Orthodoxy.

<sup>17</sup> The obvious fourth candidate to be mentioned here is Tova Mirvis' *The Outside World* (2004), in which a full chapter is devoted to wig-shopping and its significance. I think, however, that most of Mirvis' insights are to be found in the other three texts discussed here. If there is an exception, it is the identification with one's community the wig offers the wearer. For Shayna, 'a wig on her head was a foolproof way of belonging ... On subways, in department stores, and on the street, she wore her world on her head' (Mirvis, 2004: 98).

<sup>18</sup> See Rubel (2010), who has a chapter devoted to 'The New Jewish Gothic'.

religious attire to take on a new self (Goodman, 1988: 13). And thus, though her natural hair is black, '[a]ll Elizabeth's sheitels are auburn. She'd always loved auburn hair, and so when she married and had to cut hers short she decided she might as well become auburn haired. She bought auburn wigs in different styles: pageboy, straight, short, and wavy' (Goodman, 1998: 11). This theme of self-invention is, of course, a very *American* idea, and no less so in this novel, in which Elizabeth, a wife and mother, is inspired by the words: 'This is the United States of America. You can do whatever you damn well please', and reimagines herself as a businesswoman (Goodman, 1998: 189). Yet the wig is also a reimagining. In Goodman's productive synthesis of Orthodoxy and Americanness, the classic American trope has a place in the visual symbolism of Elizabeth's religion (Goodman, 1988: 189).

Englander's 'The Wig' suggests a similar openness to possibility—though the ending of the story would hardly make one think so. In fact, through the very title of the story, which immediately suggests the garment's prominence, Englander dramatizes the power the object possesses. And, significantly, Englander takes us to the agent behind the object. As Mirvis later does in her novel, *The Outside World* (2004), Englander surveys the landscape of wigmakers before detailing the mastery of one (thus both restoring the estranged object in literature to its labourer, and simultaneously recognizing the dominance of marginalized cultures in parts of America). We read about Ruchama the wigmaker, mother of six, presented as a woman fulfilling her familial roles as mother and breadwinner and helping the women of the community fulfil theirs: 'They circle the globe to see Ruchama' for their wigs (Englander, 2000: 87).

If most authors suggest head coverings oppress, Englander suggests head coverings might also liberate. Even as symbols of modesty, they can lead to freedom, individuality, independence—if always a constrained freedom, a tempered individuality, a limited independence. It is not because Ruchama fosters her customers' modesty or deepens their connection to their religious practice through their head coverings that the women come to her, but 'because they are trapped in their modesty and want to feel even as illusion, the simple pleasure of wind in their hair' (Englander, 2000: 87). Ruchama, too, seeks a form of escape in a wig; she is unhappy, frustrated

with having to tend to her husband and children, and lured by the secular woman who comes to her shop in smart slacks and a 'confidence [that] can get anything done in this world' (Englander, 2000: 89). But to achieve her desire of freedom-in-a-wig, Ruchama becomes obsessed with the perfect mass of human hair and must destroy everything in her path to get it: she deprives the man whose hair she takes of his 'defining' characteristic (the wig is thus 'defining' before it even evolves into its wig-like state); she is so absorbed in the details of the wig she cannot perform work functions; she spends so much money on the hair she fails to pay her bills; and she sacrifices her reputation and potentially her marriage by claiming she is philandering, rather than admit she is simply wig-making. So ultimately, for Englander, even as its meaning takes on nuance, the wig, as metonymy for the Orthodox woman, still, to a degree, suggests a burden, frustration, enslavement. Nevertheless, the nuance in Englander's work far exceeds that found in the feminist call to 'uncover'. It is not, after all, submission to the patriarchy that defeats Ruchama, but rather her determination to undermine it. In other words, in making the object of oppression into one of freedom, the object becomes so fetishized that it re-oppresses its maker.

Finally, in *The Saturday Wife*, wigs also allow for self-invention, as in Goodman's novel, and freedom, as in Englander's story, but their plenitude and diversity is so great that one begins to wonder what wigs *can't* do. Throughout the novel, Ragen's eponymous heroine sees 'overweight Jewesses in bad wigs' and younger married women in wigs that 'were long and smooth and sexy, in daring shades of blond and red, bouncing around their shoulders as they walked or danced' (Ragen, 2007: 18, 49). As an outsider (perhaps not unlike the reader), Delilah initially looks at these wigs and other head coverings as the marks of women's roles or statuses, but she soon comes to realize the potential these accoutrements have for herself.

