

*From the evacuees to grandma's house:
class, sexuality and Jewish identity on
British television 1975-2012*

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From *The Evacuees* to *Grandma's House*: Class and Jewish Identity on British Television, 1975-2012

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Introduction

This chapter analyzes televisual representations of Jews in the UK from two significant periods in British Jewish history that draw an inter-generational arc from the Second World War to the present in terms of collective memory and adherence to notions of community and religion. Its focus will be Jack Rosenthal's plays *The Evacuees* (Alan Parker, 1975) and *The Bar Mitzvah Boy* (Michael Tuchner, 1976) and the sitcom *Grandma's House* (2010 and 2012).¹ It will argue that *Grandma's House* represents a significant shift in self-representation, away from the mimetic idea of Jewishness in relation to Jewish ritual and its place within the community, as seen in *The Evacuees* and as problematized in *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*.² Ultimately, however, a form of continuity is restored in *Grandma's House* in terms of working-class representation, against the ongoing rags-to-riches, inner-city-to-green-suburb narrative that is still dominant in relation to British Jewry and which also feeds into the long standing anti-Semitic discourse of all Jews being rich. Since the Rosenthal plays in the 1970's, British film and television, where it has deigned to represent Jews, has been dominated by visions of upper-middle class concerns, as portrayed in such films as *Suzie Gold* (Ric Cantor, 2004) and *Sixty Six* (Paul Welland, 2006).³ *Grandma's House*, therefore, represents a welcome broadening out of the experience of British Jewry on TV.

Jack Rosenthal and Postwar Jewry

Jack Rosenthal (1931-2004) was a prolific and important playwright in the UK, particularly on TV, where many of his plays were broadcast. Arguably his most fondly remembered plays are his “Jewish” ones written in the late 1970s: *The Evacuees* and *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*. Both of these “Jewish plays” can be read as encapsulating British Jewry of the period. Where *The Evacuees* represents the memory of the adults of the 1970’s – the threat of war and the fear of the Nazis that had an ongoing impact into their adulthood – the *Bar Mitzvah Boy* echoes the voice of the 1970’s present of that same generation seeing the future through the attitudes of the 13-year-old protagonist and the desire of that younger generation to put the past behind them.

In *The Evacuees*, two boys (Gary Carp and Steven Serember), are evacuated with their whole class in September 1939 from working-class Manchester to St Anne’s, a northwest English coastal resort of, a more economically affluent area than Blackpool -- the usual holiday destination for the Manchester working classes. This difference is an important factor as will be analyzed below. Sue Vice points out the desolation given to the landscape as a backdrop to the teacher trying to get the boys temporary homes and the gradual loss of morale throughout the day. The unwelcoming responses of the inhabitants of St Anne’s is mirrored in this vision of the landscape, as opposed to the warmth and conviviality portrayed of the poverty stricken cobbled Manchester streets. The inversion of usual associations (happy seaside vs. sad city poverty) is laid out here to powerful effect and introduces a theme that continues throughout the play. Vice also explains the structure of the editing; the crosscutting that builds the contrast between the home life and the evacuation that is so important to the viewers’ understanding of the boys’ experience.⁴ This cross-cutting holds throughout the play, positing the two families as binary oppositions in terms of class as well as ethnicity. The boys’ family is portrayed as close and loving in contrast to the foster parents who are withholding and distant disciplinarians, which may also have class inflections. The

story is portrayed through the boys' eyes and in their eyes the St. Anne's foster parents are cruel. Their cruelty revolves around two aspects both equally devastating for the boys. The foster parents will not show them their mother's letters and they also deprive the boys of good food, even food sent by their mother.⁵ Both signs of withholding love are translated in the minds of the foster mother herself as being cruel to be kind, of disciplining the children for their own good, in sharp contrast to the Jewish family whom, it is implied, would not understand those terms of reference.

The issue with food is possibly the most memorable and signals different cultural values on child rearing. The boys habitually eat standing up by the table while the two adults are seated. No chairs are provided for them. This scenario famously has its dramatic highpoint when the boys are forced to eat a single pork sausage on their plate, while their foster parents are tucking in to their more tasty and fulsome meals. The camera lingers on the discomfort of the boys chewing the pork, obviously fighting their desire to repel the *treyf* meat from their mouths. Thus the boys are shown to be both physically and metaphorically outsiders to the Gentile Englishness of their temporary home, the unwelcoming dining room table highlights the breakup of the (partly absent) Jewish family unit – crosscut again, as Vice points out, with the empty chairs in the Manchester home (*ibid.*, 170). It also posits the middle class as normative Englishness, and hence something to which the working-class Jew should aspire.⁶

Rosenthal specifically sets up the Gentile English as having a distinct set of rules that is presented as excluding and un-empathetic compared to the Jewish family. However, although the explicit exclusion comes from the non-Jews, this is not a one-way street. There is an implicit meta-narrative of Jewish criticism of the cold, unwelcoming non-Jewish home that sends a strong message to the Jewish viewers of the unwelcome world beyond the community: trust is only to be extended to those within the Jewish community – even those

within one's own regional Jewish community, as exemplified by a subplot where a cockney boy is evacuated into Manchester and is goaded into fighting with the locals. The message of distrust has several roots. For example, the foster mother trying to erase the boys' mother from memory by hiding the letters could be seen within the history of Jewish children being snatched from Jewish homes and brought up as non-Jews within Jewish cultural memory.⁷ More directly, however, by the 1970's, reference to the Second World War evoked the threat of the Holocaust in British Jewry, and may well have served to remind the community in the 1970's of the times when they were beleaguered but survived, reminding them that only within Jewry can they feel safe.

