Recent literary fiction suggests that magic exerts a particularly mesmerizing appeal at present. Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), Glen David Gold’s *Carter Beats the Devil* (2001), Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004), Louise Welsh’s *The Bullet Trick* (2006), and Daniel Wallace’s *Mr Sebastian and the Negro Magician* (2007) all feature a magician as the protagonist. Wonder workers and ‘miracle mongers’, as Houdini called them, have proved no less popular on screen, as Christopher Nolan’s *The Prestige* (2006), Neil Burger’s *The Illusionist* (2006), and Gillian Armstrong’s *Death Defying Acts* (2007) attest. However, *The Escape Artist* (1997), the second novel by Lambda Literary Award-nominated Jewish American author Judith Katz, stands apart from recent representations of practitioners of the arts of illusionism, flimflam and flummery by featuring a female magician. Set in Poland and Buenos Aires at the beginning of the twentieth century, *The Escape Artist* focuses on two central characters: Sofia, who is duped into leaving her home in Warsaw for the New World, where she is coerced into prostitution, and the woman who becomes her lover - Hankus (formerly Hannah) Lubarsky, a cross-dressing conjurer and escapologist who flees the pogroms of Poland to begin a new life in South America where she strives to become ‘the most respected magic-maker since Houdini’. By focusing on the migration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Argentina rather than New York, the novel explores a lesser known and underrepresented aspect of the Jewish diaspora and, this essay argues, employs magic as a metaphor for both the traumatic effects and transformative potential of queer diaspora. Also, it is contended here that Katz stresses the specificity of the queer
diasporic Jewish female or ‘klezbian’ - a term inspired by Jonathan Freedman’s assertion that klezmer is a diasporic and queer form of Jewish music and the lesbian klezmer band Isle of Klezbos. Further, by accenting ‘klezbian’ lives, The Escape Artist simultaneously challenges a hegemonic model of Jewish diaspora that endorses dominant gender and sexual ideologies and resists the focus on men in North America that has characterized discourses of queer diaspora.

In An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures (2003), Ann Cvetkovich examines traumatic histories of migration from a queer perspective, exploring how non-normative sexualities ‘emerge from the trauma of migration’ and highlighting ‘queer possibilities for working through trauma’. For Hankus, the principle escape artist in Katz’s novel, magic not only functions as a metaphor for migrancy – as Michael Mangan points out, the first magicians were itinerants (gypsies, travelers) – but also expresses the trauma that necessitates migration. Having witnessed Cossack soldiers defile her female relatives, massacre her family, and wipe out the entire village, Hankus pulls on her father’s clothes, hacks off her long hair, and flees to Cracow where she is adopted by two men. Max and Motke disguise Hankus as a boy and introduce her to conjuring as a distraction from fear and pain: ‘Max or Motke found you in a corner of the cellar, sometimes shaking, sometimes crying’ (p. 89). Magic, the art of misdirection, provides a diversion from terror for Sofia too when, in the novel’s opening scene, watching a magician’s show helps her to forget threatening Russian soldiers: ‘those stupid soldiers with their quick fists and bad tempers disappeared from my mind as quickly as they’d frozen my heart’ (p. 12). Published just at the point when a new psychoanalytic discourse of trauma was developing out of Holocaust Studies, Katz’s treatment of magic reflects
the central tenets of trauma theory. Shoshana Felman defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that cannot be fully apprehended or processed. Traumatic occurrences are those that ‘have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference’. Reflecting this, Sofia, who relates her lover’s tale, explains that ‘something so terrible has happened to you that you find yourself walking in the pouring rain on a dirt road to Cracow and you’ve no idea why’ (p. 85).

In this context, Hankus’s preoccupation with vanishing tricks bespeaks a desire to repress - that is, to vanish - traumatic memories. As Sofia states, ‘you saw what those soldiers did to your mother and sister. You tried not to remember’ (p. 89). However, unable to forget what she refuses to remember, Hankus unconsciously restages the scene of trauma as events she seeks to deny or avoid demand recognition. As Cathy Caruth explains, like forgetting, ‘the unwitting enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind’ is a symptom of trauma. Hankus learns to vanish various objects – coins, scarves, spoons, a gramophone – but principally herself, and by disappearing she unconsciously recreates the sense of invisibility she felt when soldiers slaughtered everyone around her: ‘You stood frozen. You stood invisible’ (p. 177). Likewise, through escapology, Hankus constantly replays the moment she escaped death. Thus, for Hankus, magic is a symptom of acute psychic distress and articulates the unspeakable trauma of the past.

However, if magic is a symptom of trauma, it simultaneously offers a means of survival. After the massacre, Hankus adopts invisibility as a form of protection: ‘When soldiers stroll by you hold your breath. You become invisible, that’s how you live’ (p. 86). Similarly, when Russian officers visit Max and Motke’s café, she
disappears ‘into thin air’ (p. 92). Vanishing tricks thus function as a strategy for self-preservation. Moreover, as magic depends on the reappearance of the disappeared object, Hankus’s passion for magic ultimately signals a refusal to be rubbed out. Described as a ‘ghost’ (p. 86), she represents the return of the repressed, repeatedly erasing herself only to demonstrate that she returns and endures. Similarly, through the art of escapology, in which, as Daphne Brooks notes, the performer makes a spectacle of defeating death, Hankus expresses a determination to survive. Further, given Mangan’s assertion that ‘conjuring is all about power’, Hankus’s desire to perform impossible feats can be read as an unconscious response to the sense of powerlessness she experiences as a helpless witness to the genocidal pogrom that annihilates her family and community. In short, magic endows Hankus with a sense of agency.

