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How to Cite: Pozorski, A and Jaffe, M 2017 Writing Progeny: Elisa Albert and Philip Roth. *Open Library of Humanities*, 3(2): 14, pp. 1–26, DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.262

Published: 22 November 2017

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Aimee Pozorski and Miriam Jaffe, 'Writing Progeny: Elisa Albert and Philip Roth', (2017) 3(2): 14 *Open Library of Humanities*, DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.262

NEW VOICES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Writing Progeny: Elisa Albert and Philip Roth

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In this article, we argue for Elisa Albert's place in the Jewish-American literary canon, not only as a result of her self-proclaimed connection to Philip Roth, but also as a result of her feminist sensibility updating the classic writing-as-procreating trope. We call for a re-valuation of Albert as a self-referential master in the tradition of Roth that has so far included all of her male peers while leaving her out—perhaps because of, or despite, her uncanny representation of female sexuality and motherhood.

Elisa Albert's 2006 short story collection *How This Night Is Different* ends boldly, with a letter written to Philip Roth entitled 'Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose'. In this letter, Albert offers to bear Roth's progeny, and in so doing, provocatively offers her own stories and indeed, her career, as the offspring of Roth's own. In this coda to her debut, Albert consciously seeks to join the Jewish-American literary tradition: 'I am a young Jewish writer who idolizes you, cherishes your books, and reads them slowly, considers you the father of us all . . . but not actually a father yourself, Philip, so far as I know' (Albert, 2006: 183).

Albert's attempt to join the Jewish-American literary tradition thus far has not been as successful as we would expect. A search of the Modern Language Association database reveals that no scholarly articles have been written on her to date. Despite a number of book reviews in popular venues and scholarly publications alike—the majority of which praise Albert's mastery of her craft—this article is the first act of literary scholarship that puts Albert in focus. Predicting her own critical oversight, Albert's offer to provide Roth with the child he never had functions as a cleverly layered metaphor, one that both plays ironically beyond the classic trope in which women offer their bodies in exchange for advancement in their fields, and simultaneously inspires womb envy in an era when women with professional goals are advised to postpone or avoid pregnancy altogether.

In this article, we argue for Albert's place in the canon, not only for her self-proclaimed connection to Philip Roth, but also for her feminist sensibility that updates the classic writing-as-procreating trope. In her aforementioned letter to Roth, Albert situates herself in relation to Roth biblically (Genesis 19:34), like one of Lot's daughters, willing to sleep with the Jewish father in order to ensure the continuity of tradition. Here, Jewish-American writing becomes the tradition of interest, a tradition that Albert yearns to represent. Reading Albert in this way, we can understand her as a self-referential master in the tradition of Roth that has so far included all of her male peers, while leaving her out—perhaps because of, or despite, her uncanny representation of female sexuality and motherhood.

Albert anticipates her own displacement from the canon when she jokes: 'A British girl commented on all the "similar stories" we MFA kikes persist in composing . . .

"It does seem like there's a lot of this kind of thing out there already", offered a sweet Asian guy helpfully' (Albert, 2006: 186). Here, she draws out the national and racial stereotypes of her classmates. Albert's decision to include these testaments against ethnically categorized writing reflects Bernard Malamud's opinion that '[t]he dominant place of Jewish-American writing has abated. People with new experiences are appearing . . . Many people claim that the Jewish experience is worn out' (Betsky, 1973). Malamud, like Roth, expresses dismay at the ethnic categorization of 'Jewish writing' in part because it would mean that the post-war chic of writing by the underdog Jews could be considered outdated rather than classic or thematically universal.

However, at odds with Roth's directive that readers avoid this same kind of reductive ethnic categorization of him as a Jewish-American writer, Albert lays out her need to produce '[a] Great Jewish-American Novel' like it is a biological imperative (Albert, 2006: 179). Although Malamud and Roth thought that the Jewish label might affect their relevance, Albert claims the Jewish label with a prideful appreciation of those who were labeled against their will. In this way, she takes up Roth's freedom to be contrary to tradition while simultaneously—and paradoxically—seeking to become a part of that tradition herself.

While the comedic tone of Albert's missive and her later work echo the style of Roth's early work, and though Albert's self-referentiality serves like a 'countertext' (Shostak, 2004) to Roth's 'autobiographical gestures' (Jaffe, 2013), our position is that Albert's fiction promises something new: in Albert's quest to 'write fiction about Jews. Jews! Imagine that!' (Albert, 2006: 179), she subverts the tradition with her own brand of female sexual liberation. Yet perhaps because Albert's voice is so female, so *feminine*—'Feminism without focus on the body, the soul, the relationship between the two . . . is of no interest to me', says the protagonist of her latest novel (Albert, 2015: 136)—critics see only male authors as the proper inheritors of Roth's crown.

For example, when Nathan Englander's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* first appeared in 2012, reviewers argued that Englander could be the product of both Roth and Carver, of Philip Roth's Jewish sensibility and humor mixed with the jaded minimalism of Carver (Kakutani, 2012). Michiko Kakutani writes that Englander 'can be as funny and outrageous as Philip Roth in describing

the incongruities of modern life' (Kakutani, 2012). Englander's collection came out well after Albert's, yet despite Albert's cleaving self-alignment with Roth and her self-categorization as 'a lobotomized Philip Roth writing chick lit' (Albert, 2006: 179), she has been overlooked as Roth's literary heir.

Albert predicted this oversight even in 2006, when she writes: 'I'd felt something resembling this large-scale "FUCK" once before, years ago, when I first read Nathan Englander's heart-wrenching story about an *agunah*'s endless electrolysis and had no choice but to buy my own greatly autobiographical burgeoning novella about my own heart-wrenchingly endless hair-removal trials' (Albert, 2006: 187). Despite Albert's own confessed worries about her place in the list of Roth's progeny, critics' inability to connect her with the father of them all surprises readers far too little, as her works—ranging from an early short story collection, an illness narrative called *The Book of Dahlia*, and a more recent novel about new mothers—resemble Roth's early works in both form and content. Albert's works, like Roth's early stories 'Eli, the Fanatic' and 'Defender of the Faith', question what it means to be Jewish in the modern world, while also winking to the reader as if to say: I'm a writer's writer. No matter what I write about, it will also be about writing itself.

Given Albert's investment in the self-conscious quality of Roth's work, the fact that she has been underappreciated might have as much to do with her difficulty—her overly determined self-referentiality—as it does with her being a woman. Is it a surprise that a female Jewish-American writer's writer might be left out of the club? We, after all, connect Albert with Roth in a time of literary surprises.