Finally the younger of the two sons confesses to the mother what has been going on. She immediately takes action, returning them to the warmth of the Jewish home. There is a long crane shot of the mother and boys skipping and laughing through the bombed out streets with a jolly song of the period playing, "Everything is Tickety-Boo" (Vice, 171). Another inversion used to powerful effect: their world is back to rights even if the rest of the world is not is the implication of this scene. The contrast of the happiness portrayed amidst the misery of war serves to accentuate the message that a Jewish home that is split up is tantamount to ruin. The family would rather face death in the blitz and keep spiritually/emotionally warm than be certain of life in the coldness of the English parlor. Back home the father lights the Chanukah candles with the family around him, bathing in the glow of their light, singing a Chanukah song, the family sitting around the table, the boys valued, playing with their friends, being in the shelter and bickering with their grandmother. The implications are clear: Jewish working-class community equals warmth whereas Gentile middle-class Englishness is cold and hostile. It also reinforces Jewish nostalgia while positing normative Englishness as middle class and so achievable through class mobility to Jews. The foster mother's exclamation of self-justification to her husband, after the boys have gone, throws into relief

the different visions of child rearing operating within these different cultures: “I taught them respect. I wouldn’t say that was cruel. I call that love. That’s what I call it. Their love is not love at all. Too much love...that’s what’s cruel... I asked her to let me adopt them officially!” It thus sets up clear divisions between working-class Jewish and middle-class Gentile English values whereby the hermetic Jewish life is left intact and Judaism as the “glue” of togetherness is re-inscribed as the warm glow of a Jewish childhood.⁸

This is a Jewishness that does not take *Halachah* too seriously but maintains the rituals that draw the family together and hopefully nurtures the social inwardness that ensures endogamy, such as kosher food and lighting Chanukah candles. Vice discusses authenticity and memory in her analysis of *The Evacuees*, arguing that the viewers’ responses to the play demanded authenticity and while Rosenthal had said the play was about memory, this diverged with historians’ accounts in some of the detail (73). Nonetheless, in my view this play was pivotal in actually producing the cultural memory of the Jewish community in the 1970’s and importantly supplying the responses and answers to its sense of history of itself: as well as winning four industry awards, it earned “encomia from Wolf Mankowitz, Jeremy Isaacs and Anthony Andrews” who were all significant public figures at the time (Vice, 168). The message to the community was clear: stick together, stay within the community, do “Jewish things,” and ensure Jewish continuity. This is the message to the older members of the community, many of whom were perceiving the collapse of a consensus that coalesced around the idea of a middle ground in British Jewry (that had arguably never really existed) but was now gaining in public awareness.⁹

The 1970’s was a time where Jewish marriage was falling drastically; fascist activity was rising and the British public was just beginning to turn away from unquestioning support of Israel in the long build up to the invasion of Lebanon (Alderman, 4). The Orthodox synagogues were losing their supremacy on the Board of Deputies of British Jews as the then

chief rabbi allowed the Liberal movement to include their representatives. Significantly, this caused the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations to walk out in protest in 1971 (ibid., 5).¹⁰ In the light of these new issues the codes in *The Evacuees* may have resonated as warnings to a community that felt itself to be fracturing and less secure from within. Despite having survived the threat of Hitler, an older section of the community still feared annihilation through exogamy, as exemplified through the popular epithet within British Orthodoxy that “marrying out” was “finishing Hitler’s work.”

So what happens when the children of *The Evacuees* grow up and start to watch their children come of age? While the aforementioned “Jewish glue” is also inscribed into the *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*, the terms are being re-negotiated by the son (who, chronologically speaking, could be the son of the boys who had been evacuated in the *Evacuees*). *The Bar Mitzvah Boy* play takes place in the contemporary moment of the 1970’s when it was written. This post-war evocation is of a Jewish community, that is Jewish in private yet British subjects outside the home, but which, nonetheless, socializes almost exclusively with the Jewish community (as exemplified in the play itself). Rosenthal could not have known the prescience of this play when he wrote it in 1976, but since that time, between 1970 and 1989, according to Geoffrey Alderman, the Jewish community polarized dramatically: membership of the so called “black hat” Orthodoxy (as opposed to the more moderate and modern Orthodoxy of the United Synagogue) doubled and that of Progressive Judaism increased by a fifth (ibid., 5). Keith Kahn Harris and Ben Gidley also talk of the turning point in British Jewry when the community shifted to a discourse of insecurity and one of the two core reasons for this shift into fear politics was a concern with Jewish Continuity (the other being anti-Semitism) even while assimilation was at its most successful.¹¹ A key trigger in their view was the Six Day War of 1967, which, while seeming to be a miracle showing how precarious Jewish safety was, it also underlined the common fate of World Jewry. As Kahn

Harris and Gidley state, “Paradoxically then, Jewish security, a secure sense of belonging engendered by the success of the assimilation project, provoked a need to reinforce communal identification” (ibid., 27).

