
Redressing Jewish Difference in Tania Modleski's "Cinema and the Dark Continent"

Abstract

This essay addresses what Jewish Studies and Religion scholars have to contribute to cultural discourse about film. Through a careful reading of feminist critic Tania Modleski's essay, this article demonstrates some of the blindspots in film studies when it comes to depictions of Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism. By addressing the ambivalent status of Jewishness in Modleski's work, the essay offers another way of reading Jewishness in not only the *Jazz Singer* and *Crossing Delancy*, but in critical discourse more generally.

Almost the same but not white: the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered inter dicta: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible with that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them.¹

Prelude

I begin this essay with a quote from Homi Bhabha because his notion of the "almost the same but not quite white" status of the colonial subject has offered me a powerful way of understanding the complex position of Jews in the West. This is something I have written about extensively elsewhere.² What I want to talk about here is how I discovered Bhabha and what that might tell us about what Jewish studies and religion scholars have to contribute to cultural discourse about film. I apply Bhabha's notion of mimicry to a critical essay about film, Tania Modleski's "Cinema and the Dark Continent."³ I both admire and respect Modleski's work, even though it does not speak directly to the issue of Jewish or religious difference. I return to it because I want to call attention to how Jewish difference facilitates Modleski's broader argument precisely by being "uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules [of her argument] and within them." As I will argue, Jewish difference becomes an unexpected and unacknowledged illustration of Bhabha's notion of visible mimicry.

To put this in somewhat different terms, I write this essay out of what began as a disappointed expectation. When I first read Modleski's opening words, "Issues of race, gender, and ethnicity come together in an especially bizarre manner in one of the earliest sound films, *The Jazz Singer* ...", I assumed that the essay, which went on to tell the story of the Jewish son torn between performing as a cantor and as a Jazz singer, would lead to a critical appraisal of Jewishness. But this was not the case. Although Jewishness makes another significant appearance in Modleski's essay, Jewish difference is never fully addressed.

What follows is my effort to reread Modleski's essay for Jews and Jewishness. Instead of seeing a neat symmetry between race and gender in American cinema, a symmetry figured in the "dark continent" of her essay's title, I see the redeployment of Jewish difference. It is here that I come back to Bhabha. By using Bhabha to turn Modleski's argument in on itself and to interrogate her use of Jewishness, I make a different set of connections among and between race, gender and Jewishness. I show how Jewish difference must be concealed in Modleski's text in order to configure a single cinematic dark continent.

Those of us in religion who go to cultural and feminist studies to do work on film need to be suspicious. As I demonstrate, we need to bring our own expertise to bare on our reading of even powerful critical texts, texts like Modleski's. Jewish

and religious differences are grossly undertheorized in critical theory and, therefore, it is up to us to broaden and nuance these discussions.

By going back to the two Jewish films Modleski writes about, *The Jazz Singer* and *Crossing Delancey*, I offer a different reading.⁴ I use Bhabha's notion of interdiction to interrogate the peculiar role these films play in framing and facilitating Modleski's entire argument.

Section One: Interdiction

In her essay "Cinema and the Dark Continent: Race and Gender in Popular film," feminist critic Tania Modleski raises a series of powerful questions about race and gender as sites of interdiction. This is the explicit content of her argument, but there is another unspoken, indeed concealed crossroads that emerges from between the seams in her argument. This is a story about Jewishness and the construction of Jewish identities in popular American cinema.

It is this odd pairing of an open discussion of especially blackness and gender with a less overt discussion of Jewishness that has drawn me to Modleski's text. More specifically I am concerned about her use of two explicitly Jewish films to frame her argument, *The Jazz Singer* and *Crossing Delancey*. Although Modleski uses these films to interrogate certain persistent racist tropes in especially contemporary American cinema, there is an excess to her argument. Her choice of

two Jewish films as paradigmatic examples of racist cinema is indicative of a broader tendency in both popular culture and recent criticism. In these works Jews are used to do the work of whiteness. They are often used as examples of racist practices within the larger culture. I am concerned about this scripting of Jews. In the case of the two films Modleski examines, Jewishness matters. Not only do the protagonists of these films attempt to cross the boundaries of Jewish identities, they each remain ambivalent about the possibility of such crossings.

