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TITLE: Constructing Jewish Immigrant Identity: The "Kaffireatnik" in South African Yiddish Literature

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CONSTRUCTING JEWISH IMMIGRANT IDENTITY

The "Kaffireatnik" in South African Yiddish Literature

Joseph Sherman

Although small gold deposits were found in the northern and eastern Transvaal in 1871, what radically changed the shape of South Africa was the discovery, on the farm Langlaagte in 1886, of surface deposits which persisted at depth. This gold series was initially found to stretch in a straight line for a staggering forty miles along the Witwatersrand, from Modderfontein in the east through Johannesburg in the centre to Randfontein in the west.

The development and production of the abundant but low-grade gold-bearing conglomerate demanded massive capital investment. Initially this came from South Africa's flourishing diamond industry; later it was augmented by extensive foreign investment attracted chiefly from Britain, France and Germany. One of the crucial requirements for making this investment profitable was the need to acquire "cheap" labour at low unit cost, a process that started well before, and intensified after, the Anglo-Boer War. From the outset the developing gold industry sought to exploit as workers the sub-continent's technically unskilled blacks. Contract labour almost immediately became the only participation permitted to blacks in the production of this vast wealth. The first mining law passed by Kruger's Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) in 1871 decreed that

> ... no coloured person may be a licence holder, or in any way connected with the working of the gold mines, except as a working man in the service of whites. (Saunders 1992:200)

As South Africa's rural blacks were gradually deprived of ownership and use of agricultural land, they migrated to the cities in search of money, a motive that also brought nearly fifty per cent of the black mine labour force from outside South Africa's borders. By passing a succession of restrictive laws to control black mineworkers, the state consciously sought to create, maintain, and perpetuate blacks as a group of migrant labourers deprived of any access to upward economic mobility. South Africa's social formation thus

divided the country's capital and labour along strictly racial lines.

Because the gold mining industry depended on its huge black labour force, the mining controllers were determined to regulate the areas in which these workers lived and spent their wages. For the duration of their terms of employment, they were housed and fed in open compounds in an attempt to prevent them from spending time in white towns nearby. Whatever purchases they needed to make were supplied by general dealers and trading stores situated on the mine grounds themselves; these included additional sources of food to supplement their inadequate mine rations. This arrangement ensured a virtual trade monopoly for those shopkeepers licensed by the mines.

Although the mineworkers' need for more food offered a promising economic opportunity, filling it was inherently problematic. Obviously required were retail food outlets situated on or near the mines and extending along the whole length of the Reef. Yet from the turn of the century white society viewed with contempt any occupation that provided basic services to blacks. In December 1916 the Johannesburg *Evening Chronicle* concisely articulated this attitude:

> A man who is content to serve food to kaffirs cannot expect to rank any higher than a kaffir, for what self-respecting white man would wait on a native at table? (cited in Titlestad 1991:135)

At the same time, white administration, determined to prevent the creation of a black middle class, refused trading licences to blacks. Consequently permission to operate this burgeoning chain of what became known as "kaffir eating houses" was granted to the only whites in South Africa prepared to exploit their commercial prospects: new immigrants existing on the outermost fringes of white society, chiefly Yiddish-speaking Jews from Lithuania. The occupation of eating-house keeper, with its complex division of despised labour, was consequently constructed, controlled and regulated as much socially as economically by the directors of the gold mining industry and the state acting in concert.

For providing this fundamental service, however, the Eastern European Jewish immigrants earned only pariah status. The money-class axis in the

British-dominated cities despised them as members of an impoverished working class, while the Afrikaners in the countryside, as Charles van Onselen notes, loathed Jews, as much as they later came to abhor Indian traders, because they "... not only lived off the people by buying cheaply and selling dearly, but were alien by virtue of their outlandish religions, their intercalary class positions, and their indeterminate skin colour" (Van Onselen 1996:275). Between 1893 and 1895, two separate reports to the Johannesburg Sanitary Department deplored the fact that

> There are a number of kaffir eating-houses in the town kept mostly by low-class Russians ... [who are] of most filthy habits and give no end of trouble. (cited in Titlestad 1991:135)

These so-called "low-class Russians" filled a need created in the South African urban economy by racial discrimination, and discovered in the process economic and social advantages stringently denied to blacks. Yet their own empowerment along a number of shifting socio-economic frontiers demanded that they construct for themselves an identity exclusively defined by the parameters of racism. In different ways, of course, new identity formation was forced upon *all* the peoples of South Africa, whether black or white. While the process was evolving among Jews, it was evolving among all South Africa's population groups as well. *All* whites and *all* blacks were undergoing a forced negotiation of identity. "Black" and "white" identities in South Africa were not pre-determined categories; those very labels were negotiated by all who were interpellated by them.[1] Evolutionary in nature, continuing through numerous mutations to the present day, this process of identity formation was certainly not identical for the different ethno-cultural groups subjected to it, least of all for the Jews. This paper focuses exclusively on one particular mode of adaptation forced upon only one segment of the South African Jewish population -- a singular group of Jewish immigrants who arrived in the half-century between 1880 and 1930 who, in significant numbers, sought work in the concession stores where they could work for and among Yiddish-speaking Jews and, as they thought, earn a living and perhaps prosper without having to face the trauma of engaging in other work which would demand

learning a new language and being employed by and working alongside potentially antisemitic South African Gentiles. The dislocating confrontation of these shop assistants with South African racial discrimination in the context of their past personal experience in Eastern Europe was *sui generis*.