The Bar Mitzvah Boy takes place in a 1930’s nameless London suburb.¹² It focuses on the dysfunctional members of the main protagonist’s family, who are all expectantly dealing with the impending bar mitzvah to take place the following day. All fulfill some kind of stereotype; the mother is a worrying martyr; the husband hides behind his newspaper; the sister is withholding towards a boyfriend who she does not respect, seeing him as a doormat. This is a very different depiction of family life than the earlier one in *The Evacuees*, where the family is warm and loving. This family is marked by mutual neurosis and of a love that exists despite the irritations -- because love is bound to duty. That evening and the following morning, the bar mitzvah boy, Eliot (Jeremy Steyn), looks around at the men in his family (father, sister’s boyfriend, grandfather) and decides he does not want to follow any of them into manhood. He does not respect them. He wants something else. In the synagogue, when he is called up to say his portion of the Law, instead of going up to the *bimah* to accept the accolade from the community and read the Law that defines him in their eyes as an adult, he makes a decisive act – in the synagogue – in front of the community and to everyone’s considerable consternation he walks out.

Unbeknown to his family, who are dealing with their grief in their own ways, Eliot goes to the park and teams up with Denise (Kim Clifford), a gentile girl from his school, responding to her questions about *bar mitzvahs*. She likens it to wearing a bra or getting her period but he is not interested, so she leaves –reinforcing an experiential split between Jews and gentiles; men and women. During the opening sequence, Denise had asked “What’s he mean? ‘Marks his passage’? Is it rude?” Squidge (Mark Herman) replies, “It’s something Jewish. What Jewish boys do. You wouldn’t understand.” Denise, suspicious, is still not

assuaged, “It *sounds* rude” (Vice, 176). The gendering of the insider/outsider dichotomy is as noticeable as the cultural, although unstated. This event of the bar mitzvah is clearly one that only happens to males. They parade it with a slight swagger, never fully explaining to the girl, preferring to keep it as a secret and male rite of passage. While they are knowingly acting out their desire for ethnic insiderism in this scenario, they are also acting out their male bonding. The lewdness of the phrase emphasizes the exclusion of the woman and the sexualized nature of the banter or even flirtation, metaphorically flexing their manly muscles (in contrast to the other males in the play). Denise phones Eliot’s sister out of spite, to pay him back for being boring. His sister goes to find him in the park. He is on a swing and puts on a Mickey Mouse mask –mirroring his doubts about the authenticity of adult life: the mask of the child hiding the reluctant adult behind. There is an additional overlay here of metaphor at this transformative moment - of going back to childhood innocence; the empty playground; the indecision of what to do, swinging back and forth in his head as well as literally depicted.

Significantly women are his confidantes. Denise is the first confidante, the outsider to whom he chooses to explain himself as so many of his generation chose to do as adults by marrying “out,”¹³ although she has nothing at stake and leaves. The other confidante is his sister, wheedling out of him his reasons: “but they’re not men though that’s the point,” he states, emphatically, referring to the male members of his family. This may have been a poetic preview and judgment on what was at stake for the postwar community: the models of masculinity were being constructed through the shifts in representation from the *Evacuees* to *The Bar Mitzvah Boy* to *Grandma’s House*. These were the changes at the interface of assimilation as the community took on the mores of Englishness and of course refer back to a much older fear of the feminized male Jew. The recent *Grandma’s House* inverts this fear through the self-reflexivity of Simon Amstell and his on screen character who are an both out

and gay Jewish man. Within the contemporary assimilative world-view, the middle-class ambitious professional would be the aspiration.

It may also have been a comment on the community as a whole. Membership of an Orthodox synagogue has little intrinsic value to this community, other than assuring the fact of belonging. The day-to-day observance that is so important to Orthodox Judaism itself means little, hence the wavering boy. However, the *laissez-faire* Orthodoxy of these so-called “three-times-a-year-Jews,”¹⁴ who tend to observe the positive rather than the negative commandments, is possibly as much a source of the boy’s disappointment as the failed masculinity of the men as he perceives it, and in the logic of the play the two are intrinsically interconnected. In the moment of crises, the mother says to the father, “you’re never *doing* anything” to which the father shouts, “I go out to work, earn the money. What else am I meant to do?” “That’s it, you don’t even know,” she ripostes. He can only see the duty of fatherhood in very narrow economic, breadwinning terms, and nothing else: his wife is as disappointed in his passivity in relation to the world as is his son. The passive adherence to community or religion that his father represents has also had its day. That is, the idea of a religion that is observed mainly because it is expected of him by the community, not one that is actively and keenly felt or sought after by the individual, according to the logic of the play. Thus he has lost his potency, in contrast to the Jewish father in *The Evacuees*, who valiantly puts out the fire and is seen through the mother’s eyes as the loving father and good husband and who fulfills the ritual of lighting candles. This shift in expectation of one’s relationship to religion is in part a generational shift of the growing assimilation of Jewry from the post-war era to the 1970’s and beyond, from the small world of the community to the larger world of the middle-class professions, accessed through education or put another way, from the mimetic ideal of Jewish life, as carried down the generations, to the self-chosen instability of contemporary subjectivity as exemplified by Simon Amstell in *Grandma’s House*, to be

