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Between Deeds and Dreams: Identity as Phantasm (A Case Study in Diasporic Identities)

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Abstract

This paper addresses Amedeo Modigliani's (1884-1920) and Marc Chagall's (1887-1985) key paintings in relation to intensifying debates over national identity that pervaded early-twentieth-century Europe. Chagall and Modigliani came to Paris from Russia and Italy, respectively. Their experiences as Jewish outsiders influenced their work, and both artists addressed and undermined the dominant visual culture that was widely-disseminated through physiognomic caricatures and anti-Semitic tracts. This visual culture constructed a normative, white Europeanism against which non-European identities were, and continue to be, defined as different. A static figure of the Jew was explicitly targeted as the paradigm of "difference." Modigliani's and Chagall's contrasting bodies of work reflected their diverse formations in the worlds of Ashkenaz and Sepharad, thus revealing the fluidity of Jewish identity and imploding any temptation towards essentialism. However, both addressed salient issues facing an otherwise multifaceted people scattered throughout the world. Their imagery directly countered the ethno-centrism and anti-Semitism that, coursing through Post-Dreyfus France, would have widespread and devastating consequences on Jews and other fringe populations throughout Europe in the decades to come. What is more broadly at stake here is that both artists reveal identity itself as a phantasm: an illusion that operates both individually and collectively. Despite their immateriality, phantasms are linked to the social realm. They emerge from a web of cultural influences, create social roles and identities, and can result in unspeakable violence. Finally, this paper merges art history, theory, and visual studies to show the visceral power of art and visual culture as a means of both producing and reconfiguring notions of identity within political and social spheres.

Key words: Identity, Diaspora, Jewish, Anti-Semitism, Modernist Art

Dreams are not so different from Deeds as some may think.

All the Deeds of men are only Dreams at first.

And in the end, their Deeds dissolve into Dreams— Theodore Herzl, Altneuland¹

In 1911 the young Marc Chagall, a Russian émigré in Paris, embarked on his *Jew* series (c. 1911-1926). The figures of the bearded, Eastern European Jew that he began painting nostalgically in Paris, far from home, were inspired by his formative years in Vitebsk, a provincial town in Russia's Pale of Settlement, in the area near the Black Sea that is today the Republic of Belarus.² Based upon Chagall's introspective childhood memories of his uncles, father, and grandfathers, these figures are also portraits of a universal, social type. The beards, caps and clothing adorning this array of unspecified Jews resembled those worn by many Russian-Jews at the turn of the century. *Jew in Green* (1914) in particular, hands clasped, eyes drooping with sadness or fatigue, was inspired by Chagall's encounter with a rabbi known as the "Preacher of Slouzk," when he returned to Russia in 1914. "I had an impression," said Chagall, "That the old man was green; perhaps a shadow fell on him from my heart."³ The impoverished figure also evokes Chagall's memories of his father, who would invariably fall asleep in the flickering light of the Shabbat table after a long week of physical labor. As Chagall described him:

Have you sometimes seen, in Florentine paintings, one of those men whose beard is never trimmed, with eyes at once brown and ash-gray, with the complexion the color of burnt-ochre and wrinkles? That was my father...Everything about my father seemed to me enigma and sadness. An image inaccessible.⁴

While *Jew in Green* arose from the personal space of memory, it also exemplified certain broader typologies of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jews, thus merging the personal and the political. These typologies are evident in the physical features and clothing, and in the Hebraic text from which the figure seems to materialize.⁵ The bowed demeanor, lined face, and contemplative expression of this melancholic figure reflected a people only slowly emerging from centuries of oppression. However, while the subtle expressiveness and sculptural qualities of the Jew's countenance bear a striking resemblance to Rembrandt's seventeenth-century *Portrait of an Old Jew*, they flatten into Cubist abstraction in his clothing and background. The characteristics that signify his Jewishness are disrupted even further by the figure's green face and yellow beard, a Fauvist turn that distinguishes it from the naturalism of the Old Masters, and renders it contemporary. In this way, what initially appeared to be an archetype of the Jew becomes lost in enigma, located tenuously between modernism and tradition, picture and text, figure and abstraction: an "image inaccessible."

The figures from the *Jew* series are not always bowed down towards the earth. In the 1923 painting *Violinist*, another unidentified Jew is depicted, cradling the violin on his shoulder, and rising over a town complete with houses,

villagers, and the spire of a church. Flattened and hieratically-scaled to overshadow the surrounding figures, the painting evokes the otherworldly realm of the Byzantine icon, one of Russia's oldest artistic traditions. At the same time, in a similar play between the imaginary and the real that is evident in *Jew in Green*, *Violinist* was also most likely based on Chagall's childhood memories of his Uncle Neuch, who "played the violin like a cobbler," or even his grandfather from Lyozno, who sat on the roof eating carrots.⁶ This fiddler emerged from a deeply-personal montage of Chagall's childhood memories, and like *Jew in Green* he symbolized collective characteristics of the traditional nineteenth-century shtetl Jew. Floating through the air, groundless, his feet barely touching the rooftops, this luftmensch, or "floating man," emblemized the Diaspora that had rendered Europe's Jews nationless for almost two millennia. Yet again, like *Jew in Green*, the fiddler is semi-abstracted and his skin is colored green. Painted in the contemporary Fauvist style, this antiquated figure is firmly relocated in modern life.