I have chosen to focus on Modleski's essay because I found its excesses as well as its theoretical framework helpful to my own work. By building on Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry to talk about both race and gender within American cinema, Modleski broadened Bhabha's critique. She demonstrates how "mimicry" can help explain some of the dynamics of "othering" as they continue to operate within Western culture. In this way she helps solidify Bhabha's linking of colonialism and liberalism in the "the liberal/colonial project".

By making these critical connections, Modleski's essay allowed me to see, for the first time, how Jewishness might be figured in similar terms. In other words, mimicry offers a powerful way of explaining the complexity of Jewish difference within the liberal/colonial project. Given this, what is most ironic about my reading of Modleski's essay is that I apply her arguments about race and gender to the ways in which she both acknowledges and erases Jewish difference in her own text.

When I first read her essay I kept waiting for her to make these connections. I was surprised that she never did. In part this paper is a meditation on that absence. Why and how could Jewishness figure so prominently in her argument and never be addressed?

What Bhabha's notion of mimicry offered me was a framework for recognizing these complexities. By paying attention to the sites of interdiction, the crossroads within and between blacks and Jews, Jews and women, we can begin to break down these monolithic structures of race, gender and Jewishness and reimagine other possible relationships.

By looking at Modleski's text in particular I hope to reassess the ways in which Jews are used not only in popular film but also in cultural and feminist studies to talk specifically about whiteness. What troubles me is that in much of this recent work, Jews are made to do the work of whiteness, to stand in as paradigmatic white people in attempts to interrogate whiteness. The 1993 publication of Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*⁵ typifies this phenomenon. This promising book lauded by feminist critic Chandra Mohanty, among others, as an "impressive study of the social geography of whiteness inaugurat [ing] a whole new, exciting, and necessary direction in feminist studies: the exploration of the categories of racialized gender, and of genderized race in the construction of white identity ..."6 posits the

"whiteness" of its subjects unproblematically. What is striking is that approximately one third of the women interviewed for this ethnographic study were Jewish. This exceptional Jewish percentage is presented as neither a methodological nor a political problem. Instead in this text, as in Modleski's, Jewishness and "whiteness" are and are not conflated. As a ground-breaking work on whiteness and race, Frankenberg's text is especially disturbing precisely because it re-enforces the assumption of Jewish whiteness and, at the same time, reinvokes the persistence of Jewish difference as if it did not matter.⁷

Homi Bhabha on Mimicry: Rereading Modleski

As Bhabha argues "The colonial discourse that articulates an interdictory 'otherness' is precisely the 'other scene' of this nineteenth-century European desire for an authentic historical consciousness."⁸ In this way he connects the colonial and liberal projects as mirrors of each other and this is crucial to my argument. By talking about Jewish difference I am asking that we look again at what happens to "others" within the liberal west as well as outside of it. In other words, "authentic historical consciousness" comes with its "other" both within and outside of the West.⁹ Thus Bhabha writes:

Within the conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination - the demand for identity, status -- and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history - change, difference -- mimicry represents an ironic

compromise ... [C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformulation of the marginalizing vision of the Other, as a subject that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce slippage, its excess, its difference ... [M]imicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy; mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. (Bhabha, 126)

I offer this rather lengthy passage from Bhabha's text in order to demonstrate how complicated and seemingly contradictory this 'ironic compromise' actually is. What is difficult about mimicry is that it highlights the give and take, the ambivalence of the liberal/colonial project. What Bhabha makes clear is how and in what ways, for the colonial subject, resemblance to Western cultural norms is critical, a form of concealment and protection. Yet even in saying this, Bhabha's reading remains ironic. Since resemblance is not the same or equivalent ["the difference between being English and being Anglicized"¹⁰, for example]. Those who engage in mimicry also pose. They perform and in so doing sometimes make fun of these very roles. Ridicule and imitation are also possible interpretations of precisely these gestures. This argument is crucial for Modleski's reading of *The Jazz Singer*. What also comes through in Bhabha is how these performances indicate the impossibility of resemblance. The difference that was to be effaced keeps coming back. This re-emerging "process of disavowal" is at the heart of Modleski's reading of *Crossing Delancey*.