looked at later. In the end, Eliot performs the reading of the law outside of the community: in the park he stands on his head and recites his Torah portion with his sister as witness as proof of his manhood outside of the synagogue (and as hinted at when metaphorically flexing his muscles at the outset of the play). What this pivotal moment represents is *not* the moment he leaves the “community,” but rather the moment he questions the terms his parents have set him about what kind of community he can expect, and what kind of manhood, compared to the kind of community he might desire or the kind of man he would desire to become. He cannot quite break away completely yet which is why, significantly he recites the portion to his sister, saving his true feelings for her, and not to Denise.

In this act Eliot embodies the metaphor of the upside down world he and the future represents to the post-war generation, where the individual can flout The Law with impunity from the wider congregation – where marrying out is, if not the norm, then at least usual and openly practiced. In this way, the vision of British-Jewish life, understood as a safe and natural home, as it was envisaged earlier in the post-war era, is significantly questioned. The normative Jewish life, as a kind of middle-of-the-road Jewishness that still clings to the idea of mainstream Orthodoxy in a three-times-a-year way, is also questioned through this final gesture. The self-chosen bar mitzvah act is the arbiter of change to a community that has Friday night dinner and attends the orthodox synagogue on high holy days and celebrations, where “marrying out” brings shame on the family, and socializing internally is the expectation. What was a rite of acceptance and belonging conferred by the community to the individual now in effect becomes a rite of choice – or not – a personal decision of the individual and his journey into manhood. In this evocative and important moment in the play the British Jewish community in line with the broader trends, makes a generational leap, rejecting the social contract of the post war generation that puts the social above the individual and joins the neo-liberal individualistic narrative of freedom and choice.¹⁵

***Grandma's House* and Contemporary British Jewry**

Grandma's House builds on the legacy of Jack Rosenthal in his presentation of a complete Jewish world. It similarly borrows the trope of parading the fractured family. It is a sitcom that relies on stock Jewish characters: the guilt-inducing nagging mother (“the stitches I had, giving birth to you” to which her son responds in a defiant gesture of refusal, “they must have healed up by now”); the benign *schlemiel* but much loved grandfather, who does not say very much, overpowered by the women in the family, just wanting an easy life; the way the family revels in everyone knowing everyone’s business. In these ways *Grandma's House* does the same joke-work that we have seen earlier in Rosenthal’s plays. It can also be seen within the framework of Ivan Kalmar of “embarrassed Jewish Individuals” or “eji’s” who trumpet their uneasy relationship to their Jewishness at every turn and use their social ambivalence to gain “social purchase.”¹⁶ As its title indicates, *Grandma's House* takes place exclusively on the property of the grandmother of the central character, Simon (Simon Amstell), and his younger cousin, Adam (Jamal Hadjkura). Members of the family congregate within her house during each episode. Each week focuses on a set of interweaving everyday dramas that draw out the vulnerabilities of each member of the family, their defensive competitiveness, and the social ambivalence of the two grandsons.

Grandma's House constitutes a multiple shift in self-awareness of the Jewish community in the UK. First, it represents an acknowledgement of double consciousness in Jewish identity. Second, it betrays a sense of Jewish subjectivity that is performative, or in a constant state of flux, rather than relying on mimesis through tradition. Third, it shows disregard for an “authentic” Jewish experience that is so important to Rosenthal’s plays. Finally the naturalized gay sexuality of Simon Amstell’s character whose on screen family revels in stories of his unrequited love life, represents a miasmatic shift in Jewish masculinity

since the earlier post war period¹. This sitcom also is important in the return to a working-class Jewish experience that has been largely absent in UK TV representations since Rosenthal's plays and offers a recuperative reading of Jewry that eschews the narrowness of the stereotypical upper middle-class professional, bringing back an older stereotype of the Jewish taxi driver, who earlier featured in *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*. It also takes place in a very similar type of house to the earlier play.

The sitcom is essentially a vehicle for Amstell who was born in 1979 in Gants Hill, and has appeared in TV comedy since childhood. He is also a well-known stand-up comic in the UK. To be clear – Simon Amstell is a real person who is a comedian. In *Grandma's House* he is acting a character called Simon Amstell who, the audience is led to believe, is a fiction, but who often references a TV career history that the audience knows happened to the real, pre-*Grandma's House* Amstell. Thus reality and fiction are blurred, making for a contemporary take on the subject who has no authenticity. The audience can never tell who the real Amstell in the fiction is, nor who is the real character in the comedy. This is another differentiating factor from the Rosenthal's plays indicative of a shift in Jewish self-identity. Sue Vice discusses the desire for authenticity in the audience responses to both plays discussed here by Rosenthal (168). Such keenly-felt desire for an authentic representation is rendered redundant in the reception of *Grandma's House*. *The Jewish Chronicle* reviewer, for example, acknowledged that this comedy was a subjective construction that does not necessarily define the whole community nor did it worry about the burden of representation:

Jewish viewers might squirm as they recognize something familiar in Simon's grandparents, mum, aunt and nephew who kvetch and bicker over the dinner table together. Whether you enjoy it or not will depend on how you feel about Amstell's geeky, angst-ridden persona.¹⁷

¹ It is also part of a wider acceptance in British culture.

