Looking Jewish: The Embodiment of Gender, Class, and Ethnicity among Ashkenazi Jewish Women in Montreal, 1945-1980

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This article examines how Jewish-Canadian identity was inscribed and negotiated on the bodies of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jewish women in Montreal in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Ashkenazi Jewish-Canadian women, caught in a North American beauty culture that idealized certain physical features, often had a fraught relationship with their own bodies and difficulty determining how they fit into the Canadian model. Drawing largely on personal interviews, as well as women’s magazines and cookbooks, the author explores how these women both concealed and revealed their difference and sameness, and how “Jewishness” and “Whiteness” were embodied, coded, and mapped onto the body.

OVER THE COURSE of my life, many people have told me that I do not look Jewish. Some people assume that my olive-toned skin means that I am Spanish, Italian, or Greek in origin. I have also been told that I do not sound Jewish, that my accent is more reminiscent of southern Ontario than it is of Montreal’s Jewish community. Over the course of my research on Jewish women in Montreal, this subject kept coming up; my interviewees repeated what I have heard countless times.

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times. The subject of “looking Jewish” seemed to be very important to them. Some sympathized, claiming that those around them did not believe they were Jewish. Sarah confided, “[A] lot of people take me as Italian.”¹ When she asked why they thought she looked Italian, they could not give her an answer. Aviva similarly commented, “When you look at me ... you wouldn’t necessarily think I was Jewish, red headed, freckles.”² Aviva insisted, “I don’t consider myself looking ethnic.” These remarks left me wondering: what does it mean to “look” Jewish?

I examine how Jewish-Canadian identity was inscribed and negotiated on the bodies of Ashkenazi (of Eastern European heritage) Jewish women in Montreal in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Ashkenazi Jewish-Canadian women, caught in a North American beauty culture that idealized certain physical features, often had a fraught relationship with their own bodies and difficulty determining how they fit into the Canadian model. This problem was compounded by the influx in the late 1950s of Jewish women of Moroccan descent and Hasidic women from Eastern Europe, which complicated the question of what Jewish-Canadian women “looked like.” Drawing largely on personal interviews, as well as women’s magazines and cookbooks, I explore how these women both concealed and revealed their difference and sameness, how “Jewishness” and “Whiteness” were embodied, coded, and mapped onto the body. Moving beyond existing scholarship that focuses on immigrants, this study focuses on the experiences of second- and third-generation Ashkenazi Jewish Canadians. As neither immigrants nor fully Canadian, these so-called ethnic Canadians worked to reconcile their history and traditions with their present nationality in creating a distinctly Canadian Jewish identity.

Methodology
The most important sources for this paper are my interviews with Jewish individuals conducted between 2008 and 2010.³ I sought participants who considered themselves Jewish and who had lived in Montreal at any point between 1945 and 1980, but deliberately excluded public figures.⁴ I did not specify that I wanted to

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¹ Interview 4, interview by author, October 27, 2008, Montreal, QC.
² Interview 21, interview by author, November 13, 2008, Montreal, QC.
⁴ By public figures, I refer to members of the executive of various philanthropic and Zionist organizations, activists, unionists, politicians, writers, and so on. I deliberately chose to exclude these individuals for three reasons. First, the following works have, in whole and in part, already documented these experiences of such individuals. For example, see Paula Draper, “Abraham’s Daughters: Women, Charity and Power in the Canadian Jewish Community” in Jean Burnet, ed., Looking Into My Sister’s Eyes: An Exploration in Women’s History (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986), pp. 75-90; Ruth Frager, Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Movement of Toronto 1900-1939 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Tamara Myers, “On Probation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Women’s Anti-Delinquency Work in Interwar Montreal” in Tamara Myers and Bettina Bradbury, eds., Negotiating Identities in 19th and 20th C. Montreal (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), pp. 175-201. Secondly, I was inspired by American scholarship on the everyday experiences of Jewish women. Some examples include, but are not limited to, Paula Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish
interview women, as men also play an important role in the formation of ethnic and gendered identities. My interview group comprised 32 females and three males. I contacted the individuals who participated in my study in two ways. First, I placed a notice in a local English-language newspaper that invited interested individuals to contact me. Five of my participants were recruited this way. Secondly, I recruited individuals through word of mouth and referral. Many of my interviewees put me in contact with other interested individuals, provided me with suggestions for possible interview subjects, and spread news of my interviews by word of mouth.5 The biggest problem I encountered when searching for interviewees was my inability to make inroads into smaller Jewish communities. The bulk of my participants were drawn from people of backgrounds similar to mine because these were the individuals most likely to be reached through word of mouth.

As a result, my “typical” interviewee was female, and of Russian or Polish ancestry. She was a descendent of immigrants. She was between the ages of 50 and 69, married, and had two children. She was educated and worked outside the home in some type of profession, though she had stayed at home when her children were young. The practice of Judaism was the factor subject to the most variation. There was no one way of being Jewish in Montreal over this period, as elsewhere. Whether it was religious affiliation, synagogue attendance, keeping kosher, or attending Jewish studies, my interviewees displayed a great deal of variety in terms of life history.6 Despite the differences among my 35 participants in terms of generation, educational background, occupation, age, and particularly religiosity, religious education, and religious affiliation, the views of this group of predominantly Ashkenazi Montrealers about body image and looking Jewish were astonishingly similar.

History: The Roles and Representation of Women (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995); Jenna Weissman Joselit, The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); Riv-Ellen Prell, Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). Finally, this project was largely inspired by my desire to see the experiences of the women in my family reflected in the historical scholarship in Canada.

