

Historiography of the World Part 1:

The Jewish Body, Historical Crisis and The Comedic Farce

By: Joshua Louis Moss

In a sequence midway through the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2007), performer Sacha Baron Cohen enters a real Confederate antiques store somewhere in the southern United States.¹ In character as the titular Borat, Cohen proceeds to stumble awkwardly through the shop, shattering antiques, lamps and other fragile items as the enraged shopkeeper watches helplessly. The sequence concludes with Cohen attempting to pay for the “accidental” damage he has caused by offering locks of pubic hair in a small plastic bag, which he insists is a form of currency in his homeland of Kazakhstan. Cohen’s performative invocation of “the fool” in service of foregrounding the shopkeeper’s historical ignorance works within the classic farcical structure of comedic slapstick; the “resolution” of the crisis is more offensive to the victim than the offense itself. But this sequence of destruction and comedic payoff in the form of Borat’s notion of pubic hair as currency cannot be dismissed as simply banana-peel buffoonery. The use of a real location, and the specific choice of a Confederate antiques shop, speaks to Cohen’s career-long engagement with embedded racist and cultural hierarchies as the source of his comedic material.

Borat can be read as engaging two distinct areas of consumptive pleasure. First, Cohen engages the classic structure of slapstick farce by playing the destructive fool. Second, Cohen engages a complex renegotiation of both historical hierarchies and embedded racial constructions within the provocation and ruptures of these antics. The former is classic comedic farce. The latter is complex ideological challenge.

To fully comprehend the humor of *Borat*, Cohen relies on his audience’s understanding what the shopkeeper does not—not just that Borat is a character and therefore not real—but that Cohen himself is an ethnic in disguise as another ethnic; that Cohen is a Jew. Cohen’s Jewishness informs his duplicity as Borat. Cohen is a member of history’s most famous ethnic victims returned in disguise in the only way possible: by exploiting fissures within the very hierarchies that allow racism to exist; not to remind the world of global historical traumas, but to make it laugh.

Cohen’s construction and exploitation of this malleability, this ethnic liminality, becomes his chief methodology for both the creation of his characters and the exposure of cultural ignorance through the duplicity of each of these characters’ ethnic constructions. Cohen’s Ali G creates confusion as to whether he is African, Arabic, of mixed race, or simply a white person influenced by hip-hop culture.² People mistake the flamboyant gayness of Cohen’s Austrian hairdresser character, Bruno, as simply Germanic urban fashion style. Cohen’s Borat exploits ignorance about third-world primitivism. In each of these characters, Cohen relies on a confusion of ethnic identity to create unease in the

targets of his performance. Cohen's characters, while disparate in the specifics of each identity, exploit the same classic mechanism of farce—the ethnic mask of the fool in disguise creating crisis to expose the true selves of their targets.

In the Confederate antique shop example, Cohen's refusal to pay for the damage he inflicted asks the audience to consider whether Cohen's comedy is not simply the aesthetics of farce reinscribed within a quasi-documentary format, but also as an overt form of political challenge. For Cohen, the offering of pubic hair as payment for Confederate antiques is comedic but also political; the artifacts of slavery do not deserve preservation and privilege. They are not simply historical memento to be cherished. They deserve to be smashed, are worth no more than pubic hair, and their owner humiliated for his cultural ignorance as to the historical pain embedded in their preservation. Cohen's Borat may be fictional, but his actions are authentic. Cohen's cultural violence—verbal, conceptual or physical in execution—utilizes the structure of duplicitous slapstick farce as the framework for a more marked sociopolitical commentary in which invokes crisis to expose the embedded racist hierarchies at work underneath our collective cultural veneers.

The fact that Cohen's "native" language spoken in *Borat* is not Kazakh, but Hebrew, further illuminates this concept. When Cohen's anti-Semitic Borat character becomes upset, the fact that he shouts frantically in Hebrew only further exposes the ignorance of his victims, for whom all ethnic languages are simply gibberish. It is perhaps no surprise to learn that Cohen wrote his undergraduate dissertation at Cambridge University on the intermingling of constructed black/Jewish identities in the American south in the 1960s.³ Cohen's essay, "'The Black-Jewish Alliance': A Case of Mistaking Identities," deconstructs how blacks and Jews dealt with racism by intermingling and exchanging a malleable and shared ethnic identity. In Cohen's performances in the American South in *Borat*, his academic understandings of a malleable ethnic otherness at work in dialectic with white heteronormativity manifest literally. Cohen does not return as the victim; his Borat functions as an avenging ethnic clown returning to subvert historical hierarchy, not to engage in debate. His methodology is not armed conflict, but the violent subtext of comedic farce.