Earthbound or groundless, oppressed or euphoric, Chagall's *Jews* are generally viewed today as exemplary, albeit quaint, depictions of the lost world of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewry that was transformed to the point of obsolescence in the tumult of the twentieth-century. These portraits helped to shape a mythologized figure of the Eastern European Jew, impressed upon the popular imagination by Shalom Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman in the hit Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The original impact of these figures has been overshadowed by their popular acclaim today. Twenty-first-century Jewish-Americans, in particular, are associated with higher levels of education, suburbia, and upper-income brackets,⁷ a situation that has contributed to the current perception of Chagall's work as nostalgic visions of an idyllic Jewish origin. In this contemporary setting, the precarious state of Europe's Jews at the turn of the century is difficult to imagine.

While Chagall's Jewish figures have come to represent the lost world of the shtetl, the relationship of Amedeo Modigliani's (1884-1920) imagery to his Jewish heritage is more tenuous, and only the subject of recent scholarship.⁸ Biographically speaking, Modigliani could not have been more different from Chagall. As opposed to Chagall, who was formed in the provincial, Russian shtetl, Modigliani arrived in Paris from the unusually privileged Sephardic-Italian community of Livorno, Italy in 1906. He was well-versed in Western art and philosophy, including the writings of Nietzsche, Bergson, and the Russian anarchist Prot'y Kropotkin.⁹ He had also been formed by Sephardic intellectual traditions that embraced humanism, Italian nationalism, and pluralism in a fully-integrated utopian worldview that melded the religious, political, and social.¹⁰ Finally, while Chagall had been formed in an environment relatively lacking in pictorial traditions, given the Jewish prohibition on engraved images, Modigliani studied art from a young age. His portraits and nudes resonated with the indigenous, Renaissance masters of Italian art.¹¹ When read in tandem with Chagall's work, rife as it was with Jewish symbolism and subject matter, the Italian influences on Modigliani's art appear even more pronounced. His earlier paintings in particular, consisting mostly of portraits and very few landscapes, melded naturalism with Italian impressionism [Macchiaioli]. They also tended to depict individual, and even racialized subjects, qualities that would be almost entirely eradicated in his fully-developed series of portraits and nudes (c. 1916-19).

For example, the artist's 1908 painting *La Juive* depicts a portrait of a dark-eyed Jewess. The Jewess' pale face is in stark contrast to the painting's empty background, which suggests a sense of placelessness. Like Chagall's *Jews*, *La Juive* adheres to a stereotype; her dusky hair and eyes, along her mysterious and enticing ambience, coincided with the popular image of La Belle Juive. This dual notion of the Jewish woman as either hyper-sexual and seductive, or noble and virtuous had gained prominence in the nineteenth-century. Further, Modigliani's *La Juive* is imbued with a similar psychological presence as Chagall's *Jews*. Whereas *Violinist* floats above the rooftops, and personifies rootlessness, the slumped posture of *Jew in Green* suggests a weariness that appears to render him earthbound. *La Juive's* enigmatic, saturnine features seem weighted down with a more ethereal sadness, and her vacuous background suggests a sense of dislocation. These characteristics point to a Jewish archetype that, while subtler than Chagall's *Jews'* ethnically specific dress or *La Juive's* physical features, pervaded over a millennium of European anti-Semitism and reemerged in the modern age: that of the Saturnine Jew. This constellated archetype revealed, perhaps more than any other Jewish typology, the deep roots of anti-Semitism, and the contradictions underlying Jewish life in Diaspora. That is, the polarized nature of Saturnine figure reflected a condition peculiar to Jewish identity, dichotomized between dehumanization and an intense spiritual tradition that arose from their mythical status as the Chosen People.

What is Jewish identity? By "identity," I mean the way people think of an individual or group. This might involve historical or religious factors, stereotypes, and so on. Identity itself is construed here in two ways: identity as it relates to material conditions, and also as an abstraction configured in both the individual and collective imagination: a phantasm. By definition, phantasm is simply an illusion or apparition. According to Aristotle, it is the distorted, or subjective, sensory construction of an objective reality.¹² Despite its immaterial nature, phantasm is linked to the social sphere. Karl Marx noted the power of the phantasm as a commodity form, when he said that, "The value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition."¹³ Judith Butler argued that gender itself is not an essence, but rather a performance, a phantasm created through the practice of social norms.¹⁴ In terms of racial politics, Franz Fanon suggests that image and fantasy exist, transgressively, between the borders of history and the unconscious. It is these fantasies that evoke the colonial condition, in that the colonized figure is always

determined from without.¹⁵ Thus, phantasm is understood here as a construction of reality that operates on the individual and collective levels, and that is formed by a complex web of cultural influences. It simultaneously determines social roles and identities, often from the hegemonic perspective, and can result in unspeakable violence.

Jewish identity in particular, as a troubling paradigm of twentieth-century oppression, illuminates the relationship between phantasms and material history. This is because the unique nature of Jewishness, which can be construed as a religious, genetic, or ethnic characteristic, reveals the dialectical rather than oppositional relationship between the abstract and material social realms. That is, notions of Jewish identity were and are constructed by phantasms and also by concrete historical circumstances. Phantasm and history collided with unprecedented scale in twentieth-century Jewish life—in the horrific Final Solution to the National Socialist Propaganda Campaign against the Jews, and in the 1948 return to Zion, the mythical homeland. Thus Jewish identity is formed, in Theodore Herzl's words, somewhere "between Dreams and Deeds." Or as the Jewish-American artist R.B. Kitaj observed in the tragic aftermath of the Holocaust, "What is a Jew? —[This] has never been resolved, except perhaps by murderers."¹⁶

