Comedy as a Source:
Lenny Bruce's "Jewish vs Goyish"

The menacing "Jewish question" that would ultimately lead Jews to the horror of the "Final Solution", was also a spur for Jews to lay claim to their own identifications. A famous one is the stand-up routine Lenny Bruce used to perform when playing to his home crowd in New York: "Jewish vs. goyish". "Jewish", he said, is stuff like pumpernickel and fruit salad. White bread and baton twirling, on the other hand, is distinctly "goyish". Clearly, though Bruce mimics the "Nazi" gestures of categorisation, he's really poking fun at such categories. And never more so than when we realise that "Jewish", for Bruce, doesn't even refer, necessarily, to Jews: "If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish."

Like Jews themselves, then, Bruce's "Jewish" seems to have uprooted, wandered and dispersed. It no longer corresponds to a fixed identity. Bruce, in fact, was one of the first to spot the way in which modernity created the conditions for a dispersal of Jewishness as well as Jews. For while emancipation had promised minorities that they could move from the margins to the center, it's the reverse that may have actually occurred. In the era of radical globalization and the internet, it doesn't matter who you are — even if you're male, white, straight, middle-class — you're probably feeling that your group or identity has been, if not existentially threatened, then at the very least marginalized. These days we're all mobile and unsettled (even if we stay put). We're all hyper-connected but insecure. So you're liable now to be somewhat Jewish even if you do live in Butte, Montana.

American Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce's "Jewish vs Goyish" stand-up set (1961)

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