

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.

SANDER L. GILMAN
University of Chicago

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.

NONA FIENBERG
Keene State College

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