Decades prior to these events, in the early-twentieth-century, Jewish identity was the subject of intense debate throughout Europe, for Jews and non-Jews alike. When re-positioned within this historical setting, Chagall's and Modigliani's subjective renditions of Jewish types through the use of modernist aesthetics renders their work as more significant than mere expression, or as an end in themselves. These images not only reflected the historical transformation of Europe's Jews into modernity, but also participated in the identity politics of their time. These identity politics were fueled by tensions between Jewish emancipation efforts, the innately anti-Semitic Jewish Question, and European imperialism. Underlying them were fixed images of the Jew that had been embedded in Christian Europe's imagination for centuries. These phantasms transcended the boundaries of imagination in the form of widely-spread anti-Semitic propaganda and periodic eruptions of shocking violence, all the while sustaining a rigid figure of the Jew as a spiritual, biological or social malady.

Europe was in a perilous state at the time that these paintings were produced, as it adjusted to modernity and hovered on the brink of the first world war. European Jewry, scattered throughout the continent, had already held a precarious role in society for almost two millennia. Chagall's childhood in the Pale of Settlement (the area of Russia where Jews were restricted), and the Jewish ghettos scattered throughout Modigliani's native Italy, typified centuries of Jewish experience.¹⁷ Whether in the ancient Roman provinces, Medieval Germany, or fifteenth-century Spain, the exclusive religious customs and lack of national territory characterizing Jewish Diasporic conditions frequently relegated them to the fringes of society, and made Jews easy scapegoats during periods of unrest. The influx of modernity in fin de siècle Europe was no exception. European nations struggled to maintain their autonomy amidst international tensions via conservative nationalist movements. Jews, the paradigmatic nationless people, became scapegoats for the anxiety surrounding the tumultuous unfolding of the modern age.

Chagall's and Modigliani's depictions of Jews reveal that this modern era of anti-Semitism had a firm bedrock in European history, however, extending to the Medieval Age and beyond. Their depictions must also be understood in relation to the image of the Jew that appeared in twentieth-century visual culture in the form of anti-Semitic propaganda. This modern stereotype was a secularized reproduction of those produced in the Middle Ages through blood libels, polemics of theologians, and anti-Semitic sermons that emphasized the Jews' role in the deicide of Christ.¹⁸ That is, until about the nineteenth-century, the figure of the Jew was predominantly manifested as a deicidal figure and viewed in religious terms. In the modern age, it took the secular form of the angst-ridden, "Wandering Jew" who symbolized, among other perceived maladies, international Bolshevism, predatory capitalism, and social upheaval. Further, until the early-twentieth-century, images of The Jew were rendered predominantly by Christian artists, thereby constructing this figure from the outside gaze. It was not until the nineteenth-century mass movement of European Jewry into the modern, secular world that artists such as Chagall and Modigliani, among others, began to address this image from the subjective perspective of Jews themselves.

The pervasiveness of European anti-Semitic visual culture is revealed in Peter Wagner's fifteenth-century woodcut depicting Saturn who, surrounded by his doomed children, is wearing the hat and the badge of a Jew.¹⁹ This image likely refers to blood libel or ritual murder.²⁰ Figures of the Jew frequented Medieval writing, painting, and sculpture in the form of demons with Semitic features.²¹ These images cast the Jew as thirsty for Christian blood, as an infidel, or as a mysterious figure practicing the black arts, deliberately spreading poison throughout Christian populations, and were stock clichés of popular literature and folk tales.²² In the second half of the fifteenth-century, the caricature of the Jew with a long nose and misshapen figure emerged in Germany. This image developed into a horned figure, motivated by the *pileum cornutum*, or pointed hat that Medieval Jews wore to identify themselves. This aligned the Jew with the devil.²³

The conception of Jews as a usurious, and foreign race was addressed in many Medieval texts.²⁴ Miserliness was another attribute of Saturn, and fears of Jewish economic competition and exploitation of peasantry posed as vital a threat to the Christian population as their religious obscurantism.²⁵ Perhaps the most pervasive stereotype arising from the alignment of Jews with Saturn was that of the Wandering Jew. This figure was directly alluded to in Chagall's *Violinist*, who floats high above the village as an emblem of rootlessness. Exile or wandering was considered to symptomatic of the Saturnine temperament, or melancholia, and was linked to the Jews as the paradigmatic nationless people.²⁶ The image of

the Wandering Jew appeared in popular culture as early as Sixteenth and Seventeenth-century England, and the figure's cane or staff has been traced to Saturn's scythe, a symbol of the cyclical relationship between life and death. While the cane alluded to "moral and spiritual decrepitude," the staff suggested that Jews, along with other vagabonds and misanthropes, were cursed to wander the world in interminable exile.²⁷

These Medieval phantasms permeated European imagination and visual culture through mystery plays, fiction, and visual arts. While they served to reduce a collective population into a single, malevolent figure, constructions of the Jew as separate and deviant were not simply ideological or restricted to visual culture. They crystallized historically with the restrictions of the Jews to ghettos throughout the continent (beginning with the establishment of the first Jewish ghetto in Venice, Italy in 1516)²⁸ and also erupted, often with little warning and dreadful violence, into the public sphere.²⁹ Sporadic anti-Semitic riots wove a consistent strand of bigotry and hatred throughout the Diasporic history, and continued well into the twentieth-century.

