

become positively sensitive to the subtleties of ethnicity and race.

Quite different is the case of Colin Johnson, who, parallel to a number of Austrian and German thinkers of marginal Jewish ancestry, suddenly “discovered” his descent when the “plus point” for ethnicity became evident. His ambiguous identity could have given rise to multiple self-definitions. I have no problem when people reinvent themselves by highlighting aspects of their ethnicity that they had repressed or ignored, even to the point of renaming themselves. But when this is done to seize an advantage—to claim an authenticity of experience greater than what could be claimed by someone outside the group—then I believe that the move needs to be examined.

I learned a great deal reading all the submissions to the special-topic issue. I want to thank all those whose essays were not published for their wonderful work. Ethnicity is alive and well as a topic for academic concern, as the issue and these letters show.

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### Circumcision in *The Merchant of Venice*

To the Editor:

Mary Janell Metzger notes in her important essay “Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew’: Jessica, *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity” (113 [1998]: 52–63) that *The Merchant of Venice* makes no explicit reference to circumcision as a bodily difference between Jew and Gentile (59).

I believe, however, that the play’s reference to circumcision appears in her essay’s title quotation. Gratiano is swearing by the foreskin of his uncircumcised penis, “by my hood”: “As sure as I am a gentile, as my foreskin proves, so is Jessica, as her fairness and virtue prove.” In support of this gloss, which is not noted in any edition I have seen, Frankie Rubinstein’s *A Dictionary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Puns and Their Significance* (London, 1984) cites LeClerq’s Rabelais: “Priapus doffed his hood, discovering a red flaming face” and “Priapus, standing up and taking off his Cowle, his Snout uncas’d and rear’d up, fiery and stifly propt.”

The reading works for Metzger’s argument and for future discussions about the play’s negotiation of religious and gender difference.

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### *Oklahoma!* and Assimilation

To the Editor:

Andrea Most’s essay “‘We Know We Belong to the Land’: The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*” usefully explicates the resonance of the assimilation paradigm for the Jewish playwrights Rodgers and Hammerstein (113 [1998]: 77–89). But no discussion of *Oklahoma!* can be complete without acknowledgment of the source of the assimilation theme, in the play *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931). Most cited the play in a footnote (88n9), but not the play’s author, Lynn Riggs.

Riggs (“Rollie Lynn Riggs” in the Cherokee enrollment records) was a mixed-blood Cherokee poet and playwright. His other works include at least a dozen plays and ten Hollywood screenplays as well as two books of poetry, *The Iron Dish* (1930) and *This Book, These Hills, These People* (1982). Most if not all of his works reflect the tensions of living in a predominantly white culture without losing or dishonoring an Indian heritage. Such issues are perhaps addressed most directly in his 1932 play *Cherokee Night*. But they are far from absent in *Green Grow the Lilacs*.

Ali the peddler, identified as Persian in *Oklahoma!*, is Syrian in Riggs’s play. Ali may well be a “thinly veiled representative of the Jewish immigrant” in Rodgers’s and Hammerstein’s minds (Most 82), but it does not behoove anyone to ignore Riggs’s identification of the peddler as Syrian. Maybe Riggs too felt compelled to elide Jewishness by substituting a less charged Semitic ethnicity, but this question and its ramifications have not been addressed.

Perhaps more pertinent to Cherokee politics of assimilation is the villainous Jud, an ambiguously racialized figure in Riggs’s play as well as in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s. Jud is cast in sharp relief against the melting-pot paradigm represented by the rest of the play’s characters, but rather than the “joyous vision of American community” Most sees in *Oklahoma!* (87), the original version of the play’s utopian vision of assimilation is grounded in a separate heritage of Indian nationhood defined *against* American nationalism. According to its title page, *Green Grow the Lilacs* is set in 1900, seven years before statehood. In the following passage Aunt Eller calls for Curly’s acquittal:

AUNT ELLER. Why, the way you’re sidin’ with the federal marshal, you’d think us people out here lived in the United States! Why, we’re territory folks—we ort to hang together. I don’t mean *hang*—I mean

*stick*. Whut's the United States? It's jist a furrin country to me. And *you* supportin' it! Jist dirty ole furriners, ever last one of you!

VOICES (outside, grumbling, protesting).

Now, Aunt Eller, we hain't furriners.