The tricky process of negotiating this identity, chiefly in the period between the Wars when the eating-house trade was at its peak, is perceptively documented in much South African Yiddish literature. In a sketch entitled "Gold and Diamonds" that articulates a strong social protest through a generalised stereotype, Richard Feldman charts the process by which an unskilled immigrant Jew, adrift in a discriminatory society, is coerced into a racist reconstruction of who and what he is:

> ... alone in a new land, without a language, without friends, without a trade. ... he decided to go from door to door seeking work: it made no difference what sort of work. Surely they would accept him for work done by blacks -- he was no worse than a black.
>
> For two days he wandered round. They took him on nowhere. The one person who showed an interest in him gave him to understand that ... [s]o great a degradation as that of a European taking the place of a black could not be allowed. (Feldman, p.75)[2]

This young immigrant, clearly aware of his vocational disadvantages, at first perceives the existence of class distinction purely in terms of education and training, and is perfectly willing to do unskilled labour. Immediately the person he consults teaches him the first lesson of racist South Africa: any work he takes must maintain "the prestige of the white race". Under these conditions, the only occupation open to him is "a job which served blacks" (ibid.), in other words, as an assistant in the socially tainted eating-houses. Given the intense competition generated by the trade, and the determination of owners to make as much profit from as little outlay as possible, these shops deservedly earned a bad reputation from the disgusting food they sold, the unhygienic conditions under which this food was prepared,

and the dishonesty of their managers. They engaged not only in legal meat supply and general dealing, but also in Illicit Gold Buying (IGB), prostitution, gambling and illegal liquor (Titlestad 1991:27). Feldman's narrator despondently describes the locale where the hopes of so many young Jewish immigrants would wither:

> [The eating-house] was the very ugliest place in which people could eat. ... It was dark and dirty, and the foul stench unbearable, nauseating to the point of fainting. ... But one grows accustomed to everything. (Feldman, p.75)

While a large number of eating-houses were licensed for operation in urban areas by Reef municipalities, the most profitable of them were those privately operated on mining property granted by concession to entrepreneurs with sufficient capital: "they generated virtually three quarters of all eating-house trade as a consequence of their size and favourable location" (Titlestad 1991:25). Almost all were owned by Jews who, having "made good" themselves, ruthlessly exploited the severely disadvantaged newly-arrived Jewish immigrants for reasons that Feldman's narrator bitterly recognises:

> ... of the hundreds of young folk, the majority from Lithuania, who arrived every month, the greater number were unskilled, and every one of them turned to the black-trade shops on the Reef ... The young people would plead: take us in, we will work without pay. We need only food and a place to sleep. We cannot remain unemployed any longer. (Feldman, p.75)

In the eating-houses the new assistants most keenly felt the dislocating irony of finding themselves part of a social formation that left them marginalised by the white ruling class but gave them instant superiority over black workers. They learnt to negotiate their new racially constructed identities through a conflict on two levels: tension between themselves and their materially empowered Jewish employers, and contention between crooked white assistants and their captive black customers.

Such a system of institutionalised exploitation inevitably breeds corrupting extremes of behaviour in the quest for identity reconstruction. Where traditional Eastern European Jewish life theoretically valorised spiritual over material riches, engagement with South Africa's socio-economic life reversed this value system. The new immigrants found that the learning and piety of the Old Home were totally devalued in the New. The relentless pursuit of material substance for social purchase by newly-affluent South African Jews led them to trash their cultural centre, and treat with scorn those who in an exclusively Jewish social formation had been the cynosure of respect. In Shmuel Leibowitz's 1930s tale "Bereh", one of the eating-house employees is a former *yeshive bokher* who finds commercial degradation preferable to cultural contempt:

> ... the boss took on a young Jew, an ex-teacher, who had first been engaged, here in Africa, in pedagoguery, which meant that he had to endure frightful humiliation from leaders of the congregation, and intrigues and spite from the children's mothers. Then he decided that if he had to deal with boors, he would rather deal with one than with a crowd of them. So he volunteered for the Jewish "foreign legion" whose cadres are denigrated with the insulting name *eatniks*. (Leibowitz, pp.118-19)

While to work, empathise and protest with black people was voluntarily to choose a continued condition of social degradation and economic deprivation that the whole trauma of emigration had been designed to eliminate, skilful exploitation of South Africa's socio-economic system could raise the white working-class Jew above the despised black labourer, and enable him to compete for power with the governing Gentile. However, to rise by virtue of "race" above the lot that for most Jews had been inescapable in Eastern Europe meant siding unequivocally with the exploiters. It meant first learning, through daily racist interaction, to despise -- as they themselves had once been despised -- the majority of the population who were defined *a priori* as inferior. Then it meant learning to master an entire range of dishonest

practices in hopes of eventually escaping the bondage of being an exploitee for the freedom of becoming an exploiter oneself. Feldman's sensitive young narrator paints the picture starkly:

> He asked his friend why they waited until the meat began to stink before they brought it into the eater. The answer was simple: when the meat was more or less fresh, it had a price; when it was old and the smell strong, one got it almost for nothing. And according to the understanding of the *eatniks*, nothing was too bad for the blacks. One did not regard them as people ... One grows accustomed to everything ... He worked from seven in the morning until eight at night and often the whole day on Sunday. ... for the average employee the *eater* was merely the school through which he had to pass in order to achieve his ideal: to become himself an owner at the first and best opportunity. (Feldman, pp.75-76)