On her first Saturday as the rabbi's wife, we follow a long passage in which Delilah 'agonize[s]' over what to wear on her head at synagogue. The detailed options of women's head coverings might seem oddly little different from those in Michaels' story of forty years earlier, *even as we hear of them from the perspective of a woman*. In Michaels' story, we see the rabbi's wife through the eyes of a voyeur—voyeurs—earlier incarnations of horny teenage boys who would be plastering Farah Fawcett on their

bedroom walls and lockers. In Michaels' story we are positioned as the 'murderers', as the rabbi accuses the boys when he discovers their 'ocular perversion', giving the story its name (Michaels, 2007: 98, 96). In Ragen's novel, we *are* the rabbi's wife, our eyes roving over the possibilities of invented selves. The wearer can be sexy, repellent, an actress in shampoo ads, a 1940s Italian film star, a 1970s American TV star, or respectable. Who should she be? Who can I be? We might say (if, in truth, this is a generous reading of Ragen) that her turning object into subject allows the head covering to be full of potential, a transformative object, its ritualistic power—if perhaps light-years removed from its original religious context—bestowing true agency on the wearer: agency over her image, her role, and her life.

In the twenty-first century, the need to liberate the *sheiteled* woman should be suspect. To see a woman's choice, when it is one that is not the choice of most Western, liberal women, as a sign of her false consciousness, is to recapitulate the very patriarchal structure feminism is meant to destroy. Frieda Vigel, in her blog, *Oy Vey Cartoons*, illustrates this point poignantly. Although Vigel herself left the Satmar Hasidic community (went 'OTD'), she recognizes that this was her individual choice, and that not all Satmar women want to leave or be 'liberated'. In one of her graphic cartoons, across the screen, we see men in military uniform, in three rows, three abreast, march toward a Hasidic woman, their faces impassive (see **Figure 1**). The Hasidic woman is not imprisoned (an image that we see in the film *A Price Above Rubies* [1998, dir. Boaz Yakin] as Renee Zellweger desperately tries to protect her baby from being circumcised, the *mechitzah* or divider between men and women appearing as prison bars); no gothic Hasidic rabbi or husband stands behind her, telling her what to do. She is, instead, clearly going for a stroll with her children. She is pushing ahead of her a baby carriage; behind her, forming the frailest of human defense chains, walk a boy and a girl, hands linked. The children frown; the baby peers from the pram, startled. 'Finally', reads the ironic title overhead, 'they're coming to liberate the Chasidic woman'.

Although her history is not unlike that of Deborah Feldman, who also left the Satmar community, Vigel has chosen not to use her talent to denounce all aspects of Satmar life. Instead, she takes a more measured approach, and gives readers a

greater sense of why most Hasidic women are *not* running for the metaphorical fire exits of Crown Heights and Williamsburg. 'Hasidic women live in a radically different culture than the secular American culture, and their world is more complicated and nuanced than the mere sum of these rituals. Things that seem strange and unjust to outsiders are natural and non-issues to Satmar women', she explains (Vizel, 2012: n. pag.). Further, she writes, they 'invest themselves in the home and find power and passion within the framework of their available religious outlets' (Vizel, 2012: n. pag.). Devaluing the potency of the liberation narrative in clear language, Vizel says: 'We can decry Satmar women's oppression and demand their liberation. But we'll be missing the point. Satmar women don't want to be saved' (Vizel, 2012: n. pag.). Although she argues that better resources and awareness should be provided for Hasidic victims of domestic violence, she concludes that these are only 'some of the ways we can have a conversation about the problems in the Hasidic community without narrowly judging a people from the prism of our own culture' (Vizel, 2012: n. pag.).

With multiple and ambivalent significations, the Orthodox Jewish woman's *sheitel* destabilizes any attempt at formalizing the interaction between the dominant American culture and minority religious groups. Furthermore, its literary articulation both supports the secularization thesis and undermines it.