Tracking the odds the night before the announcement of the winner of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature, a distinction which ultimately went to Jewish-American author Bob Dylan, we found that the odds for both Roth and DeLillo were about 12/1. Following the commentary on various authors' chances online, we discovered that the literary intelligentsia believed that if the Prize did not to go Roth and/or DeLillo (rumors suggested that it could be a joint award), then the next authors eligible would represent the next generation: Foer, Franzen, Lethem. But where, we wondered, were the women on that list? Had they been overlooked or undervalued or, somehow, paradoxically, overvalued in their difficulty and, as a result, pushed aside?

In response to this lack of serious scholarly attention, we argue for a consideration of Albert as one of Philip Roth's rightful literary heirs. Through her work, Albert exposes their shared literary DNA, especially in their central thematic connection: an interest in procreation as it has become inextricably bound up with the act of writing.

In the following article, we trace in four parts Albert's writing as it is interconnected with motherhood from early Philip Roth (1959), to her 2006 collection of short stories, *How This Night is Different*, to her 2015 novel *After Birth*, and to her unlikely affinity with Bob Dylan. In so doing, we seek to reveal a significant literary lineage as it develops from Roth to Albert, and to theorize the status of motherhood as connected inextricably to writing from the mid-20th-century to the present day—an argument not only about new Jewish voices, but also about an evolution of how the role of the writer-as-creator has been represented generally in the contemporary Jewish-American canon of literature.

I. Birth Control and Metafiction: Roth's Early Procreation

An important precursor to Albert's early work, Philip Roth's 1959 novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*, tells the story of Neil Klugman, a college student from Newark who falls in love with Brenda Patimkin and, over the course of a summer, becomes involved with her and her family in the upper-crust community of Short Hills, New Jersey. Often, the novella is read for its themes of race and class: Neil is an outsider who nevertheless gains an insider's view into the upper middle class life of a Jewish family via Brenda, only to resign himself to his fate as a librarian in downtown Newark after recognizing the limitations of both birth and place. When he says, early on, that the 'library was not going to be my lifework' (Roth, 1959: 32), we recognize this as wishful thinking from the start, but also as a kind of literary foreshadowing, an ironic and over-determined denial that will surely return him to the library by the novella's end, when he has arrived back in Newark for the new year to see the sun rise again.

It is this tension between Brenda—whose rejection of birth control reads as a rejection of Neil and what he represents—and Neil, who advocates for their future, paradoxically, by preventing a pregnancy, that we reconsider here: a provocative linkage of birth control and wedlock, on the one hand, and Neil's status and identity

as a reader and library employee on the other. Literary critics have written dozens of essays on this first major work of Roth since its publication in 1959. The majority of these essays tend to read the novella as a reflection on the protagonist Neil Klugman's struggle with his Jewish-American identity, or as a critique of the commodity culture pervasive in the U.S. at the time, with some essays putting the novella in direct conversation with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.[1]

In addition to these readings, we posit the importance of Neil's identity as a reader, as exemplified by his work at the library, a position he denies 'was . . . going to be my lifework', a denial he repeats when he says, 'the library wasn't going to be *my* life' (Roth, 1959: 33, 61, emphasis in original). And yet, it is a position—a role—to which he nevertheless returns by the end of the work (136). Via a close reading of, among others, the short scene featuring a conversation between Neil and Harriet, the young woman betrothed to Brenda's brother, we see how discussion between the 'two non-Patimkins together' (83) presents a work equally invested in the possibilities of metafiction in the sense that it is ultimately a book about reading—about Neil's reading—and his habit of becoming 'mesmerized almost by the dissection, analysis, reconsideration, and finally, the embracing of the trivial' (83). In this way, the conversation between Neil and Harriet functions as a synecdoche for the larger novella in the sense that it features non sequiturs, misinterpretation, self-consciousness about work, and a self-referential nod to the value of bestselling books: an uncanny, or maybe strategic, inclusion given that *Goodbye, Columbus* would ultimately become bestselling texts along with dozens of others throughout Roth's writing career.

One reason the novella was so successful was that it addresses the issue of birth control, even name-checking the infamous and ground-breaking work of Margaret Sanger, while simultaneously highlighting the role of literacy (Roth, 1959: 82). Neil's initial conversation with Brenda about whether she should use a diaphragm spans six pages, and begins when Neil admits that, unlike Ron, he was not ready to

[1] For readings of Jewish-American identity in the work, see Silvey (2014), Schreier (2011), Aarons (2007) and Levine (1970). Such critics as Kutlu (2008), France (1988) and Doyle (1994) have read the work in terms of the commodity culture inherent in the American dream. See Nash (1988), Macleod (1985), and Graham (1976) for particular comparisons with *The Great Gatsby*.

propose marriage. Rather, he says: 'I imagine that's why I proposed the surrogate, which turned out finally to be far more daring than I knew at the time' (Roth, 1959: 78). The word 'surrogate' here works in interesting ways, as it conjures the idea of surrogate motherhood only to reject the possibility of motherhood itself. The 'surrogate', in this case, is not a mother at all, but rather, its opposite: birth control. The moment therefore establishes a sophisticated juxtaposition between Brenda, with whom Neil argues extensively about protected, premarital sex, and Harriet, who is likely in the position to have to marry Ron because there is a baby on the way. The scene that includes the birth control proposal rather than a marriage proposal ends with Brenda shouting, 'Go to hell!', and proceeds with the next scene: Neil reflecting on Harriet, who impressed him 'as a young lady singularly unconscious of a motive in others or herself' (Roth, 1959: 83).

The scene with Harriet that follows echoes the scene about procreation, or preventing conception; however, it seems much more self-conscious about the act of reading and understanding an other during an awkward social encounter. As with the reflections on whether library work would be his life's work, the scene with Harriet that follows a dramatic argument with Brenda about birth control is ultimately a scene about how language fails to produce meaning at all. When viewed through the meta-fictional lens of Neil reading, we can also see the ways in which Roth has been concerned with the life of the reader from the very beginning of his career to the end—a life characterized by what Neil sees in the final pages of the text as 'a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved' (136).

When Neil meets Harriet, she seems to him superficial and thoughtless, as indicated by his observation that: 'All was surfaces, and she seemed a perfect match for Ron, and too for the Patimkins' (83). Neil looks on with horror as the Patimkins plan 'where the newlyweds should live, what furniture they should buy, how soon they should have a baby—all through this [Neil reflects] I kept thinking that Harriet was wearing white gloves, but she wasn't' (83). The reference to white gloves here suggests that Harriet isn't as pure as we have been led to think; the 'how soon they should have a baby'—such ambiguous phrasing could be read as a prescription (they should have a baby soon) or as a description of the actual fact: they will be having

a baby sooner than they planned. What proceeds is as disorienting and alienating a conversation as you are likely to find in Roth's work. An ungenerous reader would see it as a failure of Roth to master dialogue; but a closer reading suggests that this talking-past-each-other is precisely what Roth was after. The conversation has to do with reading and comprehension, but even Neil seems slightly off-kilter during the awkward exchange.

