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Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination

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Maurice Sendak's Jewish Mother(s)

JODI EICHLER-LEVINE

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL MEDAL OF ARTS (USA), Caldecott Medal, Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, and National Book Award (USA), Maurice Sendak (1928–2012) ranks among the most prolific and lauded children's book authors of the twentieth century. Born to Jewish Polish parents, his thoughts on mothers played out in his wildly popular books and his interviews over the span of his long life. They also come to readers through vivid images: milk, the moon, mourning mothers, children kidnapped by goblins. Educators, literature scholars, and art historians have studied Sendak, but, with a few exceptions, he has been overlooked in the world of Jewish studies (Lambert 2013: 92; May 2001: 141–9). His relationship with his mother Sadie (Sarah), coupled with the presence and absence of mothers throughout his texts, provides us with a window onto some of the best-known portrayals of Jewish women in American culture, namely, Jewish mothers and pseudo-mothers on the pages of popular children's literature. Sendak portrays explicit and implicit Jewish mothers in both comic and tragic modes. Ultimately, he recreates families in a culturally Jewish idiom that is both stereotypical and subversively queered (Sedgwick 1990). His broad notions of Jewish mothers and the painful pull of families expand our understanding of Jewish homes. Sendak does not just experience and portray Jewish mothers; on a metaphorical level, he becomes a Jewish mother himself.

Methodologically, this essay combines close readings of Sendak's stories with historical contextualization and critical theory. Attending to what we know about Sendak's relationship with his mother and other relatives broadens our sense of his work as a whole. His identity as a gay man who came out to the public very late in life, and as a man who wrote for children but had no biological children of his own, is also crucial for considering his portrayals of motherhood. Using lenses from the field of gender studies, we can see how constructions of Jewish masculinity complement ideas about motherhood in these works. I revisit several of Sendak's books that either feature or significantly elide mothers, including *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, *Outside Over There*, *Dear Mili*, and *Brundibar*. I also examine the 2009 film adaptation of *Where the Wild Things Are*, because of its extraordinary attention to maternal images and the fact that Sendak served as a consultant on this movie.

Sendak's work constructs Jewish mothers who dwell outside halakhic (Jewish legal) constructions of motherhood and the gendered institutional debates of American Jews as they separated into denominations. He negotiates more broadly with both American and European Jewish culture, painting women in complex strokes that sometimes echo the 'overbearing' Jewish mother while also reflecting the limited power and emotional absence of his own mother. These mothers and mother figures are not ideals; rather, they build upon a mix of transgressive tropes. They are layered, messy, difficult women, haunted by the ghost of Sadie Sendak. Sendak's literal and metaphorical 'Jewish mothers' provide new models for Jewish motherhood in mid-twentieth- to early twenty-first-century America.

As more than a writer, but a generator of books, Sendak harnesses both life and loss; through the alchemy of his pain, joy, and creativity, he both portrays and embodies maternity. Reversals, masquerade, and topsy-turvy worlds complicate idealized (or vilified) Jewish mothers in his works. Sendak's own melancholy and his lifelong grappling with his mother's depression became, through his writing and speaking, 'a public feeling', one through which he expressed fantasies on many levels (Cvetkovitch 2012). The queerness of fantasy—the Greek root of 'fantasy' means 'to show'—helps Sendak to paint queer Jewish and pseudo-Jewish mothers who are recognized through pains that go beyond stereotypical images of domestic martyrs, willing to do anything for their children. As Judith Butler argues, through psychoanalysis, 'we can come to understand how fantasy is essential to an experience of one's own body, or that of another, as gendered' (Butler 2004: 14–15). Sendak's fantasies provide images of gender that ask us all to re-encounter our bodies and our relationship to the bodies of our relatives.

'Your Mommy's Supposed To Be Perfect'

Sendak's parents, Sadie Schindler and Philip Sendak, were immigrants from eastern Europe during the early twentieth century; they met after arriving separately in New York City. Born in 1928, Maurice was their third child, with an older brother, Jack, and sister, Natalie. His childhood and teen years were spent in Brooklyn. The family moved from one apartment to another every few years, in part because of his mother's aversion to the smells and chaos created when landlords repainted apartments (Lanes 1980: 9–20).

His relationship with his mother was strained by her serious depression and anxiety, her experiences of European pogroms, and her worry for Sendak, who was a sickly child. He suffered from a variety of ailments and spent a great deal of time at home, watching the other children play from his window and sketching in his mother's kitchen. The Sendak abode was a complicated place. Most of the relatives Sadie and Philip had left behind in Poland perished in the Holocaust. In a 2004 interview with Bill Moyers, Sendak discussed how these losses shadowed

his family dynamic, with an emphasis on Holocaust guilt. Sendak had survived while so many of his cousins were dead: 'It was so cruel of my parents. It constantly made me feel that I was shamelessly enjoying myself when they [the dead children, 'kids'] were being cooked in an oven' (Moyers 2004). Thus, although his parents were safe in America during the Second World War, Sendak exhibits many traits of second-generation Holocaust survivors: children who grew up with either silence around the Holocaust or, as in Sendak's case, an abundance of reminders and discourse, haunting their childhood and adding a secondary trauma and 'postmemory' of violence to their experience (Hirsch 1997: 17–40).

Sendak discussed his fraught relationship with his depressed mother frequently and in detail. He recalled:

It was a really unkempt, unruly small apartment, three children, father who worked so hard, mother who had problems emotionally and mentally. And we didn't know that. Your mommy's supposed to be perfect. She should be there for you, love you, kiss you. Every movie we ever saw . . . We knew what it should be like. And it wasn't. And we had no sympathy at all. (Moyers 2004)

Elsewhere he said that 'she was always worried. She also had a gruff, abrupt manner, because I think that any display of feeling embarrassed her' (Lanes 1980: 18).