This repositioning demanded enormous moral and cultural shifts from Yiddish-speaking immigrants. They had to modify not only their ethics but their language. Just as for centuries in Europe Yiddish had been a despised "jargon", so in South Africa it was stigmatised by both hostile Gentiles and by the long-settled Anglo-German Jewish establishment. To enable itself to render the South African experience in both speech and writing, Yiddish was forced to mutate linguistically as rapidly as its speakers mutated socially. South African Yiddish began by incorporating words from indigenous South African languages, an annexation which, as Dan Jacobson has noted, "reveals the very nature of the enterprise in which these Yiddish writers were engaged ... the yawning racial and cultural disjunctions their work confronted, embodied and attempted to bridge" (see Sherman 1987:xiii). The language developed a particular South African Yiddish discourse to define and displace the moral discomforts of racism. In Eastern Europe, Yiddish had accommodated Jewish powerlessness to unattainable Gentile power through linguistic structures that rigorously separated what was "theirs" -- the Gentiles' -- from what was "ours" -- the Jews' (Weinreich 1980:193ff.). In South Africa

this distinction could no longer be maintained, since what the colonising Gentiles had earlier acquired was what the immigrant Jews now wanted. The linguistic distinction had therefore to be radically reconstructed: in South Africa, "ours" became what was "white", and "theirs" what was "black". As South African immigrant Jews steadily developed racist attitudes, South African Yiddish absorbed the country's all-pervasive racist discourse. It fashioned many neologisms to denigrate Englishmen, Afrikaners, and above all blacks. Chief among the latter was the word *kaffir* which, by verbally asserting racial superiority, was made to serve in Yiddish the same denigratory function it performed in both English and Afrikaans.

Kaffireater became a South African Yiddish neologism for a "kaffir eating-house". The addition of the Russian noun of agency suffix *-nik* turned the word into a pejorative description of those who worked there, equating *kaffireatniks*, in both speech and service, with blacks. Equally importantly, the word functioned as a useful distancing device through which settled Jews who had made money and become upwardly mobile could dissociate themselves from their impoverished working-class immigrant brethren. Because of his socio-economic plight and his ubiquitous existence, the *kaffireatnik*, as the embodied converging-point of these multiple ambiguities, predictably became the chief literary trope for this particular immigrant Jewish experience that South African Yiddish writing scrupulously recorded.

This experience was far more nuanced and complex than a simple class-based analysis will permit. It involved, among other issues, the construction of the concepts of "whiteness" and "blackness" in South Africa, the redefinition of traditional Jewish gender roles, and to a lesser but equally important extent, the redirection of sexuality away from the traditional Jewish nuclear family into areas that encompassed, *inter alia*, miscegenation, promiscuity, and repressed homosexuality. Consequently the language employed throughout this paper is deliberately male-gendered, because as early as 1903 Johannesburg municipal by-laws specifically prohibited white women from becoming eating-house traders, just as they prohibited black women from becoming underground mine workers. The same municipal ordinances prohibited from even entering eating-houses white females, irrespective of age, as well as prepubescent white male children, namely those under the age of fourteen

(Titlestad 1991:101).

Although the Jewish *kaffireatniks* were themselves the victims of outrageous exploitation by their Jewish employers, they were paid to exploit people even worse off than they were. This recognition enabled them to devise particular strategies to preserve some measure of self-respect. The Jewish *kaffireatniks* gave Yiddish, their mother tongue, a status it never enjoyed among other South African whites, either Jewish or Gentile, by making it among themselves an eating-house *lingua franca* that excluded blacks. At the same time, by ear and without formal instruction, they acquired the ability to communicate in Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and other African languages spoken by the mineworkers, in this way further empowering themselves linguistically over blacks. The attitudes of immigrant Eastern European Jews came to be shaped by what they perceived as a society uncompromisingly divided between moneyed whites and labouring blacks. As Dan Jacobson points out, some saw blacks "as immigrants themselves, lost in the white society to which they have been summoned, bewildered, dislocated, outcast, unable to comprehend the languages in which they are addressed" (see Sherman 1987:xi). Bolstered by a sense that, inferior as they were regarded, there were others even more inferior, the *kaffireatniks* were, in their own mean world, consequently able to compensate to some extent for the way in which the greater white South African society marginalised them.

The exploitative injustice of this social *bouleversement* impinged harshly on the conscience and consciousness of many Jews. Some were glad enough to profit from its perversions. Others revolted against them with shock. Those who did not transfer their sense of injustice into political activism became complicit to lesser or greater degrees with an exploitative system they subsequently tried to "write away". Like the Yiddish language, South African Yiddish literature remained closed to all but immigrant Jews themselves. Since it could therefore be read only by fellow Yiddish speakers who knew where they were and what they were doing, writers could speak with an openness they might not have found comfortable had they been writing in English or Afrikaans. Although they dared not publicly attribute their success to unabashed exploitation of blacks and fellow Jews in the ugly concession stores, the pervasiveness of the *kaffireatnik* theme in their writing proves that they were

fully aware of, and often guilty about, the ladder they were forced to climb.