Saturnine associations weave a common strand through the complex history of anti-Semitism and elucidate many Jewish stereotypes, but the nature of anti-Semitism itself is a mystery. Although other groups experienced the brunt of European xenophobia, the consistency with which Jews were demonized and ostracized throughout history, regardless of their geographical location, is remarkable. A variety of intellectual figures have attempted to explain this phenomenon. Sigmund Freud, himself a Jew, approached anti-Semitism psychoanalytically. He noted that anti-Semitism was "rooted in the remotest past ages" in the "unconscious of the peoples," and traced it to customs such as circumcision, which reinforced Jewish separateness while evoking dread, anxiety, and fear of castration.³⁰ The phenomenologist Jean Paul Sartre focused on the phantasmatic nature of anti-Semitism, suggesting that it was the imagined existence of the Jew, not actual interactions, that gave rise to the anti-Semite.³¹ This in turn played a role in forming the Jews' own sense of identity. This suggests that Jewishness itself, as an identity or as a form of identification, existed only to the extent that it was experienced, and defined by those around it. Sartre's idea is, of course, problematized by its removal from the tangible riches of Jewish culture and history, and its suggestion that Jews have no real identities other than those created by the anti-Semitic gaze.³² However, while this analysis provides a compelling account of the racist pathology, it is also significant in understanding Chagall's and Modigliani's internalization and reconfiguration of Jewish archetypes via their own Jewish subjectivity.

Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, dismantled hurried generalizations that often attributed anti-Semitism to abstract notions such as the "eternal scapegoat."³³ Arendt argued that the reduction of the Jews to the perpetual victim was complicit with anti-Semitism itself in its elimination of historical agency, both on the part of the perpetrators of anti-Semitism, and on the part of the Jews. Instead, she approached it socio-politically, arguing that its modern form correlated with the dissolution of the nation state and the rise of totalitarianism. In short, Arendt claimed that, contrary to popular belief, modern anti-Semitism did not intensify concurrently with nationalist movements. Rather, it coincided with the dissolution of traditional forms of nationalism and the nation-state into modern, internationalist imperialism.³⁴

While these analyses suggest that the nature of anti-Semitism itself is quite inconclusive, historically-speaking the modern era of anti-Jewish bigotry can be defined as a transition from Judaism, as a form of religious identification, to Jewishness, as a secular form of identification. The gulf between Judaism and the prevailing Christian empire, rooted in the Medieval Age, had been largely constructed of religious differences. This gulf began to disintegrate along with the secularization of the Jews that occurred in the nineteenth-century, otherwise known as *Haskalah*, or the Jewish Enlightenment. Rather than eradicating the divide, the ambiguous new identity of Europe's Jews, along with their increasing assimilation into the broader culture, led to a new brand of anti-Semitism. This time, it was based heavily on physical markers of difference linked to claims of nationality, ethnicity and race. It is worth noting that, at this pivotal historical moment, Jewish artists such as Chagall and Modigliani (among others) began to participate in the secular art world and visual culture for the first time in history.

The shift to modern anti-Semitic stereotypes, characterized by a switch from religious to racial bigotry, has been traced in its earliest forms to the German composer Richard Wagner. His pamphlet *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1850) identified "the spirit of Judaism with that of modernity-understood not as decadence but as artistic decline."³⁵ Although Wagner's conflation of Judaism with modernity was permeated with bigotry, he was correct in assessing that modernity and the historical secularization of Europe's Jewry ran concurrently, beginning around the turn of the nineteenth-century. At this time, most of the world's Jewish population resided in Europe, with more than half of these restricted to Russia's Pale of Settlement. The Pale of Settlement consisted of fifteen provinces in the western portion of Russia that had been annexed from Poland at the end of the eighteenth-century, along with half-a-million Jewish subjects.³⁶ It was from here that Chagall emigrated to St. Petersburg in 1906. As he recalled in his memoir *My Life*, "To live in St. Petersburg, one needs not only money, but also a special authorization. I am a Jew. And the Czar has set aside certain residential zone in which the Jews were obliged to stay."³⁷

Life for the majority of Russian-Jews during this time was fraught with poverty and hardship. While Chagall's experiences in St. Petersburg were filtered through a flippant and poetic lens in his memoir, the hardships that he endured, simply for being a Jewish non-citizen, were overtly implied.

Lawyers have the right to keep Jewish servants. But, according to the law, I must live in his house and take my meals there...I realized then that, in Russia, Jews are not the only ones who have no right to live, but also many Russians, crowded together like lice in one's hair. My God!³⁸

Chagall also experienced the anti-Semitism that was, perhaps, more prevalent in Russia than anywhere else in Europe. Again, he describes, "Back there [Russia], still a boy, at every step I felt-or rather people made me feel! - that I was a Jew."³⁹

In this context, the sense of being an "outsider" was fundamental to Jewish experience at the time, and followed the artist to Paris. When Chagall arrived at the age of twenty, not knowing a word of French, the foreignness of his Russian-Jewish background was mitigated by his multicultural surroundings in Montmartre, the Bohemian quarter of Paris, and the artist's colony of *La Ruche*. As Chagall himself described it:

[*La Ruche*] was the name given to a hundred or so studios surrounded by a little garden and very close to the Vaugirard slaughterhouses. In those studios lived the artistic Bohemia of every land. While in the Russian ateliers an offended model sobbed, from the Italians' came the sound of songs and the twanging of a guitar, and from the Jews' debates and arguments.⁴⁰