In terms of the history of Jewish mothers in America, Sendak's relationship with Sadie is difficult to classify. There is, of course, no single type of Jewish mother, or even one Jewish mother stereotype. At times he voices a nostalgic longing for an idealized, self-sacrificing immigrant *yiddishe mama* (Jewish mother). Yet on other occasions he does not describe her as the monstrous, overbearing mother who became a stock stereotype of mid- to late twentieth-century Jewish humour (Antler 2007: 123–48). His mother's 'gruff' manner does reflect the popular notion that Jewish mothers exert power over supposedly feminized, weak Jewish fathers, to the point of performing masculine assertiveness; note, too, how he describes his mother as unloving and emotionally distant. Rather than presenting the sort of overbearing mother who became a stock stereotype of Jewish literature and film, Sendak's works are, in many ways, a form of second-generation Holocaust survivor literature, in which mothers are represented as 'distant' and 'deeply flawed' (Lieber 2005). In both his musings and his literature, Jewish mothers—and other relatives—have moments of monstrosity and warmth, often all mixed up together.

A Missing Mother Rendered Visible: Monstrous Maternity and *Where the Wild Things Are*

I begin with a misplaced mother. In Sendak's work, some mothers are absent, distant, or exist only in the gaps beyond the printed page. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max's mother never appears in an illustration, but she drives the story, send-

ing him off to bed without any supper and then relenting at the book's close, when he returns and finds that his supper 'was still hot' (Sendak 1963). Mickey of *In the Night Kitchen* wanders in an urban dreamscape on his own, but sings of milk, food, emotions, and the moon; his mother is not present in the book, but her gigantic kitchen implements are. As in classic European fairy tales, mothers are omitted in some of Sendak's greatest works, including *Wild Things*, which is inarguably the book for which he is best known. This lacuna enhances a sense of vulnerability and the ways that these young protagonists must forge their own way in the universe. In this and most of his later books, Sendak's children, not their parents, are the agents of their own stories.

Where the Wild Things Are begins with, 'The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind / and another / his mother called him "WILD THING!" and Max said "I'LL EAT YOU UP!" so he was sent to bed without eating anything' (Sendak 1963). Sendak reported that his own mother would call him *vilde chaya*, or 'wild animal' in Yiddish, and he also recalled being sent to bed without any supper (Moyers 2004). Yet Max's mother is never visually present in *Wild Things*, and speaks only one line of dialogue. She bookends the text, catalysing Max's journey by sending him off hungry, and drawing him back home with the tantalizing smell of the meal she ultimately sets out in his room. Thus, the prime mover of the plot's mechanics is an unseen creator. She is the one who birthed Max, but she is not explicitly included in his story. At the start, she seems to be the missing 'mommy' who is 'supposed to be there for you', a doppelgänger of Sadie Sendak. At the end, however, her decision to serve dinner represents a wish fulfilled: it is there, placed so carefully and lovingly on a table. Even then, we still do not see *her*: only her handiwork. Here, food is quite literally love, but the lover herself is disembodied.

Other Jews *are* explicitly depicted in the book, however, and they are fearsome, caring, smothering, and so much more: the wild things themselves. On this island, Max meets substitute parents: a surrogate family that is frightening but whom he can ultimately control. Sendak stated that the wild things were based upon his Jewish relatives who would pinch his cheeks and declare that they could 'eat him up'. In fact, he encountered some of these relatives in the context of a Jewish mourning ritual, as described in this excerpt from an interview with Bill Moyers:

And then, we were at . . . someone had died. My brother, sister and I were sitting *shiva*, the Jewish ceremony. And all we did was laugh hysterically. I remember our relatives used to come from the old country, those few who got in before the gate closed, all on my mother's side. And how we detested them. The cruelty that children . . . you know, kids are hard.

And these people didn't speak English. And they were unkempt. Their teeth were horrifying . . . hair, unravelling out of their noses. And they'd pick you up and hug you and kiss you, 'Agggghh. Oh, we could eat you up'.

And we know they would eat anything, anything. And so, they're the wild things. And when I remember them, the discussion with my brother and sister, how we laughed about these people who we of course grew up to love very much, I decided to render them as the wild things, my aunts and my uncles and my cousins. And that's who they are. (Sendak 1963)

Thus, the final images of the wild things were extended Jewish relatives—cousins, uncles, aunts: they were not Sadie. However, in some early drafts of the book, one monstrous figure is quite explicitly a mother. Selma Lanes in *The Art of Maurice Sendak* (1980) analyses an intriguing sequence in the book when it was still titled *Where the Wild Horses Are*. In this version, the boy protagonist stands in a magic garden. Then, 'Someone appeared and said "stay with me, I am your mother."' "That cannot be", said the boy, "you do not look like my mother, and besides my mother is home waiting for me."' Then this pseudo-mother transforms herself, like a werewolf, into a vicious creature: 'With a growl the make-believe mother turned into a terrible wolf and chased the boy out of the magic garden.' He, in turn, metamorphoses into an old man, who frightens the wolf away (Lanes 1980: 89–92). Thus, at one point, Sendak's Jewish mother was quite literally a monster on the page, just as she was a frightening figure off it.