Few of the eating-house assistants ever earned enough to support families adequately, let alone to save enough to quit their own exploitation. In 1915 the *Rand Daily Mail* claimed that "the kaffir eating-house trade pure and simple is not sufficient to allow a decent living being made by more than a fifth of those engaged in it" (cited in Titlestad 1991:61). Hence the homeless bachelor, deprived of kindred and comfort, became a stock figure in South African Yiddish literature. Presented there, such minimal identity as he is able to construct for himself removes him not merely from white society at large, but specifically from the traditional Jewish community, underpinned as it is by a man's patriarchal role as head of a nuclear family. The unmarried *kaffireatnik*'s transitory relationships with women are invariably depicted as fornicatory gratifications of fleshly appetites; the demands of his job reconstruct his gendering to fulfil what Jewish tradition customarily defines as the female role of providing food; and his sexual identity must seek its chief expression within an all-male environment. As South African Yiddish literature depicts him, the *kaffireatnik* thus finds himself perpetually in a Jewish male identity crisis. Deprived of all positive reinforcement, living a wasted life that erodes his self-esteem, he is made dependent on his employer's goodwill. He carries the stigmata of the eating-house figuratively and literally upon him everywhere. In 1989 an interviewee, recalling the eating-houses of the 1930s, remembered that "[if] you met an *eatnik* in the road, you knew by the smell that came from him that he worked in the *kaffireater*" (cited in Titlestad 1991:71).

In South Africa's racist hierarchy the *eatnik* existed on a shifting and ever-vulnerable frontier: "white" in skin, his trade made him simultaneously distinct from, yet one with, the blacks he exploited; the same racist pejoratives were used to classify him. He became a "white kaffir", a term of greater contempt even than "poor white". However much destitution during the Great Depression of 1929-1932 may have led a "poor white" to betray his race/class by seeking whatever work he could find, state-created employment was designed to keep him "above" the blacks. A "white kaffir", on the other hand, especially as he was almost always a Jew, was socially irredeemable. Instructive in this regard is the overt racism uttered throughout Mendel

Tabatznik's "Eating-House Payday", a sketch that uses the eating-house as a metonym for exploring the mutations Jewish identity is forced to undergo in a society divided along racial lines. The worst disparagement that bigoted Charlie can devise for his humane opponent Kalman is to assert, "There could be no doubt but that Kalmanke also had the soul of a kaffir" (Tabatznik, p.163). On the surface, this thought offensively verbalises stock supremacist prejudices. On a deeper level, though, it unconsciously encodes a recognition of the shared though different experience of exploitation between white Jewish shop assistants and black migrant labourers. What irrevocably sundered them, of course, was the socially constructed and legislatively enforced racial divide.

The situation's complex ambiguities emerge most clearly from a close reading of Shmuel Leibowitz's "Bereh", a short story that microscopically examines the empty fringe life of disempowered Eastern European immigrants -- Jews, and to a lesser extent Yugoslavs (see Titlestad 1991:151-59). By virtue of the documentary intensity with which this tale explores the nullity of one individual life -- that of the eponymous character -- Bereh's function is synecdochic. His richly-textured history is a crucial socio-literary document that repays detailed analysis. Early on in this tale we learn that part of the *eatnik*'s wage is free board and lodging:

> ... [Bereh] makes his way to his little room for a night's rest. There, on an iron cot, the other *eatnik*, Dzinah the Yugoslav, has long been asleep. When Bereh enters, he lights a candle and undresses quietly so as not to awaken his room-mate. He hangs his clothes on a nail in a corner and covers them with a coarse blanket. In the room the air is thick, stale and hot -- a blend of bloodied clothing and sweat. A strange odour emanates from the Yugoslav, because he sleeps in the same shirt in which he works. He has a curious concept of thrift. He maintains that it costs him less to wear out a shirt to shreds on his body and then buy a new one, than to have it washed every week and pay for the soap. (Leibowitz, p.113)

The apparent perk is here unmasked as extended exploitation. Their employer gains more hours of work from his assistants by housing them on his premises, but to make even more profit, he provides them with substandard living conditions. Bedded like beasts, the eating-house assistants are systematically deprived of all sense of personal worth, as the wardrobe arrangements and the Yugoslav's "curious concept of thrift" reveal. The socio-economic marginalisation that first drove such men into eating-house work is entrenched by their abusive conditions of employment. In the minds of their bosses, their labour function renders them indistinguishable from blacks, so any impositions, however self-serving, will do:

> ... in the big room behind the shops ... [a] group of employees sits at the oilcloth-covered table, smoking free cigarettes, playing cards, reading, and writing letters to far-flung homes. The air in the room is full of smoke, heavy, stale. It often happens, when the warehouses are packed with merchandise, that bales of woollen blankets are dumped along the walls of the dining-room. "Never mind, it's not for more than a few days," the boss murmurs comfortingly with his soft little tongue. And the air in the dining-room grows more stuffy. (ibid., p.111)

In a social formation where all values have prices, poverty is degradation and squalor the correlative of depravity. Bereh knows only too well that the unforgivable white South African offence is getting into financial difficulty (Leibowitz, p.114). Himself a failed employer, he is ineluctably demeaned into exploited employee. A caustic narrative voice recognises that an exploitative society intensifies each man's greed and self interest: "Everybody pulls the scanty blanket to himself" (ibid.).

Even in exploitation, though, racial distinctions are rigorously maintained. However much the *kaffireatniks* may work in dehumanising conditions, they do not have to eat the offal which is the staple fare served to their black customers. As early as 1909, the *Transvaal Leader* lauded in eating-house owners that "genius for ... preparing white men's waste to meet the black man's wants" (cited in Titlestad 1991:60) vividly illustrated by a

description of Bereh's disgusting diligence:

> ... when the intestines get to stink so badly that even the tomcat starts sneezing ... [Bereh] carries them out into the yard, shoves them into old tin cans, around which fat golden flies from half Africa are buzzing, washes them, sews together the decomposed pieces, cuts the rotten parts which are beyond repair into small bits, adds to them pieces of meat, onion, rice and potatoes, sprinkles handfuls of strong curry and white pepper over the mixture, boils it in paraffin tins and dishes it out on metal plates to hungry black workers. (Leibowitz, p.118)

His sole motivation for this offensive industry is an appallingly self-*negatory affirmation of capitalist labour exploitation*: "*Let a man do his work* and make a loaf of bread for the boss" (ibid., p.120).