For Cohen, one key piece of information informs this entire framework; Cohen is Jewish. His Jewishness exists as one of the few exegetic pieces of information given to audiences about his non-character self. Cohen frequently does talk show appearances in character and rarely gives his real thoughts or opinions in interviews. He refuses to divulge much about his real life and is famously private.⁴ Audiences have the privilege of knowing only two central precepts about Sacha Baron Cohen: Cohen is a performer and Cohen is a Jew.

Why does Cohen's Judaism function as a central lynchpin of his mythos and one of the few exegetic transparencies given within his carefully constructed opacity? Consider the famous and oft-cited statement from Karl Marx that history repeats itself first as tragedy, and second as farce.⁵ Marx's argument that historical narrative is as much in dialogue with the present as with the past it purports to represent informs not just class distinctions

and power relations, but identity politics within the national and the global. In our present historical moment, returning to Marx's assertion becomes a productive way not only to examine Cohen's duplicitous ethnic constructions but also to examine how cinematic farce itself functions as a space for historical renegotiation. For Sacha Baron Cohen, his real world Jewish identity is not only ancillary information, but an essential component of the liminal dialectic between real world and character, between tragedy and farce. "Cohen the Jew" informs "Borat the Anti-Semite," "Ali G the pseudo-black" and "Bruno the Flamboyant Gay" all within the classic comedic structure of farce. Without Cohen's real world Jewishness, his subversion of ethnic construction itself would not be possible. For Cohen's Jewishness speaks to the inheritor of historical trauma, and as a result, Cohen's characters can transform historical trauma into the second reading of contemporary farce.

Consider what Jurgen Habermas notes in his summary of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry, that there is a "counterweight of emancipatory potential built into communication structures" that offers rupture points for ideological challenge.⁶ Habermas's potential counterweight often manifests itself within the comedic genre where Marx's notion of dual histories are both foregrounded as schismatic rupture point and where contemporary anxieties can manifest themselves under the mask of historical recreation: the historical farce. Farce, more than other forms of comedy, depends upon visual and linguistic double entendres as part of a successful schema. In a review of Jameson's *Brecht and Method* (1998), Steven Helmling notes how Bertolt Brecht managed to "conflate the revolutionary apprehension of history" with farce to reach the consumptive pleasures of the sublime.⁷ Helmling notes that, for Brecht, the Marxist historical dialectic is fundamentally "comic in principle."⁸ Following this Brechtian understanding of the comedic sublime, Habermas's "emancipatory potential" can manifest itself not only through the genre of "tragedy" (represented as historical drama or epic) but also through the "farce" of comedic absurdity. Here *Borat* locates its challenge to hegemony under the ruse of comedic farce.

But what mechanism informs Cohen's transformation from tragic reality to performative farce? Cohen performs this through the corporeal. His exegetic Jewish real world body transformed into performative ethnic clown allows space for Brechtian notions of the comedic sublime to emerge from the satire of paradox writ visceral. By using his real world body to highlight the cultural constructions of ethnicity, Cohen's liminal ethnic characters follow directly from one of the most famous practitioners of historical farce in the 20th Century, and one who also used exegetic Jewishness to inform ethnic masking: Mel Brooks.

Mel Brooks's Spectacular Jewishness

As historian Glenn Linden observed, the 1960s and 1970s brought about significant cultural reexaminations of the social, political and structural entanglements of the teaching of "history" in the United States' school systems.⁹ Beginning in the mid 1960s, the United States undertook a significant financial investment to redesign the teaching of history to incorporate more diverse sensibilities, a process Linden describes as

