

Holocaust Girls

by

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Class of 2016

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in English
and the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program

Holocaust Girls: An Introduction

In her memoir *Fierce Attachments*, Vivian Gornick describes the ritual of walking with her aging mother through the streets of New York City, reflecting on their shared and troubled past. The walks start off calmly, but from time to time, Gornick's mother makes a comment that aggravates her. "My head fails to fill with blood," Gornick writes. "I become irritated but remain calm. Not falling into a rage, I do not make a holocaust of the afternoon" (74). It embarrasses me to admit that once, I freestyle rapped the following lyrics to a boy who was attempting to sleep with me: "Yo I know you're mad attracted to me / But back the fuck off please / I don't think you can handle all my Anne Frank steez." These are both prime examples of what I call Holocaust Girl behavior: the often-feminine appropriation of Holocaust imagery and rhetoric to discuss issues largely unrelated to the Holocaust—in the first case, a tense familial bond and in the second, sex or a decided lack thereof.

In this thesis, I define and explore Holocaust Girls, a category consisting of (mostly) women who through the Holocaust and its tropes, deal with topics that include but are by no means limited to gender, sexuality, personal anxieties, romantic relationships, familial problems, and general malaise. In keeping with the Borscht Belt-born tradition of joking about the Holocaust, Holocaust Girls tend to approach the subject matter with humor and flippancy. The comedians Joan Rivers, Patsy Abbott, Pearl Williams, Sarah Silverman, Roseanne Barr, and Sandra Bernhard all qualify as Holocaust Girls.

I first observed Holocaust Girl behavior at Jewish summer camp, where Holocaust jokes were extremely popular and where my friends and I developed a communal obsession with mocking the Holocaust. This irreverent treatment of a grave subject matter

felt refreshing and rebellious to me. This was largely because it defied the approach that had been ingrained in me at the yeshiva (Orthodox Jewish day school) I attended for fifteen years—namely, ceremonious memorialization. This was considered to be the only appropriate way with which to regard the Holocaust, which is of course understandable given the calamitous nature of the event, but which struck me as contrived. In the essays featured in *Holocaust Girls*, I examine my long-held resistance to traditional methods of memorialization and memory, and call into question my skepticism of the values with which I was raised.

There are many aspects of the topic of Holocaust Girls that I did not have the chance to address in my thesis, such as the question of male-identifying Holocaust Girls, who exist prominently and include figures such as Allen Ginsberg in the poem “Kaddish”, the band Neutral Milk Hotel on the album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, and the Marx Brothers. Additionally, the language and symbols of the Holocaust played a major role in debates surrounding the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. The ACT-UP movement re-appropriated the triangular pink badge homosexual concentration camp inmates were forced to wear in Nazi Germany, inverting it as a symbol of its participants’ refusal to remain passive. Similarly, Larry Kramer titled his 1989 book about the crisis *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*. Ultimately, I decided that AIDS activists’ reclamation of Holocaust imagery did not qualify as an act of Holocaust Girlhood because of its focus on mass tragedy rather than personal or private issues.

It is worth noting that though I initially believed that “Holocaust Girls” was my original term, I discovered during my research S.L. Wisenberg’s 2006 collection of essays by the same name. Many of the essays in the book explore the role of women in American

Jewry and Wisenberg's own childhood preoccupation with the Holocaust. In her writing, Wisenberg draws connections between Holocaust Girls and European Jewish history and suggests that Holocaust Girls, however wrongheadedly, long for the past. This is where Wisenberg and I differ: My Holocaust Girls are preoccupied not with the actual events of the Holocaust but with a watered-down version of the Holocaust that is suitable for manipulation and play. Though our definitions of the term are incompatible, I am indebted to Wisenberg for helping me sharpen my own classification of Holocaust Girls.

This thesis explores questions about who reserves the right to employ mass tragedies as a means of illuminating personal struggles and the privilege to joke about horrific events. My writing on the subject without having been directly affected by the Holocaust or other mass tragedies, of course, raises further questions about chutzpah, self-involvement, the exploitation of calamity, and mass tragedy as shtick.

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Concentration: Camp

Last November, on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, Nicki Minaj released a lyric video for the song “Only,” featuring Drake, Lil Wayne, and Chris Brown. The video, whose concept Minaj claims to have had no role in creating, is an animation of what looks like a Nuremberg Rally. The video, entirely black, white, and red, shows a cartoon Minaj bitchfacing on a throne inside of an elaborate pillared structure. Slaves fan her with giant feathers. On the structure’s roof squats a nude statue of Minaj looking over her shoulder. Behind aviator sunglasses, cartoon Minaj, along with the divine rear of the statue above her, overlooks rows of neat gray soldiers. Guns in ready position, they listen as Minaj raps (“Dez hoes couldn’t test me / Even if they name was pop quiz”). Later, they set out in tanks. Lil Wayne raps over the gunshots.

There are no swastikas or Hitler mustaches in the “Only” video; there is only the suggestion of Nazism. It is perhaps this attempt at subtlety that most outrages my Facebook friends: classmates from the yeshiva I attended for fifteen years and acquaintances from Jewish summer camp. They sniff out the Holocaust like drugs and write angry posts about why the video offends them. They are pissed at Minaj for making a mockery of the Holocaust (the *shoah*, some call it on their Facebook pages, the Hebrew term for the Holocaust, which literally translates to “catastrophe”). They are extra-pissed at Drake, hip-hop’s resident Nice Jewish Boy, for complying with the video’s anti-Semitic concept.

A girl I have known since kindergarten, writes: “The number of Holocaust survivors is rapidly decreasing. This is the time to educate yourselves. My grandparents would be horrified, I know I am.” I think of her survivor grandparents, whom I have met a

handful of times, and I wonder if they would really be horrified. If I were an elderly Jew watching a Nicki Minaj video, I think I would be confused more than anything else. I picture the scene: Zeide readjusts his glasses so he can get a better look at—oy, what *is* that?—a close-up of Nicki’s impossibly perky ass in a skintight black cat suit. *MORDY, WHAT’D SHE SAY?*, yells Bubbe, tuning up her hearing aid so she can make out the lyrics more clearly: “Hut one, hut two, big titties, big butt too / Fuck with them real niggas who don’t tell niggas what they up to.” Neither this scenario nor the “Only” video horrifies me. The video, as a matter of fact, sort of thrills me, not because it is good (the concept and graphics are both pretty lackluster), but because admittedly, I take a strange and indeterminate pleasure in watching Nicki Minaj pretend to be a Nazi or an almost-Nazi.

Masochism might have something to do with it. A note on my cell phone regarding the “Only” video: “I wanna belong in Nicki’s club because she won’t take me as a member. In fact, she wants to kill all the members of my club. Ergo I revere Nazis because they hate me?” The note is of course a play on the old Groucho Marx joke, “I never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member,” later co-opted by Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*. Once, I recited the line to my shrink in attempt to explain my tendency to fall for people who clearly have no interest in me. She didn’t get the reference. I decided that I would never want to belong to any club whose only other member had never seen *Annie Hall* and promptly stopped seeing her.

My statement on Minaj strikes me as extreme in retrospect. As a Holocaust Girl, I cling to some theoretical version of the Holocaust, but I don’t revere the actual accomplices of genocide. I want to contemplate annihilation, but I don’t want to be annihilated, by Nazis or by Nicki. In the essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag writes,

“Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (280). Minaj is not a Nazi but a “Nazi,” or a not-zi. Minaj’s quotation marks insulate the Holocaust, keep its devastating realities contained within them while still allowing us a sense of danger. Nicki *could* massacre us, but instead, she will just give us sultry glances. The quotation marks of Nicki’s “Nazi” are also confetti. She gives the Holocaust pizzazz. Minaj dares to suggest, like the pipsqueak of a boy who marched Hitler Youth-style down the camp stadium courts gleefully shouting “Heil!” that the Holocaust or “Holocaust” can be great fun. Nicki kills me.

In the video, the red bands on the soldiers’ arms and the red banners behind Hitler-Minaj’s throne bear in the style of a swastika the initials YM for her record label, Young Money. Like Sylvia Plath in “Daddy” or Angela Chase in the *My So-Called Life* episode where she says Anne Frank is lucky “because she got to be trapped in an attic for two years with this guy she really liked,” Minaj turns mass tragedy self-referential. The Holocaust becomes useful only in that some aspects of it pertain to her. Does she qualify as a Holocaust Girl? Unlike Sylvia Plath or Angela Chase, Minaj performs Nazi rather than Jew, perpetrator rather than victim. Holocaust Girls need not be Jewish, but need they perform Jewish victimhood, or victimhood of any kind, in order to belong to the club?

Consider the ways in which Nicki’s minority identity, between her thick Caribbean Queens accent and her frequent use of the n-word, is integral to her persona. Minaj, a black woman born in Trinidad and raised in South Jamaica by a single mother after her alcoholic, drug-addicted father tried to burn down their family apartment, represents a breed of Holocaust Girl entirely different from that of Plath, an upper middle class New England goy whose father died in her childhood and who went on to win a Fulbright. Plath

writes in “Daddy,” “I may be a bit of a Jew” (75). Because of her privilege, Plath can afford to use the mass murder of Jews as a powerful metaphor for her fraught relationship with her dead father. In a sense, Nicki already *is* a bit of a Jew; black people in America have faced holocausts of their own since *Middle Passage*. An amateur review of “Daddy” reads, “I do think it implies a profound self-absorption and narcissism. ‘Chuffing me off like a Jew’—the callousness of this poem, if one stops to think about it (and it’s very hard to do so while in the poem’s grip), is appalling.” The reviewer regards Plath’s claiming the identity of a Jewish victim as a manipulation of the Holocaust for personal gain and suggests that her Holocaust Girlhood stems from deep self-involvement. My Facebook friends might say the same of Nicki Minaj.

“Camp,” Sontag writes, “is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (284). The “Only” video immediately proposes itself seriously (or as seriously as the general public is willing to take a hip-hop video) because of the grandeur of the Nazi pageantry it showcases. However, we cannot take the video altogether seriously because the crowd of perfectly aligned Nazis, the sounds of gunshots, and the fast-paced, profanity-laden song lyrics ultimately render it too much. The central too-muchness presented in the “Only” video, is without a doubt Minaj’s sexuality. Minaj opens the song by assuring us, “Yo, I never fucked Wayne, I never fucked Drake,” and proceeds to gloat over her body’s desirability. Meanwhile, the video zooms in on cartoon-Minaj’s exaggerated hourglass body, too much for men to handle. In their respective stanzas, Drake and Lil Wayne express strong sexual interest in Nicki. In one couplet that reads like something a rowdy middle school boy might say on the back of the bus to prove himself dangerous, Drake proclaims, “She was sitting down on that big butt,/

But I was still staring at the titties though.” Combined with aggressive sexuality, can we take the “Only” video’s Holocaust theme seriously? And should we? Nazism seems to me a symbol for Nicki Minaj’s extreme and militant sexual power.

“To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (280). Not all Holocaust Girlhood is campy, but Nicki Minaj’s sure is: She poses as a Nazi with the understanding that she is playing a role for the sake of an extravagant metaphor. However, for Minaj in the “Only” video, the metaphor is not of life as theater, but of death, or six million deaths, as theater. Minaj’s booming voice and exaggerated figure serve as stage, actors, and set.

On the other side of camp stands Joan Rivers, a Holocaust Girl who is, like Nicki Minaj, notorious for her too-muchness. A year before her death, while hosting the 2013 Oscars episode of *The Fashion Police*, Rivers said about an image of Heidi Klum in a gold body-hugging gown, “The last time a German looked this hot was when they were pushing Jews in the oven.” Here lies another instance of the merging of sexuality and the Holocaust—a trend I observe over and over again among Holocaust Girls. Rivers brings the Holocaust where it doesn’t belong: the lighthearted and frivolous atmosphere of a celebrity fashion talk show. From what I can tell from the cut-off, low-quality clip of the joke available on YouTube, it lands clumsily. The audience reacts with laughter that sounds more like muffled shrieking. One of Rivers’ *Fashion Police* co-hosts, probably Giuliana Rancic, though it’s hard to say for certain since her face is obscured from sight, mutters, “You love those jokes,” sounding embarrassed and apologetic. Avoiding the term

“Holocaust” like it’s a racial epithet, she attempts to temper Rivers’ inexorable too-muchness.