People reduced to objects on both sides of the racial divide find it a short step from commercial to sexual abuse:

> A young black girl blunders into the midst of the Christmas Eve uproar. Her employer has sent her to buy a loaf of bread. As soon as she enters the eating-house door ... [y]oung boys ... push her into a corner, pinch her and stroke her. The boys tighten their thick lips with lust and emit wild, grating whistles like the muffled braying of young donkeys.
>
> When this tumult reaches Bereh in his butchery he suddenly throws up his work, walks out to the young customer, personally sells her the loaf of bread and then, as if unintentionally, grabs her firm protruding breasts, gives them a squeeze, and bursts out laughing.
>
> The black girl, with wild bewilderment in her big, childlike eyes, stares at the old man and shakes her head from right to left ... and gives a thin shriek: "*Indala kangaka, iseyisifebe*!" [Zulu: "So old, and still such a bad person!"]. Old Bereh gives a wolfish smile and says in the piping voice of a

> child, "*Nikisi la mntanami -- amazambane kuphela*" [Zulu: "There's nothing there, my child -- only potatoes"], and makes his way back to his customers in the butchery. (ibid., pp.122-23)

What the writing obviously intends the reader to find most offensive here is not the lust of sex-starved black youths but the casual sexual insult of a seventy-five-year old man. Disturbingly interpellated by racist discourse, however, the subtext of this depiction of raunchy blacks demands the reader's complicity in finding Bereh disgusting more because he is breaking caste than because he is behaving indecently. Authorial gaze has already sited Bereh's overcharged libido in a male-centred daily grind that arouses "[t]he fantasy of an old bachelor's lust ... Spicy obscenities pour out of him as from a leaky sack" (p.112). What this gaze's recoil registers also, though, is a subconscious privileging of whites. It takes for granted that while "primitive" blacks "naturally" treat every young woman as a sex object, a white man should be more "civilised". Moreover Bereh's facility with language enables him to turn horseplay into empowerment. Having abused the young woman physically, he also abuses her verbally by undercutting her outraged protest with a lewdly witty retort in Zulu. Both forms of abuse exploit the racial advantage granted by a white skin.

Another form of this socially conditioned denigration is dramatised in "Eating-House Payday" through the crook Charlie's outburst against the defence by Kalman, a fellow *eatnik*, of his black victim:

> "The insolence of a bloody greenhorn to take the part of a black kaffir! ... I suppose you think that way you'll curry favour with the blacks, but I'm telling you you're making a mistake, you bloody lout! You don't know yet that the kinder you are to a kaffir the more he becomes your enemy. You're still a green animal -- you obviously think they're also human beings. They're just wild *bobbejaans* [Afrikaans: baboons] and that's how you have to treat them!" (Tabatznik, p.164)

Kalman is the catalyst for an authorial protest against the moral corruptions

of eating-house life which, having led Charlie wholly to internalise all the values of the racist society he inhabits, have constructed him as a racist himself: "The eating-house had been a good school for him," the narrative voice observes as it directs the reader, through Kalman, to a shocked recognition that all trace of Jewish ethical values in Charlie have been entirely erased: "[his] tricks had eaten their way into his soul, like filth into a dirty body" (ibid., p.165).

The creation and perpetuation of fear, whether of real or imagined retribution, is an essential instrument for maintaining the *status quo* in a racist society. Assistant and customer are alike ruled by an amorphous but omnipresent menace. The white *eatnik*'s fear of losing his job in a highly competitive trade is compounded by his dread of losing the self-conferred esteem he enjoys there. Black buyers, subordinated by legal enactment, are kept submissive by unquantifiable terrors of the "white man" whose powers appear limitless. Inability on both sides either to understand or to control the forces directing them escalates the tension between one class of exploitees and another:

> At the ex-teacher's counter ... after every purchase there is a bid for *bhansela* [Zulu: gratuity]. At this counter, as if cast from iron, has been standing for quite a while a massive sweaty *umXhosa* [Zulu: a man of the Xhosa people]. He waves his powerful naked arms ... and firmly demands his share of sweets. The ex-teacher gives him a handful of peanuts. The *umXhosa* dashes them violently aside and roars, "I don't eat beans! I am *umXhosa*, not *imbuzana*!" [Zulu: a little goat] In his anger he drops half his red blanket and is left with his shoulders and thighs exposed like an angry young Greek god ... The young man realises that he will not easily rid himself of the black, so he takes out a handful of floury sweets and hands it over. Satisfied, the *umXhosa* takes the sweets in both hands, picks up another candy which has fallen on the floor, and, in great joy, his muscular body breaks into a dance; he leaps into the air like a young colt. (Leibowitz, p.122)

A racial power struggle of potentially serious proportions is enacted here. The young ex-teacher is given no motive for withholding the *bhansela* but the desire to exercise petty power over one more powerless than himself: like all bullies, he gives in only when challenged. In standing up for himself, the black man unknowingly reveals the latent power that could destroy this vicious cycle of exploitation. However, the interpellatory operation of the social system short-circuits and disables that power. Like "an angry young Greek god" with muscular "shoulders and thighs" and the vigour of "a young colt", the mineworker, in the nakedness of his powerful body and the fearlessness of his self-assertion, embodies dormant black revolt against white oppression. Yet he unleashes his might over a matter which confirms him as a dependent child. The narrative renders this fictionally-depicted *umXhosa* virtually unconscious of the larger exploitation he suffers, and reduces his incipient fight for justice into a trivial determination to get a free handout. Maintaining him as a minor in both his demand and its satisfaction, the system -- as the narrative shows -- makes him complicit with his own exploitation. Thus is the racist hegemony maintained.