“rethinking the nature of history, the values it teaches, and how those values could be taught to students.”¹⁰ Brooks’s films reflect these changing paradigms and anxieties about what constitutes dominant historical narrative and the potential cultural violence at work in the assumptions made therein. Brooks renders the historical as farce through a simple strategy: the hierarchical inversion of ethnic power structures through casting and character development. *The Producers* (1968), *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *Young Frankenstein* (1974), *Silent Movie* (1976), *History of the World – Part I* (1981) and *To Be or Not To Be* (1982) were all either set historically or renegotiated historical events as central underpinnings of their comedic premise. Each film engages “history” superficially as fodder for set-piece-based farce, suggesting not only historical denature but also the absurdity of assumed historical truths. But each film also engages “history” through the awareness of Brooks’s historically specific gender and racial crises of the 1960s and 1970s. Brooks’s representation of characters and events—such as the black sheriff protagonist of *Blazing Saddles* or the Jewish showbiz Torquemada revue in *History of the World – Part I*—inverts historical narrative by placing the powerless in a position of diegetic, thematic, and aesthetic power. At one level, these ethnic inversions challenge the white Christian heteronormativity of Hollywood genre tradition, but they also foreground the artificiality and, thus, the absurdity of presumed historical narrative. Brooks’s strategy must be read along two axes, as both self-reflexively cinematic while also historically reactionary. If within the biblical epic genre, Cecil B. DeMille can cast Moses with the non-Jewish Charlton Heston, then within reflexive genre parody, Torquemada must be the Jewish Mel Brooks.

For most of Brooks’s career, academic reevaluations of what was meant by “history” faced a larger cultural crisis. Sandro Mazzadra argues that Franz Fanon’s 1961 arguments on the “discovery of equality” offered the key to a successful post-colonial rethinking of African-European identity constructions. This led to the ideological “unhinging of compartmentalization” in the 1970s.¹¹ Mazzadra positions Fanon’s critical analysis within this extended period of global historical renegotiation of the 1960s and 1970s. In the late 1970s, Jacques Derrida helped found the Greph movement to mobilize opposition to French governmental attempts to “rationalize” the educational system. Derrida locates this crisis in the breakdown of the “common code[s]” found in linguistic shifts as well as state, regional, and national differences.¹² Derrida’s examination focuses on a dialectic between Anglo-Saxon philosophy and the rising role of the African subaltern in French school systems.

Derrida’s dialectic exploration of the “teaching of history” as an interplay between power structures of ethnic and national identity suggests a larger discourse involving ideological renegotiation within an increasingly foregrounded and shifting global exploration of what was meant by “ethnic identity.” Brooks’s films exploit these global cultural anxieties by inverting the ethnic, racial, sexual, and gender hierarchies of both textual and Hollywood cinematic history. By casting blacks, Jews, gays, and women as protagonists instead of in “traditional” roles as sidekicks, as famous rulers of history instead of victims, Brooks invokes Foucault’s argument for the expansion of Marxian class dialectics into the post-colonial discourses of race and ethnicity.¹³ By denaturing the assumed hierarchies of the past, Brooks engages the anxieties of his present that Linden, Foucault, Derrida and

Fanon observed. Brooks's use of ethnicity as disruption align directly with Foucault's "race struggle" dialectic and its shift of Marxian emphasis from class to other forms of ethnic and regional identity.

In making the argument that Brooks's tool of historical disruption is not simply textual, but also corporeal and exegetic, we must position Brooks's presence as that of a historical response to Eugenics within a post-Holocaust framework of Jewish response to cataclysmic trauma. This reimagination of history engages the satire of the body—Brooks's appearance, in costume as King Louis XVI, Torquemada or as Comicus (Nero's personal Jewish Catskills comedian) in *History of the World – Part 1*—operating as historical incongruity simply through Brooks's illogical appearance in historical events. His utilization of the flamboyantly queered Dom DeLuise as Nero, Gregory Hines as palace guard Josephus in *History of the World – Part 1*, or Cleavon Little, Gene Wilder, and Madeline Kahn in *Blazing Saddles* (1974), speak to Brooks's extensive ethnic subrogation for comedic effect. As Walter Benjamin observes, "empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers."¹⁴ For Brooks, empathy with the victim, invoked through the inversion of power structures through his varied ethnic cast of protagonists (blacks, gays, Jews and women), functions as historical counter-narrative, the invocation of crisis and anxiety mined as the main source of its comedy.

Brooks's first major success as a performer, *The 2,000 Year Old Man*, suggests this schema was central to Brooks's comedy from very early in his career.¹⁵ As with Cohen's use of a Confederate antiques store, Brooks's choice to make his character 2,000 years old, nearly the exact age of Jesus Christ, was hardly accidental. The allusion to Jesus in Brooks's *2000-Year-Old Man* foregrounds the critical renegotiation of power and historical narrative in what Michel Foucault describes as the heterotopic space, a space of complex ideological renegotiation and multiplicity of power frameworks.¹⁶ If the story of Jesus serves as the dominant historical framework, Brooks's Jewish response represents its comedic historical inversion—Franz Fanon's post-colonial reclamation of the split self through a Christian-Jewish binary.¹⁷ Brooks may be Jewish, but the allusion to Jesus and Christianity in the title informs his self. Brooks can attempt to reclaim his sense of self after the violence of historical imposition, but he may do so only through comedy. One comedic bit illuminates this dialectic:

Reiner: "There were no buses at the time. What was the means of transportation then?"

Brooks: "Mostly fear."

Reiner: "Fear transported you?"

Brooks: "Fear, yes. An animal could growl, you'd go two miles in a minute."

Reiner: "What language did you speak?"

Brooks: "Basic rock. That was before Hebrew."

Reiner: "Can you give us an example?"

Brooks: "Hey, don't t'row t'at rock at me!"¹⁸

Brooks's invocation of a fictional language, "basic rock," as a precursor to Hebrew, echoes Borat's "Kazakh" Hebrew. In the historical farce, language itself has become denatured and devoid of meaning, functioning only as pun and joke. Brooks's fear of the throwing of rocks maintains his Jewish counter-narrative of victim under historical assault and as tragedy transformed/reclaimed into the comedic. The history of the 2000-year-old man may not be one of historical triumph but surviving long enough to laugh at the tragic and trauma reimagined as the performatively sublime.

Brooks's awareness of his own overt ethnic Jewish body and his desire to manifest and preserve indexicality outside of a character motivated the creation of the character of the 2000-Year-Old-Man: "I did [albums] because I wanted to do something for ethnic comedy. In 50 years I don't think there will be a Jewish accent. I wanted to leave something, because I'm spectacularly Jewish."¹⁹ Brooks's awareness of his historical moment and his "spectacular" Jewishness inform his equally potent anxiety of cultural loss. Brooks's wanted to renegotiate a 2000-year historical narrative in which Jews simply were not inscribed. Brooks's Jewish voice becomes the voice of a two thousand year alternative history, previously silent, now given a historical voice, but this voice can only exist through comedic absurdities and clever puns.

When directing his first film, *The Producers*, in 1966, Brooks's understood the power of cinema even to challenge traditional historical representations of an event as horrific as the Holocaust. In *The Los Angeles Times* in 1968, Brooks claimed, "I wanted to put down Nazism, but I didn't want to get on a soapbox. I used a kind of mental ju-jitsu. I went with the neo-Nazi. By overdoing the super Nazi, I exposed the insanity and ludicrous nature of Nazism." In another interview, Brooks commented, "How do you get even with [Hitler]? You have to bring him down with ridicule... It's been one of my life-long jobs – to make the world laugh at Adolph Hitler."²⁰ In 1978, Brooks made a cameo in *Peeping Times*, NBC's comedic spoof of *60 Minutes*, playing Adolph Hitler in a series of "just discovered" home movies. Brooks's sketch features Brooks playing Hitler pretending to be Charlie Chaplin acting like Hitler in *The Great Dictator*.²¹ Brooks's use of Chaplin's satire of Hitler in order to create comically complex and multi-layered references suggests Brooks's understanding not just of historical renegotiation through farce, but the intermedial nature of farce itself. Playing Hitler playing Chaplin playing Hitler, Brooks completes Chaplin's initial goal to render Hitler farcical. Only Brooks can do what Chaplin could not – invoke the farcical read of history. For Chaplin, Hitler was contemporary, and thus, unconquerable and tragic. For Brooks, the power of historical narrative offers at least a minimal retroactive conquest through the act of rendering Hitler ludicrous. As with the 2000-Year-Old Man, Brooks's historical counter-narrative can only find voice through farcical inversion.

Brooks's frequent breaking of the fourth wall, his vaudevillian embrace of shtick and his frequent use of the cameo and multi-character performances all seek to expose the notion of narrative "history" as fraught with holes, incongruities and absences. One of Brooks's most famous cameos is as the Indian Chief who considers scalping a black pioneer family in a wagon train during Cleavon Little's flashback in *Blazing Saddles* (1974). After pausing to allow the audience to recognize Brooks himself in war paint as the Indian

Chief and gazing at the arrival of the black family on the frontier, Brooks utters a single resigned word: “Schwartzers.” Brooks’s use of the derogatory Yiddish word for black people immediately breaks down historical assumptions about all three ethnic constructions invoked. The incongruity of the black frontier family, forced to ride at the back of the wagon train; Mel Brooks performing as a Native American; and the Yiddish expression of racism, break down any tropes of the “Western” genre at work. In Brooks’s historical farce, all ethnicity is simply construction, and rupturing these constructions becomes the key to revealing the embedded racial hierarchies they seek to hide. Brooks foregrounds America’s racist past to satirize its present historical moment by placing the black and the Jew in a relational discourse with permeable and interconnected identities of otherness.

But Brooks further subverts the canonical historical construct by injecting his films with sociopolitical commentary. Brooks, as the Indian Chief, allows the black family to leave unharmed. The Jewish ethnic, nominally in “disguise” as Native American, shares an understanding with the African-American ethnic who cannot use disguise. Brooks’s final line of dialogue drives home the point when he remarks in part English and part Yiddish, “Hus du gezen in deine leiben, they darker than us. Woof!”²² Whether the “we” Brooks is referring to is Jewish or Native American is irrelevant. Whether the audience recognizes Brooks speaking Yiddish or assumes it is Native American enhances the comedic rupture. For historical normativity, all whites are in power and speak English, and all ethnics speak “something else” and are “dark.” The only variation, as the Native-American/Jewish character played by Brooks notes, is the degree of darkness.²³

Ella Shohat argues that ethnicity within a multi-ethnic society must be thought of as a relational discourse with “permeable boundaries of identity.”²⁴ Shohat connects Jews in blackface with the ethnic disguises of Mel Brooks and the “ethnic chameleon” of Woody Allen’s Leonard Zelig in *Zelig* (1983). Brooks’s appearance as the Indian Chief in *Blazing Saddles* demonstrates Shohat’s observation that ethnicity engages in an ongoing relational discourse. Brooks’s self-reflexive cinematic parody—Jew in Native-American makeup—also echoes and satirizes the use of blackface during the silent era. As Michael Rogin notes, silent cinema’s use of Jewish performers in blackface engaged complex notions of immigrant identity and historical negotiation within the body politic.²⁵ Jewish performers like Al Jolson, performing in blackface in films like *The Jazz Singer* (1927), embraced racist tropes but also negotiated and satirized the dual identity and ethnic interchangeability of minorities during a period of massive immigration.²⁶ Brooks’s invocation of “Indian Face” is both historically but also cinematically farcical. Brooks attempts to bring the audience in on the joke through his use of Yiddish as his “Native American” dialect. Brooks’s satire cannot be understood as that of an actual Indian Chief, but of the violence done by normative Hollywood conventions and casting stereotypes. The idea that one ethnic can “substitute” for another—even as absurdly transparent as the self-described “spectacularly Jewish” Mel Brooks playing an American Indian—satirizes neither American Indians nor Jews, but white heteronormativity’s indifference towards the specifics of ethnicity.²⁷

The Jewish Mask

For another example, let's turn back to Sasha Baron Cohen and his character, *Ali G* (2001). With Ali G, the Jew in ethnic disguise functions not simply as satire of racial stereotypes, but as a direct challenge to notions of hierarchical whiteness and relational ethnic otherness. Cohen's Jew in quasi-"blackface" confuses cultural normativity through relational ethnicity, and as with Borat, Cohen's exegetic Jewishness functions as a satirical manifestation of the struggle between ethnic otherness and normative whiteness. Just like Brooks's Indian Chief speaking Yiddish and sadly regarding a black family who has no ability to "hide," the Jewish body has a permeability of "darkness" that the African does not. The Jew is neither fully white nor fully black, and thus can inhabit the cinematic space comedically without racial charge or the overt ideological confrontation of a more clearly visually demarcated ethnic.