'Ron tells me you have a very interesting job', Brenda says, to which Neil responds: 'I work in the library'. Immediately then, Neil reveals himself to be a working-class kid, but more importantly, as literate and bookish. When Harriet says, 'I've always liked reading', Neil answers with, 'That'll be nice, married to Ron'. It is as if he has inserted himself into the Patimkin narrative: what would it be for him to be married into the Patimkin clan, to be planning for a baby, to give up the work at the library? When Harriet answers with, 'Ron likes music', Neil wonders: 'What had I *said*?' (84, emphasis in original).

How the two strangers get from a library job to reading to marriage to music is beyond both them and the reader. There are gaps in the logic of the text, in the logic of the conversation. The novella itself calls attention to this fact. At this moment, we understand, as Neil understands, that there is something fundamentally wrong: If he is to avoid ending up prematurely married like Harriet and Ron, if he is to avoid becoming a father so he can continue with this reading, he must go talk to Brenda—to make things right following their disagreement about birth control which would protect both Neil and Brenda from an unwanted pregnancy interrupting their youth. How has Neil's literal and figurative literacy led him so astray? As Brenda ultimately says to Neil, 'You can't understand my side' (Roth, 1959: 84), once again questioning Neil's ability to read the situation, to comprehend the relationship between literacy—his own—and child rearing.

Following the jumbled conversations with both Brenda and Harriet, Neil finds himself driving to the mountains and watching the deer when he comes upon 'young white-skinned mothers, hardly older than himself' (Roth, 1959: 95). Such a sight invites further reflection—on the lives of these mothers and the reality of their children. Neil reflects: 'They looked immortal sitting there. [. . .] These were the

goddesses, and if I were Paris I could not have been able to choose among them, so microscopic were the differences. Their fates had collapsed them into one. Only Brenda shone' (Roth, 1959: 96). They are rendered as immortal, in part, because they have progeny. Their children will have children and so on into infinity. And yet Brenda stands out precisely because she is not yet a mother. Neil persists in wanting to protect her from such a fate, and to protect himself.

Finally, the connection between motherhood and literacy becomes strangely reinforced during the climactic moment of the story when Brenda shows Neil the letters her father and mother have sent her after finding her diaphragm. With a wink at the epistolary tradition *Samuel Richardson's Pamela*, or Virtue Rewarded (1740), the 18th-century novel about a woman whose purity is compromised, Roth provides the letters here for Neil and for us to read. It is not the content of the letters that bothers Neil so much as the poor quality of writing: 'Why does your father capitalize all these letters?' Neil asks. He reads the 'mistake'—the punctuation mistake of Mr. Patimkin embedded in his criticism of his daughter's mistake, thus: 'As for your mistake [Neil] read aloud to Brenda, "it takes Two (upper case T!) to make a mistake and now that you will be away at school and from him and what you got involved in you will probably do all right I have every faith you will. Your father. Your father"' (133).

It is difficult not to see the self-righteous sense of superiority in Neil's reading of this letter by a successful, albeit nearly illiterate man. We sometimes wonder if Neil feels he must break with the Patimkins because of the class differences and the judgment they are willing to pass on their daughter who is doing the right thing in protecting her future, or the fact that they are near-sighted, obtuse, superficial, and inadequate *writers*.

Four pages later, Neil is alone again in Newark when the sun is rising—it is a new day—and it is the first day of the Jewish New Year. Most significantly, however, he is back in time for work at his library job, a job that has been threatened since the beginning of the novella when Brenda asks: 'What about the library?' (51–2) when they first start talking about whether to pursue a sexual relationship. It seems clear that Neil has made his choice here: If given the choice between books and literacy on

the one hand, and children and the Patimkins on the other, he feels he is better off with the library, a place that may ultimately become his life after all. In this way, we might read the novella as less about the Patimkins' rejection of Neil and more about his acceptance of the solitary life of the reader.

As we know from Roth's biography, as Elisa Albert knows, this would be true of Roth in life, too. In this first novella of a young career, Roth's references to writing are further reinforced by references to procreation, or more precisely, by references to choosing a life of books over a life with children. In this early phase, Neil, like Roth, has decided: literary progeny, rather than biological progeny, will make him immortal.

II. Albert's Roth-Referentiality in 'Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose'

Albert's 2006 short story entitled, 'Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose', a story that ends her first volume, *How This Night is Different*, signals in every possible way—stylistically, thematically—that she is the literary heir of Philip Roth. Further, it signals that Albert knows, too, that Roth has chosen literary progeny over biological children. And even more stunningly still, it addresses the question of literary tradition by indirectly wondering who gets to be included and under what circumstances.

Several decades after the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Albert crafts the story as a letter written to Roth in which she offers to have his children, noting that—in Roth's previous work—he reflects self-consciously about failing to produce progeny. Albert offers 'Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose' for names of possible daughters they may have, but—in so doing—makes the provocative move of offering her own stories, indeed, her career, as the offspring of Roth's own. She knows, so many decades later, that an aspiring writer need not choose between literacy and parenthood. Also noteworthy is the invocation of 'Bessie', a reference to Roth's own mother, further reinforcing the generational line.

In the beginning, Albert writes: 'Dear Philip Roth' as a way to introduce an intertextual relationship with one of the most important Jewish-American authors of her time (and ours), and, in so doing, to link herself with Roth while simultaneously managing to mock that very impulse. The effect, of course, is a self-conscious alignment

of her work with Roth in terms of both style and theme. Following her half-brave, half-comedic, incredibly stylized salutation, she continues, in a similar self-parodic fashion: 'Maybe you don't get many letters. Maybe you haven't received a truly-balls out, bare-assed communiqué since 1959. You once signed a book for me' (Albert, 2006: 177). The phrases 'balls-out', and 'bare-assed communiqué' comically imitate the style of Roth. The line, 'you once signed a book for me', not only reminds the fictional Philip Roth of their connection, but also you and me as readers: This author has talked to, been in contact with, Philip Roth, the best American living writer.

Albert writes about a turning point in her young career when she awakens to the discovery of 'my hard-won infant novel worthless, my broken engagement still haunting and heartbreaking, my parents still aging [. . .] without the great reward of grandchildren' (189). In figuratively linking a writer's output with her children via her 'hard-won infant novels', Albert self-consciously positions her fiction as the offspring of Roth's fiction: her stories come from Roth's stories, and she has delivered them into the world.