"Eating-House Payday" also explores the way the exploited Jewish *kaffireatnik* manipulates infantilised mine labourers in a degrading attempt to wrench both profit and self-esteem from his own peripheral condition:

> Today is Charlie's big day. Today he is the master here. He knows that ... his employer relies absolutely on him, but to be properly rewarded for such drudgery he also knows he must look out for himself. He runs from one labourer to another, cracks witticisms over their naked black shoulders. Then suddenly he flies into a rage and starts yelling abuse at a black man, who stands trembling. Charlie knows that with blacks one has to work with both hands: one hand must stroke and the other must strike ... (Tabatznik, p.162)

Kaffireatniks are shown here to be corrupted by several converging forces. Their own social marginalisation makes the temptation to assert superiority over reified blacks irresistible; awareness that they are exploited themselves

drives them to cheat their cheaters. Ironically, Bereh was himself ruined in exactly this way: his "employees began to help themselves to a share of his profits ... The golden pounds of the turnover, clinging to their sticky fingers, sprang from till to private pocket" (Leibowitz, p.114). Like the blacks, the eating-house assistants keep at their foul work through dependency not loyalty: "The bosses suck the marrow from your bones and then send you to hell" (ibid., pp.111-12).

The South African eating-house system worked through the abuse of the powerless by the powerful, and the chief source of power is money. For one day in the month, it empowers even the degraded mineworkers who on pay day "come in [to the eating-house] with greater assurance and self confidence than usual" (Tabatznik, p.161). In the white *kaffireatniks* the boss, as dispenser or withholder of livelihoods, automatically inspires fear and obedience:

> When the chief assistant sees the boss, he applies himself to his neglected work with great alacrity. The boss graciously deigns to say "Good morning" as he edges himself into his office. Bereh follows him. Soon a squeak is heard from the iron safe. One hears money being counted out. (Leibowitz, p.109)

All-powerful only in his sordid shop, the boss's consciousness of his wider social inferiority is manifest in the furtive movements made by this man, whom his employees "wheedle" and "flatter" (ibid.). "Eating-House Payday" confirms this entrapment by sketching its obverse. Where Charlie's only defence for his dishonesty is that "it's done everywhere" (Tabatznik, p.164), Kalman's probity elevates him above fear of dismissal: "No one can threaten me with bosses. They can all go and whistle" (ibid., p.165). Kalman is young and strong, physical signifiers respectively of an independence and integrity rooted in Jewish ethics and hence impervious to the pressures of the racist society he inhabits. He counters Charlie's dishonesty by presenting blacks as human beings, invoking in support central Jewish tenets of behaviour: "In Africa and in the eating-house, a man should also be a *mentsh* ... You should always fear God, both in private and in public" (ibid., p.165). This unassailable sense of Jewish identity further enables Kalman to assimilate into Jewish maleness

the potentially feminising activity of cooking food:

> Kalman reigns over the ranges enrobed in a big apron with wide blue and white stripes. It has occurred to him more than once that the priests at the Altar were once also similarly enrobed, which is probably how the prayer-shawl evolved. (Tabatznik, p.162)

His moral convictions compel Kalman openly to describe the incident to his employer Fleischer, and to offer his resignation: "With the truth, learned people say, one goes far ... If you want to sack me because of this, I won't hold it against you" (ibid.). In a society where identity is referential, though, self-interest can turn even ethical principle to financial advantage. Candidly validating his rectitude, Kalman naïvely opens himself to even more devious exploitation: "Mr Fleischer heard Kalman's story out with both impatience and curiosity. ... such a youth, so strong and so honest, would be useful to him ..." (ibid., pp.165-66). In trade founded largely on fraud, the bosses understandably value those who conscientiously rob for them. Not as naïve as Kalman, because he is not as honest, Bereh by contrast can crudely dismiss this type of self-interested hypocrite who "tries to wheedle him into renting one of his small shops which has been standing empty for a long time" (Leibowitz, p.115). But this would-be manipulator's lip-service to a supposed generosity his own practice has long vitiated is complemented by Bereh's sense of his own futility:

> "... when there won't be enough strength to earn a living, I'll sharpen the chopper, lay my stupid old head on the block and make sparks fly!" And to emphasise his words, he splits a pig's-head in two on the block so that bits of brain and bone fly ceiling-high. And sadly, Bereh adds, "And behind my coffin will trudge a dozen prostitutes, a few bastards, some coloured newspaper sellers and a lame dog."
>
> "A Jew doesn't talk like that," snaps the *landsman* indignantly, and without a good morning he takes himself off.

(Leibowitz, p.116)

Sadly, in the eating-house world of South Africa, a Jew *did* talk like that: for him, the filthy labour alone separated meaningless life from obliterating death.