5 That said, even the word-of-mouth method of recruitment did not work as I had originally anticipated. In most instances, when I was referred to another person, my participants sought to help me reach a variety of individuals. They directed me towards people they perceived as more or less religious, from different ethnic backgrounds, with different levels of education, and so on. The individuals whom I was able to interview who were Sephardi and Hasidic were contacted in this manner. Because of this characteristic of word-of-mouth recruitment, the sectarian nature of the Jewish community of Montreal, and my own position as an English-speaking, secular Ashkenazi Jew, I was unable to reach substantial numbers of people from the Sephardi (North African and Mediterranean) and Hasidic (strictly religious) communities in Montreal, both of which are notoriously closed to outsiders. For this reason, my study focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) women.

6 What follows is a detailed statistical analysis of the individuals in my study. Nearly 95 per cent of my participants were Ashkenazi in origin. Of the total, 70 per cent could trace their ancestry back to Russia or Poland, 37 per cent were the second generation of their families born in Canada, 31 per cent were from the first generation born in Canada, and 26 per cent were immigrants. Of the group, 29 per cent identified themselves as Orthodox Jews, followed closely by 20 per cent who identified themselves as Reform Jews, and 17 per cent who identified themselves as Conservative Jews. Seventeen of the 35 individuals whom I interviewed were between the ages of 50 and 69. One was between the age of 40 and 49, while the rest were between the ages of 70 to 90 or older. The overwhelming majority (33 out of 35) of my participants were married or had been married. Of the total, 53 per cent of the women had two children, and 32 per cent had three (15 per cent had none or more than three).
Any scholarly work involving oral history raises the problem of memory and the relationship between the past and the present. In this instance, I asked participants to recall events and attitudes from 30 to 60 years ago. Memory, by its very nature, is unreliable. People forget, exaggerate, invent, and revise memories often without conscious thought. With this in mind, I treat memory as an amalgamation of experience and reflection. Memories are therefore important, not for their ability to tell us “what really happened,” but because they allow historians to examine the lenses through which individuals make sense of their past, present, and future.7

The Body, Embodiment, and Performance
Central to my analysis are body theory and performance theory. Body theory takes the position that human bodies are not simply physical objects. Instead, they are sites, embedded in our lived experiences, where both discursive and material elements converge in the shaping of identities, power, and relationships. The study of body theory is made possible by the concept of embodiment. Here I use Kathleen Canning’s definition of the term, whereby embodiment refers to the varied processes through which bodies are made, marked, and imbued with meaning. These processes can include the use of cosmetics, dieting, body modification, clothing and accessories, hand and arm gestures, and even vocal intonations.8

Closely linked to embodiment is performance theory. Concepts such as ethnicity and gender are not fixed or immutable, but instead constitute “a set of acts that produce the effect or appearance of a coherent substance.”9 In her more recent work, Judith Butler has linked gender performance theory to the idea of “precarity,” noting “anything living can be expunged at will or by accident; and its persistence is in no sense guaranteed.”10 Identities are inherently unstable, and so the performance of identity is a process that continues throughout the life of a subject.

The mapping of concepts such as gender and race onto bodies must take into account the agency of the subject. In assessing surgical attempts to reshape bodies, the work of Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*, offers important insights into women’s agency with respect to cosmetic surgery and their bodies in general. She disagrees with those who argue that women are victims of misogynist messages about beauty or cultural dupes who

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will try and buy any new product to satisfy their vanity. Instead, she argues that
individuals should be reinstated as active and knowledgeable agents who negotiate
their lives in a context where their awareness is partial and options are limited
by circumstances that are not of their making, because people draw upon both
shared and contradictory cultural discourses to make sense of and legitimate their
actions.\textsuperscript{11} This article draws on these works to explore how Ashkenazi women in
Montreal negotiated and mapped discursive ideas such as gender and ethnicity
onto their bodies.\textsuperscript{12} The importance of bodies to Jewish women in Montreal is
such that 19 out of 35 of my interviewees discussed the topic with me.

**Racialized Beauty and the Shikse Goddess Look**

Beauty culture in North America was enormously influential in shaping the
views of Ashkenazi Jewish women in Montreal. Over the course of the twentieth
century, mass media came to define images of beauty, in large part due to the
commercialization of beauty. The cosmetics industry is the most well known
proponent of this phenomenon. It has long employed representations of ideal
beauty to sell its products.\textsuperscript{13} Advertising and mass media representations of women
have long been critiqued for their unattainable and idealized images of beauty.\textsuperscript{14}
Indeed, most Canadian women felt that they did not conform to the idealized
image of “Canadian” bodies, especially when it came to the issues of beauty and
gender norms. This feeling was certainly true for Ashkenazi women as well.

Long-standing tensions with other Montreal cultural groups ensured that
Ashkenazi women in Montreal were influenced by larger North American ideals
of beauty, rather than those of Quebec.\textsuperscript{15} Historically, the Jewish community
spoke English out of a desire to ally itself with the Anglophone élite and because
of Jews’ distrust of French Canadians. Though the Jewish community benefitted
greatly from this alliance, Jews were often excluded from Anglophone social and
cultural institutions, perhaps most famously in the quota system for Jews at McGill
University.\textsuperscript{16} The rise of a Francophone élite following the Quiet Revolution

\textsuperscript{11} Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge,

\textsuperscript{12} David M. Guss, *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance* (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 2000); Shane Vogel, “Madam Zajj and US Steel: Blackness, Bioperformance,

\textsuperscript{13} I do not mean to suggest that there were not alternative mass media representations of beauty. For example,
women like Madam Walker worked to produce Afro-versions, as of course in the 1960s did women like
Angela Davis. See Dara N. Greenwood and Sonya Dal Cin, “Ethnicity and Body Consciousness: Black
and White American Women’s Negotiation of Media Ideals and Others’ Approval,” *Psychology of Popular
Media Culture*, vol. 1, no. 4 (October 2012), pp. 220-235; Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling

\textsuperscript{14} Kathy Davis, “Remaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty,” *Hypatia*,
vol. 6, no. 2 (1991), pp. 29-43; Kathy Peiss, “On Beauty and the History of Business,” *Enterprise and

\textsuperscript{15} Representations of idealized beauty for Francophone women in Quebec differed substantially from those in
the rest of Canada. See Jean Du Berger and Jacques Mathieu, *Les Ouvrières de Dominion Corset à Québec,

\textsuperscript{16} Harold Martin Troper, *The Defining Decade Identity, Politics, and the Canadian Jewish Community in the
1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 43.
began to erode many of the advantages the Jewish community had gained through its tenuous alliance with the Anglophone élite. The growth of Québécois neo-nationalism also caused a great deal of anxiety in the Jewish community because of the perceived historical connections between nationalism and anti-Semitism, particularly in light of the rise of separatism, language legislation, and the October Crisis.