Interestingly, despite the doubling of the real and fiction in the construction of Simon in the series, in interview Simon states that it was really important to him and David Swimer, his co-writer, that it was authentic. However they did not imply authenticity in Jewish terms, but instead as revealing “true” feelings.¹⁸

In the TV series (as possibly in reality) Simon struggles to redefine his career as a serious writer or actor, against his family’s aspirations for him to become a popular TV celebrity. They were happy with his role as chat show host and want him to continue on that track. Some of the gags in *Grandma’s House* rely on his previous performances on TV and his real life as a TV presenter is part of the conceit of the fiction in the sitcom. His previous career in real life on TV is one of the ways of situating contemporary subjectivity that is a site of flux, re-invention, and desire through the doubling as will be explained below. This subjectivity-in-flux differentiates the Jewish subject from that of *The Evacuees* through the *Bar Mitzvah Boy* to *Grandma’s House* in an incremental way. Where the *Evacuees* offers a stable idea of Jewish identity that knows what it is and who it wants to be: it is a safe, protective, warm environment, *The Bar Mitzvah Boy* begins to ask the question of what it is to be Jewish; or how one might want to be Jewish but finds an equilibrium in compromise (in that Eliot celebrates his *bar mitzvah* but on his own in the park). *Grandma’s House*, in contrast, offers no equilibrium but instead discomfort as normative, and with no redemption.

In its lack of visible and active Jewish ritual or formal involvement, *Grandma’s House* shows a contemporary development away from the post-war British middle-of-the-road type of mainstream Judaism as depicted in the Rosenthal plays which was more about an idea of community than Orthodoxy.¹⁹ Adherence to religion and the role of the ritual in the shaping of the community as Jewish is central to the self-representation of post-war Jewry as represented in the longevity of the *The Evacuees* and *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*.²⁰ In *Grandma’s House*, in contrast, there is no adherence to religious ritual or reference to ritual, the

synagogue or formal community in this series as such. Jewishness is embedded in its use of language, such as Yiddish, as well as its cultural mores. In Series 1, Episode 3, for example, Jewishness is alluded to, *via negativa*, in the outrage of the family when Auntie Liz (Samantha Spiro) wears a crucifix in a desperate attempt to try and get her son into a church school by pretending she is a Christian.

It is significant that *Grandma's House* is set in the north-east London suburb of Redbridge which has had a long standing working-class connection with the East End. Gants Hill, which is where the sitcom is specifically set, was known by the wider community in Redbridge as the “taxi driver belt,” so it is no surprise that Simon’s grandfather, Bernie (Geoffrey Hutchings), had been a taxi driver. The move out of the East End was precipitated in part by relative affluence and aspiration but also by bomb damage and postwar slum clearance.²¹ Yet, Redbridge Jews generally were overwhelmingly employed in “distribution and services”²² with little of the cultural or economic capital that marks the much more affluent, professionalized northwest London suburbs.²³ Nonetheless, by the 1970’s, Redbridge had the largest population of Jews in Europe and while Sue Vice has identified the TV location of *The Bar Mitzvah Boy* as Willesden, in my teen Jewish circles in Redbridge we (and there were others too) all believed it to be set in Gants Hill.²⁴ However, this community has been much reduced from dominance to marginality and concomitantly become increasingly culturally impoverished by the moving of cultural institutions from central London to the less accessible (for those in east and northeast London) middle-class suburbs of northwest London.

The extent of the invisibility of the nuances of class and geography in the Jewish community is exemplified by the fact that none of the reviewers of the first series of *Grandma's House* recognized the particular locale of northeast London Jewry. For example, Jonathan Margolis, an ordinary Ilford Jewish viewer, wrote how his wife exclaimed, “Oh my

good gawd, that's Clayhall²⁵," when the first exterior of the suburban semi-detached house was shown. "Don't be so daft," he said. "It'll be west London somewhere. It always is. You know Ilford doesn't exist to the creative classes".²⁶ *Grandma's House*, therefore, represents a counterhegemonic Jewry that is little known outside the northeast London Jewish community itself. The professional northwest London of the Jewish professional classes is dominant in contrast to the northeast London because the stereotypical picture of contemporary Jewry is one of bourgeois suburbia (rather than working-class suburbia and the stereotype of an inner-city working class). This current misrepresentation is bound up with the visibility of the Jews in the media, as journalists and commentators, coupled with the persistent stereotype of the Jewish professional, in particular the doctor or lawyer.

However, it can be argued, that it is also the way in which there is a disjunction between the notions of working class and Jewish: the connection between the terms and the historic connection to the East End of London, which has long been associated in popular memory with Jewish life for a particular historical period. It is central to the rags-to-riches journey of the many immigrant communities inhabiting this part of London, including that of the Jewish community: the East End is where that journey starts and the affluent suburbs is where that journey ends. Working-class Jews in the UK are generally associated with the former struggle of grandparents and great grandparents in the East End of London or Cheetham Hill in Manchester that is romanticized from a position of middle-class assimilated safety. It sits alongside an older stereotype of the poor peasant in the *shtetl* and the myth of progression to wealth and assimilation in the present. The idea of Jews as middle class is completely naturalized in contemporary Britain. Jews themselves reinforce this misconception which, in turn, often blinds them to the reality of the breadth of contemporary British Jewry. Yet, the importance of Rosenthal in the British Jewish imaginary is a testament to this history of recent working-class Jewry running well into the 1970's and now as we can

see it returns again.