Redressing Jewishness:

Issues of race, gender, and ethnicity come together in an especially bizarre manner in one of the earliest sound films, *The Jazz Singer* ... (t)he Jewish son, played by Al Jolson, donning black face for a theatrical performance, hears "the call of the ages - the cry of my race," (and) sings "Mammy" to his dying father, promising to take up momentarily the father's role as cantor. Subsequently - and the coda is added to the film-version of the stage play - the son returns to his show-business career, thus being permitted the best of both worlds, old and new. (Modleski, 1991, 115)

Tania Modleski opens her essay with this striking statement. In her reading of this powerful film about the struggles of a young Jewish man to find a place for himself in America, she attempts to bring together questions of race, gender and ethnicity. As she argues, throughout the film the invocation of "the call of the ages...the cry of my race" comes to name the site of these conflicting desires.

The 1927 film opens with a series of images of the New York Jewish "ghetto". This is where "the Jazz singer" is born. It is not only his home but the site that gives birth to his music. As we learn through the opening intertitles, Jazz is linked to a long tradition of prayer and sacred song and yet remains different. Having to choose between jazz and sacred song, Jakie Rabinowitz leaves this home not to return until the final climactic scenes of the film. Song embodies a kind ambivalent call of the ages, the cry of this 'race.' What is contested is which song is

the "real", whose song counts, the father's cantorial voice or the son's jazz? In this way song becomes the site of conflicting emotions about both filial loyalty and cultural assimilation.

To better appreciate Modleski's encapsulation of the final scenes of the film it is important to return to the film to see how the stage is set for these events. Leading up to the climatic ending, Jack Robin, the now grown man of the ghetto returns home to New York for his big break in show business. After years in exile, he is offered a chance for both success and reconciliation. We see Jack about to board a New York train. He is elated. In capital letters the intertitle reads: "NEW YORK, BROADWAY, MOTHER, HOME." In this moment the promise of New York extends beyond the boundaries of the Jewish ghetto to include Broadway, the symbol of assimilated success.

Actually Modleski moves a bit too fast in her depictions of these final New York scenes. In the film there is first a return to the ghetto home where we see mother and son reunited. This is a crucial scene completely lost in Modleski's narration. In this scene Jack speaks for the one and only time in the entire film. Between singing to his mother two renditions of "Blue Skies," one straight one jazzy, mother and son converse. Although a sound production, this scene offers the only sustained conversation in the entire film.¹¹ Although brief, the scene is critical for it is in between the two renditions of the song that dialogue becomes possible.

Mother and son are able to speak literally *inter dicta*. Unfortunately the scene is quickly interrupted by the father's return home. Hearing jazzy music being played on his piano, the cantor/father demands silence, and he gets it. The film goes silent only to return to its previous rhythm, the interplay between silence and song. It is only after this crucial scene of interrupted conversation, a scene not discussed by Modleski, that we get to those precious final scenes of the film that draw her attention.

Although, as Modleski argues, the film version of the play assumes the best of both worlds old and new, the relationship between old and new is more ambivalent. It is only in these final scenes, for example, that we see Jolson in blackface. First we see him applying his make-up as he readies himself for a dress rehearsal for the show he will not end up performing. We then see the dress rehearsal. At this performance his mother watches from the wings. After begging Jack to take his dying father's place as cantor for Yom Kippur the opening night of the show, she finally watches him perform on stage. As she watches, he sings "Mother of Mine, I Still Have You," a song about a mother's undying love and devotion, not "My Mammy." His mother is moved by the performance. She is convinced of Jack's rightful place on stage. She muses, perhaps this is what God intended. She hears the cry in his voice. Nevertheless, despite his mother's blessing, tormented, Jack does return home to see his dying father.

He is no longer in blackface and, once home, he is unable to leave. He stays in order to lead "his people" in prayer. The opening performance of the Broadway show is cancelled. It is only in the film's coda that Jack/Jolson finally sings "My Mammy" on stage for his mother. This time she is a proper member of his audience/congregation. He sings to her in blackface from the stage as a successful performer.

In her encapsulation of the film Modleski tries to combine Jewishness, ethnicity, race, religion, masculine and feminine as always performative, integrally connected to sound and song. Although I disagree with much of her depiction of the film she is right to point out these striking connections. As a celebration of song and the new sound potential of film,¹² song becomes the site of conflict. Old and new are juxtaposed and Jolson seems to be able to have it both ways, but does he? Isn't his final performance of someone else's song, "My Mammy," to his own mother, an ironic compromise? His mother initially finds it difficult even to recognize him in blackface. The first time she sees him in costume is in his dressing-room, just before he goes on stage at the dress rehearsal. She isn't sure if it is really her son under the make up. Quizzically she looks again. She calls him a shadow of himself.¹³

What is the role of blackface and mimicry in Jolson's achievement of success? Here the issue of mimicry is all too apparent. If Jolson is really white, why

must his success be masked? Not only his face, but his very name is changed. The name up in lights is "Robins" not "Rabinowitz".¹⁴ The ambivalences of these gestures, these attempts to pass within the dominant culture are literally staged. As such they do constitute "an especially bizarre" presentation of acceptance and of Jewish whiteness. Yet are they really all that "strikingly unconventional and far fetched"?¹⁵

Through mimicry Jolson attempts to take on the mantle of whiteness. In so doing he must both lose his name and appropriate the face of a black man to secure his dominant status.¹⁶ The allure of passing, the desire for acceptance, for normalization both propels these performances and mark them. The unacknowledged cost of this is what concerns me. In "*The Jazz Singer*," Jolson becomes the paradigmatic minstrel performing over and over again with each new showing of the film. He becomes the bearer of this racist legacy but not simply as white. Rather, as the "not quite white", Jolson embodies this liberal/colonial ambivalence. He speaks and does not speak through both intertitles and song. Only a few words are actually spoken.

Located in between cultures, Jolson comes to bear the weight of this doubled legacy. He neither gets all of the benefits of "whiteness" nor can he escape the responsibilities that tie him still to the ghetto. The "tear" in his song links him forever to that past even as he finds a place for himself on stage. The tear

essentializes his difference creating a link once again between past and present, old and new.

Crossing Delancey:

I now want to turn to Modleski's reading of *Crossing Delancey*. Placing *Crossing Delancey* euphemistically within the tradition of "*The Jazz Singer*," Modleski draws parallels between Jolson's ambivalent relationship to his Jewish roots and Izzy, the female protagonist of this film's relation to her Jewishness. In this case the best of both worlds, even in the ambivalent terms of Jolson's performance, is not an option and this is gendered. The Jewish woman must, as it were, hear "the call of ages" perhaps even "the cry of her race" at least as expressed by her grandmother, give up her assimilated life, and marry Sam, the Jewish pickle man. Here too identity is expressed in terms of a kind of performance. Jewishness can be put on or taken off but it is also fixed. As much as one might try to cross over, to move on, one is called back. In part this is what happens to Izzy.

Crossing Delancey takes its title from a story Sam tells Izzy on their first arranged meeting in the film. After a long evening, finally alone, unchaperoned, Izzy expresses what appears to be quite apparent to those of us watching from the audience, the two have little in common. As Izzy tells Sam, they live in different worlds. Izzy cautiously refers to this incompatibility in terms of "style." In response

to this Sam tells the film's story -- a love story about overcoming such difference. The tale is hopeful. It argues that changing one's "style" is not only possible, but inevitable.