Canadian beauty ideals in this era were heavily influenced by American and British mass media. Fashion magazines and print advertising featured images of young, thin, fair-skinned, and often blonde models. Popular models of the day included Edie Sedgewick and Twiggy in the 1960s and Cheryl Tiegs and Jerry Hall in the 1970s. Beauty pageants, including Miss Canada, followed suit, featuring winners of “northern European origin.” The Ashkenazi women of Montreal were no more immune to these trends than were other Canadian women. One figure in particular stood out in the imagination of many: Twiggy. Laura described the prevailing images as “skinny Twiggy look, you know.” Emily explained, “[W]ell, everyone had a magazine that showed a certain type of woman when I was younger and a teenager. And it was a London type of look, part of the street type of thing, ... Twiggy. ...But it was definitely, definitely there.”

This vision of beauty, though powerful, was not necessarily accepted by all Ashkenazi Jewish women. Some individuals rejected mass media representations of women altogether. For example, Sarah claimed that they were simply not an issue for her and her friends. Laura largely ignored mass media representations of beauty because they seemed to speak only to Anglo-Saxon women. Other people turned to alternative visions of mass media beauty. Emily insisted, “I blocked out all of it! [laughing] ... I never let it affect me.” Emily preferred what she described as “the dirty, grungy, hippyish type” embodied by celebrities like Mama Cass. Tamara blamed her mother for her lack of exposure to mass media, since “my mother never let me have a Barbie doll.” Tamara looked to Jewish actresses instead. She recalled, “There were still actresses back then that you could look up to. I mean, Barbra Streisand. I liked her nose.... The actresses on Fiddler on the

21 Interview 13, interview by author, November 5, 2008, Montreal, QC.
22 Interview 30, interview by author, November 26, 2008, Montreal, QC.
23 Interview 4.
24 Interview 13.
25 Interview 30.
26 Ibid.
27 Interview 14, interview by author, November 6, 2008, Montreal, QC.
Roof were kind of beaky.”

Though alternative visions of beauty did exist in this period, the power of mass media remained unchallenged.

Twiggy and other beauty icons of the era eventually coalesced into one image of beauty: the shikse. Officially, shikse is a Yiddish word for a non-Jewish woman. She represented the imagined white woman of the Ashkenazi community of Montreal. However, the term shikse often has a negative connotation, suggesting that non-Jewish women are immoral, loose, and “not kosher” (unclean). It is also heavily implied that the shikse is Christian. The negative connotations result from the belief that shikses “steal” Jewish men from their rightful brides, Jewish women. In “The Quest for the Ultimate Shiksa,” Frederic Cople Jaher notes, “the exotic female in Jewish life is the sexy shikse, frequently a blue-eyed blonde who offers gratifications withheld, at least until marriage, by proper Jewish girls.” At the same time, the shikse is desirable not just because of her physical appearance, but because shikses are “tickets into American society” for Jewish men who “desperately seek assimilation.” The acquisition of the shikse goddess is a status symbol, a symbol of entry into middle-class society.

Within the Ashkenazi community of Montreal, the shikse became increasingly conflated with the idealized “Canadian” woman to such an extent that “Canadian” women were now imagined to be blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and thin. Aaron, for example, saw Canadians and Jews as two separate categories of individuals. As he noted: “What is Canadian? Canadian, when someone describes Canadian, do they describe them as dark hair dark eyes? Tendency is not to. Tendency is to think of a northern clime, having lighter hair, blue eyes, possibly, I think that, if you were to ask, what is a Canadian, that would stick out first, before the dark hair, dark eyes would.” Similarly, Donna was aware from a very young age that “well, there are the Jews and the shikses. You know, I grew up with people from the shtetls, so it was very clear as to who was Jewish and who wasn’t. And it wasn’t the best of terms, but yeah. I heard it, and I knew what it meant.”

The shikse image posed a particular problem for Jewish women who had any combination of blonde or red hair, blue eyes, and tall and thin bodies. Many found their Jewish identities being questioned by other Jews, much to their resentment. Elaine described a meeting with her husband’s uncle, who questioned her Jewishness: “because Evan’s late uncle, I don’t know if he was referring to me or somebody Evan went out with. He said, blonde hair, and she’s tall. Is she a shikse? ... You’re a shikse if you have blonde hair and you’re tall.” Sharon used very similar language to describe an encounter with her sister’s future mother-in-law:

28 Interview 5, interview by author, October 28, 2008, Montreal, QC.
30 Ibid., p. 521.
31 This “Canadian” woman was implicitly understood to be Anglophone and of Anglo-Celtic descent, as opposed to French-Canadian (many of whom also did not fit this blonde, blue-eyed stereotype).
32 Interview 1, interview by author, October 15, 2008, Montreal, QC.
33 Interview 31, interview by author, January 4, 2010, Victoria, BC. A shtetl is the Yiddish term for a small Jewish village.
34 Interview 3, interview by author, October 26, 2008, Montreal, QC.
You mean *shikse* goddess beauty? ... I suppose in the media [they] portray this exotic look, the Hebrew look or whatever.... It’s not like it was then. Most guys then wanted to go for the *shikse* goddess. I think, my sister and I we both have blonde hair and blue eyes, so we go at the time to over to [her] future mother-in-law, she says ... “Is she a *shikse*?” I said loudly, “NO, I’m NOT a *shikse*.”