We can see the Albert/Roth connection when juxtaposing Roth's early story from his first collection, *Goodbye, Columbus*, as discussed above. In pursuing a reading of *Goodbye, Columbus* as self-referential before its time (before contemporary critics were even using the term), and—relatedly—as interested in procreation in terms of making babies (or failing to make babies in the sense that nearly the entire plot revolves around the question of a diaphragm), we have argued that connotations of productivity extend to the birthing work of writing. However, for Neil, one must choose between the two: between literary productivity, which involves a life of reading and writing, and repeating (as E. I. Lonoff would describe it in Roth's 1979 *The Ghost Writer*) it on the one hand, or sexual productivity, on the other hand. Neil must return to the library at the end of the story alone, in 1959. Albert, on the other hand, takes a different track, arguing that she can both produce stories, stories about writing, stories about Roth, while also producing children, literally, in the name of Roth.

As such, Albert refers outright to herself as a writer writing—writing to none other than Philip Roth! 'Fiction is forever, Philip, I know you agree', she writes, emphasizing the 'f' sound via alliteration in the words 'fiction', 'forever', and

'Philip' (185). She links writing so regularly to the act of procreating, of having Roth's child, of making literal what she already knows to be true: that she is already a part of his legacy—as a writer of short fiction who betrays very intimate knowledge of the work. What is reproduction if not a way for an individual to reproduce herself, to call attention or refer to herself: Look over here, it is as if to say, I have created another version of me in this very story you hold in your hands. Albert, like Roth, writes fiction that refers to itself as fiction while simultaneously taking up the theme of children—children, who, by definition, invariably connect back to ourselves. This becomes no clearer than when she writes:

> But now I've figured out . . . a way to produce something literary and lasting, a way to prove once and for all (while we're at it) the existence of God. I want to have your child. If I can't be the heir to your literary throne, I'd like at least then to be the vessel for the manufacture of an actual heir, flesh-and-blood proof, once you're gone and the books are all that's otherwise left of you, that you were here, that I read you, and that it meant something special, something singular and personal and only between the two of us. (190)

Over-the-top writing, and this over-the-top sentence, of course, Albert follows with a footnote, further commentary, in a funny parenthetical sentence: '(The overtones here of traditional groupiehood and falsely-empowering femininity are hard to outrun, but quite frankly, and I hope you can buy this, I really don't give a shit)' (190).

Albert invites or invokes or even authorizes this line of interpretation when she announces:

> Fine. I'll just tear a page from the Roth playbook and simply turn this letter into a kind of postmodern "story" (and I'll even leave this part in to further confuse and complicate, to experiment with implicating myself, the "Elisa Albert" alter ego, in all the ways you yourself are so adept with, see how it feels, how you must feel, when people announce fact is fiction and fiction fact, when people read your writing and assume they know you. Am I guilty of that too? (196)

Once again, at the end of this letter, now a story, Albert calls attention to the fact that the entire thing has been crafted as a kind of postmodern intellectual mind game—that we know her as well as we know the 'real' Philip Roth, and that what links them, if not a child, is a shared investment in fiction and the role of the fiction writer.

What Albert's early fiction reveals is that we are all connected somehow to Roth, not via children, of course, but via his stories, via our roles as readers and writers. Perhaps, in this way, 'Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose' could be metaphors for all of us, for Elisa Albert too, who have grown up—as women (and men), writers, teachers, readers, parents—via the fiction of Philip Roth.

III. Baby-Making and Motherhood, Fiction-Making and Authorship

For many of us women who teach, read, and write about Philip Roth, there remains a lingering worry that we have chosen the wrong side of feminist literary history. In the letter at the end of her short story collection, Albert explains how she has come to terms with a defensiveness against Roth that led her, initially, to play the 'tired "misogynist" card', but she offers, to begin the collection, a scalding assessment of misogynist practices that erase women from motherhood. In 'The Mother is Always Upset'—the title taken from a mohel's dismissal of a mother's feelings about her son's impending circumcision, an extension of a new father's explaining away of his wife when he blames all her feelings on 'hormones'—it is 'perfectly acceptable somehow that this baby boy had sprung from [the father] alone' (Albert, 2006: 18). Albert's ultimate goal, in this collection and in her latest novel, is to write herself into mattering, into being taken seriously, as a woman writer, and to write women into a literary tradition through her Roth-inspired female voice. In this way, as with Roth a generation earlier, Albert realizes that one way to be remembered, to carry a legacy, is through the written word. Whereas it may have once only been possible for women to matter for the children they produce, Albert shows us that women may be remembered for the fiction they produce as well.

This insight becomes manifest a decade after the publication of *How This Night Is Different*, when Albert publishes her second novel, *After Birth*: a story about the

ways that women are pitted against each other and their own bodies in the context of new motherhood in the 21st-century, which she wrote a year after her own son was born. Albert's narrator, Ari, bemoans:

> Another day gone, okay, I get it, I got it: I'm over. I no longer exist . . . This is why there's all that talk about kid-having as an express train to enlightenment. You can meditate, you can medicate, you can take peyote in the desert at sunrise, you can self-immolate, or you can have a baby, and disappear. (Albert, 2015: 3)

This beginning to *After Birth* immediately situates Albert's writing in conversation with second-wave feminism—the bedrock for accusations that name Philip Roth 'misogynist'.[2]

Albert's narrator is participating in the crying out associated with Julia Kristeva's theory of maternal 'abjection' from the seminal work *Powers of Horror* (1982); Kristeva describes the culmination of maternal abjection as 'the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us and that "cancels our existence"' (Kristeva, 1982: 210). In Albert, we also see Donna Harraway's feminist critique of the late 1990s, still kicking hard fifteen years into the 21st-century: Harraway posits that women's 'troubling talent for making other bodies' is the central cause of sexual inequality in the workforce (253). One can imagine Albert herself, left off the Foer, Franzen, and Lethem list, experiencing the sentiment she offers here.