My pappy and mammy was *both* borned in Indian Territory! Why, I'm jist plumb full of Indian blood myself.

Me, too! And I c'n prove it!

Her call here is not to a "court of insiders" (Most's description of the parallel scene in *Oklahoma!* [84]) but to a court of outsiders: their allegiance is not to the United States.

The early twentieth century was the age of assimilation in Indian country—and such fraternal acceptance of and assimilation with the white settlers is reflected not only in Riggs's writing but also in that of his contemporary the Cherokee novelist John Oskison (*Wild Harvest* [1925], *Black Jack Davy* [1926], and *Brothers Three* [1935]). Mixed-blood Cherokees during that era occupied a position similar to that of the Jews since both groups had ambiguous external markers of race, and thus it is not surprising that Rodgers and Hammerstein discovered in Riggs's play a fruitful impetus to their creative talents. But at a time when the question of cultural appropriation is often at issue, critics should beware of impressing the cultural production of one ethnicity into the service of another without giving credit where it is due.

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To the Editor:

Andrea Most charges in her abstract that *Oklahoma!* "exemplifies how ethnic outsiders [Hammerstein and Rodgers were of Jewish descent] demonized a racial other in an effort to be considered white and thus to be included in the utopian (theatrical) community of America." In her article she is more explicit: "Jewish desire to assimilate and escape discrimination is thus expressed in this musical at the expense of blacks." The validity of these charges turns on Most's understanding of Jud Fry, a white hired farmhand who in her view "embodies many of the characteristics and functions of the black man in racist thinking" (86). Certainly Jud is in many ways "other" than the norm celebrated in *Oklahoma!* Most rightly observes of Jud that "[t]his fiercely individualistic, primitively sexual, and lawless presence is an obstacle to the white utopian vision of love, marriage, and statehood that *Oklahoma!* promotes." The issue is whether Jud is depicted with "racial undertones" (83).

Most seeks to bring out the "submerged [. . .] racial motifs" connected to Jud by citing a number of similarities between him and "the stereotypical black man" (82). Jud's skin is dark, "bullet-colored"; his sexuality is threatening to Laurey, the heroine, who compares him to an animal; he lives in a smokehouse (recalling to Most "late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century derisive references to African Americans as *smokies*"); in the rafter of the smokehouse is a "good strong hook" (evoking for Most "images of black men lynched for supposedly assaulting white women" [83]). In context, however, no one of these similarities is specifically racial. For example, Curly, the cowpuncher, does not have lynching in mind when he refers to the hook in the rafter; he suggests that his rival for Laurey might hang himself from it. The only explicit connection of Jud with blacks comes in a stage direction for the duet "Pore Jud Is Daid." Invited by Curly to imagine his own funeral, Jud is so moved by Curly's (mock) eulogy that he chimes in with his own praise, "like a Negro at a revivalist meeting" (83). Surely the humor here depends on our awareness that Jud, in his self-pity, is temporarily out of character, the comparison to a fervent Negro serving to point a contrast rather than a genuine resemblance.

All the above instances except the last one derive from the musical's source, Lynn Riggs's 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, a fact that Most does not acknowledge. Rodgers and Hammerstein are of course accountable for what they chose to include from their source, but in weighing their intentions it is worth distinguishing what they borrowed, invented, and omitted. When Laurey expresses her revulsion for and fear of Jud, the musical omits her reference in the play to "[s]ump'n black a-pilin' up" in him (40). Also gone from the musical are the play's casual references to "niggers" (32, 53, 140).

In plot the chief difference between the musical and the play has to do with the informal trial and exoneration of Curly, after Jud falls fatally on his own knife while the two fight over Laurey. This violation of due process reminds Most "of the times in American history when a white man (or mob) could kill a black man with impunity" (84). Yet Curly is clearly innocent, and it seems unlikely Rodgers and Hammerstein would wish, even subliminally, to invoke the spirit of a lynch mob at this point in their finale, where, as Most observes, the atmosphere is lighthearted and celebratory.

From the evidence presented, I thus find that Most's claim that Jud is an "unassimilable, [. . .] racially defined 'dark' man" should be regarded as unproved (81). Yet isn't it to be expected that a "submerged" motif would be inexplicit, hinted at rather than spelled out? If so, Most's way of regarding Jud should not run counter to other,