But perhaps this was always the case. To return to the late nineteenth century and Cahan's rendering of Gitl, a greenhorn heavy-handedly defined by her hideous head covering, we might note that the socialist newspaperman's novella is not without nuance. At the end of *Yekl*, Jake and Gitl are divorced. Jake in his final iteration—as Cahan's later David Levinsky in his—is written as a man of regret, a man who sold his (religious) birthright for a mess of pottage. Gitl is a picture of triumph. Perhaps the great difference between them, after all, Cahan might be suggesting, is *not* their stage of Americanization, *not* the gap between Jake's Saturday afternoon carriage rides and Gitl's lighting of Shabbos candles, or Jake's new name and Gitl's delay of hers ('Gertie', he wants her to be called, or 'Goitie', as we read, aurally reminded of his incomplete Americanization, albeit *ahead*, as we might think, of hers), but rather, their fundamental difference might be their distinct negotiations with American culture. Jake takes on everything America demands of him; his transition from Yekl to Jake,

like his progress, in the final scene, on the Third Avenue cable car, is painful—but any pause in it could only be temporary. Gitl, on the other hand, resists the belief that ‘it is quite another world’ and makes of America a world that is hers, too. In the end, she refuses to ‘yield to Jake’s’—by which we might read ‘America’s’, or rather, Jake’s *imagined* America’s—demands completely, but could not nerve herself up to going about “in her own hair”, like a Gentile woman’ (Cahan, 1970: 39). When she faces Yekl for the last time, she is as ‘Americanized’ as she will be: ‘The rustic, “greenhornlike” expression was completely gone from her face and manner, and, although she now looked bewildered and as if terror-stricken, there was noticeable about her a suggestion of that peculiar air of self-confidence with which a few months’ life in America is sure to stamp the looks and bearing of every immigrant’ (Cahan, 1970: 83). And she manages this not in a *sheitel*, but neither wholly in her own hair, but rather in ‘her own hair’ that was ‘thatched with a broad-brimmed winter hat of a brown color’—a compromise that ‘nettle[s]’ Jake, perhaps because it shows that she has achieved what he could not: a negotiation between her religion and her adopted country, and a solution that fits them both.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Abraham, P** 1995 [1996] *The Romance Reader*. New York: Riverhead.
- Ahmed, L** 1992 *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Alderman, N** 2006 *Disobedience*. New York: Touchstone.
- Appiah, KA** 2006 *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin.
- Auslander, S** 2007 *The Foreskin’s Lament*. New York: Riverhead.
- Becks, M** 2005 *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost Mormons and Found My Faith*. New York: Random House.
- Brauner, D** 2015 History on a Personal Note: Postwar American Jewish Short Stories. In: Brauner, D and Stähler, A (Eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, pp. 105–18. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Brown, J** (as Eshes Chayil) 2010 *Hush*. New York: Walker.
- Butler, J** 2004 *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

- Cahan, A** 1970 [1896] *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*. New York: Dover.
- Charles, L** (Director) 2006 *Borat* [Motion Picture]. United States: Four by Two Productions.
- Charles, L** (Director) 2008 *Religulous* [Documentary]. United States: Thousand Words.
- Davidman, L** 2015 [2014] *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dawkins, R** 2006 *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam.
- Deitsch, C** 2015 *Here and There: Leaving Hasidism, Keeping my Faith*. New York: Schocken.
- Dennett, D** 2006 *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Penguin.
- Dreyfus, H** 2015 First Ex-Chasidic Gay Memoir Defies Niche. *The New York Jewish Week*, 13 October. Available at: <http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/first-ex-chasidic-gay-memoir-defies-niche> (Last accessed 19 September 2017).
- Englander, N** 2000 *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*. New York: Vintage.
- Feldman, D** 2012 *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Feldman, D** 2014 *Exodus: A Memoir*. New York: Plume.
- Furlong, S M** 2011 *Why I Left the Amish*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Furman, A** 2000 *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: Return of the Exiled*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Gilmore, L** 2001 *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma, and Testimony*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Glinter, E** 2014 Ex-Hasidic writers go off the path and onto the page. *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 27 May. Available at: <http://forward.com/culture/198622/ex-hasidic-writers-go-off-the-path-and-onto-the-pa/> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Goldberg, M** 1993 *Whistling and Other Stories*. Cambridge, MA: Zoland Books.
- Goodman, A** 1998 *Kaaterskill Falls*. New York: Delta.

