"NO ONE WOULD HAVE GUESSED HER RACE".[1] ASSIMILATION, DISSIMULATION AND MEMORY IN JEWISH-AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING

"No one would have guessed her race" - this statement is part of the characterization of Babette, the heroine's grandmother, in G.B.Stern's novel *The Matriarch*. The narrator continues: "It is so queer that she should have been given blue eyes, and a straight, almost impertinent nose." These are bodily features that in this novel keep appearing throughout several generations and serve to visually affirm the protagonists' inner orientation, for they "did not bother to sit and brood over their persecuted race."[2] With reference to the time in which this novel was written, Sander Gilman observed that

> The Jew's experience of his or her body was so deeply impacted by anti-Semitic rhetoric that even when that body met the expectations for perfection in the community in which the Jew lived, the Jew experienced his or her body as flawed, diseased.(...) and yet, as we know, it was precisely those Jews who were the most assimilated, who were passing, who feared that their visibility as Jews could come to the fore.[3]

Gilman's analysis helps one to gain insight into the narrative strategies of dissimulation and their references to the history of the persecution of Jews which we can find in Stern's novel as well as in numerous texts by Jewish writers. In the following I want to take a closer look at these strategies of dissimulation and the questions surrounding them. I will quote from texts by Jewish-American women writers,

autobiographical and fictional, written since the New Immigration around the turn of the century.

Representations of difference. The hegemonic and the marginal group

There is a basic correspondence or agreement in a number of recent and thematically diverse studies in the fields of anthropology, cultural theory and psychoanalysis, in scholarly work about the histories of colonization as well as in the processes of Enlightenment,[4] a correspondence in ideas of how Western cultures construct their "others": By repressing unacknowledged and unconscious contents of their psyche, and transferring these outward, the hegemonic group draws boundaries between "self" and "other". These boundaries primarily serve to establish a coherent self, and only in the second place do they aim at defining an "other". In order for this process to function collectively and repetitively the hegemonic group strives to make sure that what has been transferred outward beyond its own boundaries is in practice recognized as "other". Unambiguous identification of the constructed "other" lies within the logic of this specific transferral, of negation and of attribution. The most extreme and brutal case of enforced identification in history are the yellow star that had to be worn by Jews, the enforced "J" in the passport in Nazi Germany, and later, the numbers burnt into the skin in the concentration camps. These measures were taken precisely at a time when in the course of so-called assimilation actual signs of difference were vanishing altogether.

Freud's ideas about projection point towards the nature of those markers of identification. In his theories, **to project** means to treat inner excitements as if they did not originate in the psyche, "as though they were acting not from the inside but from the outside".5 Elsewhere he writes: "The ego behaves as if the danger of the development of anxiety threatened it not from the direction of an instinctual impulse but from the direction of a perception."[6] The markers thus constructed are predominantly visual ones and based on a profound misjudgement of inside and outside. In racist discourse bodily features are transformed into signs with at least double reference: they serve as outer signifiers for inner traits of the discriminated group which are **attributed** traits that have nothing to do with those who bear them, **and** they refer to those who have produced these signs and the repressed in their collective psyche. The interior of the discriminating group is thus tied to the exterior of the discriminated group, and existing differences between groups are superimposed with imaginary, fictive differences. For the discriminated group the features that are constructed as markers of the "other" turn into stigma.[7] In the light of these complicated processes of "othering", strategies of dissimulation which are employed by the discriminated group have to be seen as a means to avoid being seen and treated as "others". One of the possibilities to deal with this is to erase the outer signs of difference, to hide what by the dominant group has been

defined as visual markers of difference and, in their view, otherness. A major incongruence lies in the fact that projection lies on the level of the imaginary whereas the measures enforced upon the minority group are situated on the level of the real.

These very brief theoretical remarks should stress the point that if we want to talk about the representation of difference in works by the minority culture, we are not talking about natural, pre-given difference but about attributed differences whose modes of construction by the dominant group have to be taken into consideration.