Donna remembered an encounter with two Jewish men: “the two of them started talking in Yiddish.... And they started calling me a *shikse*, and all of kinds of names, and I was insulted.... So I retorted in Yiddish, and then they got, Oh. Oh....” Finally, Dana recalled being bullied and gawked at by both adults and children when she was young: “I mean, when I was a kid, people used to say, I’d go in a store, and they’d call their partner, ‘Moishe come quick! Look at this little girl! She has blue eyes and black hair.’ Well, apparently that’s not very Jewish.”

These exchanges were born out of a commonly held belief that it was (and is) possible to identify a Jewish person based on sight alone. Today, this concept is referred to as “Jewdar.” All of the individuals who participated in my study admitted to their familiarity with the concept when asked. For example, Laura responded immediately with “Absolutely!”

While the concept was pervasive, not everyone agreed with the mechanisms behind Jewdar. Some, like Lisa, ridiculed the notion of Jewdar: “Oh look at him, he looks so Jewish. Maybe you can tell. Maybe not. Not always. Not always.” She wondered why some people felt it was important to be able to tell whether someone was Jewish. Tamara insisted that the concept was “not true. There are lots of blonde blue-eyed Jews. My grandmother’s one.” When asked what she thought of Jewdar, Aviva laughed and admitted that, while identifying someone as Jewish was possible most of the time, she refused to admit that it was true on principle. She then continued: “Do I look Jewish? Go to Israel, you have blonde, blue-eyes, you’ve got red hair, freckles, I mean, it’s completely stupid.”

Despite the popularity of the concept, the exact physical indicators of Jewishness often proved elusive. Some people, like Miriam, used previous experiences to guide their judgements. She insisted that “there is a look” and “there are features,” but acknowledged, “that’s maybe my practised eye.” Laura looked for “the overall package. Mannerisms.” Sarah claimed that “there’s a certain expression about a Jewish person, by the smile ... something that’s there.” Most people looked instead for specific behaviours that they connected to Jewishness. Some,
like Sharon, relied on vocal intonation and attitude, as well as the correct use of
“Yiddishisms” or Yiddish expressions.46

Others looked for a combination of speech patterns and mannerisms. Linda
commented, “I suspect that we think it’s the physical but it’s more the way they
behave and how they speak and what they talk about. And there are lots that you
can’t.”47 Still others looked for clothing and accessories and geography. Karen,
who claimed a 99-per-cent success rate in Montreal, explained her ability thusly:

I’m not looking for anything, it’s just, ... it’s not even physical features. It’s more,
clothes, dress, walk, where I’m seeing them. It’s a dead give away. When you’re
from the city of Montreal and you’re going to certain restaurants you know [are]
frequent[ed] by the Jewish community, you know there’s going to be lots of Jewish
people there. If I’m going out of my zone, if I’m in a area that’s not as Jewish, it
will be the clothes they’re wearing, the hairstyle, the jewellery, the latest vogue, the
bling, the nails, the look.... You just know.48

Finally, a few relied on signalling techniques like “bageling.” Debra claimed to be
a world-class “bageler.” She explained: “[A] bageler is someone who, let’s say I
was in a store, I was in New York City.... And the guy said to us, ‘oh, I have one
like that, but it’s bigger.’ That’s bageling. You let people know that you’re Jewish.
I guess he didn’t look Jewish, but he let us know by bageling.”49

The most common physical characteristic associated with Jews was that of
dark hair and dark eyes. These features were often given the label of “Semitic.”
Rosemary told me, “Well. Look at our background. We’re Semitic. And you
know what Arabs look like. You wouldn’t call them, when you look at them you
wouldn’t say they’re Catholic or Protestant right away. You know what I mean?”
She explained that the Semitic look was “dark mostly, olive skin, dark.”50 Linda
described Semitic-looking individuals: “They’re dark. They have dark eyes.
They might have dark skin. Their features might be wider, fuller lips.”51 A certain
amount of diversity, however, was acknowledged. Aaron later added, “Okay, fine,
the eyes, the hair, everything. But my mother does not have dark eyes. She didn’t
have black hair. Or anything. Not even dark brown hair.”52 Laura remarked, “The
Ashkenazi have more, they’re more blondes and reds.”53

Though these characteristics were often coded as “Jewish,” they refer here to
a very specific type of Jew: those of Ashkenazi or Eastern European heritage. The
most obvious characteristics are the use of Yiddish expressions and the presence
of dark hair and dark eyes. Further, the intangible features, the mannerisms, the
gestures, and the accents, are considered the most telling. These features rely
upon the idea of “us” versus “them.” At the same time, this category excludes

46 Interview 17.
47 Interview 22, interview by author, November 14, 2008, Montreal, QC.
48 Interview 16, interview by author, November 10, 2008, Montreal, QC.
49 Interview 9, interview by author, November 2, 2008, Montreal, QC.
50 Interview 8, interview by author, October 30, 2008, Montreal, QC.
51 Interview 22.
52 Interview 1.
53 Interview 13.
individuals who have physical features coded as “Canadian.” Put another way, “If you’re really Jewish ... you won’t look so-called Canadian.”

The *shikse* and the “Jew” became mutually constitutive and mutually exclusive concepts that served to represent the imagined Canadian/white woman and the imagined Jewish woman. These two categories at once serve to highlight both difference and sameness. Both coded specific physical features and assigned them, accurately or not, to one category or another. In turn, these concepts reified the categories of “Canadian” and “Jewish” women; Canadian women have physical features associated with individuals of Anglo-Saxon heritage, while the same holds true for Ashkenazi Jewish women and (their associated) Ashkenazi features. The inherent instability and the internally contradictory nature of this system, however, are revealed through an examination of Jewish bodies and efforts to (re)make them.

**Jewish Bodies and (In)visibility**

The nose job phenomenon illustrates the often deeply ambivalent relationship that Ashkenazi women had with their own bodies, as well as with their Jewish and Canadian identities. My discussions with Jewish women indicated that noses were a key signifier of “Jewishness,” to the extent that 16 of the 35 interviewees discussed nose jobs. Their discomfort with the topic, however, meant that I often initially received one-word responses accompanied by awkward laughter. For instance, Miriam’s initial reply was: “Absolutely!” Bernadette replied: “Oh Yes.” Lisa responded: “Yes, half of my teachers! Sure.” Laura and I had the following exchange:

Interviewer: Have you ever heard of Jewish women getting nose jobs?
Laura: Oh yeah!
Interviewer: Do you know any?
Laura: Oh yeah!

Aaron had an almost identical response:

Interviewer: Have you ever heard of Jewish women getting nose jobs?
Aaron: Yeah.
Interviewer: Do you know any?
Aaron: Yeah.

Many saw Jewish noses as “ugly.” Miriam described how many girls she knew growing up had nose jobs. When asked why she thought girls would want this procedure, she insisted that it wasn’t because they didn’t want to look Jewish—it

54 Interview 1.
55 Interview 7.
56 Interview 29, interview by author, November 25, 2008, Montreal, QC.
57 Interview 11.
58 Interview 13.
59 Interview 1.
was because they wanted to be beautiful: “They don’t like their hooked nose. [Laughter] Not to do anything with Judaism. They don’t like their appearance. They don’t like their noses. Whether it’s Jewish, Italian, Greek, whatever, you know, they don’t like their nose.” This was consistent with comments from other interviewees. Sarah remembered many girls getting nose jobs, particularly when her daughter was younger, but she insisted that it was “[b]ecause they don’t like the hump, but they never mention religion just that they don’t like the hump. Not because it’s Jewish, just ugly.”

Aaron claimed that he knew several women who had had nose jobs: “There was one friend of ours.... She needed it desperately. She had the ugliest freakin’ nose you ever saw.... It was not a Jewish nose; it was just an ugly nose.” Debra said, “I’ve heard of women who’ve wanted to fix their noses, but I don’t know anyone who’s done that to look less Jewish. Perhaps [to] look more attractive.”

Beth even contemplated having the procedure herself. In response to my question about magazines and beauty in the 1960s, she told me about her own feelings about her nose:

Well... I have a big nose, okay? Which I got from my father. On those magazines, everybody had a button nose. And you have no idea how much I wanted that when I was young. [I never would because it would be very painful.] But I wanted it. And I never needed glasses. [But] I always wanted to wear glasses. Why? Because when I put glasses on, I could wear glasses on the bridge of my nose. And you would not see this whole thing. And it looked more button-ish, like I saw in the movie magazines.

In each one of these cases, my interviewees insisted that having a nose job was not about having a “Jewish nose,” *per se*, but having an “ugly nose.” This disavowal only strengthens the association between Jewish and ugly, however. By the postwar period, Jewish women in Montreal had internalized Anglo-Saxon conventions of beauty. Physical characteristics that referenced Anglo-Saxon heritage—blond hair, blue eyes, a small nose—had become coded as beautiful, while physical characteristics that referenced Eastern European Jewish heritage—large noses in particular—had been coded as not beautiful, and even ugly.

Yet Ashkenazi women who underwent the procedure were not usually censured for their behaviour. It was sometimes seen as a smart decision to improve one’s quality of life. Both Diane and Beth understood and sympathized with Ashkenazi women who underwent nose jobs. Diane even went so far as to applaud their bravery.

I think they’re smart.... Because I think it makes them feel good about themselves. And having something that you dislike about yourself and have to live with it and I don’t care what people say, everybody accepts everything, you look like, people

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60 Interview 7.
61 Interview 4.
62 Interview 1.
63 Interview 9.
64 Interview 2, interview by author, October 15, 2008, Montreal, QC.
poke jokes at people who have very large noses or whatever. I think that if you can better yourself in looks or whatever, go with it.\textsuperscript{65}

Similarly, Beth commented, “[I]t makes it easier if you look like everybody else, if you’re immigrating into a country, you’re darn well [sic] it makes it easier.”\textsuperscript{66}

While it is clear that the preponderance of nose jobs among Jewish women in Montreal in the postwar period is an indication of the desire to appear “Canadian,” it was also a way for Jewish women to conform more closely to middle-class Jewish identity.\textsuperscript{67} The nose job came to be a powerful symbol of one’s Canadianness and middle-class status, but also a symbol of “Jewishness” due to its growing popularity among Jewish women. My interviewees were all quickly able to identify specific individuals who had undergone the procedure.\textsuperscript{68} While these women may have been proud of their noses, it seems they were equally proud of their nose jobs. The fact that their families were able to afford a medical procedure for cosmetic reasons (rather than a medical necessity) was a powerful indicator of middle-class affluence. At the same time, while “Jewish noses” are notoriously difficult to define, in a world where markers of difference are difficult to discern, “discriminating gatekeepers need to invest heavily in their ability to discern ethnicity based on looks. This is how the ‘Jewish nose’ becomes useful.”\textsuperscript{69}

Well-integrated Jewish individuals were often the most sensitive to this problem.\textsuperscript{70} These individuals stood to lose the most; they had managed, to one extent or another, to assimilate into the dominant North American culture. However, their identification as Jewish by other individuals threatened to expose them as “Other.” Jewish women thus increasingly turned to medicine, particularly cosmetic surgery, to cure themselves of the “disease” of Jewishness.\textsuperscript{71}

The popularity of nose jobs, therefore, is not simply the rejection of “looking Jewish,” but part of a complicated process through which Ashkenazi women sought to embody the idealized Jewish-Canadian woman.