- Gribbin, A** 2011 Preview: The Four Horsemen of New Atheism Reunited. *The New Statesman*, 22 December. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/12/richard-dawkins-issue-hitchens> (Last accessed 19 September 2017).
- Habermas, J** 2008 Notes on Post-Secular Society. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25(4): 17–29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x>
- Harris, S** 2004 [2006] *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Harris, S** 2006 *Letter to A Christian Nation*. New York: Vintage.
- Hitchens, C** 2007 *God is Not Great*. New York: Hachette.
- Jessop, C** 2007 *Escape*. New York: Random House.
- Johnson, J** 2015 Trump calls for a 'complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States'. *The Washington Post*, 7 December. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-the-united-states/> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Johnson, J** and **DelReal, J A** 2016 Trump tells story about killing terrorists with bullets dipped in pigs' blood, though there's no proof of it. *The Washington Post*, 20 February. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/02/20/trumps-story-about-killing-terrorists-with-bullets-dipped-in-pigs-blood-is-likely-not-true/> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Lax, L** 2015 *Uncovered: How I left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home*. Berkeley, CA: She Writes Press.
- Mann, R** 2007 *The Rabbi's Daughter*. New York: Dial Press.
- Michaels, L** 2007 Murderers. In: Michaels, L (Ed.), *The Collected Stories*, pp. 95–8. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Mirvis, T** 2004 *The Outside World*. New York: Vintage.
- Mohanty, C T** 2003 *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384649>

- O'Neill, B** 2007 Misery Lit ... Read On. *BBC News*, 17 April. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6563529.stm> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Ozick, C** 1970 America: Toward Yavneh. *Judaism*, 19(3): 264–82.
- Peretz, I L** 1990 [2002] Three Gifts. *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, Wisse, R (Ed.), pp. 222–9. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Potok, C** 1967 *The Chosen*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Pratt, M L** 1992 *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203163672>
- Ragen, N** 2001 [1989] *Jephte's Daughter*. New Milford, CT: Toby.
- Ragen, N** 2007 *The Saturday Wife*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Rak, J** 2013 *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Reich, T** 1988 *Master of the Return*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Jovanovich.
- Roiphe, A** 1997 [1987] *Lovingkindness*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.
- Ross, T** 2014 How Ex-Frum Memoirs Became New York Publishing's Hottest New Trend. *Tablet Magazine*, 7 January. Available at: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/158130/ex-frum-memoirs> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Rubel, N L** 2010 *Doubting the Devout: The Ultra-Orthodox in the Jewish American Imagination*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Said, E** 1978 [1979] *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Satrapi, M** 2003 *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Random House.
- Satrapi, M** 2004 *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*. New York: Random House.
- Senior, J** 2015 Review: 'Here and There', a Renunciation of a Sect, Tinged with Love. *The New York Times*, 6 December. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/books/review-here-and-there-a-renunciation-of-a-sect-tinged-with-love.html?mcubz=1> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Skinazi, K E H** 2015 *Kol Isha: Malka Zipora's Lekhaim as the Voice of the Hasidic Woman in Quebec*. *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 33(2): 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2015.0010>

- Skinazi, K E H** 2018 (forthcoming) *Women of Valor: Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Tamm, J** 2009 [2010] *Cartwheels in a Sari: A Memoir of Growing up Cult*. New York: Three Rivers.
- Vincent, L** 2014 *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood*. New York: Nan A. Talese.
- Vizel, F** 2007 About Me. *Shpitzle Shtrimpkind* blog. Available at: <https://www.blogger.com/profile/10129526520146433087> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Vizel, F** 2012 On Hasidic Women. *Oy Vey Cartoons: Doodles and Other Missives*. Available at: <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/who/> (Last accessed 3 September 2017).
- Whitlock, G** 2005 The Skin of the *Burqa*: Recent Life Narratives from Afghanistan. *Biography*, 28(1): 54–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2005.0040>
- Whitlock, G** 2007 *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226895277.001.0001>
- Winston, H** 2005 *Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels*. Boston: Beacon.
- Wirth-Nesher, H** 2001 'Shpeaking Plain' and Writing Foreign: Abraham Cahan's *Yekl*. *Poetics Today*, 22(1): 41–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-22-1-41>

**How to cite this article:** Skinazi, K E H 2017 Are Head Coverings the New Black? *Sheitels* and the Religious-Secular Culture Wars in Twenty-first-century America and its Literature. *Open Library of Humanities*, 3(2): 12, pp. 1–27, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.138>

**Published:** 08 November 2017

**Copyright:** © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS**