Punching Through the Line:

Reading the Book of Esther with Hannah Gadsby's "Nanette"

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Abstract

Increasingly, scholars are arguing for trauma-informed methods to attend to the often-circumscribed nature of narrated grief in the Bible. To date, however, little work has addressed the transmission of biblical trauma, that is, how certain forms of suffering live on in subsequent rehearsals and continue to affectively shape us. We find evidence of such transmission in the reception history of the book of Esther. While Esther has been designated as burlesque, satirical and carnivalesque writing, it has also been characterized as a response to trauma. The application of the "strange humor" of parody, festivity, and laughter in the midst of the danger and violence recounted in Esther has typically been lauded as a subversive strategy of survival for the Jewish community. However, comic analyses have rarely included an adequate appraisal of the costs of sublimating the book's traumatic core in this way. To trope the words of comedian Hannah Gadsby, the book of Esther's use of comedy "freezes an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and seals it off into jokes." Drawing on the comic philosophy of Gadsby's stand-up performance, "Nanette," this essay first reevaluates previous comic readings of the biblical narrative. Esther's comedic frame, we find, is implicated both in the narrative suppression of violence directed against women in the text and in post-biblical justifications of violence directed at ethnic "others." Second, Esther's potential to perpetuate trauma by way of fusing anger to laughter is analyzed in light of its legacy in certain Jewish postmemories, particularly in connection with the observance of Purim. Finally, employing Gadsby's insights into the "transmutation of trauma," strategies for "punching through the line" of Esther's comedic limitations are considered with discussion of Patricia Cronin's 2015 sculptural installation, *Shrine for Girls, Venice* and Amos Gitaï's 1986 film *Esther.*

Keywords: Amalekites; Biblical studies; Biblical Reception; Patricia Cronin; Esther; Hannah Gadsby; Amos Gitaï; Humour; Postmemory; Purim; Trauma; Violence

"For when the lot has determined that another people is now subject to danger, the critic reading 'Esther' cannot innocently submit to lots."

- Mieke Bal[1]

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[1] "Lots of Writing," *Semeia* 54 (1991): 96.

Without attention to the Bible's traumatic core, biblical narratives lose their potency to inform present-day suffering. While the foundational stories of the Bible are shaped by catastrophic memories of exile and colonization, biblical writers often write in circumspect modes to express what may be too difficult or dangerous to communicate directly. David Carr, in his 2015 book *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, argues biblical authors not only appeal to the mythic past to explain the present (Abraham's sojourn is a guise for the post-exilic journey from Babylon, for example), but to process the psychological incomprehensibility of Israel's survival in the wake of imperial persecution (96).

We find one illustration of veiled biblical trauma in the tragicomic story, or "traumedy," of Esther. An exemplary work of historiographic prose, Esther offers a window into the tense relationships between Jews and non-Jews in the Diasporic Greek-speaking world.[2] The use of parody, festivity, and laughter in the midst of the dangers recounted in Esther has been lauded as a subversive strategy of survival for an oppressed Jewish community. However, comic analyses have rarely included an adequate appraisal of the costs of sublimating the book's traumatic core in this way. To trope the words of comedian Hannah Gadsby, Esther's use of the comic "freezes an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and seals it off into jokes" (2018).[3] Gadsby's stand-up special "Nanette" abounds with humorous vignettes about mistaken identities, gender role-reversals, and misogynistic buffoonery congruent with the satirical social commentary of Esther. The humour is largely subversive, as Gadsby "punches up" to call out toxic masculinity and heterosexual privilege. At the same time, "Nanette" probes the problematic relationship between comedy and trauma, bringing to light the former's insufficiency for communicating Gadsby's experiences of homophobia and sexual assault. Much like the story of Esther, a Jewish woman who must safeguard her identity in the Persian kingdom, Gadsby's story of navigating the stringently heteronormative world of her youth in Tasmania can only find its fullest expression outside the traditional stand-up genre.

Drawing on the comic philosophy of "Nanette," this essay first reevaluates previous comic readings of the biblical narrative. Esther's comedic frame, we find, is implicated both in the narrative suppression of violence directed against women in the text and in post-biblical justifications of violence directed at ethnic "others." Second, Esther's potential to perpetuate trauma by way of fusing anger to laughter is analyzed in light of its legacy in certain Jewish postmemories, particularly in connection with the observance of Purim. Finally, employing Gadsby's insights into the "transmutation of trauma" (2022, 22), strategies for "punching through the line" of Esther's comedic limitations are considered with discussions of Patricia Cronin's 2015 sculptural installation, *Shrine for Girls*, *Venice* and Amos Gitaï's 1986 film *Esther*.

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[2] Scholarly dating for the Esther narrative spans the Persian to Hellenistic periods, though there is wide consensus its author was a Diasporic Jew.

[3] All quotations attributed to Gadsby are from "Nanette" unless otherwise noted.

Hannah and Hadassah

When “Nanette” premiered on Netflix in June 2018, it was met with worldwide praise, and Gadsby’s performance continues provoke debate about the nature of comedy. The comedian proves to be a master of the genre while decrying the confines of her art. Midway through the show, Gadsby announces her intention to “quit comedy.” Having developed her comedic persona by converting the traumas of her youth into laughter, she uses “Nanette” as a vehicle for reassessment. She shares how, during a conversation with her mother about coming out to her as a lesbian, she first realized the limitations of jokes:

> [W]hat my mum eventually said to me is pretty much at the core of why I’m questioning comedy. She said to me, “The thing I regret is that I raised you as if you were straight. I didn’t know any different. I am so sorry. …I know I made it worse, because I wanted you to change because I knew the world wouldn’t.” And I looked at my mum in that moment and I thought, “How did that happen? How did my mum get to be the hero of my story?” She evolved. I didn’t. See, I think part of my problem is comedy has suspended me in a perpetual state of adolescence. The way I’ve been telling [my coming out] story is through jokes. And stories, unlike jokes, need three parts. A beginning, a middle, and an end. Jokes only need two parts. A beginning and a middle. And what I had done … was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused with my actual memory of what happened. But unfortunately, that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality. Punch lines need trauma because punch lines need tension, and tension feeds trauma.[4]

Later in the show, Gadsby divulges that another comical story she told earlier in the show about a straight man who confused her as a gay man ended in a violent assault:

> Do you remember that story about that young man who almost beat me up? It was a very funny story…. I made a lot of people laugh about his ignorance, and the reason I could do that is because I’m very good at this job…. But in order to balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn’t tell that story as it actually happened. Because I couldn’t tell the part of the story where that man realized his mistake…. [a]nd he said, “Oh, no, I get it. You’re a lady faggot. I’m allowed to beat the shit out of you,” and he did! (Gadsby 2018)

Until “Nanette,” she had omitted the assault from the story, only to realize her comedic framing had erased the most significant part. Here and elsewhere, Gadsby does not shy away from expressing anger. However, she counterbalances her anger with a vulnerability that invites empathy. “What I would have done to have heard a story like mine," she continues, "Not for blame. Not for reputation, not for money, not for power. But to feel less alone." Laughter is *not* our best medicine, she surmises, rather, "[s]tories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine" (Gadsby 2018).

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[4] Gadsby’s closing observation here is congruent with ideas expressed by philosopher Henri Bergson in his classic treatise, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1914). Adaptability to life, generally, and laughter, specifically, he posits, emerges in the play between “tension” and “elasticity.” “The rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (18–21).

The traumedy of Esther, like "Nanette," holds comedy and suffering in tension.[5] It tells the story of a young Jewish woman living in the post-exilic Persian Diaspora who becomes wife to the king, Ahasuerus. Esther's ascendency occurs on the heels of a prior woman's demotion: Vashti, the former queen, declines to appear before the king and his cronies at banquet. A state of pandemonium ensues; letters are dispatched across the kingdom exhorting husbands to reassert control over their wives. Vashti is deposed, and, after some time, the king's advisors seek out "beautiful young virgins" (2:2)[6] to audition for queen, an audition which includes a night of compulsory sex with the king. After advancing to the foremost position in the harem, Esther, or Hadassah as she is known among her Jewish kin, takes her place as his new consort.

While Esther's Jewish identity remains secret, a crisis arises. Esther's cousin and protector, Mordecai, refuses to bow before the king's chief advisor, Haman, a descendent of the Israelites' age-old enemy, the Amalekites. Incensed, Haman convinces the king the Jews of the land should be annihilated wholesale. Mordecai urges Esther to divulge her Jewishness and persuade the king to terminate this genocidal plan. Though it is verboten to go before the king unsummoned, Esther courageously pleads with Ahasuerus on behalf of her people. She unmasks Haman as the true threat in the realm, and he and his ten sons are executed, Mordecai replaces him as the king's chief advisor, and the celebration of Purim is established.

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[5] While it is not the purpose of this essay to make a thorough comparison between the book of Esther and "Nanette," it is worth noting some prominent connections. Esther's need to conceal her identity as a Diasporic Jew inversely mirrors Gadsby's need to leave from her homeland of Tasmania, where homosexuality was outlawed until 1997 ("I had to leave as soon as I found out I was a little bit lesbian."). Just as the book of Esther pokes fun at male insecurity, Gadsby lampoons the male conceit implicit in contemporary gender discourse ("Men are from Mars, and women are for his penis!"). Both narratives explore role reversals and the construction of identity. Esther and Mordecai each cross-dress in royal garb (5:1, 6:11, 8:15), blurring the boundaries between Jews and Persians. Analogously, Gadsby pokes fun at our modern obsession with gendering infants ("I don't assume bald babies are boys. I assume they're angry feminists, and I treat them with respect!").The androgynous Gadsby herself channels the ambiguously-sexed eunuchs in Esther, "go-betweens in the battle of the sexes" made to scurry between the male and female courts (West, 2006, 284). Decrying society's obsession with her gender identity, Gadsby admits exasperation ("I don't identify as transgender…. I'm clearly 'gender not normal,' but…I identify as *tired*. I'm just tired.").

A final parallel lies in the naming of each work. Esther is named for its protagonist, who arrives on the scene when her foil, Vashti, makes plain her intention not to acquiesce to her husband's authority. Esther must hide her Jewish identity to gain the good graces of the king. Gadsby names her show after a woman called "Nanette," who, similar to Vashti, disappears in the first five minutes. Gadsby explains she titled the show after a woman she met in a café, only to discover afterwards there was not enough material to build a show around her. One could read her setting aside of the title character as the shedding of Gadsby's previous comedic persona for a new one. Esther, too, must reveal her identity as Hadassah for her story to move forward.

[6] All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version and refer to Esther unless otherwise noted.

Esther's Comedy

Esther has been designated as satire (e.g., Weisman 1998), burlesque (e.g., Berlin 2001), comedy (e.g., Radday, 1990; O'Connor 2003), farce (e.g., Jackson, 2012) irony (Sharp 2009) and carnivalesque writing (e.g., Craig 1995; LaCocque 2007). It has also been characterized as a response to trauma (Emanuel 2017; Kim 2020) and as a case of "biblical horror" (Dunbar 2021). While these classifications appear contradictory, they are not mutually exclusive, and one would be hard-pressed to deny *any* comedic content. Readers immediately recognize the oft-inebriated Ahasuerus as a caricature of the powerful rulers of the day (Radday 1990, 295). "[He] is not expressly evil," writes Yehuda Radday, "only an immature, fickle-minded and unbelievably stupid dynast" (298). Ahasuerus foolishly chooses the parvenu Haman, the most wicked of villains, as his chief advisor (Radday, 301). However, this would-be architect of Jewish destruction is outsmarted by the very Jewish subjects he wishes to annihilate. His downfall occurs in almost slapstick fashion, first as he begs for his life whilst face-first in Esther's lap, and later as he hangs upon gallows intended for Mordecai. Finally, the Jewish people as a whole get the last laugh as other Persian subjects all over the land begin calling themselves Jews (*mityahadim*, lit. "Jewed themselves," 8:17) to avoid retribution for Haman's heinous plan (Jackson 2012, 210).

Most interpreters recognize the laughs are not ends unto themselves. Kathleen O'Connor views Esther's humor as psychological resistance (2003, 63):

> The laughter sparked by the book of Esther's irony, exaggerations and reversals implies an open future. It invites readers to look beyond the present appearance of things. For the Jews the future looks closed; only slaughter and death. But laughter is despair's opposite. It bursts out of the body and articulates without words a vision of survival. This laughter does not deny pain and suffering, terror or doubt. Instead, it promises life on the other side of sorrow and pain. It shows the situation can change and that judicious risk can crack open the world and make the whole system fall apart. (O'Connor 2003, 64).

Michael Chan similarly argues the writer's aim is subversive. As in other Jewish court tales, the king's rage is exploited as a comic target (2013, 4). Ahasuerus's anger *is* the joke, illustrated by his over-the-top response to Vashti's refusal, and the four-year recovery period it takes for his anger over her refusal to subside (Chan, 18–19; cf. Levenson 1997, 54). The lampooning of the king, Chan argues, "not only destabilize[s] and demythologize[s] royal power but also augment[s] the community's identity, providing it with a common object of ridicule" (2013, 24).

The women in the story stand in the crosshairs of laughter and royal rage. Feminist scholars have generally championed Vashti and Esther as comic heroes who reject misogynistic norms or exploit those same norms to save the Jewish people. With chutzpah, Vashti exposes the king's weaknesses, setting the stage for Esther, who is characterized as a craftier femme fatale. "[T]he story is even more deliciously comic," writes O'Connor, "when the compliant young woman brought in to replace Vashti outwits the system, manipulates the king, and undermines the king's principal henchman, Haman" (2003, 58). While some feminist interpreters decry Esther's role in shoring up the patriarchal order (e.g., Lee 2020, 294–296; Fuchs 1999, 80–84; and Sharp 2009, 74–81), most view her ability to maneuver within her own perilous position as something to which to aspire.

Kenneth Craig likewise argues Esther's humor functions as a weapon of the powerless. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, Craig highlights the literary features that situate Esther squarely within the genre, including drunken banquets, maskings and unmaskings, iconic fools and collective gaiety. Most important is the book of Esther's reversal of the social hierarchy. Craig writes:

> The carnival occasion is provocative because it imitates an alternative view of reality and embodies a liberating escape from the status quo. Bakhtin holds a utopian view of carnival that suspends "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" … and the horizontal and egalitarian structures of carnival lower the hierarchy of an official culture or an official force. Since dominant ideologies seek to establish a unified and fixed social order, carnival is always a threat (Craig 1995, 30; cf. Bakhtin 1984b:10).

As we have already seen, peripety in Esther abounds. Mordecai's ascendency is realized through a series of plot twists at Haman's expense; he literally assumes his enemy's garb, or at least the garb Haman had assumed the king meant for him. Esther, appropriating the very words spoken by Haman ("if it pleases the king," 8:5; cf. 3:9) petitions Ahasuerus for a written order reversing the original decree procured by Haman for the destruction of the Jews.