Here is the power of Sendak's interest in masquerade, in things not turning out quite the way they ought to. As in *Little Red Riding Hood*, a dangerous wolf passes as a comforting relative. The child masters it by literally transforming into an adult, rather than performing Max's trick of staring into the wild thing's yellow eyes and play-acting at being a king. The false mother initially appears ordinary, with no illness or anger. Then her teeth and claws emerge. In real life, Sadie Sendak passed her own traumas down to her children through fierce, frightening tales of persecution, 'stories of Cossacks descending on the Jewish town of her childhood, and of being hidden with her brothers and sisters in the dark cellar of her father's store' (Lanes 1980: 26). Sendak could not conquer those historical demons, but Max could prevail in the midst of Dionysian chaos. As in this mother/wolf draft, Jewish mothers have historically been figured as literal or figurative monsters (Antler 2007). Other critics have traced the connections between eastern European vampire lore and antisemitism (Halberstam 1995), or the monsterizing of Jews that accompanied centuries of European persecution (Cohen 1996: 8, 16).

In Spike Jonze's 2009 film version of the book, on which Sendak was a close consultant, the Jewishness and monstrosity of the wild things is even more pronounced through their accents and their first names, which include 'Ira' and 'Judith'. In the film, Max's mother is present on screen, as is a pseudo-mother, a female wild thing named KW. So is monstrosity, that hallmark of American stereotypes of the 'overbearing' Jewish mother. Read through this lens, the wild things' cry, 'We'll eat you up! We love you so!', evokes dysfunctional family monstrosity: a mix of consumption and adoration.

Max's film mother, played by Catherine Keener, portrays a much more recent stereotype: the overworked, exhausted, single working mother. Her distance stems from the demands of the second shift, rather than from mental illness, as was the case with Sadie Sendak. Max witnesses her sadness during a stressful work call and tries to entertain her. In one lovely, sad shot, we see her from his view below the table: he stares up at a tired woman hanging up the phone, sighing in resignation. She is an explicitly loving if sometimes exasperated figure, emotionally close to Max. She asks him for a cheering story and types his tale on her computer. Over forty years after the original book, Max's mother has been updated to a twenty-first-century model. Her work may provide another explanation for Max's loneliness, one that goes beyond the existential loneliness of childhood. Keener's portrayal is also a fine corrective of the mythical stay-at-home mother who bakes perfect cakes and stands ready to greet her family in a starched apron—that woman only existed in certain cases and moments (lower-class immigrants more typically had working mothers), yet that imagined domestic goddess remains part of our contemporary cultural imagination (Coontz 1993).

In the film, when Max quarrels with his mother, a mix of fidelity to the text and some entirely new players is apparent. Before he puts on his wolf suit, he peers at his mother flirting with a handsome male dinner guest, laughing over wine in the living room; he feels sad and excluded. Only *then* does he put on his wolf suit and stamp angrily down the stairs. In the kitchen, he complains about dinner—frozen corn, not 'real corn', further evidence of his mother's stretched, harried daily life. Ultimately, in an extraordinary standoff, Max climbs up high upon the kitchen's island counter. His mother begs him to come down. Instead, he folds his arms and shouts, 'Woman, FEED ME!!' As their fight continues, Max screams 'I'LL EAT YOU UP!' just as he does in the book (Jonze 2009). His mother declares him 'out of control' and sends him to his room with no dinner—but in this adaptation Max flees the house and runs off into a forest rather than seeing his bedroom transform into one.¹

Ultimately, Max finds a different sort of maternal figure on the island of the wild things. The 105-minute film examines these creatures and their familial dynamics in nuanced, creative ways that the book cannot. Max's relationship with a male wild thing named Carol and with a female wild thing named KW reveals a search for alternative families and the achingly painful nature of love. Carol and KW seem to be an estranged, perhaps romantic (or sibling) couple. They experience great tension throughout the film, particularly due to KW's affinity for her new friends, a pair of scraggly owls named Bob and Terry. Throughout Max's adventures with the wild things, anxiety about the state of the world and interpersonal dynamics runs high for all of the characters. When Max finally meets the mysterious Bob and Terry, who are portrayed as oracles of a sort, he asks them the poignant question: 'How do I make everyone OK?' Their answer is unintelligible. Max wants to keep the wild things and his real-world family happy, but does not

know how to do so. As he appears to lose his 'powers', the wild things, in turn, are frightened. When they first made him king, they asked: 'Will you keep out all the sadness?' When Max is unmasked as just a boy, this promise goes unfulfilled.

In a powerful sequence, perhaps the climax of the film, Max flees from an angry Carol, who has discovered that Max is not really a king. Carol shouts, 'You were supposed to take care of us, you promised. I'LL EAT YOU UP!' Like Max in his mother's kitchen, Carol is accused of being 'out of control', and, again like Max, he stumbles through the forest, lost and furious.

What happens next is a rich combination of maternal protection and literal eating. With Carol close at his heels, Max encounters KW, who urges him into her giant, furry body: 'Crawl inside my mouth, I'll hide you!' Max slips down through a narrow tunnel into a gooey, womblike space, with just a small circle of light visible above him. Here, Max is truly *eaten*—but never digested. He hears KW calm Carol, who says, sadly, 'I just wanted us all to be together.' Max hears their voices in muffled tones, just as babies *in utero* hear their parents' voices beyond the walls of their mother's body.

After Carol departs, Max remains, cosy and wet, in KW's stomach. As with his biological mother, he attempts to protect her emotionally: 'He doesn't mean to be that way . . . he's just scared.' KW, her eyes resigned and exhausted, says: 'Well, he makes it harder and it's hard enough already.'

Then KW starts to close her mouth, and Max begins to choke, unable to breathe. He asks her to take him out. Reluctantly, she reaches her hand down into her throat, gently grabs hold of his wolf costume, and pulls him out through her lips, in an image that startlingly evokes a birth scene: he is covered in goo and wet, just fitting through a slit mouth that looks like a vagina. Is this a reverse birth, moving up instead of down? A rebirth? A realization that separation is part of growth? A reminder of his own mother, the one who birthed him the first time? A reminder that KW is *not* his mother, spurring him to return, as in the book, to 'a place where someone loved him best of all' (Sendak 1963)? The scene operates on all of these levels: it is clearly a turning point in the narrative. As he sits and recovers on a log, he tells KW: 'I wish you guys had a mom', and decides, 'I'm gonna go home' (Jonze 2009).

Thus, in the film, it is not the smell of his mother's cooking but, instead, the care of a surrogate mother that recalls Max to his origins. Ultimately, just as in the book, he walks to the beach where his boat awaits. The scene is far more sombre than the one in the text. In the book, the wild things roar on the shore as they cry out, 'Oh please don't go! We'll eat you up—we love you so!' (Sendak 1963). In the film, Max says a quiet goodbye to most of them in turn, except for Carol, who is off sulking. Judith, a grumpy maternal figure who serves as a foil to KW, tells him, 'You're the first king we haven't eaten.' KW lifts him gently into the boat. Placing her face close to his, she whispers: 'Don't go . . . I'll eat you up, I love you so.' The comment is unbearably tender; it is hushed like a lullaby, not yelled in distress.

Collective mourning and roaring *do* follow once Carol runs to the beach to bid Max farewell. He howls a sad, 'Arooooo!' Max answers in turn, and aroos in a call and response with all of the wild things. Again, the tone, though louder, is one of grief, not attack.

Finally, after a reverse voyage, Max re-enters his home. Here, unlike in the book, his mother is a visible presence on screen—though there is no dialogue for the rest of the film. During these final moments, she shows her tremendous relief at his return. Like KW, she stares at him closely in the face, pulling back his wolf hood, removing his wildness and revealing the scared little boy below, with a look of wonder on her face. They embrace, and then we see him sitting at their kitchen table, eating a massive slice of chocolate cake and drinking a tall glass of milk: the same meal we see in the book, minus the soup.

Here, Max's mother redeems and strengthens their bond through food. Unlike in the book, she is embodied and present, sitting close to him and watching as he eagerly consumes his dessert. The lack of soup, which is featured not just in *Where the Wild Things Are* but also in *Chicken Soup with Rice* and other Sendak classics, alters the meal into one of sheer decadence. Perhaps soup is simply not as lavish on film as pastry, but, unlike chocolate cake, it needs to be warm. In the book, the fact that the soup 'was still hot' becomes the iconic symbol of Max's mother's love. Food remains a crucial ingredient to the story's ending, on many levels. As in religious rituals and other customs, breaking bread together solidifies relationships; as in many stereotypical American portrayals of the Jewish mother, food is love, though here it is not served with a side dish of guilt or forced upon the child.

Most significantly, Sendak saw food and eating as central to life, literacy, and thinking about families. He stated, 'The business of eating is such an immensely important part of life for a child. The Grimms' tales are full of things being eaten and then disgorged.' He also connected the metaphorical consumption of love—Max or the monsters threatening, 'I'll eat you up!'—with physical sustenance and psychological complications:

On the face of it, what could be more destructive? But, in fact, the child may not view it in that light. It's the most natural thing. There's that great, luminous breast hanging over your head; if you have that much of the mother, why not more? Obviously she's there for you. There's something both monstrous and poignant about it. (Lanes 1980: 239)

By transforming the physical breast and milk into the broader symbol of food, Sendak begins to queer Jewish parenting and Jewish families. Mothers may lactate (setting aside wet nurses, formula, and the possibility of male lactation for the moment), but *anyone* can prepare solid food, and Sendak could draw and describe food very, very well. This opens up a newly gendered space for placing food at the

centre of existence; one does not literally have to be a Jewish mother to provide imagery of love-infused, yet monstrous, consumption. Sendak takes on that essentialized role of provider—which is so embodied in the case of a literal breast—and queers Jewish motherhood by becoming the one who sets out virtual food. He finds literal mothers simultaneously wonderful and monstrous. Like his mother, Sendak the author performs acts of love, sustenance, and terror.

The wild things had the potential to be much *more* queer, a possibility that is explored more in the film than in the book. KW, Carol, and their friends are an alternative form of family, a non-biological *tribe* (another term with Jewish overtones) that can welcome but also destroy or evict its members. The fact that Max is ultimately pulled back to his biological mother, that he cannot find his perfect comfort even in KW's warm belly, suggests Sendak's deep ambivalence over mother figures.

Helpless and Bereaved Mothers

Where the Wild Things Are explores developmental conflicts between parents and children, as well as the monstrosity that lurks within the family itself. Other books from Sendak's oeuvre portray how the *outside* world violates and threatens the family, another theme that is common in Jewish history. In these books, we see children and their mothers in a stark world of terror that combines fairy-tale settings and historical traumas. If we read *Outside Over There*, *Dear Mili*, and *Brundibar* intertextually we can see this pattern quite starkly (Sendak 1981, 1988; Kushner and Sendak 2003). *Outside Over There* features Ida, a young girl who loses her baby sister to goblins, then rescues her. Sendak intended *Dear Mili*, his adaptation of a Wilhelm Grimm tale, to be a sequel of sorts to *Outside Over There*. He makes *Dear Mili* take place in the same cottage as *Outside Over There*. He explains that at the start of that book, 'Ida's died, all the mother's other children have died, she has only one living child left, and that's the baby from *Outside*', who is now a young girl (Cech 1995: 10).

In both texts, the mother exhibits a nearly catatonic despondency. The first full-page spread of *Outside* shows a farewell: 'When Papa was away at sea . . .'. Only the mother's back is visible, her red dress flowing. The next set of text reads, 'and Mama in the arbor'. On the right-hand page, Mama sits beneath a trellis, staring blankly away from her daughters. She is slightly hunched over; her face is pale and her bonnet hangs limply from her hands. Despair and depression possess her. Far to her left, the goblins prepare the ladder they will use to steal the baby, but she seems not to see them. On the right-hand side of the page, Ida holds her baby sister, who squirms and screams and struggles in her arms. The awkwardness of their pose is painful to behold; the baby sister is more than half Ida's size, signifying the overwhelming burden Ida holds in her arms.

Similarly, the mother in *Dear Mili* evinces a sense of melancholy and decay. In Sendak's own interpretation of the sequence, she is the same woman, now aged. In the book's first illustration, she gazes down into a basket of flowers. Her dress appears torn. Yet she gently, absent-mindedly touches Mili's hair as Mili looks down too, petting a dog. Their cottage is surrounded by autumn branches and wilted flowers. The mother's sadness is understandable: 'all she had in the world was a little house and the garden that went with it. Her children had died, all but one daughter, whom she loved dearly.' When war comes to their village, the mother sends Mili away into the woods, where she is protected by St Joseph, and dwells happily for thirty years that to her seem like just three days. When Mili, still youthful, returns to her aged mother sitting outside the cottage, Grimm's text says that the mother cried out 'in joyful amazement'. Yet the illustration is more macabre than celebratory. Her limbs are skeletal and her eyes appear blank, unseeing, incapable of helping her to catch a last glimpse of her 'dear child, wearing the same little dress'. After the reunion the pair fall asleep side by side and are found in the morning, both dead (Sendak 1988).

The third text in this triptych, *Brundibar*, claims no sequential or narratological connection with *Outside Over There* or *Dear Mili*, but its thematic overlaps are obvious. This 2003 picture book, a collaboration between Sendak and playwright Tony Kushner, follows a Hansel and Gretel-like tale of two children, Aninku and Pepicek, who seek milk for their sick mother. In order to earn money to buy the milk, they sing for coins from passers-by. A dastardly, moustachioed villain named Brundibar (clearly reminiscent of Hitler) steals the coins and chases the children away. Ultimately, they receive assistance from a large gathering of children, chase Brundibar out of town, and return to their mother with a red pail full of milk, restoring her to health. The text was based on an opera by the same name written by Czech composer Hans Krása. It was performed at the Czech 'model' camp Terezín (Theresienstadt); Krása and most of the children in the production were later killed in Auschwitz. For Sendak the project, which he called the closest thing he had ever had to a 'perfect child', seems to have been the text that most explicitly engaged with and revealed the Holocaust demons of his past (Eichler-Levine 2013: 130).

Relying on images from this opera, Sendak and Kushner restore it from obscurity and eerily resurrect its composer, librettist, and performers through both the presence of the story itself and through images that depict actual children from the production, as well as the original invitation to the Terezín performance. Parenthood is unmasked as an inherently frightening, fragile notion. At the literal and physical heart of *Brundibar* we find a haunting lullaby and heart-wrenching images of maternal grief. First, we read the full text of the song that Aninku, Pepicek, and their friends sing in order to raise money for milk. I quote here at length because of its intertwined images of infancy, parenting, and death:

MOMMY SINGS 'ROCKABYE,
 BABY, WHEN YOU ARE GROWN,
 YOU'LL SING A LULLABY AND
 I'LL BE LEFT ALONE . . .'
 MAYBE YOU'LL FEEL A BLUSH
 WHEN, MOMMY, YOU RECALL
 HOW YOU BATHED US NAKED
 IN THE SINK, WARM AND WET,
 GAVE US MILK, WHISPERED SOFT,
 'LITTLE PET, YOU'LL SOON FORGET.'
 NOW YOU ARE VERY OLD.
 YOUR HAIR IS SOFT AND GRAY.
 MOMMY, THE CRADLE'S COLD.
 BLACKBIRD HAS FLOWN AWAY.

Readers turn the page, and see one of Sendak's most terrifying images, on a two-page spread with no text: a flock of enormous blackbirds, carrying small children away from their mothers. They rise into the night above Prague. The mothers gathered on the ground are weeping, leaning against tree trunks, or reaching up in vain, trying to pull their children down from the sky. Most of the women's faces are hidden, covered by handkerchiefs, hands, forearms, or bonnets. One woman dashes off the left side of the page with a toddler in her arms, escaping; her stoic face is the only one that is visible. These are peasant mothers, clad in aprons and kerchiefs; the children, boys and girls, are drawn in the squat, fat, European (aka Jewish) style that earned Sendak criticism early in his career (Kushner 2003: 190). The horror of Holocaust-era parent-child relationships, of abrupt separation, is pictured here in a nightmarish moonscape. The image of a child on a blackbird is so central to *Brundibar* that it appears, stamped over and over again, as if infinite, on the inside front and back covers of the book.

Mili's mother and the mothers in *Brundibar* all engage in frantic attempts to protect their children, with a complicated mixture of holding on tightly and having their children ripped away. The Holocaust resonances throughout such works are pronounced, as both Sendak and numerous scholars have acknowledged (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2009; Kushner 2003; Lanes 1980). As Jean Perrot writes in his analysis of *Dear Mili*, 'in the vision of a family destroyed by war, Maurice Sendak has touched the vulnerable psychological quick in the immigrants' son of his childhood' (Perrot 1991: 259).

Mili's mother is a victim, but one who exercises agency in sending her child away from these horrors, evoking European parents who got their children to safety via the Kindertransport. In contrast, the *Brundibar* mothers lose their children abruptly, as so many parents did during the Holocaust and other horrors. In these cases, there is no time for a last-gasp try; no rush through the forest to safety; no way to jump off a train bound for Poland. The visual tropes are similar, as is the sense of grave injustice; the circumstances differ.