The story Sam tells plays out this scenario. The story is about a man who for many years wore a brown cap that hid his eyes. One day the cap blew off his head and "across Delancey Street" only to be hit by a truck and ruined. In response to this turn of events, Sam gave the man some money to buy a new hat with the stipulation that it not be another brown cap. The man ends up with a fancy new hat and, within twenty four hours, a new bride as well.

After Izzy initially rejects the message of the story by turning down an invitation to dinner, Sam persists. He sends her a new brown hat and beckons her to cross back over Delancey Street to be with him. By playing out the story in reverse, Sam asks Izzy to return to her roots, to come back downtown to the old world of the Jewish ghetto, the world of her grandmother. He does this by reviving the brown hat. In so doing he challenges the legitimacy of her uptown life and questions her account of her own desires. For the rest of the film Izzy struggles with these issues. She is ambivalent. Despite this, the film's overt message is clear. It tells Izzy and other Jewish women like her - to hear the cry of her people. They don't belong uptown, cross back over Delancey Street, go back to where they belong. Despite this overt message it is Izzy's ambivalent desires that fuel much of

this film. Although the film asks us to consider what Izzy really wants, as I have already indicated, it answers this questions definitively with the story of the nice Jewish pickleman.

With this in mind, the critical scenes are very much about desire. According to Modleski, the most telling of these takes place in a sauna. After running around an indoor track leading nowhere, Izzy relaxes with a friend in the sauna and tries to figure out whether or not she should ask out a nonJewish writer (the object of her uptown desires). While in the sauna Izzy overhears a conversation between two black women. As Modleski explains:

While the women recline in their towels, the camera pans down to reveal two black women, one of whom, a very large woman whose ample flesh spills out of a tight bathing-suit, loudly recounts to her friend an anecdote about love making in which while performing fellatio ... she discovers a long - "I mean long" - blonde hair, which the man rather lamely tries to explain away. The camera tilts back up, as Izzy, having listened intently to the conversation, thoughtfully remarks, "Maybe I will call him." (Modleski, 1991, 129)

For Modleski, this scene becomes paradigmatic of "the use of black women to signify sexuality" in popular film. What concerns me is how Jewishness is once again both figured and erased in this discussion. As Modleski goes on to explain,

The black woman's story not only hints at the threat of miscegenation - for, just as this woman's lover has strayed, so too is Izzy straying from her roots - but represents directly all those desires that this postfeminist film is disavowing: both a voracious sexuality and a voracious hunger in general,

resulting from the deprivations suffered by single middle-class white women in the modern world. (Modleski, 1991, 129-130)

This passage embodies precisely what Homi Bhabha refers to as an identity that is "almost the same." In its opening clause Izzy is clearly identified with the black man who, like her, desires a "whiteness" that is "other" -- a nonJewish man. By claiming this desire Izzy breaks a taboo, she crosses (to cross over, leave, and also cross as in Christian, as opposed to the specific sanctioned crossing back, back to the brown cap, that the pickle man offers) a kind of racialized boundary as a Jew. The threat is miscegenation, a legal breach. She is clearly "not white" and like the black man she is also desiring. But, as Modleski's text continues she becomes "almost the same", like one the "single middle-class white women" whose desires are repressed.

This is precisely the ambivalence of Jewish difference. Despite Modleski's willingness to point out these contradictions, she does not stick with them. Izzy's Jewishness and more specifically the ties that bind her to the Lower East Side drop out of Modleski's argument. In her subsequent references to this film, the sauna scene metonymically not only comes to represent this film but more broadly to signify white feminist appropriation of blackness. Modleski writes: "It is urgent that white women come to understand the ways in which they themselves participate in racist structures not only of patriarchal cinema - as in *Crossing Delancey* - but also of contemporary criticism and theory."(Modleski, 1991, 133)