The carnivalesque also illustrates Bakhtin's notion of a "pregnant death;" destruction is linked to renewal and previously impossible things seem possible (Craig 1995, 30–31; cf. Bakhtin 1984b, 25). Among the seemingly impossible things to transpire is the two-day massacre, at Mordecai and Esther's behest, of all those who sought to harm the Jews. This massive revenge fantasy is, in Craig's words, "the ultimate reversal: a minority threatened with annihilation because of one man, kills 75,810 without experiencing a single casualty!" (1995, 136). The establishment of Purim (so-called because Haman had cast *pur* or lots to annihilate the Jews) culminates Esther's storyline. "The Jews . . . have their days of killing," writes Melissa A. Jackson, after which "this victorious occasion will be remembered and celebrated regularly" (1995, 203).

Esther's Violence

As with humor, violence permeates Esther. The violence is both hidden and overt, secreted and brazen. At the outset, we should distinguish between the narratively suppressed violence against women in the text and the hyperbolic violence against the Gentiles recounted in chapter nine. As already observed, the revenge fantasy at the end of Esther cannot be easily understood apart from the anti-imperial satire that characterizes the rest of the novella. While I will argue the two forms of violence found in Esther are connected and that each poses significant moral questions, the latter, certainly constitutes a form of "punching up" from the margins meant to destabilize structures of power.

Violence Against Women

Not unlike other stories in the Hebrew Bible, sexual and gender-based violence and territorial/ethnic violence take place in tandem (e.g., Gen. 34; Num. 31; Judg. 11; Judg. 19–21). However, in Esther there is no overt acknowledgement that the sexual offenses preceding the threat and enactment of other forms of violence are linked. As Nicole Duran observes, "[T]he fact that Mordecai's life is threatened for his rebellion, while Vashti simply disappears for hers, does leave readers with the impression that threats to the status and survival of the Jewish people are more serious, more dramatic, and finally more important than threats to the social position of women" (2004, 84).

In reality, the sexual threats against women and girls in Esther are endemic. It is not merely that Vashti inadvertently sets in motion the events that will culminate in massive interethnic fighting; rather, the expository episode calls our attention to the ways proximity to power is connected to social identity (Duran, 72; cf. Beal 2002, 16).[7] As Timothy Beal argues, Vashti is the "other woman" to Mordecai's "other Jew," each negotiating their position somewhere between inside and outside the court. Each is "marked for oblivion," and while Vashti will physically disappear from the narrative, her subversive spirit looms large as the instability of the realm is further exposed by Mordecai and Esther in the ensuing chapters (Beal 2002, 17; cf. 47, 55-56, 78–79, 113–115.).

Nonetheless, Vashti's transgression proves dangerous in the male sexual economy as the search for her replacement ensues. In her recent book, *Trafficking Hadassah: An Africana Reading of the Book of Esther* (2021), Ericka Dunbar addresses the neglected subject of state-sponsored trafficking in Esther and its correspondences to the silence surrounding the sexually exploitation of Africana females today. She reassigns Esther to the genre of "biblical horror" to call attention to "interchangeability of female bodies" and the gruesome nature of the crimes perpetrated against the women in Ahasuerus's harem (2021, 91-92). She cites a series of additional "euphemisms and cover-ups," like "beautiful young virgins" (2:3), "cosmetic treatments" (2:3, 9, 12), and the "pleasing" of the king (2:4, 9) that minimize the abuses to which these young girls are subjected (Dunbar 2021, 82-85). The narrator's depiction of Esther as a willing participant ("she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised," 2:15) obfuscates that words of affirmative consent are never uttered by Esther or any of the other girls (Dunbar 2021, 83). Dunbar also highlights the biblical narrator's failure to identify the ethnicity of any of the virgin girls "from India to Ethiopia" (1:1; cf. 2:3) (or Vashti before them, for that matter) who audition for the king. "The narrative and ideological effect" she writes, "is the erasure of ancestral and ethnic roots and the presentation of these vulnerable ethnic girls as inferior and exposed to sexual trafficking" (2021, 80).

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[7] Beal highlights the recurring use of the phrase "in the presence of" (*lipne* or forms closely related), used thirty-seven times in the narrative as a whole. This leitmotif calls our attention to the relationship between spatial location, social status and access to power (Beal 2002, 18).

Ultimately, the horror genre upends narratorial authority, empowering readers to respond with the revulsion appropriate to the events recounted (ibid., 2021, 93–94). Dunbar rejects classifying Esther as a comedy, arguing comic framing directs the conversation away from the sexual violence (2021, 86). This is evident in biblical scholarship, where some interpreters have ignored, glossed over, dismissed, or otherwise rationalized rape and abuse (2021, 86–89).[8] As Rhiannon Graybill observes, a particularly insidious line of reasoning within biblical studies suggests that because biblical women are denied the personhood necessary for consent, what may be considered violations against them does not constitute rape in its own context (2019, 5-7).

At the same time, it would be an injustice to paint a broad picture of victimized women in the book of Esther with no agency at all. As Graybill also reminds us, it is necessary to read biblical narratives of violence against women with a nuance modern discourses of consent do not allow for.[9] The women entering the king's harem may have done so willingly because "the consequences of saying no would be too much" (Ahmed 2014, 55 quoted in Graybill 2019, 14) given the broader colonial context in which such choices were made.

Moreover, attention to women's agency draws our attention to Esther's complex position vìs-a-vìs the power structure in which she operates. Though she defies the limits of her gender, she is also complicit in the suffering of others. When the queen gives her "full written authority" (9:29) for the institution of Purim, oppressive institutions are purportedly overturned. "Esther's law," writes Duran. "is opposed to the institution of law itself, the institution by which the court wields power.… [It is intended] to remind the legal world that [law] is a construction, not a part of the planet's fabric" (2004, 82–83). However, Duran also queries, "[I]s not a well-defined period of license [such as Purim] conducive to maintaining *the very legal system by which women are oppressed*? By instituting a temporary release from the pressures of the rules, Esther may be making the rules more tenable" (Duran 2004, 83, emphasis added). Carolyn Sharp is more biting in her assessment:

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[8] Dunbar cites a number of examples, and I have identified others as well. One of the most disappointing is Francisco-Javier Ruiz-Ortiz's *The Dynamics of Violence and Revenge in the Hebrew Book of Esther* (2017). In a monograph dedicated to the subject of violence in Esther, he makes one reference to biblical texts containing violence against women (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 3). He does not seem to include Esther among them, nor does he discuss the violations against women and girls in the royal court.

[9] As Graybill writes, "Consent, far from reducing exploitation, can increase it, especially when we fail to attend to (post)colonial contexts and colonizing assumptions about who knows what's best (10)."

> [In contrast to Susannah, Joseph and Daniel], Esther is never said to fear the Lord, and she does not resist the attentions of the king, but instead actively competes for the position of favored concubine. Through her frank sexual availability, no just her romanticized desirability, she gains access to the royal court. One may see hints here of the dangerous sexuality of the Foreign Woman, especially if one is inclined to read Esther's "heroism" in the two-day slaughter excessive….After the Jews are saved and Jewish identity need no longer be hidden, there is still no mention of Esther beginning to keep kosher in diaspora, as Daniel was so careful to do. Nothing is said to have changed regarding her Jewish identity. Torah remains unproclaimed and unobeyed in this book. God remains unmentioned. Esther remains a foreign queen still in regular sexual congress with a foolish and dangerous non-Jew. In saving her people, Esther has simultaneously consolidated her political power and moved irrevocably into a diaspora from which there is no return. She has become fully vested as Queen of Persia and queen of paradox (2009, 74–75, 81).

To this we may add the fate of the women and girls in the king's harem does not demonstrably change.

Anti-Imperial Violence

Though sexual violence may be obscured in Esther, other forms of aggression and violence are not. The initial clash between Haman and Mordecai ignites the plan to "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day" (3:13). Haman marshals ethnic stereotyping to gain the king's support for his cause, telling him, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them" (3:8). True to the carnivalesque spirit, the violent reprisals in response to Haman's cruel machinations are swift and audacious. "The narrator's delight at the turn of events … does not allow room for compassion for the dead," writes Adele Reinhartz, "Exultation rules, not only in the story, but also in the rituals associated with Purim; feasting, drinking, gifts of food to friends and the Jewish poor so that all might partake in the celebration of sweet revenge" (2017, 14).

Francisco-Javer Ruiz-Ortiz identifies *naqam* (vengeance) as an interpretive key to Esther's plot. Though the term is only mentioned in 8:13, the edict allowing the Jews to avenge their enemies situates their survival as a matter of retributive justice (Ruiz-Ortiz, 82–83). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible vengeance is a judicial penalty dispersed in equal measure to or in some other way commensurate with the crime committed (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 80–81).[10] While the vengeance enacted by Jews in Esther is disproportionate to Haman's actual crimes, the counter-violence is arguably predicated upon the threat of large-scale extermination prompted by his actions.

Nevertheless, many contemporary Jewish scholars have attempted to address the troubling scale of violence. Lydia Lee divides their arguments into three groups. First, a small number of Jewish scholars contends the extent of the bloodshed carried out by the Jews is far less gruesome than traditionally suggested. Robert Gordis asserts on syntactical grounds that the "women and children" in 8:11 are the *objects* of those who "might attack them" (i.e., the Gentiles) and not among those Jewish subjects allowed to participate in the revenge (Lee 2020, 288; cf. Gordis 1976, 49–53). Based on his reading of 9:1–2, and 9:5, Jonathan Grossman also argues violence was directed at the enemies of the Jews only and not the general Gentile population (Lee, 289; cf. Grossman 2011, 191).

A second group of Jewish scholars, including Jon Levenson and Frederic Bush, argue in tandem with Ruiz-Ortiz that the slaughter must be understood as part of a larger strategy of Jewish survival in the Persian realm. Lee summarizes:

> The dilemma and vulnerability of the Diaspora Jewish community within the capricious Persian Empire means that the Jews have to work with the system of their enemies to ensure Jewish survival. Thus Mordecai's edict to slay the women and children of any that attack them (Esth. 8:11) is justified as the quid pro quo of the first edict issued by Haman (3:13) (286, cf. Bush 1998, 39–54; Levenson 1997, 110–111).

The strategy "to work with the system of their enemies to ensure Jewish survival" is mirrored in the celebration of Purim during the Shoah, what Sarah Emanuel refers to as "hidden resistance" (2017, 30):

> [T]he very ability to "get away" with a Purim celebration illustrated in and of itself the Nazis' own ineptitude. For despite the Nazis' close watch on the Jews in ghettos and concentration camps, some Jews managed to find moments in which they could venerate their customs and, implicitly, debunk the German Guard. This was doubly transgressive, in fact, as Hitler had declared it illegal to mock the Nazi party…. [T]o observe an illegal holiday—in a way that mocked Hitler's own authority, no less—enabled Jews under the Third Reich to turn Nazi expectations on their heads, if only momentarily. The book of Esther does much the same (2017, 31).

Taking the argument for subversive resistance further, a third group of Jewish scholars argues the violence in Esther should be understood as incredulous. Edward Greenstein, the first to develop a comprehensive comic reading (followed by Radday and Berlin), asserts that Esther must be understood "in the context of Jewish communal festivity." "[B]y observing Purim and hearing the comedy of the scroll," he writes, "Jews may drown their routine anxieties in imagination and joy" (Greenstein 1987, 239).

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[10] Ruiz-Ortiz offers as examples Gen. 34:25-27 and Judg. 16:28-30 (offenses to honor), Exod. 21:12-14 (premeditated murder), and Josh. 10:12-13 (the law of *ḥerem*).

A comic reading remains the predominant strategy to which current scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish, turn to explain the violence in the story. While the massacre of Gentiles may be exaggerated fantasy, we need to scrutinize the implicit insinuation that situating the book as farcical literature frees us from the task of examining the implications of said violence. As Lee argues, the focus on comic hyperbole "seems to detach imagined violence from ethical considerations, reducing violence at the end of the Esther narrative, even if not acted out, to pure entertainment without any ethical undesirability" (2020, 291). Though laughter may provide an antidote to despair, it is not, as Gadsby came to realize, invariably a cure.

The Purpose and Limitations of "Tendentious" Comedy

Humor is often mapped along diametric poles. Sigmund Freud divides jokes between those which are "an end in [themselves]" and those with an objective, which he labels as "tendentious." "Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them" (1905, 90). David Creech similarly differentiates between "reconciliatory" and "antagonistic" humour; the former "[seeks] laughter for laughter's sake," whereas the latter "is at the expense of someone or something" (Creech 2007, 22; cf. Nelson 1990, 23).[11]

To be sure, Gadsby performs her fair share of tendentious humor in "Nanette", but with a twist. Inverting the stereotype of the feminist killjoy, she encourages her straight cis male audience members who feel offended by her comedy to "lighten up" ("it's just locker room talk") (Jenzen 2020, 40). Such humor, Freud might say, functions as a distancing mechanism through which pain may be safely processed without direct confrontation (1905, 103). I will return to this point momentarily. At present, we can observe that tendentious humor exists, like all discourse, in an unspoken economy of power relations, at the heart of which lays a desire for the reversal of social hierarchies. "I love being mistaken for a man," quips Gadsby, "'cause just for a few moments, life gets a hell of a lot easier. I'm top-shelf normal, king of the humans!" (Gadsby, 2018)

We have already observed how a series of carnivalesque reversals of power drive Esther's plot. However, the peripety in Esther is the product of not only a comic vision but a parallel system of honor and shame. In her sociological analysis, Lillian Klein illuminates how a highly gendered cultural code of honor/shame propels Esther's plot. Within this code, social capital is measured in terms of one's hegemony, especially one's sexual dominance. "As exiles," Klein explains, "the

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[11] Frank MacHovec similarly identifies one of three classical theories of humor as "derision-superiority theory" (1988, 30–34). Cristina Larkin-Galiñanes likewise recognizes "superiority and disparagement theories" in her overview, calling attention to Bergson's (n. 4) influential argument that we laugh derisively at others to highlight the unsociability of their foibles, thereby reinforcing proper social mores (2017, 8).

Jews are in a "dependent" position, one associated with females, whereas autonomy and power are associated with males" (1995, 149). Mordecai's refusal to prostrate himself before Haman captures graphically the magnitude of the affront to Haman's honor, driving him to obliterate not just Mordecai but the entirety of his people (Klein 1995, 161). As a woman, Esther must negotiate this system of honor and shame by manipulating her own shame in the service of her people. This is nowhere better captured than when she petitions her husband to punish Haman: "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king" (7:4). Esther may be a woman, and she may be Jewish, but for Haman to dishonor the wife of Ahasuerus is to dishonor the king himself (Craig 1995, 116–117). Concealing her initiative with deference the queen reverses the fortunes of kindred. "Revenge is made sweeter," writes Reinhartz, "by the inversion of hierarchies in which weak women speak truth to male power" (2017, 23).

If we juxtapose comic readings of Esther with Klein's observations about the dialectics of honor and shame at here, it becomes apparent that the tendentious humor in Esther is meant not only to chastise bad behavior, but to alleviate the degradation felt by the Jewish audience. As the narrative crescendos into a hyperbolic fantasy of revenge, the characters (and by association, the audience) are able to escape the shame normally afforded the powerless. However, this "escape" is limited. As philosopher Jerome Miller, argues, even in the comic imagination, the powerless are subject to the same drive for domination that motivates the powerful:

> Comedy as the contempt of the powerful for the marginalized, or as the revenge of the marginalized on the powerful, is laughter *at* the Other from a position of privilege in relation to the one being laughed at—even if the only privilege that can be claimed is that afforded by getting the last laugh. As an exercise in domination, its purpose is precisely to differentiate the one laughing from the one who is laughed at, indeed to humiliate the one laughed at because of her very difference from the one laughing. It says "I am not you and for that very reason I am superior to you," as if my very difference from you were the proof of my invulnerability to humiliation (1995, 222, emphasis in original).

For Miller, the problem with much of comedy lies in the attempt to inoculate oneself from vulnerability, for "the effort to laugh last is governed by the very dialectics of power that satiric comedy originally set out to subvert" (ibid.).[12] While this imagined state of invulnerability may provide a temporary space in which to safely process the trauma of persecution, such safety is attained at a psychological and moral cost. When participating in farce, theater critic Eric Bentley contends, audience members avert "not only social problems but all other forms of moral responsibility." (Bentley 1981, 210). Rather than call into question the systems of power that sanction oppression, tendentious humour affords its participants a sense of moral impunity in order to participate in those systems. However, these feelings of righteous anger, absolution, and inviolability can lead to dangerous and even deadly results.

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[12] Philosopher Susan Purdie (1993) argues similarly from a Lacanian framework that the tendentious joker attempting to overturn power relations seeks to become a "master of discourse," however the joker's participation in the system of signification, even if to temporarily transgress that system, leads to a reassertion of the symbolic order that sanctioned the original structures of oppression. At best, tendentious humour exposes the instability of power relations within the symbolic order which may allow for some modulation of repressive ideologies.

"The Violence of Memory"

While farce is escapist and abstract, it simultaneously requires aggression to function, and it also frankly enjoys the hostility. Violence is everywhere in farce. The hostility in the story and shown by and in the characters is based around some feeling in those characters of innocence or misuse. With regard to the function of farce, this feeling of hostility is consequently raised in the audience as they too feel malice emerging from a sense of innocence, resulting in a desire that mirrors the characters in front of them, a desire to strike back. In this sense, farce's power depends upon the degree of aggressive feeling it can arouse in the audience (Jackson 2012, 202).

While Esther perennially inspires frivolity, it has also engendered hostility, aggression, and, episodically, overt racist acts. We already observed the many ways the narrative is invested in the forgetting of the violence against women and girls. Whereas these memories are suppressed in text and commentary, other memories are harnessed, at times to dangerous ends. Embedded within the Esther story is the story of Israel's ancient enemies and Haman's progenitors, the Amalekites. The Amalekites, (or Amalek, collectively) are remembered as exceptionally ruthless.[13] In Exod. 17, Amalek attacks Israel at Rephadim from behind and without provocation, when the people are still weak from their long sojourn in the Sinai desert.[14] After a long struggle, Amalek is defeated, at which point Moses is commanded to "[w]rite this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (Exod. 17:14). As if to initiate this act of remembrance right away, Moses then dedicates an altar to YHWH, proclaiming, "The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exod. 17:15, cf. Num. 24:20). While rabbinic and modern commentators have struggled to unravel the contradiction to blot out the memory of Amalek in *every* age,[15] the narrative nonetheless links the past to the present and future. Over the centuries, Amalek is thought to have resurfaced in the architects of Jewish destruction from Haman to Hadrian to Bohdan Khmelnytskyi to Adolph Hitler. Arguably it is difficult, nigh impossible, for Jews to forget Amalek, who has "found a human face again and again in history" (Knight 2009, 226).

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[13] According to one opinion in *Midrash Tanchuma*, the Amalekites are said to have cut off the penises of the Israelites and threw them toward heaven saying, "This is what You have Chosen, take for Yourself what You have chosen." This teaching is likewise found in the earlier *Pesikta D'Rav Kahanna*, where it is also suggested the Amalekites tore up Torah scrolls and attacked the foundations of the Temple sanctuary.

[14] That shame is evoked by this text is evident in rabbinic writings. In *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, the rabbis assert the Israelites fell prey to Amalekites because they had strayed from Torah. The term *Rephadim* is thought to refer to the slackening (*raphah*) of their obedience to God's commands (Feldman 2004, 51).

Yet contained within the legacy of Amalek, historian Elliott S. Horowitz observes, is not only the memory of violence but "the violence of memory": "'[M]emory is an aggressive act,' [David G. Roskies] asserts, particularly among people with limited access to other forms of aggression" (2008, 109–110, quoting Roskies 1999, 10). To ensure its perpetuation, collective memory must be performed through recurrent practices (Vincent 2014, 26; cf. Connerton 2007). In Jewish observance, the commemoration of Amalek occurs with the recitation of Deut. 25:17–19 (*Parshat Zakhor*, "portion of remembrance") on the Shabbat before Purim and alongside the reading of Megillah Esther on Purim, ritually linking Amalek to Haman (see Megillah 30a). According to the Talmud, it not enough to remember silently, rather "remembrance must be expressed out loud, *with the mouth*" (Megillah 18a, emphasis added).

Horowitz highlights the history of Torah scribes and everyday Jews testing out a quill or fountain pen by writing the name of Amalek and then crossing it out to symbolically fulfill the divine commandment (107–108). The blotting out of Amalek in writing is mirrored in the practice of eliminating Haman from hearing during Purim by crying out, stomping feet and spinning graggers when his name is spoken. While these practices are associated with the merriment of the festival, they are rooted in older teachings and customs. A prevalent rabbinic teaching held the last letters of the first three words of *wehayah 'im bin hakkowt harasa'* ("If the one in the wrong deserves to be flogged," Deut. 25:2) spell out the name Haman (*hmn*). This teaching appears to have led to customs in Europe of breaking pots and banging stones upon which the name of Haman was written (Brodt 2016).

Over time the eradication of Haman/Amalek transformed into what Egyptologist Jan Assmann refers to as a bonding memory. He writes:

> Bonding memory has a normative, contractual character. It commits the individual to fulfill the obligations he committed himself to the previous day. However, the context may have changed so much from one day to the next that nothing reminds him of the commitment he has made and of the interest that led him to make it. [The memory] must therefore be carried through a hostile environment, where it no longer seems appropriate but instead has receded into the distance.… [Bonding memory] arises from the clash between the obligations we must remember and the interests of a future present. (2006, 10)

Group bonding is also one of the aims of the carnivalesque. As Craig explains, Bakhtin understood the nature of carnivalesque laughter as "corporate, universal and ambivalent." It is the corporate and universal laughter of the throngs in the marketplace free to laugh at anyone (1995, 150-151). Yet those who are “merry and exultant” are “simultaneously mocking and ridiculing.” The carnivalesque, “is a therefore an *attitude* which answers to the experience of ambivalence while allowing mankind [sic] a vehicle to overcome paralyzing fear” (Craig 1995, 151, emphasis in original). Strikingly, then, the bonding memories associated with Haman/Amalek are predicated on the same ambivalence, or tension, that exists at the intersection of carnivalesque laughter and anger. And “anger,” Gadsby asserts, “much like laughter, can connect a room full of strangers like nothing else. But anger, even if it’s connected to laughter, will not relieve tension. Because anger is a tension. It is a toxic, infectious tension” (Gadsby 2018).

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[15] For discussion of this paradox and some contemporary responses, see Vincent 2014, 11-44.

The fusion of laughter and anger in Esther seems not only to connected individuals in space but also across time. As the drowning out of Haman’s name further merged with memories of Hitler’s atrocities, the suffering and resistance recounted in Esther appears to have expanded, for some, from a bonding memory to what feminist theorist Marianne Hirsch describes as a “postmemory.” Where bonding memory underscores the sociality of memory, the concept of postmemory calls attention to how traumatic events of the past, through images, stories and behaviors, can come to have qualities of “present” memories for the generation that follows: “[Such] memories [are] transmitted … so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2012, emphasis in original). The experience of postmemory is not an exclusively linear occurrence passed down from one person to another, but rather a complex inter- and trans-generational phenomenon shaped by environmental, behavioral, and epigenetic causes (Hirsch 2017, 4–7).

Postmemory is, moreover, not static but subject to change (Hirsch 2017, 4–7). Emanuel demonstrates how the postmemories of “trauma and counter-trauma" in Esther transformed over time from expressions of hidden resistance during the Shoah to overt defiance, finding new and heightened representation in the post-Shoah image of the Israeli Sabra, or “new Jew.” Early Zionist textbooks fashioned Sabra leaders as modern day Mordecais ready to reverse the roles of victim and perpetrator (Emanuel, 37).[16] “[T]he establishment of the Israeli Sabra created space for both revenge fantasy and revenge reality against any and all lingering ‘Amaleks,’” Emanuel explains. Appropriating “Amalekite power and force,” the Sabra reflects an attempt at “post-traumatic wish fulfillment” seeking “to process, survive, and counter trauma (Emanuel 2017, 23). However, such fantasies allow for the disavowal of the very trauma that shapes them: “For in such imaginary, [survivors of trauma] can be ‘rid of the terror, shame, and pain of the trauma [and] restore [their] own sense of power,’ without having to resort to the mourning process and the traumatic recall it entails (Emanuel 2017, 189 quoting Herman 1997).[17] Trauma is disavowed in favor of fantasies of retaliation.

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[16] More recently in 2013, the Chief Rabbinate of the Israeli army produced a short film about Purim for Israeli soldiers which depicts a valorised Mordecai juxtaposed to images of contemporary Iranian and Palestinian leaders. See “פורים: הסיפור האמיתי (‘Purim the True Story’),” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxgDpH6drOs. Cf: HaCohen.

The revenge fantasies of the Sabra have become realities in episodic acts of aggression and violence by Israelis towards Palestinians, considered by many ultra-Orthodox Jews to be the "lingering Amaleks" in their midst. In an act of what she deems religious hate speech, Israeli philosopher Yael Tamir tells of a fiery public reading of Deut. 25: 17–19 by extremist Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League, during a protest in the Palestinian village of Um el-Pachem. "If not for the intervention of the Israeli police," she writes, "blood would have been shed that day" (Tamir 2000, 323–324). During Purim in 1994 , one of Kahane's disciples, Baruch Goldstein, opened fire on Palestinian Muslims at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, killing twenty-nine persons and injuring one hundred and twenty-five more. According to Israeli scholar Ran HaCohen, Goldstein's actions were the culmination of years of Purim parades in Hebron that had become "a tradition of provocations, with Jewish violence escalating from year to year" (2013).[18]

Of course, animosity ignited in the names of Amalek and Haman extends beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They have become convenient monikers for adversaries of all kinds—applied by Protestants to Catholics (e.g., Gouge 1631, 188) by the British to Scots (e.g., Webster 1746), Puritans to Native Americans (Corrigan 2020, 18–55), by Afrikaners to indigenous South Africans (Kistner 1975, 78), by Hutus to Tutsis (Spijker 2017, 68-69), and, most incredulously, by medieval and early modern Christians to Jews, who identified Haman with the crucified Christ (Lee, 281–282). The biblical conflict is perennially appropriated towards new ends in which virtually any group can fall prey to the totalizing logic undergirding the myth of Amalek.

Punching Through the Line

Just as there have been attempts to reject Esther as comedy, there have been efforts to neutralize the dangerous ideologies inspired by the accounts of Amalek and Haman.[19] Amalek has been allegorized as the "evil inclination" converting an external enemy into a war waged against hatred within one's own conscious

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[17] On the psychology of revenge, psychoanalyst Nina Thomas concurs: "Through the fantasy of inflicting equivalent pain and suffering on his [sic] torturer, the avenger is able to reverse the passivity of victimization and by doing so, blunt the affect attendant to mourning" (2004, 297).

[18] For a discussion of violent incidents occurring during Purim celebrations in Hebron from 1981 to 1998, see Horowitz, 4–8. HaCohen also points to two incidents of violence against Arabs in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem during Purim in 2013. No media outlets connected the crimes to the Jewish holiday, though HaCohen argues the context was directly relevant.

[19] See Jaffee 2011 for a discussion of further approaches to the problem in Jewish thought. As Jaffe rightly notes, the preponderance of rabbinic commentary on the subject reflects attempts to restrain notions of an historical Amalek. Christian theologian Henry Knight has also argued that Amalek should only be identified *after* he has perished, holding open the possibilities of reconciliation (2009, 231): "After identifying someone or some group as Amalek, the particular identity of that other is lost. Hereafter one relates to a cipher, not to a human being. After Auschwitz, that is an abomination that can no longer be tolerated" (228).

(Horowitz 2008, 134-137). For our purposes here, however, neither attempts to sideline the comedic genre or neutralize Amalek/Haman are enough to address the particular confluence of laughter and anger that undergirds the broader plot of Esther. We have seen how humour enables or reinforces the narrative reversals that drive the plot forward. This suggests that, far from abandoning the comedic genre, we must understand and, in certain respects, participate in its narrative contradictions to "punch through the line" that formerly "sealed off" the trauma of Esther into jokes. Gadsby's reflection on her own creative journey to "Nanette" during a 2019 TED talk is instructive here:

> I realized that I'd been telling my stories for laughs. I'd been trimming away the darkness, cutting away the pain and holding on to my trauma for the comfort of my audience. I was connecting other people through laughs, yet I remained profoundly disconnected. . . . I did not have an answer, but I had an idea. I had an idea to tell my truth, all of it, not to share laughs but to share the literal, visceral pain of my trauma. And I thought the best way to do that would be through a comedy show. . . that did not respect the punchline, that line where comedians are expected and trusted to pull their punches and turn them into tickles. I did not stop. I punched through that line into the metaphorical guts of my audience. I did not want to make them laugh. I wanted to take their breath away, to shock them, so they could listen to my story and hold my pain as individuals, not as a mindless, laughing mob. And that's what I did, and I called that show "Nanette." I fully expected by breaking the contract of comedy and telling my story in all its truth and pain that that would push me further into the margins of both life and art.… But that is not what happened. The world did not push me away. It pulled me closer. Through an act of disconnection, I found connection. (Gadsby 2019)

In *Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation*, Gadsby further describes "Nanette" as "an experiment in the transmutation of trauma" meant to "repurpose comedy into something that would allow me to express the heat of my anger and the pain of my trauma, but without transferring it" (2022, 331). Even as she engages in playful taunts with her audience, she lays the groundwork for an affective experience of shared vulnerability by naming her own shame and anger rather than burying them in jokes (Jenzen 2020, 40).

As we have seen, the tendentious humor in Esther often masks the shame and alienation experienced by its characters and, by extension, its readers. What would it then mean to transmute the "infectious tension," between laughter and anger and punch through the line of Esther's comedic veil to address its traumatic core? How might one illuminate and transcend the pain of Vashti, Esther and all their sisters in the service of healing? And what would it look like to transmute the traumas embedded in the Purim celebration?

We turn now to two works of art which offer avenues for "punching through the line." The first, conceptual visual artist Patricia Cronin's *Shrine for Girls, Venice*, is an exhibit installed in Chiesa di San Gallo, in 2015. Three sets of empty garments are laid upon the three stone altars that form the central feature of this small church—on the central altar, brightly colored saris from India, representing two teenage cousins who were gang raped and lynched in the Indian village of Katra in 2015; on the left, grey and violet hijabs from Africa, commemorating the 276 girls kidnapped by Boko Harem in Nigeria in 2014; and on the right, monochromatic uniforms from the United Kingdom, memorializing the thousands of young women forced into servitude in the Magdalene laundries of Ireland in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beside each display are small photographs documenting the atrocities committed against these girls. Cronin explains:

> I lure my audience into the church by elegantly arranging the chromatically rich saris on the central altar, they move closer out of curiosity and then notice a small framed photograph to the side and all becomes clear. With such disturbing content, I thought it was important not to beat them up with it, but to let their own individual emotional/psychological arch take place (Reilly 2015, 38-39).

As spectators move through the exhibit, they are invited to participate in what she describes as "global bereavement" for the countless exploited, missing, and murdered women and girls around the world (Reilly 2002, 37).

Though the book of Esther is not Cronin's subject, art historian Ayla Lepine likens the vivid saris on the main altar of *Shrine for Girls* to the opulent garments worn by Esther in Guercino's 1639 painting *Esther Before Ahasuerus* (2022a, 2022b). She writes, "In Guercino's painting, Esther's eyes are closed in suffering, recalling the passage: 'how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?' (Esther 8:6).… Cronin's textiles and their stories insist upon opening viewers' eyes, as paradoxically do Esther's closed eyes in Guercino's painting" (Lepine 2022b). Similarly, what first struck me was the central altar and its resemblance to a royal throne. Yet, unlike Lepine, the saris reminded me of Vashti, and my first reaction was to laugh. I imagined for a moment all the women in the royal harem casting off the fetters of their royal costumes, leaving them in a heap on the throne. In the place of the king, the comparatively lifeless slate-grey icons of Saint Gallo and the Virgin Mary (suspended in the alcoves to the left and right of the altar) are looking down, helpless to thwart the rebellion before them.

Like many viewers, my initial response did not yet take into account the sobering photographs adjacent to each altar. Nonetheless, what I later realized I was drawn to was one of several turnabouts contained in Cronin's work, features congruent in form with the comic reversals of Esther. A closer study of *Shrine for Girls, Venice* alongside the biblical narrative illuminates a path forward for Esther's sisters that is transgressive and transformative. Though mine is a synchronic comparison, the exhibit illuminates and redresses many of the systemic injustices that enable textual and actual violence against women and girls worldwide. Where the book of Esther suppresses the identities of trafficked girls, Cronin's installation calls attention to the specific faces and names of her subjects, their distinctive cultural and religious (Hindu, Muslim and Christian) contexts, and the particular stories of abuse they have endured. At the same time, the diverse histories represented on each altar are symbolically woven into a larger fabric of solidarity that constitutes a call to action (Reilly 2002, 45).

Cronin's use of the deconsecrated Chiesa di San Gallo constitutes yet another reversal, as she levels a critique of patriarchal religion and its complicity in the subjugation of women. Their clothing is preserved as relics, conferring upon them the sanctity they were denied in life. "[T]here is no glory in their death, no otherworldly triumph," Cronin states; rather, the church is re-sanctified as a site to meditate upon their losses (39). The women and girls are transformed from victims to martyrs in the original sense of the Greek word *martyron*—as witnesses who demand a response (Hirsch 2017, 14).

At the same time, their clothing is a visceral reminder of the bodily traumas these women endured. Hirsch sees in Cronin's work the potential to address postmemories of gender-based violence. "The clothes materialize the photographs, give them dimensionality and texture" she writes, "Metonymically … they stand in for those bodies, recalling the crimes those bodies suffered and poignantly underscoring their absence. They are the outer layer of skin that both contains and communicates deeper wounds of violation" (2017, 13). No longer mere symbols of femininity or signals of oppression, the garments become an affective means of fostering deeper connections between women. Read alongside Esther, *Shrine for Girls* offers an avenue for narrative repair as it gives synchronic voice to unacknowledged suffering. In evoking skin memories of trauma, the exhibit connects the narrative past to the present. The stories of the women and girls of Esther can now be joined with others in the service of change.

Next we turn to Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitaï's film *Esther*. Gitaï is a political filmmaker, and his early documentary films such as *House* (1980) and *Field Diary* (1982) were critical of Israel's policies toward Palestinians and Arabs, (Privett 2008, 12–13). With *Esther*, he begins to express his political philosophy through fiction. On the choice of Esther, Gitaï writes:

> It took me quite a long time to work out why I was so attracted to the story of Esther and what its meaning was in terms of today…. There are winners and losers, but the *Bible* [sic] insists on the contradictions of victory. The present-day situation in the Middle East is somewhat similar. People who were persecuted not so long ago learn to persecute. That in turn confronts us with a circular, ongoing tragedy which is relentlessly rooted in the *Bible*. Both sides keep referring to the ancient texts in order to justify their part of the conflict. The story gradually becomes more and more bloody and intractable. In the story of Esther, there is no way out (1993, 88).[20]

Esther was shot in Haifa, Israel, resituating the Diaspora story in "the homeland." Filmed in the style of *tableaux vivant*, the sets resemble a series of Persian miniatures, while biblical texts are voiced in modern Hebrew, each signaling the political reversals of his project.

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[20] For a fascinating study of Esther's connections to other ancient Persian literature and the biblical tale's reception in the Arab/Islamic world, see Silverstein 2018.

In fact, Naama Harel argues, Gitaï's recontextualization of the Esther story among the people and symbols of the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict is true to the leitmotif of inversion in Esther and the customs of *Purimshpiln*. (2015, 251-254). The open-air sets were staged in the ruins of Wadi Salib, an Arab quarter until the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. The decision to construct Ahasuerus's palace among the decay of late-Ottoman buildings calls to mind the once lovely Mediterranean city and belies the broader myth of an uninhabited Palestine prior to the influx of Diasporic Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Ingersoll, Meroz, and Neeman 1993, 59). *Esther*'s cast includes Arab and Jewish actors often taking "reverse" roles. Mordecai is played by Palestinian actor Mohammed Bakri and Haman by Juliano Merr, the son of Arab and Jewish parentage, thus inverting the relationship between the Bible's Jewish protagonist and his non-Jewish nemesis. Mordecai's attire gradually changes from yellow to the same dark brown worn by Haman, not the "royal robes of blue and white" (8:15) he is granted in the text. Whereas the Talmud teaches Jews are to become so inebriated during Purim that one cannot tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai," here "even without drinking one cannot distinguish between [the two]" (253–254).

Esther represents the key scenes of the biblical narrative, while the narrator (actor Shmuel Wolf in the roles of a beggar, a eunuch, and a jailer), routinely breaks the fourth wall to fill the narrative gaps (Ehrlich 2016, 123). Gitaï allows the sounds and sights of Wadi Salib—police sirens and jet planes, street signs and burning tires—to intrude upon the film, creating an intertextual dual-time structure. Art director Richard Ingersoll describes how this convergence of the fictive and the real sometimes yielded profound results. During the filming of Haman's execution, dozens of Palestinian children were recruited to form a chanting mob. After hours of waiting in the hot sun they exuberantly began to cheer "Death to Haman!" However, their chants quickly shifted to "yalla Beitar, yalla ("Go Beitar, Go"), an ironic reference to the Israeli football club Beitar Jerusalem, whose fans are known to chant "Death to Arabs" during matches (Ingersoll, Meroz, and Neeman, 59; cf. Harel 2015, 251). "For a moment there was a genuine feeling of panic that the scene was going to erupt into a riot," recalls Ingersoll, "Reality had been allowed to puncture fictional time and even predict something of the future" (59).