But the despair that begins this novel is just fuel for Albert's fiery social commentary. In *After Birth*, she takes up the taboo politics of breastfeeding versus formula feeding, natural birth and Cesarean section, and generally, the subjectification of women. Ari feels 'raped' by the culture of surgical births, believing that she had no choice but to endure the pain of a C-section because the medical field is less concerned with women's bodies than it is with getting sued (Albert, 2015: 113). Through text messages to her pregnant friends featuring links to pop-culture journalism, like

[2] For a brief history of Roth as misogynist, see Gooblar (2012).

the 'Top Ten Signs Your Doctor is Planning an Unnecessary C-Section', Ari engages in her own brand of 21st-century activism (Albert, 2015: 176). Ari rants about postpartum 'choices' after attending a support group for new mothers:

> How noble of you to plug your kid with some processed milk-derivative shit marketed by the same people who brought you Oreos, how very feminist of you, yes, every woman makes her choices, absolutely, what glorious freedom we enjoy. Way to stick it to the man. How empowered you are, subverting a basic function of your body . . . What shipshape shiny master's tools you've got there. How's the dismantling of the master's house working out? (Albert, 2015: 27)

The reading experience of passages like this one and others on Cesarean birth, which are prevalent in Albert's novel, can be brutal, forcing women to examine their own positions on these issues and, perhaps, to feel shamed or empowered by Ari's diatribes.

Albert's ultimate goal is not to shame women or espouse green parenting, but to reveal how the stultified discourse on these topics divides women after childbirth, a most vulnerable and lonely time. And perhaps, as Bernice Hausman writes in 'Breastfeeding, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Feminism', 'feminists should see that there is more agreement over what impedes women's freedoms as mothers than disagreement over the value of breastfeeding'; Hausman continues:

> in both cultural and biological terms—[these disagreements] serve only as the staging ground for contemporary ambivalence about motherhood and women's freedom. As feminists, we should interrogate these debates themselves as mechanisms of gendered discrimination that keep women preoccupied with evidentiary contests rather than focusing our attention on widespread political structures of domination and subordination. (331–32)

Albert's narrator herself is not free from these political structures, but her anger—the socially unacceptable and uncomfortable fact of women's anger—at least

cuts through the ambivalence to which Hausman alludes. At times, Ari's anger is not productive, like when she blanketly dismisses a recent grandmother who innocently questions whether it is true that women have a predisposition toward chocolate: 'O-ho, the second-wave police are out. Heaven forbid it might be true that female bodies are different . . . Best deny it, deny it, make it to the Oval office, win, win, win. . . *Oh, it's most definitely a woman thing,* I say, then turn my back and work in silence' (Albert, 2015: 139).

It seems that the real 'woman thing' is Ari's divisive behavior, which wryly performs Ari's own master's thesis: '*feminist organizations very frequently tend to implode . . . because women are insecure competitive ragey cuntbags with each other. In a nutshell*' (Albert, 2015: 46, emphasis in original). (It's okay: she decides to be nice to other women by the end of the novel.) Of course, Albert's narrator is a vehicle, a character; readers do not have to agree with her or even like her all of the time. Just as we must remember not to confuse Roth's personal opinions and actions with those of his narrators—an act of poor reading that may have cost him his Nobel—we must remember that Albert's autobiographical gestures produce fiction, not straight editorial.

After all, Albert's angled attention to sexual liberation, like Roth's, is in bed with the very act of creation. One of our favorite examples of Roth's attention to sexual liberation as it relates to writing itself comes at the end of his career, four decades past the early work that got him into so much trouble with the New York Intellectuals and a Jewish-American readership concerned over issues of representation. In *The Humbling* (2009), we meet Pegeen, the young, dildo-wielding, bi-sexual seductress of Simon Axler, a protagonist challenged by the prospects of a career waning in his old age. Pegeen is, far and away, symbolic of the argument perpetuated by critics such as Sondra G.S. Bleich, George Stade, Hermione Lee, Michiko Kakutani, and Anne Roiphe that Roth's 'female characters are mere types', either good or bad, sane and safe or maniacal and fatal (Gooblar, 2012: 8). Pegeen serves as a caricature of one his bad women, and Roth knows so in creating her. Gooblar (2011) argues that Roth's 'self-consciousness' is born out of the 'defining scrutiny he suffered over his early work', and that in his later period, Roth 'seems most concerned with looking back on his career as a writer' (Gooblar, 2011: 7).

Thus, to address this criticism, Roth offers up a twist on the male protagonist's suffering at the hands of Pegeen: Simon Axler's fantasy that Pegeen yearns to bear his child. In Axler's imagination, Pegeen makes these requests in succession, 'I want you to resume your career. I want you to impregnate me' (Roth, 2009: 117). Contrary to Roth's early work, in which Brenda's potential pregnancy in *Goodbye, Columbus*, or Josie's pregnancy in *The Facts*, deem those women's lives [read: work]-threatening, Pegeen's potential pregnancy, as Axler (like Roth, at this time, confronting end-of-life issues) conceives of it, is his most 'hopeful thought', one that reignites his professional ambition. The allegory, so to speak, has many possible interpretations. In our previous article, 'Anything but Fragile and Yielding', we read that 'Pegeen has more sexual freedom than anyone knows what to do with . . . Pegeen Mike is the one who controls' (Jaffe & Pozorski, 2012: 89), and in this novel, she functions as Axler's ultimate humbler; she has no interest in *his* fantasies (mostly, Pegeen is using him as part of a rebellion against her father and mother), and so, his future goes dark.

One rationale for Roth's late-career contemplation of 'fatherhood' is that this 'bad boy' of American literature is looking for ways to continue his legacy of sexual liberation, and a 'nasty woman' like Pegeen—a character more complex than many of Roth's critics dare to see—could motivate all sorts of innovation. Or possibly, since *The Humbling* comes after Albert's proposal and the slew of high-profile book reviews and interviews that tempt Roth to respond to Albert, we might imagine or conjecture, in the style of Nathan Zuckerman, that Roth here continues the conversation, writing back to Albert, inviting her to write as his literary bedfellow, to make manifest all of her own nastiness in this creative space that they share.

In *After Birth*, Albert summons to this liberated creative space not just forefathers, but foremothers, as well, to evolve their scripts with her 21st-century experience. She writes:

> Adrienne Rich had it right. No one gives a crap about motherhood unless they can profit off it. Women are expendable and the work of childbearing, done fully, done consciously, is all-consuming. So who's gonna write about it if everyone doing it is lost forever within it? You want adventures, you want

> poetry and art, you want to salon it up over at Gertrude and Alice's, you'd best leave the messy all-consuming baby stuff to someone else. (Albert, 2015: 185)

Albert is 'gonna write about it', making it her adventure, her poetry, her art. This is the feminism of now: letting the baby stuff be all-consuming, being conscious of it, claiming it, and writing from that place of being fully consumed; putting that fully consumed self onto the page not only as some catharsis, but as human experience. As Hannah Arendt argues, 'man does not know where he comes from' (Arendt, 1958: 63), but despite Arendt's recognition of this 'lacuna' in philosophical traditions, as Imogen Tyler suggests, Arendt's theories on natality separate the 'concept of birth' from 'the subjects who birth', thus reifying 'a masculinist tradition in which birth only ever appears as "birth without women"' (Tyler, 2009: 1). In *After Birth,* Albert tells a story of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and early motherhood that is refreshing because the reader gets the sense that the writer's own body must have birthed a child; the book is itself a sort of child created and fed by her all-consumed body.