Despite the ostensible comforts of family and tradition that one might expect it to offer, *Grandma's House* is not a comfortable home. It is a home that Simon keeps coming back to but keeps trying to escape from also. He sits in the discomfort, in his ambivalence. This is not a new ambivalence, it is just we are allowed to see it more clearly in the gaps between what is known and what is presented on screen. That is the hovering other in the series: the impossibility of either belonging or not belonging, the radical lack of certainty. Amstell's inability to be at home in the familial house with his family may well be underpinned by his sexuality also, despite their acceptance. In Jewish orthodoxy to be gay is to be profoundly unaccepted and *in the closet*.² It can be argued that orthodoxy still sets the overall tone for collective Jewish ontology within the UK in the case of its hetero-normativity (and indeed hetero-normativity is still the orthodoxy within the wider community in the UK). This can be usefully contrasted with the Rosenthal plays where the familial equilibrium is always restored in the end and is predicated upon the traditional nuclear family. It may be that through the re-invention of Jewish life without the Community - as it is represented in *Grandma's House* - Amstell's sexuality does not threaten the normative hegemonic Jewish values of a certain type of Jewish masculinity so central to Jewish continuity and *halacha*³ that revolves around synagogue life⁴.

The insertion of the doubling: of Simon playing himself and Simon's interior life is what allows the series to sidestep the patronizing sneer of the assumed normative middle-

² See the documentary *Trembling Before G-d* (Sandi Dubowski, 2001) and the film *Eyes Wide Open* (Haim Tabakman, 2009) for the poignancy and difficulty of being an orthodox gay Jew.

³ An exploration of the intersectionality of race, class, sexuality and gender incorporating the insights of Daniel Boyarin and Izkovitz et al would be part of a longer study that is beyond the scope of this chapter. It would be particularly rewarding to develop this subject in relation to British Jewish Identity.

⁴ The existence of Gay synagogues are a testament to the expectations of hetero-normativity in synagogue life

class white voyeur. We are asked to identify with the dilemmas with which Simon is faced; we see the family through his loving -- even while ambivalent -- eyes rather than our own. The doubling in *Grandma's House* is worked through several devices: the main conceit is the self-reflexivity of Amstell playing himself. This is directed at the viewers, of course. There is also the misrepresentation between the self on screen, who the viewer never sees but is alluded to again and again, such as the confident, cocky, famous real-life Simon and the self-doubting schlemiel we see before us. This in turn is played out through the portrayal of the difference between his mother's expectations of him and his own aspirations⁵. They are not interested in his aspirations and ridicule him for them when he forces them to take notice. He tries again and again to confer his interior world on them, to no avail.

It would be an obvious link to turn to the double consciousness, as formulated by WEB Dubois, of the Black subject who is conscious of the self of the African-American and the self of Africa, his Diasporic consciousness that speaks to the difference he is made to feel from the norm in America.²⁷ This could be an explanation for the desire of Amstell to play himself. In playing himself there opens up a gap that can reveal the dilemmas that are not his alone to own, but that forms part of the formation of otherness, of any otherness but specifically here of Jewishness in a performative repetition that re-constitutes the British Jewish subject in our time, the return of the repressed, hysterical, Other.

The performative doubling celebrates a heterogeneous disjunction and arises out of a continued lack of comfort, despite the assumed assimilation. The heterogeneous disjunction allows for critique and a questioning of the self as well as a performativity that produces the subjectivity formed through the dialogue between the real and the fiction. In the UK sitcom, through the main character, Simon Amstell, an interior life is conveyed that is not usual to the

⁵ interestingly, given usual cultural narratives of marriage, here his mother's expectations are not for him to be married thus normalizing his homosexuality: his expectations of himself are to be creatively fulfilled and in love.

form of sitcom. Simon Amstell is trying to grow up. Through the interior dilemmas he expounds, which revolve around being taken seriously, about making a contribution (to art and culture), and particularly about negotiating between the members of his inward-looking family (with his grandmother as the matriarch) and the world outside the community, he speaks to dilemmas at the crux of contemporary everyday experience in the Jewish community and possibly timeless dilemmas of immigrant communities.