\textbf{Othering and Jewish Ethnic Divisions}

While the shikse goddess look encompasses the imagined white woman and the “Jewish look” refers to the imagined Ashkenazi woman, there was a third

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Interview 10, interview by author, November 3, 2008, Montreal, QC.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Interview 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Conversely, while they were able to tell me about other people, my interviewees were uncomfortable revealing anything about themselves. Not a single person admitted to having had a nose job. I can only speculate as to the reason. A certain level of discomfort around the notion of reshaping one’s Jewishness might be to blame. Further, the prevailing attitude towards nose jobs has changed in recent years, and it is now looked down upon as an indication of a vain and materialistic personality. Therefore, my interviewees were likely reticent to admit to undergoing the procedure themselves, if indeed any had done so. See Rita Rubin, “A Nose Dive for Nose Jobs,” \textit{Tablet Magazine}, June 7, 2012, accessed March 6, 2014, http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/101732/a-nose-dive-for-nose-jobs.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Bernice Schrank, “‘Cutting Off Your Nose to Spite Your Face’: Jewish Stereotypes, Media Images, Cultural Hybridity,” \textit{Shofar}, vol. 25, no. 4 (Summer 2007), pp. 21, 24-28.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 388-389.
\end{itemize}
category: Jewish individuals whose physical features or mannerisms did not align with the accepted norms for “looking Jewish.” Ashkenazi Jews often singled out the Hasidic and Sephardic communities in particular as “other” Jews.

Hasidic Jews
The main influx of Hasidic immigrants occurred in the years immediately following the Second World War. The Hasidim were not a homogenous group, but comprised many different sects, each of which followed its own rabbi. Hasidic Jews tended to keep themselves apart from other Jewish communities, often living within their own geographical enclaves. They practised a far stricter form of Judaism than either the established Jews or the postwar newcomers and retained much more rigid gender role distinctions. For example, men continued to wear the clothing they had worn in Eastern Europe and did not shave or cut their side locks. Women wore clothing that covered all parts of their bodies except their hands and face and covered their hair upon marriage.

Ashkenazi Jewish women in my study often described Hasidic Jews as odd, old-fashioned, and backward. When I asked Kim about her thoughts on the Hasidim, she replied that she thought they were “strange.” David referred to them as “Neanderthals and barbarians.” Donna referred to them repeatedly as “annoying,” while also stating that “we were the modern Jews in Côte-Saint Luc, and they were the old-fashioned Jews in Outremont. And we didn’t [interact].” Donna remembered visiting a Hassidic area with her grandmother. She told me that at the time she considered them “quaint.”

Others criticized the Hasidim over their appearance, focusing on their distinct costume. When I asked Miriam whether or not she believed it was possible to identify a Jew on sight, her first, impulsive response was: “guy with a beard and a payots, you don’t have to guess!” Donna remembered thinking, “[T]hey looked like pictures of my great-grandparents.” She recalled a specific incident when she was in school: “I remember we had a kid in my class, in Talmud Torah, whose father was a cantor and had tzitzits and we, some of the kids in the class were unmerciful. I mean, they tied him to the chair.... I used to think they [the Hasidim] were peculiar.” David focused on clothing when discussing an encounter with a Hasidic man: “You mean the [Hasidic man] at the shopping centre with the

73 Tulchinsky, Branching Out, p. 284.
74 Interview 31.
75 Interview 20, interview by author, November 12, 2008, Montreal, QC.
76 Interview 31.
77 Ibid.
78 Interview 7. Payots is the Yiddish term for side locks. After their bar mitzvah, religious Jewish men do not cut their sideburns or beards.
79 Interview 31. Tzitzits is the Yiddish term for the ritual fringes. Jewish religious law requires that fringes be attached to the corners of garments. Many religious men wear a rectangular piece of cloth with fringes (tallit katan) or a prayer shawl (tallis) to fulfil this requirement. These fringes can sometimes be seen.
tzfillin? They come to your door, and they’re ‘You’re not going to shul, you don’t wear a tzfillin?’ And I’m going ‘You don’t wear clothing from the 21st century?’**

Hasidic women, alternatively, were often described as tired drudges. In accordance with their beliefs, Hasidic women wear long skirts to their ankles, long sleeves to their wrists, and high collars. After marriage, Hasidic women tend to cover their hair with a scarf or sometimes with a wig. Hasidic women also tend to marry young and have large families. When asked what she thought of Hasidic women in her youth, Donna replied, “[T]hey always looked really tired to me. But I always thought they were nice to their kids.”** Similarly, Leah commented on the burden placed on Hasidic women in such a way that reinforced their otherness. In one instance, Leah described an encounter with a Hasidic woman as follows: “[A Hasidic woman] come[s] in, she’s pregnant, she’s got one by the hand, you know.” When talking to the Hasidic woman, Leah discovered that she was in school to learn a business to pass onto her sons.** Leah remembered thinking at the time, “I look at them, and I think, hey lady are you for real. You’re in Canada, why are you tying down your children.” She spoke favourably of another Hasidic woman who only had two or three children. Leah asked this woman why she had so few children, considering her religious beliefs, and the woman replied that she had received a special dispensation from the rabbi because she was too anxious. Leah’s commentary on this instance: “Good. You know, there’s one that used her brain.”

Many Ashkenazi Jews saw the representations of Hasidim as a negative stereotype of Jews in general that was unjustly applied to them as well. The Hassidim represented everything that the non-Hassidic Ashkenazi Jews wanted to avoid showing: their Eastern European roots, their otherness, and their difference. As David explained, “You make us look like idiots. You’re a bad name for Jews. Jews give Jews bad names. And I resent the Jews who come off looking like a typical Jew, who come off, looking like those Nazi diagrams of what a Jew was, with a big nose.”