The details of Ari's lactating body are especially on point: 'my tits were on fire . . . my tits were like rocks, like explosive hot rocks . . . I could feel my tits in my elbows' (Albert, 2015: 72). This description of the all-consumed body feels unapologetically authentic. To produce the feeling of authenticity in a reader, one must write a 'raw thing' (Roth, 1983: 149). Roth's phrase 'raw thing'—[read: Rothing] perhaps his own term for the autobiographical gesture—appears in several of his novels, including *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) and *The Human Stain* (2001). In *The Human Stain,* the 'raw thing' is a 'parody of the self-justifying memoir'; Coleman Silk complains, 'writing about myself, I can't maneuver the creative remove' (Roth, 2001, 19); In *The Anatomy Lesson*, the 'raw thing' recurs as the writer's inability to distinguish between the 'fiction of seeming self-exposure' and 'what existence had now become' (Roth, 1983, 149).

This existence is a far cry from her idealistic baby-making fantasy with Roth in 'Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose', where Albert writes to him:

> You can change a few diapers or you can be completely absent . . . You won't have to worry about a goddamn thing, Philip. I've got me some nice birthing

> hips (apple shaped, like my mother's, which she claims makes child-bearing relatively easy) and I'll be a wonderful, loving, responsible mother. I'll grow roses and herbs and bake vegan cookies . . . disallow more than an hour or two of TV a week (but not in an arbitrarily authoritarian manner), teach her to be kind . . . Laugh a lot. (Albert, 2006: 191)

Though Albert's baby-making fantasy makes light of birthing stories and allows for Roth—one who revokes his legacy to Jewish-American literature—to be an absent literary father, by her third publication, Albert is seasoned enough to reflect on a process that she has come to know in more complexity. In other words, Albert is no longer playing house in *After Birth*. She is herself a sort of house, like a Jamesian house of fiction, because her account of childbearing is metafictional and evokes voyeurism. Or, if, as Albert writes to Roth at the close of her letter to him, 'I am the fiction; the suitcase is myself' (Albert, 2006: 196), then the womb is a sacred compartment of that suitcase from which *After Birth* springs forth. And, literally, Albert delivers the progeny of Roth's words; Albert's 'suitcase' serves to carry on what Roth calls 'the suitcase of myself' in *The Anatomy Lesson*:

> I'm sick of raiding my memory and feeding on the past . . . I want an active connection to life . . . I want an active connection to *myself*. I'm sick of channeling everything into writing. I want the real thing, the thing in the *raw*, and not for the writing but for itself. Too long living out of the suitcase of myself. (204, emphasis in original)

In this passage, Zuckerman is longing to make his life meaningful away from the page. He has decided, momentarily, to pursue a path in medicine because his chronic bodily pain—the manifestation of his mourning after the loss of his mother—has him practically living in doctors' offices and hospitals. He sees sickness and death all around him, and scared of his own death on the heels of his mother's, Zuckerman is looking for this 'active connection to life'.

Without a mother, and without his own children (much of the novel explores how annoyingly all-consuming his peers' children are), he has no 'active connection'

to the living. Despite his best efforts to assuage this pain through a multiplicity of sexual partners, Zuckerman, it seems, will have no respite without some more lasting physical connection to the womb in a women's body.

We make this point because we see more evidence of a connection between the womb and the suitcase in *The Anatomy Lesson*. A physical, actual suitcase appears early in this novel; Zuckerman keeps putting down this suitcase in his close examination of a book called *Your Baby's Care*, which was presented to his mother in the hospital bed where he was born and left to him with notes in her handwriting about his development. As Zuckerman reads the advice to new mothers of his birth era, he finds that 'his mother's milk had stained the page . . . he was the son who had learned to live on her body . . . he put his tongue to the page' (65). By putting his tongue to the page, Zuckerman is trying to reconnect to his mother's body, to taste the active connection to *her* life once more. He lets go of his suitcase—a symbolic action—when his connection with his mother's body is palpable. But without his mother, and without progeny, he feels lost in his writing, in the 'suitcase of himself'. (Similarly, Albert's *After Birth* narrator yearns for her dead mother; even though Ari's mother is represented as a woman without maternal instinct, Ari instinctively looks to her mother for support in child-rearing and to make meaning of herself). When Albert offers up her womb to Roth in 'Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose', she is offering to make lasting meaning of Roth's writing through her own.

It is important that we recognize this paradigm shift between what is culturally plausible in Roth's writing and Albert's writing. Roth's cultural milieu is not one that causes him to muse much in these metaphorical terms on the latent potential of impregnating others; but Albert's is one where a woman's womb gives her an inherent power, especially because she has more freedom to choose if or how she uses it in this era. Unfortunately, we must make this claim with the provision that women's rights over their own bodies are dependent on many factors, including class, race, nationality, and even regionality. And we also recognize, as Albert does, the biological complexities beyond scientific intervention of fertility that impact both sexes' capacities for reproduction.

All in all, Albert's representation of female reproduction consummates a correction to 'European philosophical and literary traditions' that rests on the notion that birth 'is the gift of men or male gods' (Tyler, 2009: 2). Imogen Tyler writes:

> The history of philosophy and literature are littered with male births, metaphorical births in which birth is imagined as a masculine or divine act of creation. Michelangelo's famous Sistine chapel painting, *The Creation of Adam* in which the finger of God gives life, is one of the most vivid examples of male procreation. (Tyler, 2009: 2)

Albert may consider Roth as 'the father of us all' (Albert, 2006: 183), an ironic Zeus of American literature, 'but there is no fruition, no birth', she is quick to add. Albert feminizes the American literary tradition by giving us birth and breastfeeding:

> I'm good at this. Look at me, nursing two babies in tandem. I'm a damn fine nurse. I am way more than enough. I am everything. Give me a third. Give me a fourth. I am a font. Plenty to go around. Let me sit here, life all around me, in me, through me, down the front of my oversized shirt, forever and ever, amen. (Albert, 2015: 133)

Consider this metafictive prayer as Albert's offer to the next generation of writers. If Roth is the literary father, then Albert positions herself as literary mother, a font of enough fiction to sustain her literary children. Albert evokes 'The Indian Princess' of American iconography: The Native American Princess in early depictions of the figure to later become lady liberty (**Fig. 1**).