The Blessings and Burdens of Milk

Images of food—particularly milk—are oversized tropes throughout the Sendak corpus. With its maternal associations and the multivalent meanings of consumption, this is not a surprise. Sendak portrays the relationship between food and family as enormously complex, and even more tensions underlie what we see on the printed page. His relationship with his mother and her food has been described in various contradictory ways. Lanes claimed that Sendak enjoyed the smells of his mother's warm kitchen. On the other hand, he once said that 'I often went to bed without supper because I hated my mother's cooking . . . If she was gonna hurt me, she'd make me eat.' Sendak *loved* to eat, so this is a striking condemnation and reversal of the 'food is love' formulation; it connects more with the notion that Jewish mothers force unwanted food on their children (Antler 2007; Lanes 1980: 1–9; Moyers 2004; Sendak 1971). Food connotes many things in Sendak's work. In *In the Night Kitchen*, fantastic dreamscapes evoke America's bounty, but also its dangers. In *Brundibar*, we witness hyperbolic, gooey abundance that is not available to those who are impoverished and bullied. In *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Chicken Soup with Rice*, food is a comforting treat when returning from adventures or from the cold winter wind.

Milk is an even more charged symbol. In *In the Night Kitchen*, Mickey becomes the milk. He is one with it, with the nurturing substance, and it occurs far from his mother, in his dreamy night wanderings. When the bakers try to put him in an oven, he yells, 'I'm not the milk and the milk's not me! I'm Mickey!' as he pops out of a giant pie. Later, however, he seeks out and embraces milk, diving into an enormous glass bottle and singing, naked, 'I'm in the milk and the milk's in me! God bless milk, and God bless me!' Here, Sendak, who despised organized religion yet held fast to his ethnic identity, uses the language of blessing, a Jewish rhetorical move if ever there was one. By observing this, I do not mean to suggest that Sendak intended Mickey to engage in a Jewish ritual act. Far from it. If anything, Mickey's enthusiasm, set in a mid-twentieth-century fantasy world of Americana, evokes 'God bless America!' more than it evokes 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe'. Yet the moment still conjures up Jewish idioms of attention, including enthusiastic gratitude and a sense of oneness with the world. Mickey's mother, normally a provider of milk, is absent. Mickey *is* the milk; he is in and of it and blessed along with it.

Aninku and Pepicek must find 'milk for mommy'; like Sendak's mother, she cannot care for them. Instead, they strive to care for her. The mother–child relationship is reversed as they hunt down and deliver the magical, nurturing milk in a brilliant red pail. Unlike Sendak's mother, she recovers from her disease and the family is joyfully reunited. Here, milk is a saving substance. Sendak alters our readings of family by demonstrating how children nurture parents and can, at times, heal them—a role he attempted to play in his own family, but could not

fully achieve. This also provides an interesting intertext with Julia Kristeva's reading of milk as repulsive, as causing 'nausea' as the child desires separation from the parent (Kristeva 1982: 2). Instead, for these children, milk is an object of longing; but perhaps this is because the children have asserted their independence and become providers rather than recipients of care; they are separated, matured guardians.

Although he resented his mother's illness, Sendak, like Aninku and Pepicek, also took on the role of protecting her until the end of her life. He never told her about his sexual orientation, shielding her from a truth he thought would hurt her (Cohen 2008). When he had a massive heart attack at the age of 39, he never told Sadie, who was dying of cancer, what had happened. 'What good would it have done to have told my mother about my heart attack before she died?' (Lanes 1980: 152). Here, the stereotypical charge of 'You never call, you never write!' takes on a poignant and sombre hue. Sendak called and wrote, but he did not call or write and reveal these pieces of critical information out of a sense of care, or, perhaps, resignation. His queerness lies not in his gayness, but in his parental attitude towards his mother and his undoing of the guilt behind a famous Jewish mother joke.

Jewish Mothers and Their Fantastic Offspring

Maurice Sendak did not set out to make or remake notions of American Jewish mothers. His focus was on fantasy:

Fantasy is so all-pervasive—I don't think there's any part of our lives, as adults or children, when we're not fantasizing, but we prefer to relegate that activity to children . . . Children do live in both fantasy and reality; they move back and forth with ease, in a way we no longer remember how to do . . . Fantasy is the core of all writing for children, as I think it is for the writing of any book—perhaps even for the act of living. Certainly it is crucial to my work. There are many kinds of fantasy . . . there is probably no such thing as creativity without fantasy. (Lanes 1980: 65)

Yet as a child of Jewish immigrants who came of age in mid-twentieth-century New York, he was steeped in the cultural bricolage of his age: Mickey Mouse, his father's love for Isaac Bashevis Singer, post-Holocaust theological struggles, and the golden age of comics, to name just a few. Tony Kushner writes that, quintessentially,

Maurice is a child of the Great Depression and of Jewish Depression, if I may generalize. Jewish Depression is that inherited awareness of the arduousness of knowing *anything*, an acute awareness of the struggle *to know*, the struggle against not knowing; and it is that enduring sense of displacement, yearning for and not securely possessing a home. It is the conviction, passed through hundreds of generations, that true home is elsewhere, promised but not attained, perhaps not even attainable. (Kushner 2003: 190)

Other critics have also noticed a sense of foreignness and displacement in Sendak's oeuvre. In their analysis of *In the Night Kitchen*, Rebecca Adams and Eric Rabkin observe, 'Mickey is an outsider in the night kitchen, falling into a new world with little more than his Americanized name and his native talent' (Adams and Rabkin 2007: 235).

Sendak was, beyond a doubt, a secular Jew, but one steeped in *yiddishkeit* (Jewish culture) and its symbols. The mother figures in his books are invariably tied up with Jewish ideas about mothers, popular mainstream images of mothers, and his relationship with his own mother, which did not conform to the moulds of either idealized Anglo-mothers or caring but smothering Jewish mothers. As a result, Sendak queered the Jewish mother, resisting these tropes in his portrayals, though he never entirely escaped their haunting.

Psychologists, philosophers, and literary critics from Freud onwards have argued that our interior lives and exterior utterances are rooted in fantasies, fantasies that are often closely linked with our families and with how we perceive our interlocutors in the world around us (Bakhtin 1986). Interpreting the overlaps of fantasy and family in Sendak's multivocal body of work brings us full circle, drawing a light pencil sketch—not a neat roadmap—of his overall influence on how we think about maternity. Through the liberating, subversive genre of fantasy, he brings the pull and push of desire out into the open. As Rosemary Jackson argues, 'in expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways . . . it can *tell of*, manifest or show desire . . . or it can *expel* desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity' (Jackson 1981: 3).

Much developmental psychology and the notion of intersubjectivity rest upon a dizzying movement of recognition, near-negation, and separation: 'to experience recognition in the fullest, most joyful way, entails the paradox that the "you" who are "mine" are also different, new, outside of me. It thus includes the sense of loss that you are no longer inside of me, no longer simply my fantasy of you' (Benjamin 1988: 15). This notion of loss within the mother-child relationship was central to Sendak's psychological make-up and his own reflections, even extending to images of being *in utero*. In a diary entry that he shared with Kushner, he reveals how he connected his own identity with both the Lindbergh baby (a lifelong obsession) and with the frozen ice baby of *Outside Over There*: 'I was never born, I was dead in my mother's womb, I was the ice baby—and my mother didn't notice that I'd been replaced. She could have done the magic trick to get her real baby back but she was too distracted and I stayed an ice baby.' In other words, the move of recognition never happens—the longing for the child that was once within did not, in Sendak's perception, occur; a kind of psychological death or rupture resulted instead (Kushner 2003: 24).

The process of producing *Outside*, which Sendak described as 'vomiting up' those emotions, was one of the most difficult episodes of his career (Kushner

2003: 24). His own sickliness and his mother's distance—itsself another stereotype about Jewish women as frigid, withholding, distant, like the Jewish American princess—are transformed into the picture of a baby made of ice, one that could not be rescued by its mother. Instead, the tot is rescued by her older sister, Ida. Sendak, too, had a close relationship with his elder sister and admired her greatly (Cech 1995; Kushner 2003; Lanes 1980). Still, he is lost to his mother, even more than Ida's frozen baby sister—who dies at the end of *Dear Mili*, but first briefly reunites with her loving mother. The image of 'vomiting up' a work also evokes Julia Kristeva's reading of the child's reaction to milk: 'nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not want to assimilate it, "I" expel it' (Kristeva 1982: 2–3). I read this intertextually with *In the Night Kitchen*. Mickey initially insists upon his separation from the milk, just as Sendak 'vomits up' stories of his own family's loss and pain, resisting his connection to his mother. Yet Mickey makes another move later in the book: he is in and of the milk. When he cries 'I'm in the milk and the milk's in me!' he has moved beyond Sendak, beyond disgust at the parent–child tension implicit in milk: his identity is fluid and free. Where Sendak remains in loss and pain, Mickey finds a way out.

Loss and grief are indeed at the centre of both Sendak's writing and our contemporary conceptions of the Jewish mother. It is there in the dark humour of 'You never call, you never write': where are you now? It is there in the nostalgic 'Sunrise, Sunset' stereotypes of *Fiddler on the Roof* and parental blessings: where is the infant who is now lost in my adult child? It is there in the 'Eat, eat, my child': if you do not eat, will you waste away—will you be gone? Most frighteningly, it is there in our dominant, collective memories of the Holocaust and our resulting struggle with Jewish identity: Where have you gone? Have I lost you to the ovens? Where are the future generations of Jews, the potentiality we have lost? (Levitt 2007).

This maze of vanished children and missing parents must be thought about in connection with Sendak's identity as a non-parent. Like many authors, Sendak sometimes referred to his books as his 'children'. *Brundibar*, in particular, was the book he called his 'perfect child' (Moyers 2004). What does it mean to take that metaphor seriously, particularly when considering a man who did not literally have children? Sendak did not usually express regret over his lack of children, though in one NPR interview he mentioned an imagined 'dream daughter' (Fresh Air 2012). Here, gender assignment is crucial. The notion of post-Holocaust 'compulsory motherhood' did not apply to a man, though Sendak metaphorically fulfils that imperative with his literary children (Rittner and Roth 1993: 168).

Aside from and beyond Sendak's identity as a gay man, his work and his life queer our notions of Jewish families and Jewish mothers on a theoretical level.

In his irascible, intense, emotional attitude towards his literary progeny, Sendak himself fulfils stereotypes of the mid-twentieth-century Jewish mother: a bit of a perfectionist, a bit of a martyr, a bit of a curmudgeon, and more than a bit obsessed with food. However, he preserves the post-Holocaust Jewish continuity concern through symbolic generativity rather than through biological offspring. He certainly was endlessly concerned with his relatives who had perished in the Holocaust—with the past (Lanes 1980: 140). Yet, whether or not he set out to do this, *Dear Mili* and *Brundibar* both bring us into the oft-asked forward-looking questions: What of future children after the Holocaust? What of *potential* mothers and fathers who choose not to have offspring? As Laura Levitt, a scholar of Jewish and gender studies, writes,

As a woman without children, a woman who has chosen to teach and to write and not to bear or adopt children, I struggle with the meaning of my family stories and their audiences. To whom am I addressing my writing? Without the fact of children, is it possible to still tell these kinds of stories? . . . Put another way, what does it mean for me to choose not to 'mother' and instead to teach and write about my family for others? (Levitt 2007: 162)