The heterogenous disjunction is played out through one of the central themes of *Grandma's House*, which is the desire Simon feels to do something great, something that makes a difference. It speaks to the price that has to be paid in class mobility and in the notion of the Jew as *arriviste* which goes to the heart of the intersection of race and class that runs through this program and the desire to assimilate. His family, in the piece, mocks the self-importance that they see in this desire. In their ridicule they reveal their lack of confidence in his world, in the scope of the world he desires as well as the need to rise in the shadow of his glory as they would see it from the eyes of the community: to *schlep naches*. For example when they ask him what his play is about he answers that it is “about the struggle for truth and beauty against the powers of inauthenticity and dullness.” His sister and mother immediately assume he’s talking about Clive (James Smith), his mother’s fiancé who is an annoying boor, in Simon’s eyes, but a point of comic relief to the audience as a foil in manhood to Simon himself. Their world is small, Jewish and based in the home, in the concrete but Simon’s is big and outside the home in a way that reiterates as well as constitutes his sense of inadequacy as a Jew and his desire is for elevation: he fears their smallness pulling him back, back into being merely the chat show host, or more hilariously opening an IT room in the local school.²⁸

The tension is clear: his family who reside completely in their Jewish working-class world do not desire the transcendence through culture that Simon does, who knows what the

culture of the gentile intelligentsia offers (not to be confused with the slur, from antisemitic non-Jews, of the Jewish intelligentsia as an exclusionary and revolutionary elite): Ben (Iwan Rheon) the desiring male (desired by Simon), who cannot be heard either literally nor metaphorically by the family, is rendered as a whispering shadow in one hilarious episode where the family struggle to hear him speak beside their own bellowing conversation style.²⁹ The call of the middle-class, gentile world is too faint for them to hear. They can hear Clive, the loud working class non-Jewish macho man, as they could hear the middle-class Jewish voice coach Deborah Adler (Pam Ferris), but a middle-class non-Jew is a bridge too far. In the doubling and the gaps it exposes Simon's doubts about life, but these doubts offer a radical ambivalence and contradiction. It is a paradox that makes him pertinent.

To return to the central plank of my argument: it is the process of comedy not the subject of comedy that really matters. In the final analysis, what marks *Grandma's House* as a transformative and radical sitcom that has something to say to contemporary Britain is to do with the difference between tragedy and comedy as exemplified in the difference between *Grandma's House* and say *Friday Night Dinner* (2011-).³⁰ *Friday Night Dinner* works from the particular to the universal. It speaks for everyone. In the ongoing childish pranks that the two sons endlessly play with each other there is a universal assumption that at heart "we are all like that really," that is, they are only being human. Conversely, *Grandma's House* works from the universal to the particular. Simon Amstell's grandiose pretensions are grounded in the particular of his family life: his family who grind him down. He is speaking from the particular, his flaws, doubts and ambivalence, but yet the unshakeable belief in himself despite it all, makes him more than human so that in the end, we do not think less of him, despite his flaws, we think more of him for his intentions -- which lends it a transformative value.

Conclusion

What do these self-portrayals say about the transformations of the Jewish community in the UK in the last few generations and the condition of being a Jew in Britain today? *The Evacuees* nostalgically harked back to a Jewish community that had been lost by the 1970's, if it ever was really thus. There is no self-shame or self-consciousness in *The Evacuees*. However, in *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*, outsiders are brought in as a neutral foil that reveals the perceived awfulness of the Jewish home in stark contrast to the portrayal of the outsiders to Jewry in *The Evacuees*. By the time of *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*, many of Eliot's generation had made choices that were different to their parents, either away from the middle-of-the road Judaism, or away from their class through upward mobility via the state education system of that time. But its vision of the duty of the Jewish family exists in a way that is much closer to the paradigm in *Grandma's House*. As such *The Bar Mitzvah Boy* could be seen as a bridge between these visions of Jewish life in the UK, not in terms of class, which in this scenario represents continuity, but in terms of the message portrayed (or constructed) in what community might mean: from the warm glow of nostalgic warmth of the 1940's to the hyper self-critical mood of claustrophobia and shame in the 1970's, still surviving today.

Class is a theme that has runs through these texts as an important factor in representations of Jews on British television. According to Jon Stratton the Jewish sitcom in the US waned at precisely the moment that Jews became middle class (292). However, since Stratton wrote this in 2000 there has been a re-emergence of Jewish sitcoms. Perhaps, then, the importance of *Grandma's House* is that, given Stratton's argument, it signals both an incompleteness to the assimilative project for Jews and in relation to class. If, as Vincent Brook suggests, sitcoms "are a barometer of "society's values,"³¹ then *Grandma's House* signifies a shift away from the so-called postwar British-Jewish consensus to say much about

the shifts in collective identifications since the Second World War within the contemporary British Jewish community.

¹ *The Evacuees*. Dir. Alan Parker, London: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 1975; *The Bar Mitzvah Boy*. Dir. Michael Tuchner, London: BBC, 1977); *Grandma's House*. BBC TV. London: Tiger Aspect Productions, 2010 and 2012.

² I am using this term as “a way of producing the effect of identity through a Jewish tradition,” as discussed by Vikki Bell, “Mimesis as Cultural Survival: Judith Butler and Anti-Semitism,” in Vikki Bell (ed.), *Theory Culture and Society* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE, 1999), 141.

³ *Suzie Gold*. Dir. Ric Cantor. London: Green Wolf Films, 2004; *Sixty Six*. Dir. Paul Welland. London: Working Title, 2006.

⁴ Sue Vice, *Rosenthal* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 168-176

⁵ This term “foster parents” is a loose term, as they are merely the people who took in the evacuees for the duration of their evacuation.