Aesthetic norms of femininity and visual markers

In Nessa Rappoport's story "The Woman Who Lost Her Names", Sarah's name is changed into Sally in the kindergarten; later, in school, the girls in her class "had radios, then TVs, then nose jobs and contact lenses".[8] In *How to Be a Jewish Grandmother* Sylvia Seaman writes about a grandmother and her granddaughter who together undergo an operation on their noses: "Now we were two shiksas who wanted to be Jews, but not to look it."[9] In Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" the mother worries about her daughter: "She fretted about her appearance, thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple".[10] Conversely, and similar to the text quoted in my title, we find relief or ironical remarks if any signs of difference from the norms are missing. "But she's lucky. Nice straight nose, good face. No one would ever take her for...", says Panofsky, the old friend from the shtetl of Lucy's father in Lynne Sharon Schwartz' story "The Opiate of the people".[11] The female protagonists' most frequently described bodily features are their hair and noses, and they are nearly always put in frames of reference both to Jewish and to gender affiliation. Even self-assured counter-images like Cynthia Ozick's fictional character Puttermesser, who "resembled no poster she had ever seen" have to be set against the norms of the dominant group:

> with a Negroid passion she hated the Breck shampoo girl, so blond and bland and pale-mouthed; she boycotted Breck because of the golden-haired posters, all crudely idealized, an American wet dream, in the subway.[12]

"Our bodies are the tools for creating an assimilated American woman; they are the bearers of our 'acceptability'", writes Susan Weidman Schneider in a handbook for Jewish women.[13] Those who believe that "nose jobs" are just an opportunist adaptation for the Jewish American Princess to improve her chances on the marriage market, misjudge the situation altogether.

The figure of the female body as a malleable substance is employed most often in terms of what Bernice Mennis calls "to vanish into the mainstream".[14] To comply with the governing aesthetic norms of femininity is a specifically gendered means of erasing signs of difference. In many novels it becomes obvious that perfect femininity is not seen as a value in itself but as a protection against discriminatory projection. This specific means of protection, however, creates new and additional pressures. The terms that are chosen to describe the characters' efforts to conform to ideals of femininity are significant: "to keep a low profile",[15] "to vanish into the mainstream", "to merge into the background"[16]. It becomes obvious that by this the body is robbed of its expressiveness, the inner life becomes sealed. "We - my sister, mother and I- were constantly urged to speak quietly in public, to dress without ostentation, to repress all vividness or spontaneity, to assimilate with a world which might see us too flamboyant"[17], writes Adrienne Rich.

Visual markers and memory

"You'd be safer on the streets if your appearance conformed. That's why the Jews got away from wearing payess (side curls), yarmulkahs, and black robes. (...) People aren't tolerant. They'll attack you if you look different" - this is the advice which a father gives his daughter in Thyme Seagull's story "My Mother Was A Light Housekeeper".[18], and to the daughter this advice refers back to the father's memory and the history of persecution: "I can tell dad is recalling his boyhood in eastern Poland. He knows what it is like to be hated because of how you look." Many narratives deal with the specific consequences for women if they have to abandon the visible signs of religious practice, consequences which are far-reaching because of the performative richness of Jewish religious practice for women's everyday life, like the ritual practice of religious households, the purity and dietary rules, and the covering of hair in different public domains. Especially women's narratives which deal with early immigration, for example novels by Anzia Yezierska, Rose Cohen, Edna Ferber, Meredith Tax, are built around the drastic changes that occur under the rule of dissimulation, of concealing the visual side of religious practice which introduces entirely different movements of bodies, tones of voices, and of self-presentation.

The contents of the projections which are anticipated and dreaded are rarely described explicitly. Instead, the stories focus on the question of how their protagonists can be identified as different and projected upon as others, and more precisely, how, in certain political constellations this projected otherness could be used as a basis for discrimination and persecution. Images of what the anxieties contain need not be invented because history provides them in abundance. "As a child, my first conscious feeling about being Jewish was that it was dangerous, something to be hidden. For years I agonized over my visibility as a Jew. (...) My sense of danger was rooted in a total physical

and emotional knowledge of the war", writes Irena Klepfisz.[19] Depending on the time they were written, the texts refer to the Russian pogroms or the Nazi murders, but most frequently they also refer to the history of persecutions back to biblical histories.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's work about the specificity of Jewish memory[20] is confirmed by the stories I am talking about. It is a model of memory in which the decisive stages of history are equally present and can be activated at any historical moment in the consciousness of those who remember. Many religious practices also point to the specific quality of this memory. In the context of a historical debate Ben Halprin has made a similar point: "however much attitudes toward the Jews may respond to salient, immediate experiences, they also relate to the entire historic background of the Jews as perceived at the particular time"[21].

In her autobiographical essay "Dreaming of Hitler" Daphne Merkin addresses this point when she describes how she walks along Park Avenue on Yom Kippur in clothes that make her completely undistinguishable from the American norm, but nevertheless, "Floating always among us was an awareness of the importance of avoiding, if one could help it, 'too Jewish' an appearance, the dreaded stigma of 'too Jewish' a voice."[22] and then she continues to describe how this constant dissimulation leads to self-hatred. There is a bitter reversal of this situation in Marjorie Sandor's story "The Gittel" in which lack of visible difference does not provide protection but exactly the opposite. The narrator tells about Gittel, her grandmother, who refuses to acknowledge the impending danger: "By 1920 the family was in a good position: respected by the new Berlin intellectuals. Of course it wasn't really the brains, but the red-gold hair and the fine noses that made them comfortable. You can bet if they'd looked more Semitic they'd have caught on sooner to the general news."[23] Memory plays an important part in Schwartz' story which I have already quoted. David, who has escaped the Cossack pogroms decides that the predominant aim of his life will be the complete adaptation into American culture. This is embodied in the figure of Lucy, his daughter at whom he looks with satisfaction: "All in all, a fine American girl."[24] But constantly his memory demonstrates the fragility of this achievement, and images from the past merge with the visual aspects of the present.

Models of assimilation

In the context of my argument I think it is necessary to briefly re-examine the models of assimilation that exist in North-American society. Undoubtedly, the idea of the melting pot was the most influential one in the first decades of the century, but it is still contained in enduring mythical images of the constitution of the nation. Israel Zangwill's extremely popular play *The Melting Pot*, first performed in 1908, marked one of the stages of this myth. In the foreword to the 1914 edition of the play the author explicates the vision which, in the play is held by David,

a Jewish musician who has managed to escape the Russian pogroms. For Zangwill, immigrants are "the elements that, to the tune of nearly a million and a half a year, are being fused in the greatest 'Melting Pot' the world has ever known."[25] They serve as "the ethnic and psychical amalgam of the people of to-morrow."(203) He goes on unfolding the alchimist metaphor: "The process of American amalgamation is not assimilation or simple surrender to the dominant type as is popularly supposed, but an all-round give and take by which the final type may be enriched or impoverished."

This myth contains two aspects of assimilation which have to be seen together. On the one hand transformation into an American citizen includes giving up traits of group membership, the surrender of distinguishing features, but on the other hand the myth celebrates the contribution of the individual groups to an overall achievement, or, to stay within the image, the metal which is rendered into the crucible. This contribution is idealized and thus made into a positive image for the immigrants. David, the protagonist of the play, not only gives up much of his characteristics but also composes the "Great American Symphony". Backed by their own culture's stress on achievement, early immigrant authors translated these two aspects of the melting pot myth into character and plot and thus sustained and renewed the myth. Narratives by Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska present characters who are willing or even eager to shed perceptible signs of difference and keen to achieve their cultural contributions in a way that is very similar to the kind of advice which, for example, is given to the Jewish immigrants in the *Jewish Forward*,[26] the daily newspaper published in Yiddish. At the same time the notion of difference is transferred to difference within the group, on those who have "not yet" undergone the process of transformation. I will come to this presently.

The competing model of constructing a national identity out of difference is that of hyphenated identities. This model which acknowledges plurality, offered less imaginary and psychological room for identification and found fewer followers in the times of early immigration, as becomes obvious in a speech by Roosevelt in 1915 in which he says: "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism (...), a hyphenated American is not an American at all".[27] It is only since the seventies that many Jewish-American writers favor the model of hyphenated identity. Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, Vivian Gornick, Joanne Greenberg and many others create fictional worlds in which symbolical boundaries are acknowledged, difference is respected and in which -now from a Jewish perspective- the construction of selves and others is displayed. It is interesting to see how in the wake of "ethnic revival" the old visual markers reappear and become reinterpreted, as for example in Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachment*:

> then there were the other women students. Intense in an altogether different way. Brash, difficult, 'gypsy-dark'

> (meaning Jewish from New York), the intelligence strong not subtle, the sensibility aggressive not demure, the manner startling in its overdirectness, without grace or modesty, disorienting. These women did not fall in love with Mark, who sat next to them in Medieval Lit 101.[28]

Differences within

The stories of the boundaries which are drawn within the Jewish immigrants' group itself do not only tell about differences within but also and predominantly about the pressures that are exerted towards assimilation. The differences which occur in these narratives are between Eastern European Jews and Western Jews, between "greenhorns" and already assimilated members of the group, the modern and the old-fashioned, those who indulge in an American lifestyle against those whose everyday life is ruled by religious observation, and those who have grown rich against those who still live in the tenements.[29] Again, what is under scrutiny is the visibility as Jew, the outer signs of difference and affiliation.[30]

Many stories by Anzia Yezierska address the visual aspects of strangeness from the perspective of the white American norm. The protagonist in her story "America and I", for example, is learning the language but cannot afford the perceptible signs of adaptation and sameness:

> But words alone were only for the inside of me. The outside of me still branded me for a steerage immigrant. I had to have clothes to forget myself that I'm a stranger yet. (...) With money to buy -free money in my hands- I'd show them that I could *look* like an American in a day.[31]

Hanneh Breineh, the heroine of several narratives of hers is the source of embarrassment for her daughter when she refuses to change after they have risen socially: "God knows how hard I tried to civilize her so as not to have to blush with shame when I take her anywhere. I dressed her in the most stylish Paris models, but Delaney Street sticks out from every inch of her",[32] the daughter complains.

Hortense Calisher's story "Old Stock" addresses both the internal and external drawing of boundaries and sets them into a political context. Mrs Elkin and her daughter Hester spend their holidays in the Catskills, one of the favourite Jewish resorts of the time. Hester observes

> the prim display of extra restraint her mother always wore in the presence of other Jews whose grosser features, voices, manners offended her sense of gentility

> all the more out of her resentful fear that she might be identified with them.[33]

The descriptions of the mother reveal that she strives hard to eliminate any visual signs that might set her apart. Repetitively she is described as "refined", thus reminding the reader of the melting pot myth:

> Under any hat, in any setting, her mother always looked enviably right, and her face (...) had at last attained a welcomed anonymity, so that now it was like a medallion whose blurred handsomeness bore no denomination other than the patent, accessible one of 'lady'.[34]

The vanishing point of such dissimulation consists of gendered images of femininity produced by the dominant group. The plot unfolds in a way that the readers can understand the reasons for the mother's anxieties[35] and that they go beyond internal social differences. When mother and daughter visit Mrs Onderdonk who is also marked as an immigrant by her name, the latter makes offensive antisemitic remarks. Upon this Mrs Elkin discloses that they are Jews, and Mrs Onderdonk tries to justify herself by saying that Mrs Elkin showed no sign of her ethnic affiliation, but, at a second glance she states: "the girl here has the look". The story finds a narrative "solution" by diminishing internal differences for Mrs: Elkin now feels closer to the other Jews in her guesthouse.

This text, like many others, could be used as an argument in an ongoing debate in which one side would only acknowledge the actual political situation as a reference point for the fear of being identified as Jewish[36] whereas the other side would accept the history of recurring discrimination and persecution as meaningful also for evaluating the present.[37] Bernice Mennis recalls the warnings her parents have given her as a legacy:

> One lesson was that whenever there was *any* trouble, Jews should watch out. Growing up in the early 1900s in a small village outside of Kiev, my father, his family and the Jews in the village learned that unrest, poverty, natural or unnatural catastrophes, hard times, revolution, bad weather - anything could and did bring pogroms and attacks on Jews.[38]

The complexity of this cannot easily be contained in discursive argumentation. Here, literature, as we can see from the texts I have quoted, offers fables that draw connections between a character's feelings and different historical strata. By its modes of association, of image

formation, of disrupting linear time, literature does speak a different language from the explicitly political discourse whose task doubtlessly is to find out the occurrence and social roots of discrimination in an existing society.

The specific structure of duplicity in the subject which comes to the fore if we examine, as I have done here, the representation of visual difference in Jewish-American women's novels is duplicity between inside and outside. The self that is presented in many of these novels and autobiographical narratives is a self in hiding, a self whose complex inner life that is not granted external expression[39] is unfolded in the story. It is also a remembering self that recalls the history of her or his people.

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Notes

1- G.B.Stern, *The Matriarch* (1924; London: Virago, 1987), 2.

2- Stern, *Matriarch*, 5.

3- Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, London: Routledge 1991), 179.

4- See for example the work of Mary Douglas, Freud's writings on culture, the theories of Horkheimer and Adorno, the school of anthropology around Clifford James, Julia Kristeva's theories of otherness, Tzvetan Todorov's works about colonization and many others.

5- Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (London : The Hogarth Press 1955-1974), Vol.18, 29.

6- Sigmund Freud, "The Metapsychology of Repression", in: *Standard Edition*, Vol.14, 184.

7- Harald Eidheim, "When Ethnic Identity Is a Social Stigma", in: Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Bergen: Universitets forlaget, 1969), 39-57.

8- Nessa Rappoport, "The Woman Who Lost Her Names", in: *The Woman Who Lost Her Names. Selected Writings by American Jewish Women*, ed. Julia Wolf Mazow (San Francisco, Ca.: Harper & Row, 1980), 136.

9- Quoted in: Susan Weidman Schneider, *Jewish and Female* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 246.

10- Tillie Olsen, "I Stand Here Ironing",in: Mazow, ed., 34; this is repeated later in the story: "She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimples." (37).

11- Lynne Sharon Schwartz, "The Opiate of the People", in: *America and I. Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers* (Boston, Ma.: Beacon Press, 1990), 246.

12- Cynthia Ozick, *Levitations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 23.

13- Schneider, *Jewish and Female*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 245.

14- Bernice Mennis, "Repeating History", in: *Nice Jewish Girls. A Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck (Trumansburg, N. Y.: Crossing Press, 2nd ed. 1989), 130.

15- Irena Klepfisz, "Resisting and Surviving America", in *Nice Jewish Girls*, 123.

16- Eva Figes, *Little Eden* (London: Faber, 1978), 19.

17- Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root", in *Nice Jewish Girls*, 81.

18- Thyme S.Seagull, "My Mother Was A Light Housekeeper", in Mazow, ed., 188.

19- Irena Klepfisz, "Resisting and Surviving America", 112.

20- Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1982).

21- Ben Halpern, "Antisemitism in the Perspective of Jewish History", in: Charles Herbert Stember et al., *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 297.

22- Daphne Merkin, "Dreaming of Hitler", *Esquire*, August 1989, 78.

23- Marjorie Sandor, "The Gittel", in Antler, ed., .268.

24- Schwartz, "The Opiate", 238.

25- Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot. Drama in Four Acts* (1908, 2nd ed. New York:Macmillan, 1914), 202-203.

26- Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief*. Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the *Jewish Daily Forward* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1971); see, for example, number three of the "Four rules for women" in July 1915: "If you've been cursed with growths of hair on your throat, cheeks or upper lip (...) don't forget that makes a bad impression. Go immediately to your druggist and for one dollar buy Wonderstone."

27- quoted in Volker Bischoff, Marino Mania, "*Melting Pot*- Mythen als Szenarien Amerikanischer Identität zur Zeit der *New Immigration*", in: *Nationale und Kulturelle Identität*. Studien zur Entwicklung des

kollektiven Bewußtseins in der Neuzeit, (Frankfurt/M: Bernard Giesen 1991), 526.

28- Vivian Gornick, *Fierce Attachments* (1987; London:Virago, 1988), 130-31.

29- On the social situation of Eastern European Jewish immigrants see Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars. Life and Culture on the Lower East Side*, 1890-1925 (New York, 1985); Susan A.Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl. Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y., London: 1990).

30- See also the various interior differences displayed in Meredith Tax' historical novels: *Rivington Street* (1982; New York:Avon Books, 1990); *Union Square* (1988; New York: Avon Books, 1990) or in May Sinclair, *The Changelings* (New York: Mc Graw Hill, 1955).

31- Anzia Yezierska, "America and I", in Antler, ed., 74.

32- Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", in: Anzia Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts & Other Stories* (New York: 1985), 209.

33- Hortense Calisher, "Old Stock", in Antler, ed., 142.

34- Calisher, "Old Stock", 143-144.

35- Adrienne Rich describes the fear of being identified with those who appeared still unassimilated as the anxiety to be drawn back into a world "that was messy, noisy, unpredictable, maybe poor." Invisibility should provide protection from the "real Jews" "who wanted to seize us, drag us back to the *shtetl*, the ghetto in its many manifestations." Rich, "Split at the Root", in *Nice Jewish Girls*, 81.

36- See for example John Higham, "American Anti-Semitism Historically Reconsidered", in *Jews in the Mind of America*, .237-258.

37- See also the discussion in David Gerber,ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History*, (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

38- Mennis, "Repeating History", in *Nice Jewish Girls*, 129.

39- See for example Joanna Kaplan's much anthologized story "Sour or Suntanned, It Makes No Difference", where Miriam decides that in the future "she would keep all her aliveness a secret."in Antler, ed., 208.