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*Sephardi Jews*

Sephardi Jews were also excluded from the category of “Jew.”** A significant number of Sephardi Jews arrived in Montreal in the postwar period, fleeing as many former French colonies such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco were asserting their independence.** The largest group of Sephardi immigrants to Montreal came

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** Interview 20. Tzfillin is the Yiddish term for prayer boxes worn by Jewish men during prayer. Shul is the Yiddish term for synagogue.
** Interview 31.
** Many Hasidic Jews do not work outside of their community due to concerns about being required to work on the Sabbath.
** Interview 15, interview by author, November 10, 2008, Montreal, QC.
** Interview 20.
** The terms Sephardi and Sephardic are often used interchangeably. In this text, I use Sephardi as a noun and Sephardic as an adjective, except when quoting.
specifically from Morocco, primarily in the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{87} The 1991 Census series by the Federation of Jewish Community Services of Montreal reported that since 1959 Moroccan Jews had consistently outnumbered other Sephardi Jewish migrants by a factor of about 1.5. In other words, two out of three Sephardi immigrants to Montreal after 1959 were from Morocco.\textsuperscript{88}

Many of the comments on Sephardi Jews made by my interviewees focused on this group’s physical appearance, saying particularly that they were easy to identify. My sources often referred to Sephardi Jews and Moroccan Jews interchangeably. Elaine pointed to dark skin as a distinguishing characteristic of Sephardi Jews.\textsuperscript{89} Miriam commented, “[Y]ou can tell a Moroccan from another person very easily. If you’re talking about a religious Moroccan, they stand out like a sore thumb.”\textsuperscript{90} Aaron remarked, “I think that today, the Sephardi Jews are more easily identified as Jews, in physical looks, than the Ashkenazi. While even I can usually see a Sephardi person easier.”\textsuperscript{91} Laura told me, “Sephardi are very easy to tell.”\textsuperscript{92}

Sephardi Jews were also consistently characterized as “darker” or more “Semitic” than Ashkenazi Jews. Beth commented that Hungarian Jews had an easier time after arriving in Montreal “because they didn’t look as Semitic ... I’m trying to be PC since I’m on tape ... as the Sephardic Jews. So it was easier for them.”\textsuperscript{93} Karen told me that Sephardi Jews were “a very good looking group, very striking looking features. I’m trying to think, are they all dark? Maybe darker in general? Maybe more olive-y than the Ashkenazi group.”\textsuperscript{94} Aaron remarked that Sephardi Jews were darker because of their ancestry: “They still tend to have more of the traits that were called Jewish.... The darkness. The dark skin, the closer to the equator, the darker your skin will be by nature. The darker hair, the dark eyes. And yeah, the nose itself.”\textsuperscript{95} Laura compared Sephardi Jews to Ashkenazi Jews by saying that “The Ashkenazi have more, they’re more blondes and reds, and whereas the Sephardi are all black hair.”\textsuperscript{96}

Sephardi women were often described as “exotic” and extremely stylish. These were not always positive comments, as they often carried an underlying implication that Sephardi women were materialistic, shallow, and vain. When asked how she viewed Sephardi women, Donna replied: “The people I knew, we regarded them as exotic, but not in a negative way. Because they all, okay, I’m going to make a stereotype now, they dressed better, and they had a good sense of flair, style, which was important.”\textsuperscript{97} Sarah said, “I feel that they live pretty nicely ... the young girls, they’re at the hairdressers every week, with the French manicures, ... stylish clothes. And a few times, we’ve been to the Beth Orah [a

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p. 149.
\textsuperscript{89} Interview 3.
\textsuperscript{90} Interview 7.
\textsuperscript{91} Interview 1.
\textsuperscript{92} Interview 13.
\textsuperscript{93} Interview 2.
\textsuperscript{94} Interview 16, interview by author, November 10, 2008, Montreal, QC.
\textsuperscript{95} Interview 1.
\textsuperscript{96} Interview 13.
\textsuperscript{97} Interview 31.
synagogue with a large Sephardi congregation], they’re all dressed up in their
garbs. I don’t see them lacking for anything.” Karen described Sephardi women
as more stylish and beautiful than Ashkenazi women. When asked if Sephardi
women looked different from Ashkenazi women, she replied: “Absolutely,” but
then had difficulty coming up with a reason. She finally concluded:

Sephardic woman would be described as being very high fashion, and very a la
mode, the latest thing with the feathers, the veils, and the bling, and the blang,
[sic]... They’re much more trendy because many of them are in the fashion business.
[They’re] more shiny, more sequin-y, more bubbly. But I mean, they’re stunning, I
don’t mean it’s ugly.99

The othering of Hasidic and Sephardi Jews was directly related to two postwar
changes: the changing nature of the Jewish community of Montreal and rising
Quebec nationalism. In a community that had always been characterized by
conflict between individuals with different goals, philosophies, national origins,
generations, and religious denominations, the arrival of these new immigrants made
a complex situation even more discordant. The impact of these new immigrants is
reflected in the enormous growth of the Jewish community in Montreal. In 1941,
there were 63,721 Jews in Montreal.100 By 1951, Jewish individuals numbered
80,800, an increase of 27.4 per cent from 1941. In 1961, this number again
increased to 102,700, peaking at 109,500 in 1971, or a growth of 72.4 per cent
from the 1941 totals. Essentially, within 20 years the community had grown by
nearly three-quarters.101 Two of the largest groups of immigrants, the Hasidic and
Sephardi Jews, were also from different religious and ethnic backgrounds than the
established Ashkenazi community.