La Ruche (or the Beehive, called so because of its unusual structure) was experiencing a surge of immigrant artists from all over Europe, a significant number of whom were Jews from the Pale of Settlement. However, France, where Modigliani would spend his brief career and Chagall the majority of his life, was far from immune to anti-Semitism. The nineteenth-century Dreyfus affair had severely polarized French-Jewish relations, and caused latent anti-Semitism and French nationalism to surface with a vengeance. The proliferation of emigres to Bohemian Paris was regarded with apprehension by the general public. They were commonly viewed as *meteques* or "dirty foreigners."⁴¹ By the late 1920's, Montparnasse was even described by a French novelist in the journal *Le Figaro* as "the filth of Paris," inhabited "by 80 per cent Semites and every one of them a loser."⁴²

Edouard Drumont (1844-1917), the right-wing editor of the French anti-Semitic journal *La Libre Parole*, claimed that the Jew was "the most powerful agent of destruction that the world had ever seen" and that "wherever Jews appear, they spread disorder and ruin in their wake... the Semites excel in their politics of dissolution."⁴³ This text had chilling parallels to the book *Mein Kampf* written decades later by the young and then obscure Adolf Hitler in 1925. The Marxist idea that capitalism was mainly a "Jewish creation" reappeared in the mainstream, socialist journal, *La Revue Socialiste*. Its editor, Benoît Malon, claimed that socialism "is a Franco-German creation, Aryan in the fullest sense of the term."⁴⁴ This notion echoed Marx's nineteenth-century text, *The Jewish Question*, which held that, "The god of the Jews has been secularized and has become the god of this world. The bill of exchange is the real god of the Jews."⁴⁵ This claim reproduced the Medieval linkage of Jewry with usury and financial exploitation, and converted it into a powerful, modern myth that fixed the Jew as a symbol of predatory capitalism.⁴⁶ Thus the figure of the Jew continued to be constructed against imagined, albeit contradictory, ideals, and echoed in visual culture. This time, in the modern, secular age, the figure was characterized by social rather than religious malevolence.

Further, as the Jews began to integrate into secular society and shed the markers of religious difference, the use of physical signs as indicators of Jewishness began to be used. These were commonly depicted in anti-Semitic propaganda. The 1864 cover illustration for Drumont's tract *La Libre Parole* depicts a Jewish caricature with a small skull and large, hooked nose. According to physiognomy, which was quite popular in France at the time, these features implied cowardice and dishonesty.⁴⁷ Although physical typologies of the Jew, such as the hooked nose, had emerged as early as Medieval Germany, modern physiognomy (the pseudo-scientific claim that physical features manifested the invisible qualities of the person) was justified by its alleged basis in scientific inquiry. That is, while these claims were made in the name of objective science, their innate bigotry was rendered all the more destructive by their "empirical" justification.

Unlike many of his Eastern European Jewish contemporaries in Montmartre, such as Chaim Soutine, Chagall identified directly with his Jewish origin in his work. This was a difficult, and perhaps dangerous, thing to do in nationalist France and perhaps even more so in Russia. Returning to *Jew in Green*, the title of the painting itself marks the figure as a Jew, and the subject matter also adhered to a certain extent to the long tradition of aligning Jewish identity with visual attributes that represented a collective population. The rabbi is racialized through certain visual stereotypes such as the Old World clothing, beard, physical features, melancholic demeanor, and the background of Hebraic text. Thus, in a political gesture, Chagall addressed the rigid archetype of the Jew constructed by the outside gaze. At the same time, this deeply empathetic rendition disrupts the archetype, suggesting that, while the figure may be constructed from without, it is also determined from within. By fusing subject and object, the personal and the political, the paradigmatic and the strange, *Jew in Green* is transfigured into an "image inaccessible," defined by metamorphosis rather than stasis. That is, the painting imagines essentialist qualities of a phantasmatic Jewish identity. However, Chagall visibly altered these essentialist qualities, thereby revealing the construct and, in doing so, transcending its rigid parameters.

The specific colorization of *Jew in Green* and *Violinist* is also significant in understanding the relationship of these works to the historical conditions of early-twentieth-century France. The non-naturalist, green hue of both figures' skin is clearly Fauvist, a metaphorical allusion to the transformation of traditional Jewish life into modernity. The play on

skin color in the context of the depiction of a specific racial type is also important to note. The figure of the Jew was not the only racial fantasy defined against an imagined, white Pan-Europeanism. The pervasive role of color in race politics, in the sense of the demarcation between whiteness and blackness, was at a peak in early-twentieth-century Europe. The brutal French colonialization of countries such as the Congo and Guinea was justified by emphasizing the “black” savagery of its inhabitants in opposition to the white, civilized European. Like the image of the Jew, the phantasm of the Black Savage pervaded European imagination through popular, visual culture in the form of political cartoons and imperialist propaganda. By the time that Chagall was painting this series, the clear delineation between races through colorization was already in effect in modernist art, as evident, for example, in the contrast between the African maid and the white prostitute of Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), as well as in Paul Gauguin’s late-nineteenth century depictions of Tahitian life.

However, Chagall’s Fauvist insertion of the color green into the figure of the Jew complicated the opposition between black and white that, constructed by European imperialism, was complicit with modernism itself. This situation reflects the disruptive effect that Jewish racial identity had on this fabricated abyss between whiteness and blackness. The ability of Jews to assimilate into European culture was largely based on their ability to appear “European” (or white), while still remaining indefinably non-European; a notion emphasized decades later in Franz Hippler’s propaganda film created for the Third Reich, *The Eternal Jew* (1940). The indefinability, or invisible otherness of the Jew posed a peculiar threat to white European nationalism, as an alien race that was able, through its invisibility, to infiltrate European society. In this sense, the allegorical use of color in Chagall’s *Jew in Green* and *Violinist* disrupted the symbolic divide between white and black, emphasizing, again, the intangibility of Jewish identity as a fixed racial type. Thus Chagall’s equivocated Jews arose from the subjectivity of the Jewish outsider; the marginalized figure who, operating outside of established parameters, knew all too well the endless variances of difference.