What happens to Jews who prosper and rise upward through eating-house trade is pointed in three different presentations of "bosses". Kalman's employer, Fleischer, presumably understands Charlie's duplicity because he has practised it himself. Grasping clearly that "not only the blacks have to watch out for Charlie" (ibid.), he seeks to bribe Kalman into spying for him with a promise of future advancement: "It's a good opening here. With me, one can work oneself up ..." (ibid., p.166). Since Fleischer's personal sense of Jewish identity has obviously never made unwelcome moral demands on him, he cannot perceive that Kalman's iron sense of self is not susceptible to material, social or racial influence. Bereh's boss preserves the outward forms of Jewish observance, like keeping Passover and going to synagogue on the High Holy Days, in pursuit of a visible respectability that hopes to win acceptance from the white Gentile world. The social usefulness of public manifestations of Jewish religiosity is brutally spelled out by the rich relative to whom Feldman's helpless narrator turns for assistance. Having "made good" himself, this acculturated former immigrant now has a violent hatred of all "greenhorns", not only because he sees in them a mirror image of a personal past he wishes to obliterate, but also because he fears that close contact with them might diminish the new-found status his wealth has bought:

> He was one of the most substantial men in the city, a trustee of the synagogue, the chairman of the *Talmud Torah*, a good Zionist, who often put his hand into his pocket, a member of the committee of the orphanage and the old-age home, and so on and so on. ... Today's immigrants were wild people. They brought weird ideas with them. He had driven them all away,and did not want to have any further dealings with any greenhorns. (Feldman, p.74)

These "weird ideas", obviously socialist principles fostered by the *Bund*, are

anathema to the capitalist values this *parvenu* now wholly espouses. His exploitation of communal offices have replaced black trade as his handle on social advancement. The frontier may have shifted, but identity war goes on.

Quintessentially an *urban* phenomenon, the eating-house trade alienates its practitioners: in the city, "Bereh wanders aimlessly round the streets, looking up at the tall buildings which do not belong to him. He walks totally alone and has no idea of what to do with himself" (Leibowitz, p.110). His only escape is to don costumes and play out a charade:

> [In] one of his best suits, made by the most expensive tailor in town ... [Bereh] dons a hat with a narrow brim and a blue feather in the band. Tilting it rakishly to one side, he pulls a thick cigar from his top pocket, bites off the tip with his false teeth, and lights it. (ibid., p.108).

Taking himself off for a day of ephemeral pleasures, he buys a pricey seat in Johannesburg's old Colosseum Theatre, an ambience deliberately designed to nurture his pathetic fantasy:

> Bereh eases off his tight shoes, unbuttons his collar and loosens his tie. Soft music plays drowsily ... Occasionally his nap is disturbed. A soft woman's voice, a light velvet touch on his shoulder, wakes him gently and says, "Excuse me, sir," as he is asked to be so good as to let someone through to a seat in his row ... A warm feeling of satisfaction suddenly possesses Bereh's old heart, and a sharp thought forms: "That means that you, old man, are still a something. You are here. You are not a vacant numbered seat one can ignore. They ask you and they thank you. In your hands lies the option -- if you want it, you let the perfumed woman past; if you don't want it, she must wait. So, then, put on your shoes, light up a cigar, and show that you are you -- Bereh, a gentleman of first importance." (Leibowitz, p.110)

This is why, through all his different constructions of self, Bereh unwaveringly cuts himself off from any trace of a definable Jewish identity. Not surprisingly, therefore, his old age becomes a self-mocking travesty of the different roles he revelled in as a youth. As a handsome young man, ardently desired alike by Jewish *shtetl* girls (Leibowitz, p.109) and the mistresses of Russian generals (p.112), he enjoyed his virile, dishonourable life in the Tsar's army. As an old man, he is reduced to hiring "nieces" and "hairdressers" from among the loose women of Johannesburg (p.109), while his fading toughness asserts itself in the pitiable performance of circus tricks for the entertainment of black drovers (p.117). As an employer, he sought the favour of those who worked for him with a generosity that bordered on the sycophantic (p.113). Degraded in old age to just another employee, he buys the camaraderie of his fellow *eatniks* with food, rejoicing that "they have no respect for his age, but treat him as one of the boys" (p.111). Having denied traditional Jewish communality by refusing to marry, from his self-chosen promiscuity, "Bereh acquired a Gentile heir" who is a total stranger to him (p.114). All religious commitment to Judaism is alien to him: "Every Friday night, when pious Jews walk slowly back from synagogue, Bereh hurries to the dog-races" (p.119); with wry witticisms he evades all attempts to coax him into a synagogue even on *Rosheshone* (pp.120-21). Professing that all this "means less than nothing", he feels the absence of familial ties only competitively, when his fellow-*eatniks* proudly display New Year greeting cards *from their relatives overseas*. All he can do to save face is ruefully to fish out a tattered card from a long-forgotten sister (p.120). The single time Bereh is touched by any sense of being Jewish is in the face of Greyshirt antisemitism, and then his rebuke to his fellow Jews is exclusively physical: "It's a sin for the earth to carry a young man that can't use himself" (p.119). His attempts at bonding with his black helpers by speaking their language (p.111) and giving them Christmas gifts bizarrely stresses merely the dual isolation of racial segregation and ethnic difference:

> To one he gives his tight shoes, to another a suit; the cook gets his old gramophone with Yiddish records. At night, when the blacks cook their evening meal over the red hot coals, they wind

> up the gramophone and play it enthusiastically. They stretch out on the ground, on the trampled grass near the shop, slowly eat the pieces of fatty meat, and shake their black, woolly heads in time to the music of *A Chazen a Shikkur* or *Yiddishe Mamma*. (Leibowitz, p. 121)