Woody Allen also explores this Jewish mask. As Leonard Zelig in *Zelig* (1983), Allen creates an alternative history of a Jew able to successfully "blend" using the masks of reinvented identity. Zelig's desire to morph into the dominant "type" of the land in which he lives echoes Brooks's historical Jewish body popping up throughout history as a form of comedic incongruity. Allen's Zelig and Brooks's many historical cameos utilize the humor inherent in the paradox of "ethnic disguise" just as Cohen's Borat and Ali G do today.

Another successful contemporary Jewish comedienne, Sarah Silverman, also uses ethnic disguise in her comedy. In an episode of the second season of *The Sarah Silverman Program* entitled "Face Wars," (2007) Silverman puts on blackface in order to figure out which people have suffered more, "the Jews or the blacks."²⁸ For Silverman, the attempt to "understand" being black only results in increasingly offensive comments and situations. Silverman, like Cohen, maintains opacity within the polysemy of her star construction by never breaking from her character, but unlike Cohen, Silverman's character is literally the Jewish "Sarah Silverman." Much of Silverman's humor is found in expressing racist comments in the form of well meaning epiphany. This invokes anxiety in her audience, since Silverman, like Cohen, refuses to acknowledge her presumably aware "real" self outside of the performance of her racist and ignorant character's utterances. Like Ali G, the joke is not on Silverman, but in the rupturing of ethnic constructions in dialogue with the conventions of normativity and hegemony.

In these examples, Silverman, Cohen, Brooks and Allen use ethnic malleability to foreground hierarchies that have become embedded in dominant histories and cultures. Each relies on their exegetic Jewishness to inform the constructions of their ethnic disruptions within historical narrative. For Leonard Zelig, no safe landing exists for the Jew in history. The Jew can only challenge orthodoxy by exposing the interchangeability and cultural constructedness of ethnicity that informs cultural violence.

If Mel Brooks's or Woody Allen's historical farces are contrasted with a film like *Forest Gump* (1994), it becomes clear that within dominant narratives of history, historical manipulations do not require disruption as a mechanism of comedy. *Forest Gump*, like Leonard Zelig, is introduced into indexical historical footage utilizing digital special

effects techniques, yet Gump never challenges the ideology of the historical timeline. As Lauren Berlant observes, “Gump’s clear anomalousness to the national norm, signaled in the explicit artificiality of Hanks’s presence in the newsreel footage makes his successful infantile citizenship seem absurd, miraculous or lucky; on the other hand, the narrative of his virtue makes him seem the ideal type of American.”²⁹ Gump’s physicality is represented as superior, not inferior, as are Brooks and Allen’s stumbling and bumbling. As Berlant notes, “Gump defines ‘normal’ through the star’s un-traumatized survival of a traumatic national history.”³⁰ It is Gump’s intellect that is limited, and this informs Gump’s acquiescence to the historical forces that guide his journey.

Gump provides none of the cultural disruption of the “short and ugly” otherness that Mel Brooks and Woody Allen do.³¹ Gump’s comedic disruptions, as when telling Lyndon B. Johnson he needs to “pee” or suggesting song lyrics to John Lennon, are comedic without any deviation from historical narrative. Gump changes nothing; he is simply amusing. Gump runs with dominant historical flow, both literally and metaphorically, not against it. In the one moment where Gump begins to speak his own thoughts about a historical event, when he stands at the Vietnam protest and begins to give his “thoughts about Viet-Nam,” the microphones are unplugged and Gump’s comments are heard neither by the crowd nor by the audience. Gump’s acquiescence to authority and inability to comprehend events support hegemony through Gump’s incurious passivity that is coded “noble” and “patriotic.” Gump never rebels; he simply follows orders. Gump’s character is heroic rather than comedic, nostalgic rather than disruptive, running through a singular shared history. For Brooks, Allen, Cohen, and Silverman there are many histories and exposure leads only to the ruptures of historical farce.