The notion of racial invisibility would play an even more significant role in Modigliani’s work and life. Chagall, coming from Russia, was no stranger to the anti-Jewish sentiments that he would encounter in France. However, when Modigliani arrived by train in Paris from Livorno, Italy in the spring of 1906, the young artist was unprepared for the social realities facing the rest of European Jewry.⁴⁸ His family’s leftist leanings, and his formative years in Livorno’s inclusive society left him naïve to their less privileged situations. It is generally held that, of all the European countries, anti-Semitism had far less impact in Italy, Modigliani’s birthplace.⁴⁹ The claim was even made that, before the rise of fascist race laws in 1938, “...anti-Jewish sentiments played almost no role in modern Italian history.”⁵⁰

Modigliani’s daughter Jeanne claimed later on that her father did not even encounter anti-Semitism until his exposure to Edouard Drumont’s writing in Post-Dreyfus Paris.⁵¹ Assuming that Modigliani did in fact encounter Drumont’s writing, he would surely have encountered the grotesque caricatures of Jews based on physiognomy that accompanied this writing. This xenophobic environment would force Modigliani to reconsider his own multifarious identity, particularly his Jewish heritage. Despite his racial indiscernibility (Modigliani spoke fluent French), it was in the Paris environs, fraught with anti-Semitism, that the artist’s sense of his own marginal Jewish identity was set out in sharp relief to what was perceived as normative French or, even, Pan-European identities.

The sense of alienation that this engendered was intensified by Modigliani’s interactions with other Jewish artists and intellectuals. Many of the Jewish emigres in early-twentieth-century Paris had arrived from Eastern Europe, spoke Russian or Yiddish (and very little French), and were formed by the more culturally-insulated life of the shtetlach. This included Chaim Soutine, with whom Modigliani would form a close friendship. Given this situation, Modigliani’s new sense of marginality was double-edged. Even amongst the many foreigners and Jews who populated Montparnasse, the artist’s persona was full of contradictions. He was a well-educated aristocrat who lived in destitution. He was an artist-philosopher whose models and subjects equivocated the boundaries of race and class. He was also a social idealist, formed in an ecumenical and socially-inclusive environment. Yet he responded to moments of anti-Semitism with angry outbursts, and introduced himself as a Jew.⁵² As Mason Klein suggests, “Modigliani ‘unmasked’ his Jewishness by assuming the ideological position of the pariah.”⁵³

For one who chose to be outsider, who chose the antagonist role of the bohemian, who preferred not to be understood as an [...] assimilated bourgeois, who opined against those who arrogantly assumed history, and who came to declare himself as other in common salutation (“Je suis Modigliani, juif”), self-identification was extremely important. And in contrast to the Eurocentric, if not racist, views of his fellow Italians the Futurists, Modigliani’s appropriation of culturally diverse forms was precipitated by his own self-conscious status as other, specifically his own sense of exile and of the Diaspora that defined Sephardic Jews.⁵⁴

Like many other artists (including Chagall) who emigrated to Montmartre and Montparnasse from all over Europe, Paris catalyzed Modigliani’s work towards his unique aesthetic. Stylistically, his imagery began to reflect the influence of the Parisian avant-garde and, also, exciting new movements such as Fauvism and Primitivism. The subject matter of his work also responded to the nationalism, ethno-centrism, and anti-Semitism underlying French society. That is, this jolting new experience necessitated a shift in both his self-identification and artistic development.⁵⁵ During his early years in Paris (1906-1910), Modigliani painted a series of portraits that reveal the artist’s increasing interest in notions of ethnicity and race, among these being *La Juive*.⁵⁶

As addressed earlier on, Modigliani's *La Juive* reflected ethnically-specific stereotypes. These are revealed in the figure's torpid psychological presence that evokes the Saturnine figure, along with her dark hair and her enticing, almond-shaped eyes that typified La Belle Juive. However, as opposed to Chagall's preoccupation with explicitly Jewish types, the individuation characterizing *La Juive* and Modigliani's other early portraits would be gradually eradicated in his work. In his fully-developed series of portraits, many of which were produced between the years of 1916-19, particularities are reduced to faces that appear, by all means, alike.⁵⁷ Emily Braun described this series, which has become paradigmatic of Modigliani's oeuvre:

At first glance Modigliani's art gives the impression of monotony, of faces rendered according to a common template and uniformly resigned in mood. Yet it is a mistake to assume that his style is one of sameness, for the types he depicts are explicitly marked by difference. Amedeo Modigliani was a painter of faces from diverse national, ethnic, religious and class backgrounds...His portraiture can be read as an ethnographic project that pointedly asks: Who is defined as "European" in the years around World War I?⁵⁸

This stylistic shift is exemplified in the 1917 painting, *Portrait of a Young Woman*. In this portrait, the specificity of *La Juive* gives way to the generalized features, aquiline curves, and empty, sculptural eyes derived from archaic carvings. The *Young Woman's* cocked head, long, slim neck, and Renaissance palette echo Botticelli's and Simone Martini's virgins and goddesses. The portrait is also characterized by a lack of narrative frame, or a sense of dislocation, which rhymes with Diasporic experience. There is a hint of ethnic reference in the young woman's olive skin and almond shaped eyes, yet her unclassifiable features "offer unlimited scope for identification."⁵⁹ It is the eyes that are most striking; typically of Modigliani's subjects, they gaze directly at the viewer. As opposed to the irrevocable gulf engendered between the viewer and the prevalent visual caricatures of Jews and other racial constructs, the model's gaze produces an interplay with the viewer that radically disregards differences. She compels the viewer to enter into her eyes, as if they are windows into a mutual world.