At the end of the film, the principal actors each break the fourth wall while walking along a path through the ruins. One by one they tell vignettes from their actual lives, illuminating personal histories of loss, struggle, and identity formation. David Cohen, who plays the eunuch Hatak, relates how he has lived between two worlds, much like his character. He was called a "dirty Jew" in his native homeland of Alexandria, Egypt, only later to be perceived as a non-Jew when he moved to Israel because he did not speak Hebrew. Bakri draws a loose parallel between his own emergence as an actor from an ordinary Palestinian family and Mordecai's rise to fame: "Mordecai forgot what he was fighting for…. Suddenly the war of survival turned into a cruel and bloody war…. [We] are making this film hoping to prevent such slaughter." While the actors form an additional intertext, as film scholar Irma Klein explains, "[R]ather than allowing the actor's personal present and past histories to be insinuated into their fictional-historical characters, the film does the opposite: it insinuates echoes of the Biblical [sic] story into the lives of the actors" (1993, 35).

Beyond the words the actors speak, it is the dialectic between the stillness of the *tableaux vivant* and the actors' movement here that is most striking. Symbolically, Gitaï punches through the line of Esther's comedic limitations as his audience is invited to contemplate the traumas embedded in Esther and seek a different path forward. He speaks not only his to fellow Israelis, but to all those, present and future, who bear the story's imprint. Journalist Rachel Neeman observes:

> [W]hen the oppressed Palestinian refugees become independent, they too will go through a similar process and discover for themselves an object for oppression. The transition from oppressed to oppressor will not spare them and Mordecai, in Gitaï's film, is not only the present-day Jew but also the future Palestinian (Ingersoll, Meroz, and Neeman 1993, 61).

Creatively linking the past and present, Gitaï exhorts his audience to do the associative work necessary to explore the complexities of identity (Gitaï 1993, 71). Where Cronin seeks to foster identifications between her subjects and her audience in *Shrine for Girls, Venice*, Gitaï employs his dual-time structure to achieve what German playwright Berthold Brecht's described as the *Verfremdungseffekt* ("alienation effect") (Ehrlich 2016, 123). By disallowing his viewers to become totally absorbed in the fictive world, Gitaï exhorts them to take a critical stance and form multiple and even conflicting identifications with various characters—identifications that may traverse victimhood and perpetration. Trauma theorist Susannah Radstone argues reparative appeals to postmemory should foster identifications that acknowledge "testimonial witnessing's darker side." Where films like *Schindler's List*[21] promote a "Manichaean certainty" about who is "good" and who is "bad," we, as witnesses to history's atrocities, must come to terms with our capacity to persecute others as well as to be persecuted (Radstone 2001, 61, 66). Gitaï encourages "heteropathic" recognition,[22] that is "the ability to say "It could have been me; it was me, also," and at the same time, "but it was not me"" (Hirsch 1999, 9, emphasis in original; quoted in Radstone 2001, 63).

"You Learn from the Part of the Story You Focus On"

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[21] For a discussion of *Schindler's List* and the problem of identification solely with victimhood, see Rose 1998.

[22] Heteropathic identification is a concept first proposed by phenomenologist Max Scheler (1923).

I don't want to unite you with laughter or anger. I just needed my story heard, my story felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own. Because, like it or not, your story is my story. And my story is your story. I just don't have the strength to take care of my story anymore. I don't want my story defined by anger. All I can ask is just please help me take care of my story. - Hannah Gadsby

In interviews Gadsby often marvels at how her decision to quit comedy launched her comedy career. Though some have suggested "Nanette" was not comedy, others have embraced her work as ground-breaking.[23] "[I]n a show where she argues comedy cannot accommodate trauma," writes feminist philosopher Sheila Lintott writes, ["Gadsby] performs comedy that successfully accommodates trauma" (2020, 630). Refusing to bow to comic conventions that limit her humanity, she exhorts us to privilege connection over catharsis.

Yet in true Bakhtinian fashion,[24] Gadsby resists any final closure with her audience. In a final reversal, she shifts the responsibility for carrying the pain of inequality and oppression back on to them:

> [T]his tension, it's yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like because this tension is what not-normals carry inside them all of the time because it is dangerous to be different. To the men in the room, I speak to you now, particularly the white men, especially the straight white men. Pull your fucking socks up! How humiliating! Fashion advice from a lesbian. That is your last joke (Gadsby 2018).

Denying her audience the shelter to retreat from the anger and pain expressed, Gadsby simulates, in her words, "something akin to trauma." She explains she packed the first half of her show with jokes because "I needed my audience to feel safe so that I could take that safety away and not give it back. Why? Because that is the shape of trauma" (2022, 22) Denying that safety, nevertheless, is ultimately an ethical act. "*Nanette* would have been a failure had she excised all of the tension in the audience," writes Lintott, "The tension that lingers holds the promise of changing minds and changing behaviors" (2020, 627).

Certainly, the tension in the traumedy of Esther does not abate. Sharp contends that the friction between what is said and unsaid in the ironic excesses of chapter nine leaves reader with inescapable feelings of dis-ease: The Jews inaugurate for themselves a holiday predicated upon a pogrom backed by imperial power (Sharp 2009, 69). The solemnity with which the twice-inscribed Purim decree is written down (9: 20–32) mimics the delivery of the Torah but with none of its divine authority (Sharp 2009, 76–77). Mordecai and Esther are "absorbed into the same Persian economic and political hierarchy that the Book of Esther has worked so hard to mock and destabilize" (Sharp 2009, 78). Do these final ironic turns signal an implicit self-critique?[25] Perhaps. Certainly they signal a moral burden now lays with readers to be good stewards of this story for later generations.

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[23] For a reflection on Gadsby's use of Jack Halberstam's political strategy of the "queer failure" see Jenzen.

[24] With his concept of "unfinalizability," Bakhtin maintains our knowledge of characters, and, by extension, the plots that include them, are provisional (Bakhtin 1984a, 166).

Like that of Gadsby, Cronin's and Gitaï's works each place responsibility back on to their audiences to take up the afterlives of Esther's story. Each artist distinctively "punches through the line" to disrupt histories of violence and trauma. Like Gadsby, they deny viewers the safety to retreat from the pain of their subjects in order to alter the course of traumatic legacies. Yet, neither Cronin's nor Gitaï's endeavor is enough.[26] The provocative nature of Gitaï's films may risk alienating audiences who need its message most. Conversely, Cronin's emphasis on forging empathic identifications with innocent victims may impede the recognition of Esther's capacity—as well as our own—for victimization. No doubt we need multiple stories that punch through the line.

"You learn from the part of the story you focus on," Gadsby avows. The work of narrative repair requires we look backward and forward to understand trauma's inception and its reception so we might entertain other horizons. Gadsby teaches us we can create new stories where pain is no longer drowned out by anger or laughter. At the intersection of suffering and joy, that is where Hannah and Hadassah will meet.

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[25] Stan Goldman asserts the excessively violent ending to Esther constitutes a "double-irony" signalling the need for condemnation by readers. While I find this proposal attractive, my survey of the literature suggests this final ironic twist remains lost, unexplored, or unacknowledged by most scholars. See Goldman 1990, 21–26, cited in Sharp 70–71.

[26] Nor is Gadsby's. Queer theorist Judith Halberstam (2019) has criticized Gadsby's negligence of issue of race and class in "Nanette," particularly in relation to Tasmania's violent colonial past. Gadsby briefly acknowledges the show's lack of explicit attention to "the intersections of race, gender and sexuality" in her memoir (2022, 20).

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