⁶ Institutions such as the Jews Free School, Jewish Board of Guardians were established in part to “introduce to foreign aliens Jews English middle class values.” See Juliet Steyn, *The Jew: Assumptions of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 75.

⁷ Geoffrey Alderman states that many Jewish refugee children were fostered by non-Jews and “some were lured or lulled into Christianity while others were exploited as substitute domestic servants.” Geoffrey Alderman, *Anglo-Jewry: A Suitable Case for Treatment*, (London: Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London, 17 October 1989), 299.

⁸ Even when the youngest son nearly burns down the house by re-lighting the Chanukah candles just before bed – the love is not diminished and the punishment barely there in direct contrast to the punishment inflicted on the boys when they get beaten up through no fault of their own in St Anne’s.

⁹ David Cesarani, “How Post War Britain Reflected on the Nazi Persecution and Mass Murder of Europe’s Jews: A Reassessment of Early Responses” in Tony Kushner and Hannah Ewence (eds.), *Whatever Happened to British Jewish Studies?* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2011), 129. There has never been a consensus, however, Geoffrey Alderman in his pamphlet cites the turbulence that was caused by the ascension of a representative of the progressive synagogues to the Board of Deputies and the subsequent exit of the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregation that heralded a profound rift that still existed at the time of writing the pamphlet (Alderman, 5).

¹⁰ Alderman, *Anglo-Jewry*.5

¹¹ Ben Gidley and Keith Kahn-Harris, *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today*, (London: Continuum, 2010).

¹² Vice claims it is Willesden but the Wikipedia entry claims North East London

¹³ Marriages in synagogues fell drastically from over 2000 in 1970 to 1250 in 1978 and 1075 in 1982. By 1989 the number was 1057. See Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (London: Clarendon Press, 1998), 328.

¹⁴ This term refers to those who only attend synagogue on the on high holy days.

¹⁵ Shifts in political allegiance of Jews 1974-1987 moved significantly towards the Conservative Party within British Jewry. In fact “Jews have proved somewhat more Conservatively inclined” than their non-Jewish equivalents, which could be to do with perceptions (or actual) anti-Zionism within the Labour party (ibid., 344-345).

¹⁶ Ivan Kalmar, *The Trotskys Freuds and Woody Allens: Portrait of a Culture* (Toronto: Penguin, 1994) 199. See also Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish* (London: Routledge, 2000), 297.

¹⁷ Alan Montague, "Wincing with the Amstells," *Jewish Chronicle*, August 4, 2010, <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-features/36463/wincing-amstells> (accessed 15th April 2013).

¹⁸ Amstell said; "I was really terrified, after spending so much time trying to make the scripts as authentic, heartfelt and real as possible, that I might go in and screw the whole thing up with my horrific acting." Quoted in Nick Fiaca, An Interview with Simon Amstell, *TV Choice*, <http://www.tvchoicemagazine.co.uk/interviewextra/simon-amstell-grandmas-house> (accessed, 5th July 2013).

¹⁹ The term community has been widely problematized across different disciplines. In this context I am referring to a definition in Gidley and Kahn-Harris of community "as a self-conscious though by no means unified entity whose members interact in Jewish institutions" (7). For critiques of the term community, a key foundational text is Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Culture and the Allure of Race* (London: Allan Lane, 2000). My own work has been profoundly questioning of those terms such as my video work, "So You Think You Can Tell" (2000).

²⁰ These two TV plays have been reissued recently in a BBC DVD.

²¹ Todd Endelman, *The Jews in Britain 1666-2000* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2002), 230.

²² "Redbridge Jewish Survey 1977-78," <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=1512> (accessed 9 Jan. 2013).

²³ According to recent statistics from the American Jewish charity, Met Council, "there are almost a quarter of a million Jewish people in New York who live in households with

incomes under 150% of the Federal Poverty Guideline. These 244,000 poor people represent 15% of the 1.66 million Jewish people in all Jewish households in the New York area.”

“Jewish Poverty FAQs,”

[http://www.metcouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About Jewish Poverty FAQs](http://www.metcouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About%20Jewish%20Poverty%20FAQs)

(accessed 23 Feb. 2013).

²⁴ Jessica Elgot, *Jewish Chronicle*, October 1, 2009,.

²⁵ Clayhall is an area of the London Borough of Redbridge, very close to Gants Hill, with similar demographics.

²⁶ Jonathan Margolis, “Let’s hear it for... that place in Essex,” *Jewish Chronicle*, August 12, 2010, <http://www.thejc.com/comment-and-debate/comment/36722/lets-hear-it-for...-place-essex> (accessed 21 Apr. 2013).

²⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York and Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books, 1994).

²⁸ This is the subject of Episode six, Series one, when Simon’s aunt arranges for him to open the local college media room where his cousin is studying but without asking his permission. Simon sees this as beneath him. His aunt sees it as a way of gaining social power in her milieu and sees him as an ungrateful snob. More generously put, she cannot also understand him turning down work when he is in need of it whereas he would rather not work than demean himself – another class split.

²⁹ Episode three, Series one.

³⁰ *Friday Night Dinner*. London: Popper Pictures, Big Talk Productions 2011.

³¹ Vincent Brook, *Something Ain’t Kosher Here: The Rise of the “Jewish Sitcom”* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 3.