At a fraternity party on my first or second night of college, a boy introduced himself to me as Arian, saying it like AH-ree-en. “Aryan?” I asked. “As in the Aryan race? Great to meet you!” AH-ree-en looked at me uncomfortably and quickly corrected my pronunciation. When another group of freshmen arrived, he introduced himself again. “That’s a cool name,” someone said. “Does it mean anything?” “Yeah,” I interrupted from the drink table, “white supremacy!” People glared nervously, as those who have just heard the words “white supremacy” shouted across a room are, rightfully, wont to. My new roommate nudged me and murmured under her breath, “Will you just stop?” But I wouldn’t—and really, couldn’t—just stop, for this is the way of Holocaust Girls. For every voice that says “shut up,” there is a louder one that demands, “Up the ante! Make ‘em squirm!”

We are not a delusional bunch. We are keenly aware that we ruin other people’s good time. But first and foremost comes *our* good time, which entails making a spectacle—of ourselves, yes, but perhaps more than that, of our situations. In a Holocaust Girl performance, everyone, willing or not, gets cast. Yet people are constantly breaking character to apologize on our behalf. Giuliana Rancic’s “You love those jokes,” is code for “Joan’s camp ought not to be taken seriously,” “Disregard Joan’s Borscht Belt ways; she wasn’t cut out for this gig,” “Please don’t make our dumb show get taken off the air for this,” or “Holocaust Girls will be Holocaust Girls.”

Rivers’ joke is a bombshell. The Holocaust and its excess of tragedy disrupt the buoyant atmosphere of *The Fashion Police*. Like rolling up a sleeve to reveal an unsavory

rash at a dinner party, this ill-timed interference of the ghastly brings me immense pleasure. But I would argue that Rivers is after more than shock value. The brazenness of her Heidi Klum joke mirrors the overall excess of the Holocaust. She, like Minaj, knows that spectacle loves, above all else, more spectacle.

Additionally, it is striking that Rivers, the eldest of the *Fashion Police* hosts by decades, dwells on a moment from the deep past. The fact that *Fashion Police* is decidedly current makes Rivers' Holocaust comment stand out even more. There is nothing retrospective or historical about *Fashion Police*. The show is interested exclusively in the celebrities, designers, and award shows of the moment. Sontag writes, "So many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, démodé" (285). Though the Holocaust has continued to influence and resonate long after World War II, it is out-of-date, and it registers as extremely out-of-date coming out of Rivers' geriatric mouth as she and her cohosts discuss the latest fashion trends worn by starlets and semi-famous teenyboppers. By turning back to the Holocaust within a framework that is meant to be not merely modern but up-to-the-minute in its commentary on popular culture, Rivers creates a scene of sheer camp.

Over the course of her career, Rivers had made many jokes about the Holocaust equally as coarse as the Heidi Klum one. But this particular one got under people's skin. The director of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham Foxman, a Holocaust survivor, issued the following statement to *The Hollywood Reporter*:

There are certain things about the Holocaust that should be taboo. This is especially true for Jews, for whom the Holocaust is still a deeply painful memory. It is vulgar and offensive for anybody to use the death of 6 million Jews and millions of others in the Holocaust to make a joke, but this is especially true for someone who is Jewish and who proudly and publicly wears her Jewishness on her sleeve.

Rivers refused to apologize and said, “My husband lost a majority of his family at Auschwitz, and I can assure you that I have always made it a point to remind people of the Holocaust through humor.” Rivers’ comment suggests that her interest goes beyond schtick and spectacle: She is not making light of the Holocaust, or if she is, it is only with the eventual goal of emphasizing its tragedy through an uncomfortable contrast.

“Camp and tragedy are antitheses,” Sontag writes. “There is seriousness in Camp (seriousness in the degree of the artist’s involvement) and, often, pathos...But there is never, never tragedy” (285). Rivers begs to differ. In the moment that she tells the Heidi Klum joke on *Fashion Police*, she suspends seriousness from the Holocaust. Rivers’ off-the-cuff delivery and the frivolous setting in which she tells the joke suggest that the bit is pure schtick. We think, for a moment, that the Holocaust to which Rivers refers is not the real Holocaust, but some play Holocaust that exists in the same universe as Nicki Minaj’s. But Rivers’ comment regarding Foxman’s outrage changes the register of her joke. In bringing up her husband’s family, dead in Auschwitz, Rivers reminds us of the tragic reality of the Holocaust and yet still insists upon the rightfulness of her Heidi Klum joke. With the comment, “I have always made it a point to remind people of the Holocaust through humor,” Rivers injects camp with tragedy, which as it turns out are not antithetical after all. In fact, for Rivers, camp thrives on tragedy. The punchline of the Heidi Klum joke depends on the Holocaust having happened, and in this case, tragedy is dealt with through camp. The reverse is also true: Weeks after Rivers’ death, the doctor who had allegedly killed her performed a routine colonoscopy on my father. When I dropped him off at the hospital, I told him, “I guess this is goodbye,” creating the prospect of tragedy by way of half-witted camp.

“The ultimate Camp statement: it’s good *because* it’s awful” (292). For Rivers, Minaj, Plath, and many other Holocaust Girls, the relationship between good and awful is a far more complex one than this. Through the queer alchemy of camp, they use the awfulness to make something good (or so-bad-it’s-good). But Holocaust Girls’ ultimate argument is not that the Holocaust is good because it is awful; we don’t believe that genocide is good. Rather, the Holocaust, upon whose awfulness and intensity we capitalize, provides us with our material. Thus, the performance of the Holocaust, be it from the perspective of a victim or a perpetrator, becomes good, and the Holocaust’s awfulness is what makes it so good. Tragedy heightens the stakes, gets the audience’s attention, and gives weight to our too-much spectacles. Rivers’ response to Foxman acknowledges the tragedy of the Holocaust but validates her decision to joke about it.

In a backstage interview shortly after the *Fashion Police* controversy, Rivers, clutching her daughter, Melissa, proclaims to the camera, “It was a good joke! People wouldn’t be talking about this if it wasn’t a good joke.” It’s not that Rivers doesn’t care about the Holocaust: That she brings up her husband’s family history in her response to Foxman suggests that she cares deeply. But what Rivers cares about most is that the joke landed, if not with the *Fashion Police* audience, then with the thousands of people who watched the clip online after the episode aired. The Holocaust is tragic, and so is bombing.

For a writing workshop, I wrote an essay about my history with Holocaust jokes. I included anecdotes about the gas chamber-themed pranks my friends and I pulled at Jewish summer camp and one about the time I tried to woo my high school crush by drawing swastikas on the pages of his notebook. It didn’t go over well. During the period reserved for feedback and discussion, my classmates sat in silence and futzed around with

their pens. At the end of the class, they handed me notes including questions like, “What are you trying to say?” and “What is the point or central question?” Later, I met with my professor to discuss the awkwardness of the workshop. He said that as a goyim (“Goy,” I corrected him. “‘Goyim’ is plural.”), he didn’t feel equipped to say whether the essay was offensive. “Well, did you think it was funny?” I asked him. He told me he did. “Good,” I said briskly. “If we’re being honest, that’s kind of the only thing that matters to me.” I don’t mean to offend, but I’m willing to if it means getting laughs.

Holocaust Girls seek to prevail over the Holocaust so that they might shift the world’s focus to themselves, their own hilarity, lunacy, and antics. As if to say: The death camps were awful, but isn’t my camp good?

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Competitive Consequential Taboo

Julie Klausner and Natasha Lyonne are mere seconds into their interview, and already, they're on the Holocaust. It starts when Klausner, a comedian and the podcast's host, compliments Lyonne's ring. "I am transfixed," Klausner gushes. "Is there an eye? Does it culminate in the shape of an eye? 'Cause it looks like the evil eye from here." Like my mother and late grandmother muttering "*kina hora*" under their breaths at the Shabbos dinner table, Klausner, Holocaust Girl, can't help but bring up the evil eye. Lyonne tells Klausner that her speculation is wrong, that the ring's ornament is simply a group of stones, but Klausner's suspicion of evil turns out to be warranted. The ring belonged to Lyonne's grandmother, an Auschwitz survivor.

I dream my high school senior class is being deported to Treblinka. On the train there, which is the F train, we crumble in one another's arms as if participating in a trust fall exercise. We weep. When we disembarked, a group of Nazi guards leads us to a cave. We squeeze through its tiny mouth. The inside of the cave is dank but livable, a dusty grotto set up with rows of neatly made cots. Mia Rothberg, our grade's resident theater chick, wedges herself in, wearing leggings and a floral dress.

"Wow, even in the camps you're all arty," one boy mocks.

"I am wearing these leggings for comfort," Mia assures him. "But we need to make sure we have *culture* here."

She produces a paintbrush and begins to outline an elaborate mural on the stone walls. Holocaust Girls are concerned with aesthetics, with out-of-place florals, with sprucing up Jew traps. They paint the Holocaust with flying colors.

Hungry for the details of Lyonne's grandmother's survival story, Klausner asks a series of questions in rapid succession: "Was she really in Auschwitz? Did she tell you about it? How old was she when she escaped or was liberated? Was she liberated?" Lyonne, an actress who incidentally attended the same yeshiva that I did for several years, hardly says a word. That is until finally she asks the question they've both been waiting for: "You wanna go full Holocaust?"

During my last of eight summers at a Jewish sleep-away camp in the Berkshires, my friends and I invented a game we called Competitive Consequential Taboo, or CCT for short. It was a lot like the regular game of Taboo, which entails two teams guessing words off cards, except naturally, our version dictated that players remove an article of clothing after they lose a round. The first team whose players were completely naked lost and subsequently was subject to, as the game's name suggested, a severe punishment decided on by the winning team. We played two or three times a week, late at night on the canvas folding chairs set up on our bunk's front porch. Once, my team won a particularly ruthless late night tournament. A few girls completely undressed and the rest of us left in only underwear, we gathered in our bunk's hallway closet to plan our retribution. After some minutes of hushed deliberation, we decided. We returned to the porch, where our opponents sat naked, expectant. We commanded them to stand up and rounded them up

in a line behind us. “To the showers!” Ellie called out, pointing toward the bathroom at the back of the bunk. We reveled in our collective power as they followed us sheepishly down the long hallway. When we reached the bathroom, we herded all ten girls into a single shower stall. The shower curtains had all been ripped out at this point in the summer, so we saw everything: ass cheeks squished against ass cheeks, patches of pubic hair, a sea of ankles. Some people whined (“This is sooo gross”), but no one confronted us or tried to leave. They accepted the punishment as their unfortunate fate. They had to. We winners blasted cold water over the mass of heads. The shrieks echoed instantaneously. We roared like animals while we turned the faucet on and off, on and off. This is going full Holocaust.

Spectacle is a drug. Once you go full Holocaust, you don’t go back. My last Halloween (Holoween?) costume: Anne Frankenstein. When I first told my friends about the idea, they laughed, thinking it somewhat clever or at least humoring me. But once the tube of green face paint and plastic bolts I’d ordered from Amazon arrived in the mail, they seemed less charmed by the whole ordeal. “Brill, you’ll be excommunicated,” the most curmudgeonly of them insisted as I attempted to suction the prop Frankenstein bolts to the sides of my head according to the package instructions. It hadn’t even occurred to me that the costume might be considered offensive. I was too hell-bent on doing it—and on doing it justice—that the question of ethics had fallen by the wayside. I jammed the suction cups hard into my skin. Still, the bolts wouldn’t stick. I resigned to hot gluing them to the sides of a plastic headband.

“Yeah,” Klausner replies. “Let’s go full Holocaust. May as well. I’m already up to here in like, soot.”

A popular joke at camp: to feign frustration with someone and loudly announce, “I’ve had it up to **HERE** with you!” embellishing the word “here” with an over-the-top heil. My older brother picked up this habit during his first summer at camp. At home, we practiced the routine, each time making our heils higher and sharper.

“Like, let’s go all the way in. Let’s get up to our necks.”

Let’s. In camp, we joked that the infirmary doctor was Mengele, the dining hall food our rations. Every authority figure with a stick up his ass was a Nazi, every unpleasant setting a labor camp, every tiring activity a death march, every shower a gas chamber. We especially got a kick out of the communal one we were forced to use on an overnight at the Boston JCC. We shrieked, pretending the water was gasoline.

“I feel like I’m always talking about the Holocaust,” Lyonne says.

“You and me both,” Klausner agrees.

“It’s just like, all day Auschwitz every day.”

Neither seems regretful. They are two vaudevillians doing a not-quite-finished bit.

I put green face paint on my mouth like lipstick and smear it high over my eyelids. The original plan had been to paint my whole face green, but in the end, it felt like overkill. It required no work at all to make my hair—a dark, puffy triangle—resemble Anne Frank’s. Around my neck, I tied a detachable lace collar, a relic from my teenage schoolgirl phase.

I'd asked a friend to make a yellow star for the occasion. Hesitantly, she traced two interlocking triangles on an old T-shirt and cut out the shape of a Jewish star. I pinned it to my sweater just above my left breast.

Lyonne talks about her ancestry.

“I like to say I'm half French, but-”

“But this isn't about you,” Klausner cuts her off. “The Holocaust is not about you.”

Is she kidding? It's unclear, as it so often is with *Holocaust Girls*. Klausner's interjection could be taken at face value to mean, “Don't make the systematic murder of millions about yourself.” But it might also mean, “The Holocaust is about me!” or, “There are one too many Holocaust Girls in my recording room right now.”

Had I been Anne Frankenstein all along? In a diary entry addressed to an unrequited high school crush, I wrote the following cringe-inducing sentence: “You make me feel like Anne Frank trapped inside a dusty attic.” By this, I did not mean that he made me feel victimized or threatened. (For him to maltreat me would have been a step up, as it would have required him to acknowledge my existence more than sporadically.) Rather, I meant that he made me feel unattractive, juvenile, impotent, and alienated. During my senior year of high school, not over the crush but over Orthodoxy as a whole, I wore Peter Pan collars, puffed out my hair, and declared Anne Frank my style icon. Later, I would find myself offended by a scene in a movie in which a standup comedian played by one of my favorite Holocaust Girls drunkenly slurs onstage, “A lot of people say I look like Anne Frank, but I would *never* survive the Holocaust.” It wasn't her light treatment of the subject that

bothered me, nor her screwy logic (Anne Frank died in Bergen-Belsen). It was that she had stolen my bit.

Lyonne continues despite Klausner's interruption. She explains that her grandmother's entire family was killed in the Nazi invasion of Hungary, with the exception of her grandmother and two of her grandmother's sisters, "who apparently made it through the war because of their Aryan looks." Klausner asks if there was race mixing in Lyonne's family. "No, never," Lyonne practically shouts. "God forbid. *Chas v'shalom*." "*Chas v'shalom*" is the Hebrew term for "God forbid" and hence redundant. Does Lyonne insist on using Hebrew in order to prove her now-in-question Judaism? And might her yeshiva schooling—Talmud study, thrice-daily prayers, fluency in Hebrew and all—render her more of a Holocaust Girl than Solomon Schechter-educated Klausner? Might my own? "No," she maintains. "That's just where my incredible genetics come from was my point."

Rabbi Weiser, my freshman year Talmud teacher, used to boast about how his mother's goyish beauty saved her from being sent to the gas chambers. "What can I say, *kinderlech*? She was one good-looking lady." On the subject, I wrote a poem with the first line, "I am not the kike who took the kapo's breath away."

Rabbi Weiser also taught Natasha Lyonne before she got kicked out of the school for selling weed. "She was no good," he once told our class in his vague Yiddish accent, which he occasionally enhanced for effect. "A troubled girl. And vith such potential!" He wasn't wrong about her being troubled. Lyonne suffered from a heroin addiction that nearly cost

her her life. At sixteen, after her expulsion from yeshiva, Lyonne starred in a Woody Allen movie. According to an interview she gave on Marc Maron's podcast, the school begged her to return so that her name could be included on the Notable Alumni list. She didn't.

Lyonne's grandmother lived with her family in the Upper East Side's Yorkville, the same neighborhood where I was raised. "It was all about Hitler," Lyonne tells Klausner. "My whole household was about Hitler. And then it was all about like, my father being angry at my mother for making it about Hitler again. Because she was the child of Holocaust survivors and everything was always related back to Hitler."

Another CCT punishment: We blindfold the girls on the losing team and walk them to the sundeck. There, we command them to strip and assemble themselves in a cheerleader pyramid. When we get bored of that, we tell them to collapse the pyramid into a big naked heap. Someone takes pictures. On the digital camera's tiny screen, the photograph might be mistaken for one of mass graves displayed at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Israel, or of Lynndie England at Abu Grhaib. Soon, the assistant director will learn of the CCT punishments and call us in for an emergency meeting. We will deny everything. Occasionally, I wonder where those pictures are, if anyone still keeps them in the recesses of her desktop and if they will someday come back to haunt me. Mostly, I don't think of the incident. Do the girls on the losing team?

Lyonne and Klausner play tug-o-war with the Holocaust. Each wants to claim it for her own, wants to drag the other by a rope of tragedy. Klausner talks about reading Eli Wiesel on a school trip to the same camp I attended.

“I’d go to sleep and my upper bunk, to me, is how I pictured the concentration camp when I read *Night*.”

This memory excites Lyonne. “See, this is what I’m talking about!” The two Holocaust Girls reach a point of equilibrium. For a moment, the Holocaust is about both of them; there is enough Holocaust to go around.

Klausner reiterates, as if to make the Holocaust hers again, “That is how I pictured the quarters!”

I, too, read *Night* at camp. I pictured Wiesel’s bunk as my bunk, his cramped sleeping quarters as our close-together bunk beds. In my dreams, counselors were Nazis and campers, fellow inmates. I don’t know why I am telling you this. Maybe I want in on Lyonne and Klausner’s game. This is me grasping for an end of the Holocaust Girl rope.

“Do you know what I mean? Do I know what you mean?” Lyonne asks in repetitive, Holocaust Girl excess. “Every experience you have in life, you’re thinking about it versus the Holocaust!”

“Yes!” Klausner shouts like an overworked color war captain trying to mask her exhaustion with pep.

Klausner's "Yes!" says, "I understand you and I don't find you offensive!" but also, "My Holocaust Girlhood is louder than your Holocaust Girlhood!" Ultimately, Lyonne upstages Klausner.

"I can't be in like, a subway car and not be thinking about the Holocaust."

I feel I, too, must up the ante in order to keep up. Here goes. At camp, we voluntarily showered three to a stall and slept two to a bed. One summer, a friend developed the habit of pummeling me to the ground without warning. My bunkmates would take turns sitting on my chest. When I tried to beg them to let me go, I found I was no longer breathing. Once, another friend and I stripped down and climbed naked onto the top bunk of our friend, a bit of a prima donna, wanting to annoy her. The prima donna said, "Ew, guys, your pubes!" (never mind that I didn't yet have pubes) and banished us from her bed. As an alternative, we climbed onto the adjacent top bunk of a pube-friendly bunkmate, who joined in on our nude antics. Once, sitting on my top bunk, the same bunkmate, without warning, gave me a purple nurple, a maneuver not unpopular at summer camp that involves the twisting of a nipple until it turns, as the name suggests, a deep plum color. Losing all bodily control, I peed on my pillow. I realize these anecdotes don't relate to the Holocaust. Yet so much of our behavior felt somehow informed by the Holocaust—its violence, its communalism, its sheer intensity—that recounting them seems worthwhile. It's also possible that I'm just telling these stories for shock value, which is yes, valuable and which I am by no means above.

Klausner agrees with Lyonne about the subway reminding her of the Holocaust, but she says “yep” halfheartedly and I’m not convinced that genocide has ever plagued her morning commute. Reader, I’d like you to recall my dream about being deported to Treblinka on the F train.

Or consider how as a child, I mistook the cable cars in San Francisco for cattle cars.

“And I blame Hitler for everything!” Lyonne announces.

“Okay that’s where we’re different,” Klausner says in a moment of defeat.

Does this make Lyonne the winner, or do I still have a shot?

I remember one of my very first Holocaust jokes. I was thirteen. In his bedroom, my older brother video chatted with his friends from camp while I looked over his shoulder. On the screen was Jennifer Stein, one of the most hated girls at camp, a year my senior and a year his junior.

“Say hi to Jennifer!” he mocked.

Approaching the tiny camera of his MacBook, I flattened out my hand, placed it against my forehead, and gave Jennifer a sassy heil. The previous summer, my friends and I had taken to referring to her as Hitler on account of her totalitarian power over her boyfriend, a cute friend of my brother’s. Once we decided that the Hitler reference was overplayed, we began calling Jennifer Eva Braun instead.

“You’re so mean!” Jennifer’s blurry image whined from the screen. “Brill, underrated that your sister is so mean!”

My brother and I snickered.

“I’d be careful if I were you, Little Brill,” she warned. “I’m going to make your life a living hell this summer.”

“What are you gonna do?” I snapped back. “Throw me in a pile of shoes?”

My brother and his friends laughed approvingly. This was likely not because they were deeply impressed by my wit, as I liked to believe then, but because they were shocked to hear a girl, and particularly a girl two years younger than they, deliver a Holocaust joke. The territory, at least at camp, was largely reserved for boys. This might explain the power of Holocaust Girls: Our fascination with the abomination unsettles expectations of our gender.

“I just wanted to be on the same page,” Lyonne says. “I love being on the same page as people.” I don’t really believe her. It seems more likely that Lyonne wants to be just a couple pages ahead of her fellow Holocaust Girls, wants to taunt them with the false hope that they might catch up to her without ever allowing them to. Lyonne likes relating to other Holocaust Girls, but establishes herself unmistakably as top dog, team captain, Holocaust Queen Bee.

After her defeat, Klausner says, “I will say that when you compare things to the Holocaust, very rarely does it make me feel grateful or good. It just makes me feel guilty. In other words, you go to a shitty audition, you’re like, ‘Oh, well at least I wasn’t burned alive in an oven.’ But that doesn’t make you feel good. That just makes you feel like, ‘How dare I?’”

This might be a critique of Holocaust Girlhood's inherent too-muchness and self-involvedness. Or Klausner might just be a sore loser.

Sitting on the bunk floor in the middle of the night, surrounded by Oreo packages and weighed-down laundry bags, we decide it's time. We're high off of sugar but mostly off of our joint excitement when we stampede toward the younger girls' bunk. We charge through the doorway. We flicker the lights on and off. Someone blasts music. We stomp around the bunk in a frenzy until we've woken up every sleeping girl. The floor moans, shelves rattle. Eventually, a window breaks. So do one girl's glasses. Sweeping up the shards the next day, we dub the incident *Kristallnacht*. For the remainder of the summer, we chant under our breaths: *Kristallnacht, Kristallnacht, Kristallnacht*. When Klausner compares things to the Holocaust, she thinks, or claims that she thinks, "How dare I?" Instead, we ask, "Do I dare?" and answer in the ardent affirmative.

After Klausner suggests that Holocaust Girlhood might be *chutzpadik* after all, Lyonne strikes back by hyping its benefits: "I'll just be like, 'Oh yeah, I come from stock that survived the Holocaust. This is within manageability. What are you, experiencing emotional discomfort? What, your shoes hurt?' A little bit, though. 'What, you need to get an abscess out your lung? Big deal.'" This last detail a reference to her drug addiction, Lyonne makes good use of tragedy. Like a good luck charm or a tough-love shrink, the Holocaust gets her through.

I take up smoking. I compulsively google how long it will be before I contract lung cancer. I tell a friend I am worried about the addiction getting worse. She asks me why I don't try quitting now, before it gets out of hand. In response to this, I go full Holocaust: "If the body is a temple, then mine is a gas chamber. Or an Orthodox synagogue."

"But at the same time you have like, that," Klausner argues, "but then you also have the voice that beats you up, where it's like, 'You're garbage. You're worthless.'" Is she bitter that she doesn't come from survivor stock, which might lend depth and purpose to her Holocaust Girlhood? Or is she trying to prove that even without survivor ancestors, she is more damaged than her heroin addict competition?

"The self-flagellation is such like, my shtick," Lyonne insists like a child protective of a prized toy. This possessive declaration ("My shtick, not your shtick! Mine, mine mine!) isn't enough for Lyonne, so she demonstrates: "I usually go right to the place of, 'You know why your fucking shoes hurt, you fucking piece of shit? 'Cause you're too fucking stupid to buy the right size pair of shoes. Why? 'Cause you were indecisive in the store. You're like, 'Am I a six and a half? Am I a seven? Am I six and a half? Am I a seven?'" Do you really even need these fucking shoes? No, this is the price. You're gonna pay the price, you fucking piece of shit." Lyonne takes the shtick to a depressive extreme, makes Klausner's, "You're garbage. You're worthless," look downright self-congratulatory.

The summer the flu was going around, the maintenance staff, wearing gas masks, demanded that everyone evacuate the bunk so they could spray it down with a toxic

disinfectant. It was the summer I fake-slept in odd locations, perhaps for attention: the bunk floor, laundry piles, on a bench during *davening* (prayers). I was fake-sleeping in my bed when the maintenance staff came in, hidden from view in my top bunk beneath a heap of blankets. I listened to the sounds of my bunkmates leaving and remained inside as noxious fumes filled the air. I wasn't doing a bit this time. Rather, miserable and alienated, I'd decided that I didn't want to live. Sweaty in my humid cocoon, I prayed to *Hashem*, the God I still believed in, that chemicals would kill me.

“Everybody should feel bad in this situation,” Klausner concludes.

“And it's Hitler's fault,” Lyonne says. She adds, “I genuinely blame Hitler,” as if to say, “You only *appear* to blame Hitler.”

My father, son of a middling Borscht Belt comedian, claims he can't stand Holocaust jokes, that they make him sick to his stomach. But sometimes, he'll make an exception to this rule if the joke is funny enough. Once, at dinner, he explained that when he rents a car, he makes sure to tell the Avis people not to give him a German one. On top of everything else, he said, Germans put their fuel tanks on the wrong side of their cars. “Can't trust Germans with gas,” I noted. He laughed and admitted it was a good one.

Another exception to my father's rule: a joke my younger brother made up. *What did the Nazi order at the Italian restaurant? Baked Zeide.* “That's very creative!” he beamed, a little patronizing. “How did you come up with that?” When my older brother tried to follow it up with his own joke, my father dismissed him. “That's not funny. That's just

stupid.” Lyonne-style, my brothers compete in what might be a game of Holocaust Girlhood. Neither considers that my father has relatives who were killed in the camps, a fact he has brought up only once. He says he doesn’t know anything about the relatives and that he has never attempted to find out.

Abruptly, Lyonne interrupts the Holocaust chatter: “Remember when you showed me your boobs the other day?” Klausner does. “It’s just your boobs, Hitler, your boobs, Hitler, your boobs, Hitler.” “Your tits are hot as shit,” she adds. Holocaust Girls hold no hierarchies, give equal weight to tits and totalitarianism.

As I prepared to leave the house, my roommates grew nervous. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” one of them asked me. I adjusted the yellow star, found a red notebook to hold as my prop diary, and say yes, I was sure. I have long held that a joke’s goodness can outweigh its potential offensiveness.

That summer I lay still, breathing in poison, I led my bunkmates in a chant:

“My name’s Rebecca.”

“Yeah!” they replied.

“They call me danger.”

“Yeah!”

“And when I shake it,”

“Yeah!”

“You go to the gas chamber.”

1. Klausner, Julie and Natasha Lyonne. "Stanley." Audio blog post. How Was Your Week. Julie Klausner, 22 Aug. 2014. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
2. Maron, Marc, and Natasha Lyonne. "Natasha Lyonne." Audio blog post. WTF. Marc Maron, 14 Oct. 2013. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
3. *Obvious Child*. Dir. Gillian Robespierre. Perf. Jenny Slate, Jake Lacy, Gaby Hoffmann, Gabe Liedman, Polly Draper, Richard Kind, Davis Cross. A24, 2014. Film.

A Bit of a Jew

When we read Sylvia Plath during my eleventh grade English class's poetry unit, "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" were notably missing from the curriculum. Or at least the omissions were notable to me. I had read Plath for the first time the previous year, and as the cliché goes for a certain type of disillusioned teenage girl, I'd felt *utterly transformed*. "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus"—the obvious ones—had been my favorite poems. I suspected that they did not appear on the syllabus on account of their liberal use of Holocaust imagery, which no doubt would have been frowned upon at a school whose bulletin boards frequently bore signs that read "NEVER AGAIN" and where in the third grade our music teacher had taught us a song whose lyrics were simply a passage from Anne Frank's diary.

Commemorative assemblies were held not only on Holocaust Remembrance Day, but also on the anniversaries of Kristallnacht, the liberation of Auschwitz, and seemingly, whenever the coordinator of student programming—a frenzied woman who spoke with a Yiddish cadence and wore running sneakers with skirt suits—could find a reasonably coherent survivor willing to speak publically.

"Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" were written just three months before Plath's suicide in October of 1962. They are known, along with "Mary's Song," also featured in *Ariel*, as Plath's Holocaust poems on account of their allusions to Nazism, concentration camps, and Jewish victimhood. Of course, their Holocaust imagery had been precisely what endeared me to them. The only other literature in which I'd encountered the Holocaust had been first-hand accounts of the atrocities like Anne Frank's diary and *Night*. There had

also been Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, in which a family of goyish-looking Jews attempts to hide a Jewy-looking Jew from the Nazis (to no avail), and the preposterous *Anne Frank and Me*, in which an affluent teenage girl time travels to Nazi Germany and befriends Anne Frank on the train to Auschwitz (the train to Auschwitz being an ideal location for teen girl fraternization, akin to say, a Taylor Swift concert or the accessory department of Forever 21).

Plath, on the other hand, didn't seem all that interested in the Holocaust. Or rather, she was interested in the Holocaust, but only insofar as its images and rhetoric allowed her to say what she really wanted to say, which as it turned out, had very little to do with the Holocaust. Plath seemed to milk the trauma for whatever it was worth, using every last drop of it to create some creamy, delicious cocktail which she served garnished to perfection. I thought, "You can *do* that?" Though at this point I had long been interested in Holocaust-themed tomfoolery, like the pranks we'd pulled at camp, I hadn't realized that the event was fair game in writing. The possibilities thrilled me.

In 1970, George Steiner was among the first critics to call into question the ethics of Plath—a Wasp with no familial or personal ties to the Holocaust—using the event as a metaphor in her work: "In what sense does anyone, himself uninvolved and long after the event, commit a larceny when he invokes the trappings and echoes of Auschwitz and appropriates an enormity of ready emotion to his own private design?" (Rowland 28).

Similarly, Alvin Rosenfeld refers to “Daddy” as Plath’s “boldest effort to manipulate the language of the Holocaust for private ends and, for that reason, her most problematic and distorted poem” (Rowland 179). Both critics take issue with Plath not simply for invoking the Holocaust, but for invoking it as a means of conveying the intensity of personal suffering.

I have no romantic Plath story: I didn’t stumble upon *Ariel* in a dank East Village book store, nor did a cool older girl with a nose ring lend me her battered copy of *The Bell Jar*. I have no clear memory of the first time I read Plath, but chances are I googled her name, knowing that I, a bookish feminist with a depressive streak, was the kind of girl meant to worship at her altar. Like so many young women of my generation, who grew up watching characters like Lisa Simpson, Rory Gilmore, and *10 Things I Hate About You*’s Kat Stratford bury themselves in *The Bell Jar*—the book practically a shorthand for “girl too smart for her own good”—I knew Plath before I read her.

Steiner and Rosenfeld’s critiques assume that Plath’s poetry is necessarily autobiographical, or, to use the term so often linked to Plath, confessional. “Lady Lazarus” can likely be read as at least partially autobiographical, as the events referenced in the poem line up with Plath’s personal history. However, Plath provided the following description of “Daddy”:
“The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each

other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it”
(Rosenfeld 179).

Rosenfeld raises questions about whether Plath’s Holocaust references are appropriate even in the case of a fictitious narrative, asking, “Is there symmetry—in feeling if not in fact—between the sufferings of the girl with the Electra complex and those endured by the victims of Hitler? Are there forms of poetic language that can validate hyperbole so that the daughter’s imagination of betrayal finds a legitimate comparison in the persecution of the Jews?” (179)

In “Daddy,” Plath famously writes:

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew. (75)

Rosenfeld questions whether she, or the poem’s narrator, has the right to claim Jewish identity, even for poetics’ sake.

Shortly after I “discovered” Plath, I printed out a copy of “Daddy” for a friend who had never before expressed even remote interest in poetry but who had gone to camp with me and partaken in our Holocaust-themed antics. I insisted that she read the poem immediately, exclaiming as I forced the piece of paper into her hands, “It’s the most well-played Holocaust joke of all time!” It would be years until I learned that many readers did not react to Plath’s Holocaust poems with quite so much enthusiasm. If Plath’s

employment of Holocaust imagery is, in fact, to be taken as a joke, many critics regard it as the sick kind, engendered by ignorance and extreme self-involvement.

In the biography *Method and Madness*, Edward Butscher writes, “There is no way that the poetry of an American girl writing from the remote perspective of the 1950’s could ever capture the actual, brutal reality of the Holocaust” (Young 117).

In 1974, the critic Irving Howe wrote to the editor of *Commentary*, “Is it possible that the condition of the Jews in the camps can be duplicated? Yes...But it is decidedly unlikely that it was duplicated in a middle-class family living in Wellesley, Massachusetts, even if it had a very bad daddy indeed” (Boswell 36).

Both Butscher and Howe seem to miss the point entirely. As a non-survivor, Plath obviously cannot create a realistic portrait of the Holocaust. Chances are she’d be the first to admit it. But as a Holocaust Girl, Plath has no interest in recounting historical events. If Plath’s goal is to “capture” the Holocaust, it is in the sense of holding the Holocaust captive, bottling it up, so that she might extract from it rich imagery with which to flavor her poems, works that describe not the Holocaust itself but emotional hardship that Plath suggests is in some way akin or linked to the Holocaust.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the debates surrounding Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery is that the critics consistently mention her background—either her whiteness, her femaleness, her middle class status, her education, or some combination of them. In so

doing, they suggest that because of her identity, or a given aspect of her identity, Plath does not reserve the right to reference the Holocaust.

Reading Plath for the first time as a teenager, I, inspired by her chutzpah, began to write my own Holocaust poems. They are nothing short of awful, but I bring them up because they felt revolutionary and important at the time of their writing and also because, in their Holocaust Girl excess, they are kind of hilarious. One likens the emaciated bodies of Jewish inmates to those of my anorexic classmates. At one point, I refer to Eva Braun as “the Jackie Kennedy of Auschwitz.”

Gillian Banner writes, “All of Plath’s work attracts extremes of approval and censure, of allegiance and censure, of acceptability. This is especially apparent in discussions concerning her eligibility to write about the Holocaust and the disturbance about the forms that Holocaust writing takes” (231). Banner’s discussion of Plath’s “eligibility” to appropriate the Holocaust, as well as critics’ insinuation that Plath is overstepping her bounds, suggests that some people are in some way “eligible” to write about the Holocaust.

My question is, who? Is the category limited to survivors or others who witnessed the events firsthand? And would Holocaust survivors still be eligible to write about the Holocaust if rather than writing about their experiences in the camps, they appropriated the imagery of the Holocaust? Are the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors “eligible,” and in what ways, exactly, are they entitled to write about (or decidedly not about) the Holocaust? To further complicate matters, critics’ mentions of Plath’s

Christianity might suggest that any Jew is eligible to appropriate the Holocaust, no matter how distant he/she is from the event itself. This would grant my stupid high school Holocaust poetry immunity from scrutiny. Additionally, the critics' allusions to Plath's relative privilege as a well-educated white woman from a financially stable household raises the question of whether anyone belonging to a disadvantaged group is "eligible" to employ Holocaust imagery.

Things my poems compare to the gas chambers: the communal shower at the JCC, the public dressing room at Loehmann's where once I saw my middle school principal in the buff, and a girl's well-stocked walk-in closet (built by her brutish father, naturally). None of this is acceptable from a literary standpoint—believe me—but does my Jewishness put me in the ethical clear? To be honest, this question had never occurred to me before I read criticisms of Plath. I've long considered Holocaust Girlhood a terrain free from questions of ethics. Who is eligible for Holocaust Girlhood? Anyone willing to commit to the bit, I would argue.

In a BBC interview, Plath explained that "personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking anarchistic experience..[but rather] it should be generally relevant, to things such as Hiroshima and Dachau" (Young 124).

Young interprets: "By 'generally relevant,' Plath may have suggested not just that personal experience should be generally relevant to Hiroshima and Dachau, but that these historical icons had been overly relevant to her own personal experience. That is, it may never be

clear to what extent she derived her pain from the knowledge of Hiroshima and Dachau or merely relied on these public experiences to figure her pain,” (124). In her vague description of Dachau as “generally relevant,” Plath dismisses the question of eligibility and claims the right to appropriate the Holocaust simply because she feels inclined to.

While wondering who has the right to write about the Holocaust, Banner, in her discussion of Jacqueline Rose’s *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, suggests that Plath’s femaleness links her to the marginalized identity of Jew. Rose calls attention to “the close link between fascist ideology and the fantasy of an abject femininity. They [recent writers] have argued that this feminine-connoted body of liquid, hollows and openings that fascism, at the level of unconscious fantasy, is struggling to control” (234).

Banner writes, “Plath’s Holocaust poetry implicitly recognizes these other fantasy elements, so that it contains not only the adoption of the persona of ‘Jew,’ standing in opposition to that of ‘Nazi,’ but also expressions of femaleness/impurity set against maleness/purity,” (234). Performing Jew, Plath casts herself in the role of debased woman. Later, she undercuts it by going off-script—a dramatic performance in its own right.

In fact, it is Plath’s femaleness that critics call the most attention to in their discussions of her work. Consider, once again, Butscher’s denunciation of Plath’s poetry: He objects not to the fact that Plath is an American writing about the Holocaust in the 1950s, but specifically to the fact that she is an American *girl* writing about the Holocaust in the 1950s.

Regarding the Holocaust imagery in “Lady Lazarus,” Rosenfeld writes, “The theatrical and the historical jar one another discordantly, reducing the first to girlish play-acting and making the cruelty of the second appear too much a carnival display of assorted grisly connotations” (178). Rosenfeld suggests that Plath’s invocation of the Holocaust dwarfs the emotional drama of the poem so that the subject matter is no longer “serious” but merely “girlish.”

I sense misogyny at play. Consider that both Butscher and Rosenfeld use the word “girl” rather than “woman” to describe Plath and the effect of her work, despite the fact that she was almost thirty when she wrote her Holocaust poems. They seem to suggest that Plath’s allusions to the Holocaust cannot be taken seriously not because she is distant from the event itself, but primarily because as a young woman, and a young woman writing emotionally, she does not understand its historical significance. These critics, both men, dismiss Plath as a bratty naïf who turns tragedy frivolous.

There is the early scene in *Annie Hall* in which Alfie scrutinizes Annie’s bookshelf. He waves her copy of *Ariel* in front of his face, as if airing out dirty laundry, and mocks, “Sylvia Plath. Interesting poetess whose tragic suicide was misinterpreted as romantic by the college girl mentality.” Alfie, like so many men before and after him, writes Plath off as a “girls’ poet” misguidedly revered by silly young women with no sense of how the world works. The suggestion seems to be that Alfie understands something about the human condition that Plath and “college girls” do not. Whereas young women’s discontent is puerile, Alfie’s (and Allen’s) is honest and profound, and therefore, noble.

It seems to me that Plath is in on the joke of her own infantilization. In “Daddy,” she gives her narrator a distinctly childlike voice, employing throughout the poem “oo” rhymes that resemble the sounds of cooing. Words like “daddy” and “gobbledygoo” connote babyishness. Rowland writes about “Lady Lazarus,” “‘I have done it again’ immediately presents the narrator as childish, someone who has just reveled in committing yet another naughty misdeed” (31). But in these works, Plath turns the trope of girlishness on its head by presenting her narrators as not innocent but vindictive, not victims but avengers.

“Daddy” sets up traditional male-female and perpetrator-victim dynamics between the Daddy figure and the narrator. The former, a Nazi, subscribes to a strict code of fascist machismo, while the pretty-red-hearted narrator identifies as a Jew being deported to the camps. Initially, each seems to fulfill his or her expected role in the dynamic: The father figure is described as “a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you,” while the narrator admits, “I have always been scared of *you*” (75).

However, at the end of the poem, Plath subverts the dynamic by placing the father, rather than the narrator, in the grave, allowing the narrator to be finally “through” with her suffering. The narrator has not escaped the conditions of her victimhood or her femaleness—it is by mere chance that her father died when she was ten years old—but Plath’s words place her in a position of authority. Holocaust Girl, she pulls the rifle out from under the ruffled dress when her spectators least expect it.

The summer I attended a teen writing program, the synagogue I'd attended throughout my upbringing burned down. I reported the news to a boy from my workshop. He became agitated, not because he found the story tragic, but because I had apparently delivered it with a smile. "I don't know how to read you!" he shouted angrily. Are Plath's male critics upset because they disapprove of her principles, or merely because they don't know how to read her? Does the incongruity of Holocaust and Girl baffle them to the point of distress?

Banner writes:

The Jew becomes available as an image of the subversive, a threat to the status quo, not merely a victim but also a challenger and a source of dissidence. So, Plath's 'I may be a bit of a Jew' in 'Daddy' becomes a threat, a call to arms, to resistance, rather than the passive whine of a victim. (234)

Plath's Jew narrator has agency because she dares to disorder the fascist, masculinized agenda at hand. As such, it is precisely the narrator's abject position that allows her to transcend her circumstances at the end of the poem.

The narrator of "Lady Lazarus" also gains agency gradually. Initially, she is objectified, her skin "bright as a Nazi lampshade," her "right foot a paperweight," and her face "a featureless, fine/Jew linen" (14). She then transcends her objectification and becomes a performer staging "the big strip tease," gradually revealing herself to the public (15).

Though now human, the narrator remains in a degraded position, a mere spectacle for public consumption. Ultimately, though, the narrator, a victimized woman, becomes a demonic threat to masculinity:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (17)

Plath's use of the German "Herr" is telling, as it combines the identities of German and male, thereby suggesting that Plath's Jewish identity and woman identity are similarly linked. As in "Daddy," the Jew-woman-victim figure challenges masculine, fascist motives of dehumanization.

Banner:

Plath frequently represents woman as the Thing or the Alien... Plath recognizes that it is this ability to masquerade, to become frighteningly indistinguishable through the processes of assimilation, yet to remain female, or Jewish, which causes the most profound disturbance and hostility. (234)

The power of the narrators of both "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" lies in their initial appearance as subscribers to the status quo. When they reveal their victim identities and subsequently manipulate them, they present a threat to the figures who oppress them, made all the more threatening by its unexpectedness.

Jewishness, as represented by fascism, is seen as a threat to the 'clean and proper body' of culture; it takes over, like a fungus or cancer upon the host body, debasing high art and its ideals, converting the pure, the clean, the elite, into the impure, the debased, the popular. Masculinity, Nazism, cleanliness, purity, the permitted and high culture are opposed to femininity, Jewishness, popular culture, filth, impurity, the transgressive. (233)

For Plath, the only way to counteract Nazi or masculine aggression is with Jew or woman transgression.

On one of the first nights of freshman year, I gathered outside the dorm with a group of my hall-mates to drink flavored vodka out of plastic cups. A rowdy boy hovered near a Katherine Hepburn type, easily the most beautiful girl on the hall (a Jew?). He tried to strike up a conversation. Uninterested and sashed herself, she began to recite “Daddy” loudly, imitating Plath’s sultry transatlantic accent. Freaked out, the boy backed off. But the girl refused to end her performance until she reached the poem’s final lines:

And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through. (76)

Girlishly defiant and surprisingly weird, she danced and stamped on her unwanted suitor and his pathetic attempt at masculine dominance.

The theatrical and exaggerated nature of Plath’s Holocaust poems ought not to be overlooked. In the chapter “Camp Poetics and Holocaust Icons in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath” of the book *Holocaust Poetry*, Anthony Rowland argues in favor of a reading of Plath’s Holocaust writing as an act of camp. Rowland asserts that that the amplified language in “Lady Lazarus” is not truly representative of the Holocaust as a historical event and instead “[illustrates] the central paradox of her satirical monologue: it criticises an unreflective reception of spectacle, at the same time as the camp poetics suggest that Plath might be turning tragic, historical figures into clowns” (29).

Rowland points out that in the second stanza of “Lady Lazarus,” Plath shifts abruptly from simile (“Bright as a Nazi lampshade”) to metaphor (“My right foot/ a paperweight”). He reads this as a conscious employment of what he calls “awkward poetics.” “By stretching

metaphor until it breaks down, Plath highlights both the artifice of the October poems, and the potentially campy nature of poetry itself, which has the power to transform a mundane incident...into a metaphysical dilemma” (32). By calling attention to the technique behind her work, Plath further clarifies that she has no interest in the “real.” In fact, even if she wanted to, she could never adequately capture the horror of the actual events. No writer can (though Primo Levi comes close). Critics accuse Plath of manipulating the events of the Holocaust for her own personal gain, but Plath’s very language reminds us that actually, all writing is manipulation.

The specific imagery that Plath chooses to employ in her Holocaust poems further suggests that her portrait of the Holocaust is intentionally unrealistic or surrealistic. “Lady Lazarus,” contains two references to Holocaust myths. The first is the line “Bright as a Nazi lampshade,” which refers the widespread but unproven rumor that Ilse Koch, the wife of the Buchenwald commandant, ordered that lampshades be constructed out of the skin of concentration camp inmates (14). The second is the line “A cake of soap,” which in the context of the poem, is likely an allusion to the urban legend that during World War II, the Nazis made soap out of the bodies of Jews (17). Using hyperbole, Plath replaces the historical reality of the Holocaust with an intensified version of it. Ironically, through myths, she lends her poems an air of authenticity due to the extreme and visceral nature of her imagery.

Like other Holocaust Girls, Plath regards the Holocaust as “Holocaust,” her Nazi lampshade invoking Susan Sontag’s “lamp.” This campy playfulness can be read as a

dismissal of masculine power structures. If fascist masculinity is interested in history, an archive of the events of the Holocaust as they truly occurred, then Plath is interested in “history,” an emotional reaction to the Holocaust that disrupts structures of power and creates potent feelings of terror for readers.

I dreamt that Judy Garland approached me on a train. It was older Judy, circa 1963, with short hair and a bloated, alcoholic face—my favorite era of her. She leaned in to embrace me. Once her chin was planted firmly on my shoulder, she spat the words, “You dumb kike!” into my ear with a spectacular old Hollywood drawl. When the train doors opened, she pushed me on to the tracks and started suffocating me. I didn’t mind. I thought, “How marvelous to be the victim of Judy Garland’s anti-Semitism! What an honor to be choked to death by Judy Garland!”

Am I similarly giving Plath a pass on what is actually insensitivity? Do the beauty of her delivery and the tragic allure of her legacy, like Judy’s, soften the blow of secret bigotry? And if so, do I care? Like Judy, Plath leaves me breathless and doting.

“Seeking to delineate the experience of psychic pain and elaborations of loss and fragmentation, Plath found that the Holocaust provided her with the only ‘adequate images,’” Banner writes. “It might be argued that, rather than belittling the Event by using it to figure more ordinary, individual pain, by employing these metaphors to elaborate the sufferings of the individual, Plath makes it possible to *recognize* the individuality of those six million sufferings” (238).

Banner seems to be in agreement with Rowland that Plath abstracts the event (from Holocaust to “Holocaust”) in order to tell a story not about a history of mass oppression but of personal suffering. However, whereas for Rowland, Plath’s campy essentialization of the Holocaust is for the sake of creating a clearer portrait of her own identity, Banner suggest that Plath personalizes the event as a means of making legible the lives of the victims. However, she fails to acknowledge that Plath’s “adequate images” of the Holocaust, are, in fact, urban legends, images which likely never appeared in the actual Holocaust. If anything, Plath distorts the Holocaust, abstracts it further from the lived experiences of victims.

Both “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” center thematically on the private suffering of a woman, a suffering entirely separate from the mass suffering of a genocide. Like Rowland, Banner calls attention to the disjointed and inconsistent nature of this aspect of Plath’s work: “Plath’s refusal to recognize the limits elicits frustrated attempts from many critics, especially many of those who wrote immediately following her death, to discover and impose fixity and cohesion upon her work” (232).

Unlike Rowland, Banner regards this as a political move. She argues that by neglecting to meet traditional (masculine) expectations of poetry and by placing striking emphasis on individual feeling and the merging of the public and the private, Plath counteracts notions of fascism and masculine rigidity.

Banner:

Anything which attacks and refutes the shared experience of a humane community of subjectivity, which offers the protection and solace of being able to discriminate – and in that discrimination to achieve a distance between the self and the despised, hence persecuted, Other, encouraging instead a denial of likeness with the Other – opens the route which leads, potentially, to the death camp. (233)

She goes so far as to suggest that voices like Plath's and their insistence on the subjectivity of history might prevent another Holocaust. I suppose this could be true, but Banner seems to be having a difficult time accepting the Holocaust Girl agenda, which is invariably and unapologetically apolitical and self-serving.

I acknowledge that I may be giving Banner too hard of a time. I am too cynical, too narrow-minded, too *much* about what Holocaust Girlhood can entail. I, after all, have my own agenda: to extract the Holocaust from itself, to turn it into an elaborate show to perform before you, reader. Perhaps I do so only to counteract the sentimental and decidedly political Holocaust of my upbringing: the stories of inmates making menorahs out of their potato rations, the pictures of piled shoes, the presentation of Zionism as *the* antidote to all Jewish pain and suffering.

Still, I'd like to raise the possibility that Plath's campy poetics are merely about fun—albeit fun of the sadistic variety. It is an amusing shock when the narrator of "Daddy," like Sarah Silverman doing stand-up, belittles the Holocaust in the voice of a little girl. The incongruity of the situation creates a scene of utterly delicious camp. And "Lady Lazarus," though about suicide, takes place in the festive setting of a carnival.

As a child, I pictured the Holocaust as a roller coaster. I told this to my father, and he explained that millions of Jews were killed in the Holocaust. After that, I pictured the Holocaust as a roller coaster whose cars were packed with the corpses of millions of Jews.

Does Plath, too, take perverse delight in turning the Holocaust into an amusement park?

And moreover, in reinforcing the image by writing it down?

Just three months after writing “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” Plath would stick her head inside an oven—a makeshift gas chamber. The Holocaust poems were her last hurrah. Call me a cynic or dismiss me as a silly girl, but I remain convinced that it is our duty as readers to permit Plath to ride the roller coaster of her own invention. It feels cruel to deny her the joy of letting the wind mess up her hairdo, of shrieking maniacally a hundred feet in the air, unencumbered by the judgment of the masses.

Reading *Ariel*, I coast slowly upward before plunging into an abyss. I spin loop de loop after loop de loop. My stomach flips. I lose my hat. The ride threatens to kill me, but in the end, it doesn't. It knows that the best way to thrill is through notions of terror.

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Wowschitz

In the first scene of “Wowschitz,” the final episode of *The Sarah Silverman Program*, Sarah meets at a diner with her sister, Laura (played by Laura Silverman, Silverman’s real-life sister) and Laura’s cop boyfriend, Jay. Laura solemnly tells Sarah that she is creating a Holocaust memorial for Valley Village, their Los Angeles neighborhood. Proudly, Jay gushes, “How adorable is that?”

Senior year of high school, I opted out of the annual grade-wide trip to Poland for no reason other than my newfound love of contrarianism. When my classmates returned, I asked a friend how the trip was. She told me that the entire grade had cried at Auschwitz, *even the boys*. My unrequited crush of four years had apparently broken down at the gas chambers. “Rebecca, you should have *seen* it,” the friend said, the emphasis accentuating her Westchester accent. “It was *ah-dor-able!*” What is it about memorializing the Holocaust that is inherently cute?

“Why would you create a memorial for something that never happened?” Sarah asks Laura, her voice juvenile and high-pitched. She sounds genuinely baffled, and it’s not yet clear if she is kidding. Sarah’s Holocaust denial doesn’t read as aggressive or bigoted in the vein of say, David Duke’s or Fred Leuchter’s. Instead, she is a naïve little girl who does not yet know right from wrong. She puts the “cute” in “persecute.”

A bit from Silverman's 2005 comedy special *Jesus Is Magic*: "Nazis are a-holes, and I'll be the first one to say it, 'cause I'm *edgy*. Nazis are motherfucking asshole wipes. Dicks."

Silverman delivers this in a harsher tone than usual, not even a hint of her signature high pitched, babyish voice peeking through. But then she giggles. "They're cute when they're little. I will give them that." She brings the baby voice into full throttle, as if gushing over a litter of puppies. "They're so cute. Why can't they stay small?"

Silverman explains her adorability-as-punchline humor in a scene from *Louie*: Louie watches old stand-up sets on The Comedy Channel. A young Silverman, age twenty-two or so, walks onto the stage, her hair in a ponytail, her smile sunny. She talks about her sister's wedding in a more subdued version of the baby voice. "It was really neat," she tells the audience. "They took each other's last names. They hyphenated it, you know. So now my sister's name is Susan Silverman-Abramowitz. But they're thinking of shortening it to just Jews." Louie calls up Silverman and tells her to turn on The Comedy Channel. After watching her young self for a few minutes, Silverman puts on a goofy, exaggerated grin. Now in full-fledged baby voice, she observes, "I-was-so-cute-and-I-didn't-know-better." She tilts her head coquettishly. "It's a lot of those kind of jokes: Did I say something? I didn't even know I said something."

"That's not funny, Sarah," Laura says in response to the Holocaust denial bit. "You know, a joke like that just demonstrates that you don't understand what it really means to be a Jew."

Recently, I watched a Republican debate with my father. When Trump was introduced, I heiled the TV screen, then grinned devilishly at my father. “Come on, Rebecca,” he said. “I don’t think that’s funny. I don’t like that.” I’d known he wouldn’t approve. As I stated earlier, my father dismisses Holocaust jokes as disrespectful on the whole, tolerating only those that are exceptionally clever, like my younger brother’s joke about baked Zeide. My joke, though politically charged and fun to execute (Holocaust Girls always have a fun time with executions), was juvenile. Mostly, I was trying to get a rise out of my father.

“I think I know what it means to be Jewish, Laura!” Sarah snaps. “Check this out.” She turns to the waiter and gestures at her plate. “Excuse me, these pancakes are ishy.”

Sarah doesn’t understand what it really means to be a Jew. Neither do I. We’re actively disinterested not in Judaism, necessarily, but in meaning as a whole. Here are some things we are interested in: ill-advised contrarianism, stupid gags, words like “ishy,” foolishly heiling the TV screen.

“Laura is right,” Jay tells Sarah. “You really should be more interested in the Holocaust. I mean—” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “I’m not even a Jew” —he raises his voice again— “and I *love* the Holocaust.” Sarah makes a judge-y face at him. Even she, ignoramus, knows that loving the Holocaust is for bigots and neo-Nazis. Jay corrects himself. “Love *reading* about it.”

Do Holocaust Girls love the Holocaust? One day last year, I learned that Haribo, the German candy company, used forced Jewish labor during World War II. Later that night, I drunkenly ordered bags of Haribo gummies in bulk off of Amazon. I had had a thing for Haribo candy long before I knew this information. Made with gelatin, it is not kosher and was therefore forbidden in my childhood. Its illicitness made bags of gummy worms smuggled home from the bodega after school all the sweeter. But my love for Haribo dramatically surged when I discovered the company's abusive past. I doled out gummy frogs and sour cola bottles to everyone who stepped through my front door and far too excitedly recounted to them the backstory I had unearthed. Chewing, they'd stare at me in horror. These interactions pleased me, in part because I revel in knowing facts that others don't, and in part because as has been well-established at this point, I get off on shock value. Perhaps in its own strange way, this was also a means of connecting with people, providing them with an entry point not only into Holocaust Girlhood, but also into the history of my people. I don't love the Holocaust, but sometimes things having to do with the Holocaust provoke in me feelings of love.

Laura urges Sarah to learn more about the Holocaust's history and suggests that she take a class. "Aw, yawn!" Sarah says, before adding, "Kippur!"

Yawn Kippur is right. It is considered the holiest day of the year, but it's also, without question, the biggest drag. The fasting isn't even the worst part; sitting in synagogue all day is. There, you see acquaintances from every stage of your life, plus all of their relatives, everyone—including you—looking stupid in sneakers paired with formalwear on account of

the prohibition on leather shoes. Teeth-brushing is also prohibited, so the smell of stale breath floods the sanctuary. One Yom Kippur, I lied about having a headache to get out of synagogue. Once home, I grabbed two bagels that had been set aside for the break fast, shoving one in each of my dress pockets. I ran upstairs to my bedroom, slammed the door behind me, and devoured one after the other, barely stopping for air. I spent the rest of the day worrying that someone would notice the missing bagels, and though I was anxious, I was at least no longer bored. Straying from good Jewish values makes a yawnsville holiday bearable. Later, at break fast, I gorged myself on Russ & Daughters delicacies as if I, too, had fasted. Nobody noticed the two missing bagels: a Yom Kippur miracle. It is a great pleasure, as Sarah Silverman knows, to deviate under the guise of innocence.

“You know, Laura,” Sarah adds. “I am getting extremely bored at you and I will not tolerate it! Never again!” She runs out of the diner

Our high school held a Holocaust-themed assembly once every few months if not more, featuring candle-lighting ceremonies, poems about barbed wire fences, and “Never Forget” T-shirts. Names of victims glided down the auditorium screen like movie credits. The shtick got old fast. During my junior year, I started ditching these assemblies, opting to read in the bathroom instead. Too many memorials made me numb to the Holocaust, rendered it a burden and a bore.

In the next scene, Sarah’s neighbors, Brian and Steve, a gay couple, grocery shop and kvetch about how boring they have become in middle age. Then, they notice an inattentive

cop at the butcher counter. To shake things up, Brian sneaks up behind the cop and steals his gun from the holster. Without the cop noticing, Brian replaces the gun with a nearby banana. Is this Silverman's stunt in a nutshell? Replacing the Holocaust with a big banana makes for a good gag.

It pains me a little to watch the banana scene, not because of its immature humor but because of my lifelong banana phobia. When bananas were served at middle school lunch, I fled to the bathroom in tears, the stench of the peeled fruit unbearable and the spotted yellow-brown color inexplicably repulsive. I would lock myself in a stall until the period was over. Teachers on lunch duty would often berate me for my prolonged absences and bizarre behavior, not understanding that my reaction to bananas was instinctive. I don't blame them for their ungraciousness. It is impossible to understand a trauma you haven't experienced.

Sarah is stuck in a traffic jam caused by Murray, an old man whose scooter has run out of batteries. She gives him a ride home. "Have you ever heard of the Holocaust?" she asks him, wide-eyed.

"Of course," he tells her. "I was in Auschwitz."

"No way! Awesome!"

"No, actually, it was pretty unpleasant."

"Right, no, of course. Trust me, it ruined my breakfast."

In their analysis of *Jesus Is Magic*, Lacy Lowrey, Valerie R. Renegar, and Charles E. Goehring refer to Silverman's performance style as "an ironic persona," pointing out the sharp contrast between her innocent, girlish character and her offensive comments about serious topics (60). They write:

Silverman's bold, and often socially inappropriate comic content is consistently juxtaposed with her attractive appearance, angelic voice, and seemingly innocent perspective. It has been argued that her physical attractiveness and 'little-girl' persona aid in her comedic effectiveness, particularly with regard to the most offensive and taboo aspects of her performance. (61)

"I wanna know everything you know about the Holocaust," Sarah tells Murray. "I'm really interested in being seen as interested in it."

A pious classmate with goyish good looks who had been my close friend growing up asked me, on a walk home from school, why I'd opted out of the senior trip to Poland. "I'm so fucking *sick* of the Holocaust," I groaned. "Rebecca!" she gasped. Shocking the ultra-Orthodox: a cheap but reliably satisfying thrill. Was I interested in being seen as disinterested in the Holocaust for the sake of my own persona? (Later, the classmate died in a bus accident on a community service trip to Honduras. Her funeral would mark my first return to synagogue since starting college.)

"I don't want to talk about the Holocaust," Murray says, understandably. Sarah presses him, reminding him that she saved his life. When Murray declines again, she resorts to begging. She clasps her hands and brings the little girl shtick to ridiculous new extremes: "Pwease, Muway! Pweeeease tell me about da Howocaust."

At my grandfather's *shiva*, my younger brother, then a toddler, smashed his fists into the ritual hard-boiled eggs on the buffet table, meant to symbolize life on account of their roundness. When visitors arrived, they didn't know what to make of the tray of crumbled yolks. Innocent deviant, he giggled, unaware that he had crushed life en masse, created a miniature Holocaust or Howocaust.

Murray caves. "Yay!" Sarah exclaims. She pulls out a pad and pen and slides on reading glasses. "Do you have one of those like, Holocaust-y tattoos?" Murray says he does, but that he doesn't want to show it. She asks him what Auschwitz was like.

"It was horrible."

Sarah takes this down in her notebook.

"Auschwitz, horrible L-E. This is great."

Does the act of writing transform the Holocaust's awfulness into something great? Sarah and I seem to hope so.

A news channel interviews Laura in front of the Valley Village Sports Lodge, where the memorial is set to be built. "We will be unveiling a beautiful commemorative plaque made entirely of Nazi gold." Underneath her appears a banner that reads "TV 19 NEWS Laura Silverman: Holocaust Enthusiast." "Which," Laura continues, "will honor the ancestors of Valley Village residents who were lost in the"—she lowers her voice to a whisper before uttering the next word—"Holocaust."

Is the Holocaust unspeakable? Laura treats the word like the class goody-two-shoes might a curse word. Her nervousness around “Holocaust” reinforces the subject’s off-limits status, deems it forbidden territory. Meanwhile, “Silverman jokes about the ‘unjokeable’ and says the ‘unsayable,’ thus rendering the taboo less taboo” (61).

Sarah is interviewed on a different news channel. The banner below her reads “Holocaust Memorial Smackdown.” She talks to the camera as if hosting an infomercial: “So we invite everyone in Valley Village to join me at the Sports Lodge, where I’m gonna be unveiling my very own Holocaust erection. And that’s a real word for a real thing.”

In her 2013 comedy special, *We Are Miracles*, Silverman delivers the following joke: “Girls grow up so fast. It’s like they don’t have childhoods anymore. They’re sexualized so early, you know? A girlfriend of mine has a little baby girl, and I babysat her. I changed her diaper. Totally shaved. Six months old. What a country.” In keeping with her “ironic persona” Silverman shamelessly sexualizes the infantile. What was once “da howocaust” is now an erection.

“It’s gonna be amazing,” Sarah says of her memorial. She breaks out a photograph of Murray. “I’ve got a real person who was at Auschwitz, plus we have a dunk tank, plus we’ve got a lion.”

In middle school, after a survivor recounted the horrors of her time in Buchenwald to our class, we lined up single-file in front of her. “Make one *meaningful* comment,” our teacher

instructed while the survivor was in the room. “Then shake her hand quickly, and keep the line moving.” Hadn’t this woman been dehumanized enough already? By putting Murray on the same level as the lion, Silverman mocks the treatment of survivors as freak show curiosities.

Like Plath in “Lady Lazarus,” Silverman makes a carnival of the Holocaust. But whereas Plath’s Holocaust carnival is grotesque and corpse-laden, aware of its paradoxical enmeshing of the macabre and the cheerful, Silverman advertises hers as wholesome. She presents herself as oblivious to her memorial’s morbid undertones, thereby lending it an extra layer of menace.

“Don’t be fooled by imitation memorials,” Sarah says, nodding in Laura’s direction with mock subtlety. “Come to mine, Sarah Silverman’s Holocaust memorial. Auschwitz? You’ll be saying Wowschwitz!”

Sarah’s advertisement for her memorial strikes a cord with me. While no figures from my upbringing dared treat the Holocaust with nonchalance or “Wowschwitz!” pep, I am left with the distinct sense that they—the rabbis who recounted the legend of the German girl who saved a Jewish inmate by sneaking him an apple a day through the barbed wire fence, the teachers who showed *Schindler’s List* in class, and the students who spoke treacly at assemblies about being “forever changed” by attending the March of the Living—were interested not in memorializing the Holocaust so much as marketing it. By the time I was born, not only was the Holocaust history, but so was the memory of it. As such, the event

came prepackaged and with its audience's emotional reactions to it pre-calculated, like a DVD box set of a long-running soap opera. There seemed to be only one appropriate way to treat and react to the Holocaust: ceremonious grief. This may explain my resistance to regarding it with any trace of sentimentality. Getting tearful over the annihilation of my people feels like falling prey to a trap. "Wowschwitz" makes a mockery of memorials' one-note melancholia and refusal of complex feelings.

At Yad Vashem on my eighth grade Israel trip, I didn't cry upon seeing the famous dome covered in photographs of survivors, as most of my classmates did. Feeling guilty for having the wrong reaction, or maybe just left out, I scrunched my face up unattractively and faked it.

Maybe now I am still faking it—sardonicism instead of sadness this time around. Rather than correct my improper response to the Holocaust, I've brought it to the other extreme: wrong to the point of dementedly campy. Do Silverman and I perform flippancy and farce to counteract the predictability of the maudlin?

"You know, Sarah," Laura says, "it's not a competition."

But as we've learned from Julie Klausner and Natasha Lyonne, *Holocaust Girlhood* is always a competition. Sarah seems aware of this.

"That's what losers say. I'm gonna bury you, Silverman." She stares fiercely at Laura, an intimidation tactic. "You're gonna wish the Holocaust never happened."

In a 2007 interview with the *Village Voice*, Silverman discusses her then-boyfriend Jimmy Kimmel's long work hours:

“The one way it sucks is I can never say ‘I had such a hard day,’ because he works from like 9 a.m. to 2 a.m. It’s like having a parent that’s a Holocaust survivor. You can never complain because they’ve always got it worse.”

It’s a behavioral pattern we’ve witnessed countless times before: The Holocaust Girl likens a minor personal problem to a massive tragedy. The interviewer turns it into a competition, replying with an imaginary dialogue:

“I’ve got AIDS, ma.’ ‘So what? I survived the camps.’”

AIDS, which for Holocaust Girls often goes hand-in-hand with the Holocaust (see: Larry Kramer), ups the ante.

“The family is all dead!” Silverman adds.

The comment doesn’t improve the joke, but for now, it gives Silverman the last word on the Holocaust, a feat unto itself.

Lowrey, Renegar, and Goehring write, “By adopting the onstage persona of childlike innocence, Silverman is able to discuss controversial and edgy social topics in a distinctive and humorously successful way that makes these issues more palatable to audience members” (60). My objections to that irksome non-word “edgy” aside, I challenge this argument. While “Wowschitz” and baby Nazis may initially seem more palatable than their violent counterparts, the air of innocence that Silverman lends to horrific acts ultimately renders them harder to digest. Furthermore, Silverman has little interest in

making the Holocaust palatable. She takes pleasure in watching the audience choke before it swallows. It's called a gag for a reason.

Sarah arrives unannounced at Murray's house. "Knock knock, Murray, you're gonna be a star! I'm putting you in my Holocaust memorial." She puts her hands on her hips and beams.

"What? Sarah, you should have asked me first!"

"You're totally right, my bad," she says with no hint of remorse. "I'll know for next time."

Rowdy, she leaps onto the armchair next to Murray's. She splays her legs exaggeratedly, provocatively even. One leg hangs over the chair's arm.

Often she adopts the persona of 'the kid,' especially when discussing shocking and crude material. Women who utilize this persona rarely rely on femininity, and instead, tend to provide an androgynous, inexperienced, and desexualized perspective. In Silverman's case, she cultivates a persona based in childlike naiveté and ignorance but also plays on her physical attractiveness so that she often looks and sounds like a little girl. (65)

Because Silverman's character acts like an innocent young girl, the sexualized behavior she exhibits appears unintentional. So do her off-color comments about the Holocaust.

"Oy, this is awkward," Murray says. "I was there, but I wasn't a prisoner."

"But you said you had a tattoo."

Murray rips open his shirt to reveal an enormous swastika tattooed on his chest. Sarah gasps.

“Oh my god. They made you get that?”

“No, Sarah. I played for the other team!”

“Ooooh,” she whispers, “you’re gay?”

In a 2008 interview, Katie Couric says she has trouble describing Silverman’s sense of humor.

“Irreverent isn’t really strong enough, so I came up with the word ‘demented,’” she explains, as though she’s invented it.

“Ooh, I like ‘demented,’” Silverman says. “Yeah! I like ‘demented’ because I’ve been trying not to say ‘retarded.’”

Like my father parading my newborn brother around the men’s section of the synagogue after his *bris*, Silverman flaunts that which has just been named.

“You don’t understand,” Murray says, growing frustrated, “which at this point, I don’t understand. I was a Nazi! I hated the Nazis, but they gave me orders, and I followed them. I was a Nazi!” Sarah looks exasperated, mouth agape, eyes glazed over. Murray adds, “I wake up screaming every night.”

A boy in my grade held his bar mitzvah at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, the Holocaust museum in New York. “Mazel tov,” I said to him when I arrived. “I guess this means you’ll be getting married in Auschwitz.” He didn’t find my joke funny. His grandparents had survived Auschwitz. Take too many cracks at the Holocaust, and you forget it’s serious business.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah says to Murray, her eyes focused again. “I was a million miles away. What’d you say?” Defying the law of “never forget,” Sarah blanks out on the Holocaust entirely.

At the end of the *Village Voice* interview, the interviewer says, “Wait, let me ask you one last hilarious thing: Do you think more troops should be sent to Iraq?”

“Why are we in Iraq when it has nothing to do with 9-11 and there’s a fucking genocide in Darfur?” Silverman asks. “I grew up thinking the Holocaust could never happen again and...”

The comment is almost unsettlingly earnest. The interviewer takes advantage of the opportunity to beat Silverman at her own game.

“Oh, so you’re one of those people who thinks it *did* happen?”

Mentions of Holocaust denial bring me shame and anxiety. Not because I find it repugnant (though I do), but because in the eighth grade, I chose to write a research paper on the topic. A family friend, the cousin of the famous historian Deborah Lipstadt, offered to put me in touch with her. I emailed Lipstadt requesting an interview. A week later, she curtly declined my invitation and urged me not to write about the subject because I came across as “uninformed” about its history. Holocaust denial makes its advocates look stupid, but me even stupider, apparently.

It's also possible that Lipstadt rebuffed me because of she disapproved of my general approach to the Holocaust. As far as I can remember, my email was brief but courteous. I don't recall writing anything insouciant (in other words, anything along the lines of this project) that might have undermined the subject's gravity. And yet writing this, I can't help but wonder if my Holocaust Girlhood seeped through.

A guest arrives at Murray's place: a bald, heavysset, bespectacled Ed Asner.

“Commandant von Reichenstein? What brings you here?”

“I understand you're participating in a Holocaust memorial.”

“Well, yes. I agreed to pose as a survivor because I owe this young woman, Sarah Silverman, for saving my life. Can you imagine? A Jew saves my life, and I repay her by pretending to be a victim of the Nazis.” Murray chortles. “It's really rather comedic when you think about it.”

Another thing that's really rather comedic is the obvious Semitism of these two “Nazis,” both played by Jewish actors. The commandant's German accent is remarkably unconvincing, while Murray speaks with an accent straight out of Borough Park. In addition to ironic, this is a strategic move on Silverman's part. She compensates for her character's earlier belittlement of the Holocaust by belittling the Nazis even more. The villains are reduced to two nebbishes doing bad impressions.

Recently, Silverman appeared on *Conan* in the role of Hitler. The audience applauds as she walks onstage in full uniform, a mustache, and a swastika band. “Look at that, that's

more applause than I expected.” She speaks with no accent; it’s a sort of non-impression. “Heil!” she says warmly to the audience.

“Hitler, thank you so much for stopping by tonight, and might I add, you’re the worst.”

“I know, I know,” she says jauntily.

Hitler, it turns out, is on *Conan* to defend himself against recent media comparisons to Trump.

“Don’t get me wrong, Conan. I agree with a lot he says. A lot—like 90% of what he says—I’m like, ‘This guy gets it.’ But it’s just, I don’t like the way he says it. It’s crass.”

She ends the bit by saying, “And I have to be honest. Trump, he’s starting to make me rethink some of the things I’ve done.” She pauses. “Ah, who am I kidding?” She waves her arm dismissively. “I gotta be me.”

Hitler’s gotta be Hitler. Silverman’s gotta be Silverman. Holocaust Girls gotta be Holocaust Girls.

The commandant makes a proposition to Murray: “Ve are going to raid the unveiling ceremony at the Valley Village Sports Lodge and steal the commemorative plaque made from our gold.” Murray, unassuming and nervous, hesitates. The commandant slaps him in the face repeatedly. “Stop disobeying my orders and do what I tell you!”

“Stop disobeying my orders and do what I tell you!” might sum up my education.

Orthodoxy centers on orders: what to eat, how to dress, when to pray, how to spend a Saturday, who to sleep with and when. Senior year of high school, two years after I’d

renounced Judaism, I walked home from a group dinner with some girls from my grade. We got onto the subject of my religious beliefs.

“If you’re really an atheist,” one of the girls challenged, “then why don’t you eat a cheeseburger?”

“Why *don’t* I?” I said, though aside from Haribo and other similarly minor transgressions, I’d never defied the laws of *kashrut* before. “Next McDonald’s we see, we’re going in.”

One appeared a few blocks later. I walked up to the counter and ordered a cheeseburger while the other girls huddled nervously near the door. As I unwrapped it, they changed their minds and urged me not to eat it, worried that God would smite me. This, of course, made me all the more eager to dig in. Staring directly into the eyes of the most devout girl of the bunch, I took an enormous bite. Ultimately, this project might amount to merely another bite of *treif*, another sophomoric “fuck you” to the God-fearing.

At the Valley Village Sports Lodge, Laura leads her memorial ceremony, reciting a speech that sounds like the stagy poem read annually at my school’s Holocaust Remembrance Day assembly: “For perchance we shall remember, lest we forget.” She nods somberly and unveils a gold plaque covered with names. “Let us please now observe a moment of silence.” The attendees—mostly yarmulked men—bow their heads. Sounds of cheering disrupt the silence. Laura walks to the other side of the lodge and finds a carnival. At the center of the room is a booth filled with stuffed animals. A juggling clown walks by.

“Hey sis,” Sarah says, “you were right. It’s not a competition.” She grins “I win.”

Writing this isn't a competition either. I'm the only Holocaust Girl in the rink. And yet I feel compelled to keep going, to top my own outrageousness, to emerge indisputably victorious.

A young woman approaches, dressed in an army green bra and miniskirt with a swastika band around her arm. A dark toupee partially conceals her flowing blonde hair, and she wears a small fake mustache. "Sexy Hitler," Sarah explains proudly. "Isn't that cute? Make it fun!"

When Hitler Silverman leaves the stage on *Conan*, Conan turns to Andy and says, "That's one sexy, saucy Hitler." A friend once told me my outfit made me look like Hitler, "but a hot Hitler." Even non-Holocaust Girls see the fun in tarting up the taboo, turning the Führer into a fox.

Sarah then unveils her memorial's crown jewel, a huge golden statue of a nose. She flips a switch, and water pours out of the nostrils. The nose is crying, she explains. Murray rolls in on his scooter. "Murray's here!" Sarah cheers. "He was in the Holocaust, the real one." The attendees clap, and Murray waves, queen-like. "Yay!"

In the courtyard of Yad Vashem on my eighth grade Israel trip, a group of soldiers tried to lead our class in song. The gesture was likely meant to be uplifting, but it was perceived as inappropriate. "Now is really not the time for singing," one of the rabbis told them sternly. In the eyes of some, the Holocaust has no place for pageantry—or at least a certain kind of

pageantry. But what are rabbi-approved tributes like museums, memorials, and schmaltzy poems peppered with words like “perchance” if not spectacles themselves?

In a corner, Murray removes his jacket, revealing his Nazi uniform. Covertly, he opens the back door for the commandant, who hands him a rifle. “Let de rebooting of de Third Reich begin!” The commandant shoots his own rifle at the ceiling. “Achtung!” he announces. “Ve are taking over! Everyone stand back!” The memorial attendees are forced to sit on the floor in a circle with their hands on their heads like a kindergarten class captive at story time. Sexy Hitler trembles with fear.

“Sarah, I think it’s really inappropriate of you to have invited a Nazi to a Holocaust memorial,” Laura says.

“Oy with the nagging! Must you display our people’s worst quality smack in front of the enemy?”

In his 1927 essay “Humour,” Freud tells the story of a criminal who upon being led to the gallows on a Monday remarks, “Well, the week’s beginning nicely.” “I, the non-participating listener,” Freud writes, “am affected as it were at long-range by this humorous production of the criminal’s; I feel, like him, perhaps, the yield of humorous pleasure” (161). At this point in the episode, the characters’ situation is essentially tragic, but Sarah’s joke (“Oy with the nagging!”), like the criminal’s, yields pleasure.

At the end of the episode, the commandant yells, “Die, bitch!” and shoots Sarah in the chest (or, as she puts it, “ew, right between the boobs”). I’m shocked not by the gunshot

itself but rather, its context. Though the event is over the top and campy, the presence of violence in a sitcom, a realm that bans tragedy, is unnerving. I'm waiting for something to happen that will reinforce the show's comedic status, something to counteract the wound, but instead, Sarah lies on the floor, bleeding heavily. She chokes. "Sarah, don't die on me," Laura cries out dramatically. "Don't you die on me!" The memorial attendees weep.

Freud: "If the super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering, this does not contradict its origin in the parental agency" (166). If through Holocaust jokes, Silverman ostensibly aims to parentally protect viewers' egos from suffering, she, "the kid," mischievously undermines this goal by bringing a new site of suffering into the picture. Silverman safeguards us from big-league violence, but only so that she can surprise attack later.

With this scene of violence, Silverman pulls back the curtain on the Holocaust Girl agenda. We can try all we want to suppress the brutality of the Holocaust, to muffle the trauma with quotation marks. But inevitably, she reminds us, the horror of history finds a way to sneak in. Joke's on us.

Suddenly, the camera zooms in on Sarah's wound, which magically vanishes. She sits up and exclaims, "I'm okay!" The nose statue disappears. Sexy Hitler turns into Sexy Einstein. Murray's swastika tattoo is now a Ziggy tattoo. The commandant's uniform has been replaced by inoffensive, grandfatherly garb: a Hawaiian shirt, a straw hat, and sunglasses, his rifle now a garden shovel. The plaque which once read "Valley Village Holocaust

Memorial” now reads “Valley Village People who Died of Natural Causes Memorial.” A copy of *Der Berlin Guardian* appears at Sarah’s feet. The headline reads “Austrian Art Student Killed by Ugly Dog!” Hitler has been murdered retroactively.

Silverman cancels the main event, replaces the quotation marks around “Holocaust” with brackets, annihilates annihilation.

Calling off the Holocaust is duck soup, a comically easy resolution that, unfortunately, renders my own agenda moot. Is Silverman simply throwing up her hands? Is she accepting that she is unable, or no longer willing, to navigate the complexities of the Holocaust, of memory and memorial? It would most likely behoove me to do the same, but I can’t just yet. I’m too attached.

At my bat mitzvah, I insisted on wearing a *tallis*, the fringed prayer shawl traditionally worn by men. Mine was a “girl” *tallis* made of sheer pink silk and streaked with yellow and orange stitching. My days of worship behind me, the *tallis* serves no purpose anymore, yet I keep it on a closet shelf in its rosy satin bag. The Holocaust is my security blanket—a talisman and a *tallis*.

“I guess the Holocaust never really did happen,” Sarah says, pulling the *tallis* out from under us. By eradicating the Holocaust, Silverman, master of the “ironic persona,” points at its absolute ineradicability. She reminds us that Holocaust Girlhood, no matter how outrageous the performance of it, cannot erase history’s atrocities. Through shtick, we learn

to forget the truth of the thing we are told we must never forget. Through prescribed mourning, the Laura types among us do the same. But every shtick must come to an end, as must every memorial service. When the lights come on, the Holocaust remains. It's ghastly. No longer do mythical Nazi lampshades or Sontagian "lampshades" protect us from its awfulness.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Laura, this kind of ruins your memorial." She suggests that Laura and people like her, such as the rabbis and "good" kids from my childhood, actually cherish the Holocaust because it gives them the opportunity to differentiate themselves as morally upright. Without a catastrophe to memorialize, Laura, righteous Holocaust enthusiast, is indistinguishable from Sarah, insolent Holocaust Girl.

My project—a carnival of its own—is similarly ruined by Sarah's erasure of the Holocaust. So is my Holocaust Girl identity, which though indifferent to history's specifics, depends singularly on the Holocaust having happened.

Freud: "The main thing is the intention which humour carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people. It means: 'Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!'" (166).

In kindergarten, a boy who had been participating in a game of tag charged toward the park bench on which I was seated. He screamed, his face covered in what I thought was a melted cherry popsicle. It soon became evident that he had cracked his head open on the

brick playground equipment. I watched as EMTs carried him away, the red staining the white of the stretcher.

By eliminating the Holocaust, Silverman assures us that the world is merely a children's game, but she also reminds us that children's games are in fact deeply dangerous. Popsicle juice signifies blood; the imaginary Holocaust signifies the other Holocaust—that which is indelible and unspeakable.

“Wowschitz” is the series finale of *The Sarah Silverman Program*. Without the Holocaust's existence, there is nothing left for Silverman to say. Her Holocaust Girl agenda is made futile, and so she goes Harpo Marx silent. The credits roll. The screen fades to black. I take this as my cue to shut up, too, to let go of the *tallis* for the time being.

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Acknowledgements

Tremendous thanks to Professor Erica Hunt for her wisdom, support, humor, and patience throughout this process. It has been a privilege to work with you and a pleasure to know you. I will cherish your advice for as long as I write.

Thank you to Professor Cliff Chase for sparking my love for creative nonfiction and for encouraging me to delve deeper into *Holocaust Girlhood*. Thanks to Professor Lisa Cohen for challenging me to be a better, weirder, and riskier writer and for talking through early iterations of this project with me. You have both influenced me profoundly and are some of the best teachers I have had.

I'd like to thank Professor Victoria Pitts-Taylor for her brilliance and guidance and everyone in the FGSS Senior Seminar for their invaluable suggestions.

To Lily Taylor, Caroline Shadle, and Sara Ben Ezra, thank you for Joni Mitchell and wine nights, putting up with my antics, and making 43B Home our home.

To everyone in my family: Mom, Dad, Josh, Noah, and Jake. Thank you for your compassion, hilarity, and good stories, and for the real estate game.

Love and gratitude to Kathleen Radigan and Anna Stzrempko, who keep me excited about writing and show me more kindness than I deserve. Thanks to everyone from Stethoscope Press and *The Argus* for giving me the family of writers I always wanted. Special thanks to Professor Brando Skyhorse for his endless support and passion.

To the original Holocaust Girls: Carly Stern, Ari Schoenberg, Lois Weisfuse, Na'amit Tubul, Ariel Gleaner, and Ellie Geller. Thank you for making this project possible and daring me to go there. Thanks to Fiona Tarzy, Rachel Yang, and Jenny Davis, whose jokes fuel me and whose friendship sustains me.

In memory of Daniella Moffson, whom I miss dearly and who would hate this.