This image is one of many depictions by various European and American artists between the 16th and 19th-centuries of 'America', the continent, as an earth goddess. In the earliest uses of this iconography, the princess is savage, hostile, and warlike, representing colonial-era fears of the other, but over time, as the continent became better known, the princess, like the one pictured above, is depicted as a nurturing mother, almost always featured alongside a cornucopia or treasure chest, to symbolize her wealth of sustenance and natural resources. Frequently,

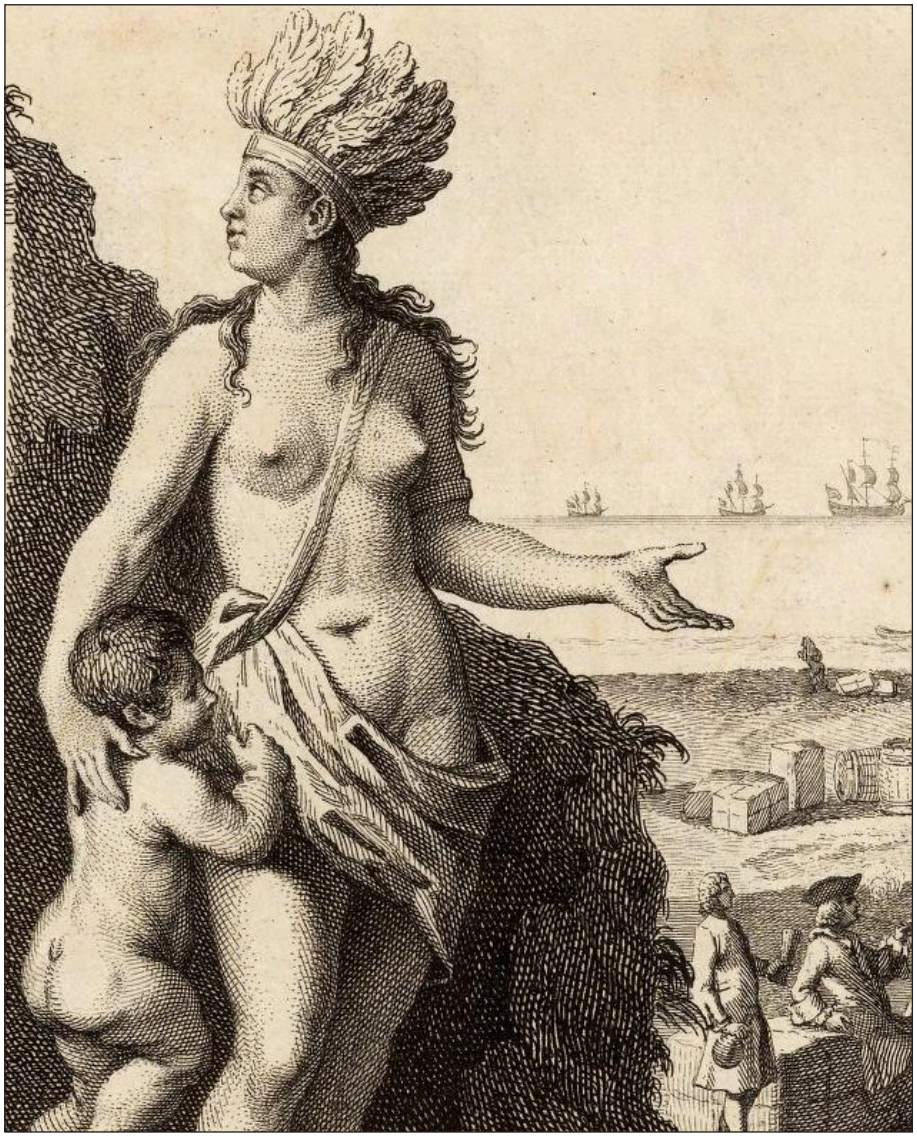

Figure 1: Detail from *A Map of the British Empire in America with the French and Spanish Settlements Adjacent Thereto*. Henry Popple, London: 1733. http://clements.umich.edu/exhibits/online/american-encounters/american-encounters-women.php (image in the public domain).

she appeared as a political commentary on the American pursuit of freedom and liberty. Almost always, she is bare-breasted, not just by connection to Classical Art, but because her breasts signify abundance, her ability to produce and nourish from her fertile plains.

IV. Bob or Philip or Imre or Elisa

This American iconography is particularly important to Albert's role as a literary mother because it helps us to trouble the category of 'Jewish-American' authorship; just as Roth is an ironic Zeus because, historically, Greeks spurred the Jewish diaspora, the idea of Albert as a native princess carries with it a certain irony because Jews in diaspora are never native. Jewish national identity is complicated by global literary prizes like the Nobel, which put authors with Jewish identities into interesting relationships with their national contexts. As Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek points out in his essay on the Nobel Prize-winning Jewish and Hungarian writer Imre Kertész:

> Kertész is—by his own recognition and by obvious logic based in his history—first a Jew who is at the same time Hungarian and second a Hungarian who is first of all Jewish. This is an important distinction with regard to Hungarian culture where literature has always had a political and social function and not necessarily and primarily an aesthetic one and where, as we can observe after the award of the Nobel, Kertész is appropriated for the "glory of the nation". (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2003: 2)

Neither Roth nor Albert suffered, like Kertész, the worst of anti-Semitism in Europe. Kertész's Hungarian and Jewish identities remain unhyphenated as he is nationally 'appropriated', recognized as a national commodity without regard to or despite his Jewishness. The overtly anti-Semitic context of Kertész's early life means that, for him, national identity and Jewish identity can never be reconciled. Meanwhile, as Roth and Albert negotiate with hyphenated identities in their role as American authors, Bob Dylan successfully, though perhaps not purposefully, elides for the most part the need for that negotiation—and not just because of his name change from Robert Zimmerman. Bob Dylan is as American as apple pie; he dresses as a cowboy (**Fig. 2**). In artistic renderings that give his nose the hook of a Shylock caricature (**Fig. 3**), his Jewishness is downplayed by this costume and he is touted as 'the real voice of America'.

In the book *Bob Dylan in America* (2010), historian Sean Wilentz situates Dylan's influence as distinctly American because of Dylan's response to the politics of the

Figure 2: *Bob Dylan in America.* Illustration by Joe Ciardiello. *The New York Times*, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/books/review/Handy-t.html?_r=0 (image in the public domain).