What was behind this stylistic development? A compelling case has been made that the generalities comprising Modigliani's idiosyncratic portrait series originated in socio-historical sources such as Italy's short-lived utopian erasure of ethnic differences during the Risorgimento period of unification (1848-1870), during which Italian-Jews were granted civil rights and liberties, as well as the holistic traditions of Italian-Sephardic humanism.⁶⁰ It is significant that Modigliani was formed in the environment of cultural integration that preceded Mussolini's dictatorship, characterized by utopian aspirations which held that emancipation would erase all difference. At the same time, his Sephardic upbringing, combined with the anti-Semitism that he faced in Paris, instilled in him an indelible sense of his Jewish heritage, as he stated, "I carry no religion, but if I did it would be the ancient religion of my ancestors."⁶¹

Portrait of a Young Woman also reflects Modigliani's fascination with imported carvings that he discovered in Paris in 1910. This array of indigenous artifacts led him to a brief experimental interlude into sculpture that would influence all of his later work. His interest in these archaic aesthetics was not simply formal, as Klein notes:

The more he perceived the subliminal theme of race, the more focused and symbolic the artist's method became. As Modigliani encountered fellow émigré artists, his hitherto latent Jewish identity became for him the subject of philosophical inquiry. [...] The underlying geometric simplification of his series of sculpted heads indicates his determination to extract from the various ancient ethnographic models a mysterious, and enduring, elemental quality, and moreover to bracket a universal visual language against the individual conceits of portraiture.⁶²

For Modigliani, the sculptures, which ranged from "Archaic Greek and Cycladic [to] early Christian and Khmer,"⁶³ represented a lexicon of faraway places, beyond the borders of Europe. They also offered him an idealized form based on the simplified aesthetics of other cultures and times. Further, in contrast to artists such as Picasso and Derain, Modigliani's attitude towards this sculpture was deferential. That is, he did not obfuscate the indigenous aesthetics under the auspices of avant-garde styles such as Cubism or Fauvism. Rather, in authentically replicating this aesthetics in *Portrait of a Young Woman* and, indeed, all of his portraiture until his death in 1920, he identified with, instead of extricating himself from, the foreign "other." This consistent abstraction of a range of ethnicities into a depersonalized face suggests that Modigliani was compelled by the fundamental qualities uniting the human race, regardless of superficial differences. The artist's utopian view of humanity seems to be alluded to in a 1907 note found in his sketchbook.

What I am searching for is neither the real
Nor the unreal, but the Subconscious,
The mystery of what is instinctive in the human Race.⁶⁴

As modern artists who identified with their marginal status as Jews, both Chagall and Modigliani produced multifaceted images that, being "neither real nor unreal," unveiled the fabricated specter of difference emblemized by the Jew. Through this, they countered the ethno-centrism and anti-Semitism that, coursing through Post-Dreyfus France, would have widespread and devastating consequences on Jews and other fringe populations throughout Europe in the

decades to come. In their dislocation of fixed identities, in which universal types were lost in such particularities as green skin, or the indiscriminate gaze of a primitive Madonna, these phantasms were formed by the crucible of twentieth-century Jewish life. Whether generalized to the point of ambiguity or riddled with Jewish idioms, the metamorphic figures showed the visceral power of art and visual culture as a means of both producing and reconfiguring notions of identity within political and social spheres.

Jewish life in exile was a paradox: too variegated to capture, yet joined by a common myth. This paradox materializes in Chagall's and Modigliani's fantastic imagery. Yet just as this life traversed geographical territories and cultures, the images that it produced do not crystallize into clear contours or an essential form. The obvious discrepancies between the muted naturalism of Modigliani's women and Chagall's buoyantly colored, semi-abstracted Jewish men collapsed any essentialist notions of what constituted Jewish art and experience. However, both addressed salient issues that united the most diverse Jewish communities scattered throughout the Diasporic geography. In this fluctuating terrain, identity is a matter of both history and imagination, the past infuses the present, and the future, a space of Deeds and Dreams, lies in how these are interpreted.

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¹ (Herzl 2000, Altneuland Epilogue)

² (Baal-Teshuva 1998, 13)

³ (Experiment Station 2015)

⁴ (Chagall 1960, 2)

⁵ These texts include The Kaddish, a prayer which includes the words: "He who makes peace in the heights, may He make peace for us and all of Israel." (Experiment Station 2015)

⁶ (Chagall 1960, 13,17)

⁷ (Harshav 1993, 3)

⁸ One of Modigliani's earliest critics, Lomberto Vitali, established a link between the artist's work and his Jewish heritage (Braun 2004, 30). However, it is only through recent exhibitions at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan, New York (*Modigliani: Beyond the Myth* [2004] and *Modigliani Unmasked* [2017-18]) that a comprehensive exploration of his works' relationship to his Jewish heritage has been undertaken. My comparative analysis of Modigliani's work was made possible by the scholarship of Mason Klein (curator at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan, New York) as well as Emily Braun in her 2004 catalogue essay for *Modigliani: Beyond the Myth, The Faces of Modigliani: Identity Politics Under Fascism*.