Criticism and Theory as Sites of Interdiction

Like Modleski, I too am interested in figuring out how feminist and cultural studies scholars participate in racist structures, but my understanding of race complicates Modleski's argument. By looking at Jewishness "at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which is known but which must be concealed," I suggest a different scenario. Although the whiteness of Jews is often understood as known and permissible, Modleski's readings of *The Jazz Singer* and *Crossing Delancey* indicate that this is not the entire story. Jewishness is also "other" and its otherness demands concealment. Jewish difference facilitates Modleski's ability to simplify the complexity of racial and gender differences. Albeit in different ways, mimicry offers a way of understanding the tensions among and between various kinds of differences as they are played out not only in popular culture but in feminist and cultural studies scholarship as well.¹⁷

¹ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," October, 28 (1984), 130.

² Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

³ Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 115-34.

⁴ This argument was culled over a number of years. I presented various takes on Modleski's essay in three different conference papers: "Jewish Sons/Jewish Daughters: Reading Tania Modleski on Race, Gender and Jewishness in Popular Film," Women's Studies Conference, University of Delaware, Newark, NE, April 1994; (2) Addressing Jewish Difference: Rereading Tania Modleski

on Constructions of Race in Popular Film," The American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, November 1994; and (3) "Race, Gender and Jewish Excess: Rereading Jewish Cinematic Difference," The American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA 1995. The essay that follows is a significantly revised version of "Addressing Jewish Difference."

⁵ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). For a somewhat different but also critical reading of Frankenberg's text see Judith Levine, "The Heart of Whiteness, Dismantling the Master's House," *The Voice Literary Supplement*, September 1994, 11-16.

⁶ See back-cover of *White Women, Race Matters*.

⁷ For a different account of Jewish whiteness and the whiteness of Jews see Laura Levitt, "Immigrant Daughters,' 'White Jews, and Embodied Readings," *The Reconstructionist* (Fall 1996), 41-48. See also Katya Gibel Azoulay's important study *Black, Jewish, and Interracial: It's Not the Color of Your Skin, but the Race of Your Kin, and Other Myths of Identity*, (Durham: Duke University Press 1997).

⁸ Bhabha, 132.

⁹ See Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*.

¹⁰ Bhabha, 130.

¹¹ See Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: the Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (Spring 1992), 417-453. As Rogin suggests "When the young Jackie Rabinowitz sings in Muller's cafe bar, he announces a cinematic revolution." But there is more, "The second sound interval is even more startling. When the grown Jack Robin (formerly Jackie Rabinowitz) sings 'Dirty Hands, Dirty Face' at Coffee Dan's, for the first time in feature films a voice issues forth from a mouth. Jack then breaks free of both the intertitles that have carried the sound, and speaks his own words. 'Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You ain't heard nothin' yet,' says Al Jolson, repeating the lines that he'd already made famous in vaudeville." (421) Later with his mother he first converses in a playful and sexually suggestive interval. On this scene see Rogin, 422-423.

¹² For an important reading of the role of popular song and the complexity of the interplay between sound and silence in this film see Lynda R. Goldstein, "Cultural Interpellation: Popular Song Interpolations in Narrative Film," dissertation, Temple University, 1992. See especially chapter two, "'With a Tear in His Voice': Articulating Subjectivity Through Song Performance in *The Jazz Singer*," 69-144.

¹³ See Rogin on the more racist original scripting of this scene.

¹⁴ Another interesting moment in the film that disrupts any simple reading of such name changes is an exchange between Yudelson and the Jack's mother about his girlfriend "Mary Dale." Assuming she is not Jewish Yudelson reminds her that her name also might have been changed.

¹⁵ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3d ed. s.v. "bizarre."

¹⁶ See Rogin on this recapitulation of the story of whiteness in American cinema as a form of legitimacy. See especially the opening sections of his essay.

¹⁷ I want to thank Janet Jakobsen for helping me think through many of these issues. I am especially grateful to her for helping me see the network of relationships among and between various forms of oppression and how they are deployed to reinforce each other.