Many Jews who did not bear children in the shadow of the Holocaust struggle with this conundrum (Levitt 2007: 178–9). For Sendak, the 'choice' of whether or not to have children was not necessarily a freely taken one, as he came of age during a period of closeting and great violence and discrimination against gay men, particularly as far as children were concerned. Furthermore, as a male, he was not essentialized as a potential vessel for children. Yet, like Levitt, Sendak was haunted by his position as a post-Holocaust living, breathing boy when so many of his cousins and other young European Jews had perished. After visiting the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, he wrote:

I had the uneasy, chilly feeling that I could get on a plane and go home, but for her there had been no escape. And that kept reminding me of my father and my mother, and the whimsicality of their coming here. I had cousins who died in the Holocaust the year of my bar mitzvah; they had no bar mitzvah, and I knew all that time that it was luck. (May 2001: 149)

Sendak is ever haunted by his alternate-universe self, the one who might have died in the ovens. However, he meets this challenge in a very different way from the traditional Jewish community's emphasis on regeneration (Kahn 2000). Returning to Sendak's reflections on his creations, we can see again how he imagines himself as a birthing mother, and the overlaps between religion, gender, and death in his work, particularly in *Brundibar*.

First, the birth pangs. They emerge over and over again in his interviews. Speaking about the production of *In the Night Kitchen*, he said, 'It comes from the direct middle of me, and it hurt like hell extracting it. Yes, indeed, very birth-delivery type pains, and it's about as regressed as I imagine I can go. Simply, it's

divine' (Lanes 1980: 174). He also said that creating a work is like 'getting pregnant when you've just gone crazy and you've found out your house has burned down' (Kidd 2011). It is, of course, a bit of a stretch to move from this common writing metaphor to Sendak as *Jewish mother*. Yet a queered, more fluid reading of Sendak brings new light to both his work as an artist and to the queered lives of his own creations. In European and American contexts, Jewish femininity and masculinity have been historically constructed by non-Jews (and some Jews) as transgressive; in other words, Jewish gender and sexuality are always already queered (Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini 2003). If Jewish men have long been understood as effeminate, passive, and weak, and the 'Jewess' has long been considered sexually voracious, an aggressive woman of excess in terms of both food and sexual desire, then queering Sendak's work is a logical step in our consideration of how Jewish mothers are represented, and how symbols of mothers are interwoven throughout his biography and work (Boyarin et al. 2003: 5).

Can Sendak pass as a Jewish mother? Interrogating a different aspect of identity, we might also ask: can Christian mothers pass as Jewish, and vice versa? Here, the ending of *Brundibar* is crucial. Sendak refused to let the Holocaust be understood as a uniquely Jewish event. In the opening scene, a doctor, his coat emblazoned with a gold star, arrives at the family's house to examine Mommy. In the closing scene, the same cast of characters celebrates her restored health, and we see a crucial new detail in the family's home: there is a cross hanging high on the mantel. While the doctor treating Mommy is Jewish, the family is Christian, and they have been all along. What can we make of this initially 'Jewish mother' who is ultimately unmasked as a gentile? What of Ida and Mili's mother, who bears no signs of Jewishness and, in the case of Mili, exists in a world where St Joseph is an active presence?

Aninku, Pepicek, and their mother *pass as Jewish*, a reversal of the typical Jewish assimilatory move to pass as Christian. Crossing boundaries of gender, Sendak, too, *passes as a Jewish mother*, specifically a mid-twentieth-century one, with all of the mixed-up love and monstrosity that stereotype could entail. Sendak keeps the inevitable *Sturm und Drang* between children and parents—the paradoxical pain that is inherent in the reproduction of children—at the centre of his work. He gives children vast amounts of credit for their ability to understand this: 'Children know there are mothers who abandon their children, emotionally if not literally. Sometimes they have to live with this fact. They don't lie to themselves. They wouldn't survive if they did. And my object is never to lie to them' (Kushner 2003: 205).

Sendak's characterizations of families have been so successful precisely because they confound our expectations and dive directly into the *unheimlich* (uncanny) pain of living in relation to other human beings. Just as Sendak claimed that the *Brundibar* family was Christian because 'everyone was in the Holocaust', it seems that all of the mothers in his books are Jewish, whether they

pass via food, grief, or monstrosity (Moyers 2004). They are also, often, Jewish mothers who grieve, just as Sendak in his 'Jewish Depression' had a tendency to work through darkness (though he also loved the pleasurable things of this world—particularly food and music). In Sendak's world, milk is positive, but it is not *embodied*. Many psychological theories and many other children's books connect eating and food directly with the body of the mother (Daniel 2006: 87–114). Despite his interview quote on breasts, Sendak amputates milk from the mother's body in these volumes. Milk comes in bottles, in glasses set out by disembodied mothers, and in red pails that children purchase. It does not come *attached*, a reflection, perhaps, of Sendak's self-perception as an 'ice baby' and his distance from his own mother.

Ultimately, milk, however magical, sensuous, or monstrous it might be, is not *repellent*: it saves. In *the Night Kitchen*, Mickey 'is not just one more commodity in a book about commodities but their savior' (Adams and Rabkin 2007: 136). Indeed, Mickey's rise after becoming one with the milk is not just salvific; it is, in the words of one critic, an 'apotheosis' (Perrot 1990: 72). With a power as great as that of any mother, Sendak has birthed a small, dairy-bearing god. *Eat, eat, my children*, he whispered from his drawing board. There will always be grief, but first, a tall glass of milk.

Notes

- 1 Sendak stated that this was the only aspect of the film adaptation on which he really clashed with Jonze and the screenwriters; he considered the magical transformation of Max's bedroom to be a crucial moment of the book.

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