⁹ (Klein 2004, 6)

¹⁰ Ibid, 4

¹¹ (Braun 2004, 34)

¹² (Stingl 2011)

¹³ (Marx 1887)

¹⁴ (Butler 1990, 188)

¹⁵ (Bhaba 2008, xxvi)

¹⁶ (Kampf 1991, 106)

¹⁷ In some accounts, Russia was not considered part of continental Europe (i.e. the "West") during this time-period, but rather a separate geographic and cultural entity aligned with "the East." Given Chagall's entrenchment in both Russian and French culture, my account reflects a more fluid relationship between East and West.

¹⁸ (Wistrich 2010, 90)

¹⁹ (Resnick 2012, 231)

²⁰ Wagner's woodcut echoed similar contemporary images of the witches' Sabbath. The alleged putridness of Jewish blood and female menses implied that women and Jews were particularly susceptible to melancholia, as well as to its astrological connections to sorcery and magic. Yvonne Owens suggests that this phenomenon demonized women and Jews via the link between the Witches Sabbath and blood libel myth. In This medieval conflation of Judaism and femininity would be maintained in modern caricatures of the Jew, and last well into the twentieth-century. (Owens 2014, 57)

²¹ (Poliakov 1955, 156)

²² (Wistrich 2010, 91)

²³ Ibid

²⁴ (Poliakov 1955, 211)

²⁵ (Zipperstein 1985) ?

²⁶ According to Medieval astrologers, the geographical area of Judea/Palestine was associated with the clime of Saturn. Although Jews had been subject to Diaspora and exile since the destruction of the Second Temple, Judaea (or Roman Palestine) had once been their "home." Despite their lengthy exile, it was generally held that Jews "continued to possess the humoral complexion dictated by their origin." (Reskin, 230)

²⁷ (Zafran 1979, 22)

²⁸ (Schachter 2011, 101)

²⁹ Even in Medieval Spain, where Jews enjoyed a privileged position well into the fourteenth-century, a riot was incited against the Jewish quarter of Seville in 1391 based on Jewish wealth and “false doctrines.” Four thousand Jews were killed. Within three months, over fifty thousand Spanish Jews were dead, and many more baptized. (Wistrich 2010, 93) Russian pogroms dated as early as 1113 in Kiev, and continued into the modern age in the form of pogrom waves breaking out in Eastern Europe from 1871- 1922. (Klier 1992, 13)

³⁰ (Wistrich 2010, 99)

³¹ Ibid 23

³² Ibid 23

³³ (Arendt 1966, 4-6)

³⁴ Specifically, Arendt argued that in the twentieth-century, anti-Semitic slogans were disseminated by totalitarian governments such as Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany as the most effective means of inspiring and organizing masses of people for imperialist expansion and destruction of old forms of government. Ibid 10

³⁵ (Wistrich 2010, 102)

³⁶ (Klier 1992, 5)

³⁷ (Chagall 1960, 66)

³⁸ Ibid 81

³⁹ Ibid 105

⁴⁰ Ibid 103

⁴¹ (Meisler 2015, 83)

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ (Goldberg 2011, 251)

⁴⁴ (Wistrich 2010, 116)

⁴⁵ (Marx 1844)

⁴⁶ (Wistrich 2010, 110)

⁴⁷ The separation of people into different classes and races, based on such qualities as the shape of the head, had gained impetus in the early-nineteenth-century through the anthropological studies of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840). Blumenbach claimed that Jews were recognizable through such factors as the peculiar shape of their skull. By the turn of the twentieth-century, craniometry, the science of the measurements of the head, was respected as an objective, empirically-based science. The Dutch physician Wachter reported on several more peculiarities of the shape of the Jewish skull and nose, which affected an “odd” way of speaking. The alleged intimacy between these Semitic physical features and mental traits was established by J.C. Lavatar, the founder of physiognomy (the interpretation of facial features), who claimed that these atypical physical traits of the Jews accounted for the manner of specifically Jewish speaking. Characterized by swiftness, this trait served to conflate the Jew with dishonesty (as a “fast talker”), as well as with femininity, as women were believed to speak more quickly than men. (Hoedl n.d., 2-3)

⁴⁸ (Klein 2004, 6-7)

⁴⁹ This claim was made partly as an attempt of Italian historians to edify Italy’s history which was marked, like many other European countries, by periodic eruptions of anti-Semitic violence from the Medieval era well into the 19th-century. However, the general absence of anti-Jewish bigotry from the Risorgimento until the rise of fascism in 1922 has been attributed to factors such as the successful integration of Italian Jews into society, as well as the relatively miniscule Italian-Jewish population, which was one of the smallest in Europe. (Schachter 2011, 99)

⁵⁰ Ibid 98

⁵¹ (Klein 2004, 3)

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid 7

⁵⁴ Ibid 8

⁵⁵ Ibid 3

⁵⁶ (Braun 2004, 25)

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ (Restillini 2002, 180)

⁶⁰ The Risorgimento stood in sharp contrast to the race laws that would be put in place by Mussolini in 1938, which assumed: (1) Race is a biological concept and Italy belongs to the Aryan race, (2) a pure “Italian” race exists, (3) Jews do not belong to the Italian race, and (4) intermarriage between Jews and Italians was not to be permitted. (Cannistraro 2000, 133)

⁶¹ (Secrest 2011, 164)

⁶² (Klein 2004, 9)

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid 14

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