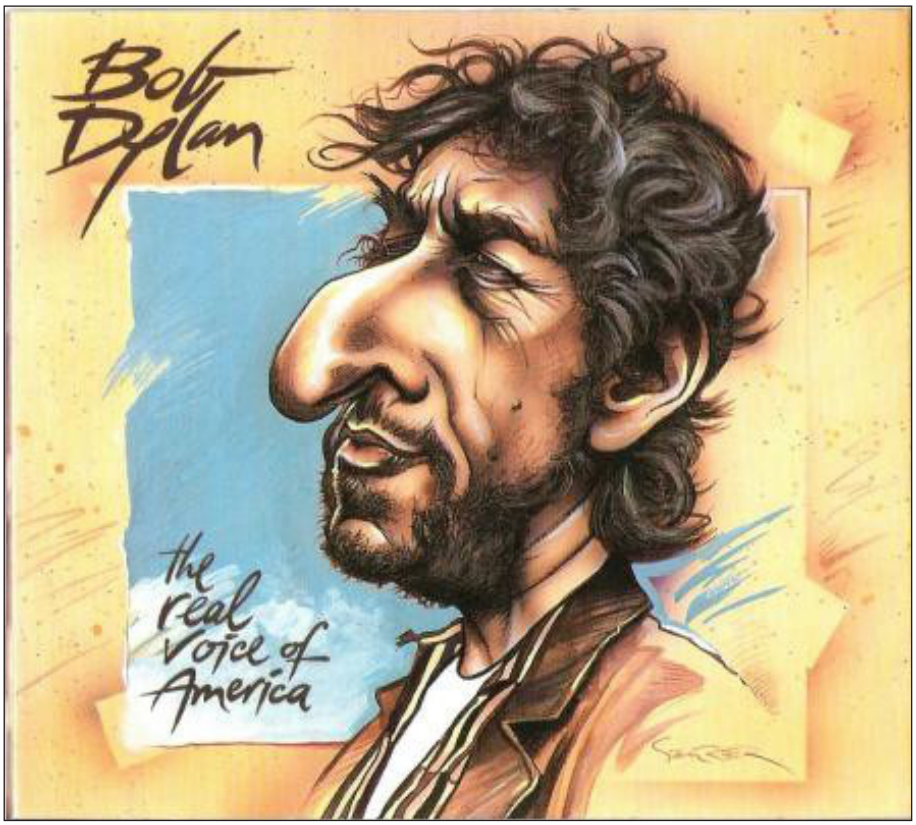

Figure 3: *The Real Voice of America.* Album Cover by J. Saurer. https://www.discogs.com/Bob-Dylan-The-Real-Voice-Of-America/release/5113130 (image in the public domain).

radical left and his interplay with such a broad array of cultural forces in the United States. But more than that, his folk music is literally *people* music, not Jewish-American. Roth and Albert are close to achieving that kind of universality in their thematic content, but their main characters are Jewish. Dylan achieves a truly popular influence.

Albert certainly values Dylan's literary influence in *After Birth*. Thrice, she nods to him, citing a favorite line from 'A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall': *I saw a newborn babe with wild wolves all around it.*[3] This scene elicits a sense of dread and disbelief: an innocent, indefensible newborn, left to be mauled and eaten by animals. As a leftist post-war critique, it illustrates the failure of humanity to protect its most precious

[3] Dylan, B 1963 'A Hard Rain's A-gonna Fall'. CA: Warner Brothers, Inc., as cited by Dylan (2004: 59).

and vulnerable. But Albert recontextualizes and reverses this feeling when she inserts the Dylan lyric in the context of breastfeeding. Ari's friend Mina, a single new mother with little support, is overwhelmed by her wailing newborn, who is failing to thrive because Mina's breastmilk is slow to come in. Mina has not slept or eaten, and in her mad reverie, she sings this line to her son. Ari, no stranger to the wild feeling of new motherhood, follows her impulse to take Mina's baby to her own breast so that she can feed him. Ari feeds both Mina's son and her own son simultaneously. Ari and Mina form a sisterhood that ensures their sons' survival.

We connect this scene and the Dylan lyric to the story of Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, who were saved by a she-wolf who suckled them (**Fig. 4**), to bring our genealogy of writing as it is connected with motherhood full circle. The European and American literary tradition, built upon the Greek and Roman mythology that elides women even in birth narratives, will remain, at its core,

Figure 4: *Capitoline wolf,* bronze, c. 500–480 BCE. Portrait of Aule Metele ('The Orator'), bronze, early 1st C. BCE (Etruscans). http://www.proprofs.com/flashcards/story.php?title=art-history-study-notes-2 (image in the public domain).

misogynist, unless we pay attention to writers like Albert, who shows us, like the wild wolf, that the female body must be honored for its capacity to sustain humanity.

When the question re-emerges about which American writer has a chance at the Nobel, a conversation that occurs once every twenty years or so, Albert's name may not be in the conversation, but we hope at the very least her name can exist in a sentence with Englander, Foer, and Lethem. It is hard to say, globally speaking, how 'the night' of Albert's created universe would be different. For one, maybe she shares it with Philip Roth. Or Philip Roth shares it with her. Maybe it results in a new baby, a new work, a new fiction. Another way to imagine a different night, or even day for that matter, is finally to have an hour in which we talk about women's fiction alongside Roth's as indebted to it, inspired by it, and up to the same standard. It is as though critics are still caught up in the 'Roth is a misogynist' loop and worry about the consequences of categorizing a woman in terms of Roth. On the contrary, through a close reading of Roth as influenced by Albert, we can see that Roth is no more a misogynist than Albert is.

In fact, Albert has preempted possible criticism that understands her as a self-hating woman akin to the accusations that Roth is a self-hating Jew. Like Roth, she is aware of the culture of criticism and is already in conversation with these issues: in *After Birth*, she names an epic all-girl band *The Misogynists*, and her truest female friend, Mina, the single new mom, is one of its coolest yet most broken ex-members. No one knows how Mina got pregnant in the first place—there is no father to speak of. In her 2015 novel, the male role in procreation is, in this example, elided.

Albert finds many ways to work within misogynist literary traditions, to mock them, to reverse them. We find it downright inspirational. Maybe someday, one of us will be writing her a fan letter to acknowledge her place in the tradition. Maybe this is that fan letter; but it is also a scholarly exploration of Albert's place in the Jewish-American literary category.

Just as Albert demands attention to the female procreative body, she also demands to be included in a category that some of her most important influences have, with varying success and in varying contexts, elided. Unapologetically, she lays out the case for inclusion when and where she wants it, and she writes to make her

passions and desires visible. It feels like a resurgent hope born out of melting pot ideology and, at once, a new kind of American dream in which there could be equal opportunity for a variety of new voices that complicate and challenge the long history of traditions that precede them.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Pozorski, A and Jaffe, M 2017 Writing Progeny: Elisa Albert and Philip Roth. *Open Library of Humanities,* 3(2): 14, pp. 1–30, DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.262

Published: 22 November 2017