The sole conduit through which Bereh can negotiate his marginal identity is food. In town on his day off, he validates himself in an up-market café by ordering "an omelette with four eggs [and] coffee whitened with thick cream" (Leibowitz, p.109). To compensate for his failure to find some prostitutes, he goes to a Jewish restaurant to eat "double portions of the home-made, peppery dishes" which he "wolfs down with huge appetite" (p.110). At the end, he seeks through food to stave off awareness of his frailty: "when a wave of nausea overwhelms him", he engorges an entire tin of sardines, a whole tomato, and a piece of fried and salted beef, "and feels strong again, as in the good years of his youth" (p.118). Food alone tenuously connects Bereh to a wholly exterior Jewishness. On the Day of Atonement, the narrative voice notes ironically, his understanding of the sacrifice of *kapores* is confined to "wolf[ing] down half a hen when Jews eat the meal before the fast, and devour[ing] the other half when the fast is broken" (p.121). While he gormandises at his boss's *Seder* every Passover, the authorial gaze trenchantly situates the *Seder* table as the central emblem of Bereh's nullity as both man and Jew:

> On the well-appointed table everything is perfectly prepared. Decanters of Israeli wine sparkle ... Candles are alight. Golden goblets are shining. The boss, in a new hat, makes *Kiddush* from the *Siddur*. Bereh stands erect, at attention, as in the good old days on parade in the Tsar's time. He bites off a piece of *matzo* and munches it without relish. But when the platters of fragrant dishes start appearing, he revives; he starts paying compliments right and left to the boss's wife ... (Leibowitz, p.121)

Significant only as a grand meal, this feast's attenuated ritual calls forth

from Bereh a response directly antithetical to Eastern European Jewishness, one learnt in the "good old days" of the Tsar's military parades. Vestigial religious associations are awakened in Bereh solely by the filthy functions of the eating-house:

> [Bereh] gets ready for the real stuff, which brings joy to his heart and light to his eyes. ... Two coloured assistants ... drag the offal over the ground, and a trail of animal blood zigzags through the dust. Bereh ... demands an ox's great intestine, the one that looks like honeycomb. Grabbing it with both hands, he throws it up and, catching it, raises it as a Torah scroll is raised for wrapping after it has been read in the synagogue, and hangs it up in the east side of the butchery. Then he takes a long knife and starts slicing with it. (Leibowitz, p.117)

So complete is Bereh's self-erasure that the offal in the *kaffireater* now assumes a perverted religious significance for him. His existence thus becomes exclusively predicated on, and wholly bound up with, his foul work. Physically and sensually, it alone provides his sole link with life, his only way of avoiding confrontation with the fact that "at night he covers himself with two coats and cannot get warm" (ibid., p.118).

Marginalised from wider white society by serving food to blacks, he is also displaced from traditional signifiers of Jewish male identity. He manages his boss's eating-house less like a man conducting a business than a woman running a home, in a grotesque parody of the *eyshes khayil*, the Woman of Virtue praised in Proverbs 31:10-28: he too rises while it is still night, wakes his assistants, feeds the cat, kills the flies, cuts up the meat and supervises the kitchen (ibid., pp.116-17). In the activities of his daily life he is, in traditional Jewish terms, playing an increasingly feminised role which deprives him of one identity without replacing it with another equally meaningful.

Because Kalman is physically young and morally strong, he can openly denounce his trade's criminality: "I couldn't believe that people could be so corrupt as to cheat a poor black man, who toils so hard for his few bitter

pennies" (Tabatznik, pp.165-66). Bereh, by contrast, is immovably tied to his life of exploitation as both perpetrator and victim. The society that spawned the eating-house has also made it his terminal point. *Déclassé* among whites, prohibited from identification with blacks, lacking commitment to shared victimisation, Bereh is the disturbing embodiment of the displaced South African immigrant Jew. Kalman's outraged sense of justice, on the other hand, articulates the possibility of breaking the grip of exploitation. His empathy with the institutionally deprived suggests possibilities of developing that kind of solidarity between marginalised victims of discrimination across the racial divide in an urban environment which, as has recently been shown, once naturally developed in the country. There in the 1920s, as Charles van Onselen records, a Jewish *smous* named Hersch Gabbe, working equally hard to make his pile in order to get out, nevertheless "readily accepted invitations to spend an evening with black peasants [and] was clearly more at home with his BaSotho hosts than across the way ... where ... thinly-veiled [Afrikaner] anti-Semitism relegated him to the barn for the night" (Van Onselen 1996:113).

Tabatznik's vision, though, remains nothing more than a naïve idealisation. Formal and informal racial discrimination is more easily implemented in pent-up cities than in scattered rural settlements. Jewish *kaffireatniks* who did not make enough money to buy their way up the urban social ladder were in the end compelled to live out their marginalised existence on a frontier ironically but indelibly marked "For Whites Only".

NOTES

1. Since all identities are fluid, the radical experience of identity transformation I am examining here was felt equally by people flooding into the city who spoke Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana and Afrikaans, for example, all of whom were ultimately slotted into very different racial and class categories. Similarly, immigrants to South Africa from the United Kingdom -- English, Scots, Irish and Welsh -- also had their cultural differences erased in a process that made them part of an artificially constructed entity labelled "white" and "English speaking". The entire process was played out along a continuously shifting frontier.

2. For the reader's convenience, the original Yiddish stories cited in this paper are referenced throughout in their authors' names, but with page references from their English translations in Sherman 1987. The sources of the Yiddish texts are given detailed citation in the reference list.

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