Farce must utilize an inversion of pre-existing normativity as a mechanism of its comedy, but as we see in a film like *Forrest Gump* (1994), this disruption can function as pseudo-disruption, reinforcing rather than challenging dominant historical structures. Yet placed in concert with Jewish corporeal presence as historical incongruity - Mel Brooks as Adolph Hitler, Louis the XVII or Torquemada, Allen’s Zelig, Cohen’s Hebrew speaking Borat, or Silverman’s ignorant black face - we must examine the Jewish body as not simply usurping normativity for comedic effect, but as part of a larger politically infused challenge to “progressive” historical hegemony. Brooks, Allen, Cohen, and Silverman utilize Shohat’s relational ethnic liminality to foreground historical dialectics between traditional “history” and an ethnicity long silenced and ignored within previously dominant modes of historical representation. With the Jewish body as both “white” and “not white,” able to pass but never fully, each of these comedians exploit their own exegetic corporeal liminality as their tool of ideological challenge to inform their comedic farce. In this sense, they directly align with the neo-Marxist Foucauldian model of class conflict expanded to an examination of larger “race based” power relationships.³² Their history ruptures, it does not codify. They simply and effectively couch this discourse within the comedic modes of farce to package this critique for broad mass culture appeal.

Bio: *Joshua L. Moss is a second year Ph.D. candidate at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. He holds a Master in Critical Studies from USC*

and a B.F.A. in film production from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Josh is currently at work on his dissertation, "Why Harry Met Sally: Jewish Corporeality, Eroticism and Ethnic Crisis in the American Romantic Comedy."

Notes

¹ The 11/16/06 issue of *The Nation* reports the actual location to have been Dallas, Texas.

² *Da Ali G Show* was revived by HBO for two seasons in 2003-2004

³ O'Neill, Brendan. "Backstory: Borat Write Thesis. It Niiice. You Like Read?" *Christian Science Monitor* 21 November 2006.

⁴ His first major interview out of character was given to Neil Strauss of *Rolling Stone*, in the article "The Man Behind the Mustache." 14 November 2006.

⁵ Marx, Karl. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Marx-Engels Reader 2nd Edition*, Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1978. 594

⁶ Habermas, Jurgen. "A Critical Theory of Society." *Modern German Sociology*. Ed. Volker Meja, Dieter Misgeld, Nico Stehr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. 196-197.

⁷ Helmling, Steven. "Brecht Our (Post-) Contemporary." *Postmodern Culture* 10:2 (January 2000)

⁸ Helmling, Steven. "Marxist Pleasure: Jameson and Eagleton." *Postmodern Culture* 3:3 (May 1993).

⁹ Linden, Glenn. *The History Teacher* 23:3 (May 1990): 293-303.

¹⁰ Ibid. 296

¹¹ Mazzadra, Sandro. "The Post-Colonial Condition: A Few Notes on the Quality of Historical Time in the Global Present." *Immaterial Labor, Multitudes and New Social Subjects: Class Composition in Cognitive Capitalism Conference*. University of Cambridge, 2006.

¹² Derrida, Jacques. *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy I*. Trans. Jan Plug. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002. 102-103.

¹³ Foucault, Michel. *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.

¹⁴ Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 263.

¹⁵ Co-created and co-performed with Carl Reiner in 1960.

¹⁶ Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

¹⁷ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967. 109.

¹⁸ Nachman, Gerald. *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003. 473.

¹⁹ Page, Don. "Viewers 'Get Smarter' With Breakthrough in Hip Satire." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 January 1966.

²⁰ Quoted in this interview: <Bmi.com/musicworld/features/200106/mbrooks.asp>

²¹ Margulies, Lee. "A Pilot Satirizes News Magazines." *Los Angeles Times*. 25 January 1978.

²² Yiddish translation: "Have you ever seen anything like this in your life?"

²³ Miller, Herbert Adolphus. "The Psychological Limits of Eugenics." *Popular Science Monthly* (1914) 84: 390-396.

²⁴ Shohat, Ella. "Ethnicities-In-Relation." *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*. Ed. Lester D. Friedman. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991. 216.

²⁵ Rogin, Michael R. "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice." *Critical Inquiry* 18:3 (Spring 1992): 417-453.

²⁶ Ibid. 453

²⁷ Page, Don.

²⁸ "Face Wars." *The Sarah Silverman Program*. *Comedy Central*. 17 November 2007.

²⁹ Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship (Series Q)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997. 184.

³⁰ Ibid. 185

³¹ Wydell, Nancy. Letter. *L.A. Times*. 23 March 1975: 23-24.

³² Foucault, Michel. *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*.