The relationship between the Ashkenazi and Moroccan (Sephardi) Jews was
particularly acrimonious. Karen described it as follows:

It goes back to the history of when the Sephardim came to Montreal. And how
were they welcomed into the city. And were they welcomed with open arms? No
they weren’t. Did they resent it? Yes they do. Did the Ashkenazim think that they
wanted everything handed to them on a platter, yeah, probably. I mean, that’s the
story of all new ethnic groups moving in. ...The last guy in is the one everybody
looks down on.102

Many North African Jews felt that Canadian Jews discriminated against them.
Many felt that Canadian Jews were even less culturally accommodating than French

98 Interview 4.
99 Interview 16.
100 Tulchinsky, Branching Out, p. 1. In this instance, I am referring to Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative,
and Orthodox Jews. For more information on the differences between these denominations, see Ronald L.
Eisenberg, “Judaism,” Dictionary of Jewish Terms: A Guide to the Language of Judaism (Rochville, MD:
101 Torczyner and Botman, Diversity and Continuity, pp. 14-16; Yam, Canadian Jewish Population Studies,
pp. 12, 14.
102 Interview 16.
Canadians and Muslims, and 20 per cent expressed an outright dislike of Canadian Jews. The Sephardi particularly objected to negative comments concerning their use of Arabic by Ashkenazim, whom they believed to be culturally inferior to the Sephardi. The deep linguistic divisions in Quebec exacerbated the problems between the two communities. Ashkenazi Jews tended to be English-speaking, while Sephardi Jews, as former French colonials, spoke French.

In this context, Ashkenazi Montrealers redefined the meaning of Jewish-Canadian identity to refer to themselves exclusively. As Ashkenazi women sought to render their Jewishness less visible, they sought to reinforce their Canadian identities through comparisons and the othering of non-Ashkenazi Jews. The Hasidim represented everything that the non-Hasidic Ashkenazi Jews wanted to avoid showing: their Eastern European roots, their Otherness, and their difference. The Sephardi represented the fear that Ashkenazi Jews did not possess the physical features necessary to pass as Canadian/white. Both, therefore, had to be excised from the public imagination of what a “Jew” looked like.

Conclusion
Ethnicity and gender were negotiated upon the bodies of Jewish women in Montreal in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in at least three ways: the shikse goddess look, the “Jewish” look, and the othering of non-Ashkenazi Jews. In a period of transition, when new Jewish immigrants with different ethnic backgrounds arrived in Montreal, and in the face of rising fears of anti-Semitism, Ashkenazi Jews in Montreal went to great lengths to identify the ideal Jewish body. Bodies that looked “too white” and those who embodied the shikse goddess look were rejected for not being Jewish enough. Bodies that looked “too Jewish” or the “wrong kind of Jewish” (read: other) were also rejected because they were not “white enough.”

North American beauty culture heavily influenced the Ashkenazi Jewish women of Montreal. In a city divided by language and ethnicity, Ashkenazi Jews looked to neither the Anglophones nor Francophones of Montreal. Instead, the Jews of Montreal looked to other parts of Canada, as well as the United States and Britain. They incorporated and internalized the idealized body of this beauty culture—bodies that were slim, with pale skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. Bodies with non-idealized features, such as round bodies, dark hair and eyes, and sometimes large noses, were accordingly coded as ugly.

Jewish noses were coded as “ugly,” and surgical procedures to alter them were considered acceptable. In this area Ashkenazi Jewish women were able to exert agency over their own bodies, allowing them to “pass” as white people, as Canadians. In turn, however, the procedure reinforced the belief that Jewish bodies are “ugly,” that white bodies are “beautiful,” and that Jewish people necessarily have either Jewish noses or Jewish nose jobs. Ashkenazi Jewish women were thus forced to straddle the line between being too beautiful and too ethnic. The

103 Tulchinsky, Branching Out, p. 314.
consequence of being too beautiful was to be given the label of *shikse*, a dangerous white woman. While they were beautiful, their Jewishness was suspect.

Looking too ethnic, or too Jewish, was equally problematic. Ashkenazi interviewees saw Hasidic men and women as the physical manifestation of a negative stereotype of Jews, one that “looked too Jewish.” Their physical features and clothing were too readily identifiable as Jewish to the Canadian public. The Sephardi, on the other hand, were representative of the inability of Jews to perform whiteness fully. They were described as exotic and strange.

The ideal Jewish woman (or, indeed, man) lay somewhere in the middle, a Goldilocks zone where bodies appeared outwardly Canadian but were readily identifiable as Jewish to other Jews. The ideal was the “look” that Ashkenazi individuals who believed in “Jewdar” called “looking Jewish.” Bodies that “looked Jewish” were ones that looked white, but not white, the same as Anglo-Canadians, but different, and that both concealed and revealed identity. The dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, sameness and difference, and revealing and concealing is illustrative of the struggles faced by ethnic Canadians as they tried to reconcile their heritage with their identities as Canadian citizens.

Bodies and identities are messy, complicated things, but life and history are also messy and complicated. Nevertheless, any exploration of identity, particularly ethnic identity, must take into consideration the body. Here I have discussed the process whereby Ashkenazi Montreal Jews (re)imagined the Jewish body and coded physical bodies as Jewish in a particular time and place. The debate over how Jewishness was embodied served to reinforce and reflect fractures in an already fractured community, just as it shored up a particular ideal Jewish female body. However, the process of “becoming Jewish” was (and is) constantly (re)formed; more work needs to be done to explore the process of becoming Jewish in other times and in other places. What about other Jewish ethnic groups? Jews are found all over the world, from Ethiopia, to China, to India. Many of these individuals are faced with an entirely different issue: being a person of colour. This has not only exposed many to racism, but has also complicated their identities as Jews. Their very existence challenges assumptions about the racial identity of Jews. It is my hope that future scholarly accounts will continue to address Jews of colour directly, further problematizing the dominant image of “Jewishness” in Canada.  