Although repression enables survival, trauma theorists propose that memory is the route to recovery, asserting that the pain of the past must be relived in order to be relieved. As Dori Laub states, ‘One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life’. Endorsing Cvetkovich’s assertion of the queer potential for working through trauma, Hankus’s recollection of traumatic events is enabled by her first sexual encounter with another woman. As Sofia states, ‘when we kissed, you remembered everything’ (p. 173). Trauma theorists also posit that testimony plays a vital role in the therapeutic process - to ‘know’ one’s story, it is necessary to ‘tell’ one’s story – and insist that testimony requires a witness. While *The Escape Artist* bears out Dori Laub’s proposition that ‘only when the survivor knows he is being heard, will he stop to hear - and listen to – himself’, it not only recognises female subjects elided in Laub’s androcentric formulation but also acknowledges patriarchy.
as a source of trauma for women. Sofia’s parents remember clearly what Hankus is
too traumatized to recall: ‘all the rapes of all their cousins and cousin’s daughters, and
cousins’ daughters’ cousins’ (p. 29). Hankus recounts her story to Sofia, who acts as
witness by relating this tale back to her (and to the reader): ‘Come close, my darling.
I’ll tell it for you now as you told me, although it breaks both our hearts’ (p. 174).
Indeed, as the opening words of the novel indicate, Sofia’s entire narrative is
addressed to her lover - ‘Sweet Hankus!’ (p. 11) - and throughout she adopts the
direct address and intimate conversational tone that, as Victoria Aarons notes,
characterizes Jewish American fiction concerned with bearing witness.¹⁷ In this way,
Katz not only stresses the queer possibilities for working through trauma identified by
Cvetkovich but also transforms same-sex desire between women, historically
perceived as sickness, into a source of salvation.

The relationship between trauma and magic is likewise explored in Chabon’s
critically acclaimed bestseller *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which
echoes *The Escape Artist* in several ways. Having escaped Nazi-occupied Prague with
the help of an illusionist, Josef Kavalier - magician and escapologist - creates the
comic-book superhero The Escapist with his American cousin Sammy Clay.
Powerless to help the family he has left behind in Prague and other victims of the
Holocaust, Joe creates an imaginary figure that performs heroic feats of rescue. The
Escapist, whom Sammy describes as ‘Houdini, but mixed with Robin Hood and a
little bit of Albert Schweitzer’, roams the globe ‘performing amazing feats and
coming to the aid of those who languish in tyranny’s chains’.¹⁸ Fighting Hitler and
liberating the oppressed with his Golden Key, The Escapist not only compensates Joe
for his own sense of impotence but also offers a means of survival in the face of
trauma. For Joe, ‘a ridiculous, make-believe war against enemies he could not defeat, by a means that could never succeed’ offers ‘the only possible salvation of his sanity’ (p. 285). Despite the striking parallels between The Escape Artist and Kavalier and Clay, Chabon won the Pulitzer Prize whereas Katz’s novel, which appeared three years earlier, has received scant critical attention to date.

One reason for Chabon’s success is that his novel focuses on male experience. Demonstrating Gayatri Gopinath’s central point in Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures (2005), that ‘all too often diasporas are narrativized through the bonds of relationality between men’,19 in Kavalier and Clay the relationship between Joe and Sammy is central and, while the novel acknowledges queer desire, such desire circulates only between men. Sammy falls in love with Tracy Bacon, the actor who plays The Escapist when his cartoon strip is turned into a radio play and eventually fulfils his ‘Houdiniesque’ dreams of transformation when he abandons the masquerade of devoted family man (which he adopts when he marries the pregnant girlfriend Joe unwittingly abandons) to pursue a new and sexually liberated life in Los Angeles (p. 3).

While the surname of Sammy’s lover communicates the taboo nature of his desire (bacon is a food forbidden by Judaic law), the Jewish prohibition of homosexuality paradoxically rests on its recognition. In contrast, as Rebecca Alpert notes, because lesbianism is not acknowledged in the Torah, it is ‘invisible’ in the Jewish community.20 In The Apparitional Lesbian (1993), Terry Castle adopts spectrality as a metaphor for lesbian (in)visibility: while the lesbian has been ‘ghosted’, she constantly returns ‘to haunt’ culture.21 Yet Castle discusses lesbian
(in)visibility in terms of conjuring as well as spectrality. Despite derealization, the lesbian re-appears, as if by magic: ‘within the very imagery of negativity lies the possibility of recovery – a way of conjuring up, or bringing back into view, that which has been denied’.22 She concludes, ‘the spectral vernacular, it turns out, contains its own powerful and perverse magic’.23 In The Escape Artist magic is associated with homosexuality through Max and Motke, the two men who teach Hankus how to conjure, and who describe themselves as ‘brothers’ but are actually ‘sweethearts’ (p. 88). Further, magic is linked specifically with lesbian desire at the start of the novel when, after imagining her first love, Tamar, in the role of magician, and herself the assistant cut in two, Sofia feels ‘a little thrill…all the way through me’ (p. 13). Inspired by the magic show the two women have just watched together, Tamar snaps her fingers and makes a coin vanish, then kisses Sofia on the lips and runs off, disappearing into her flat with the exclamation ‘Abracadabra!’ (p. 14). Given this, Hankus’s performance of the same ‘vanishing groszy trick’ bespeaks her own as yet unacknowledged desires (p. 91). That Hankus’s passion for magic articulates a taboo passion for women which resists heteronormativity is likewise suggested by one of the objects on which she chooses to practice conjuring: ‘I can clap my hands and make whole wedding cakes disappear’ (p. 112). In addition, when Hankus vanishes herself she unconsciously positions herself as a non-normative subject by embracing the invisibility that, according to Castle, defines lesbian existence. Significantly, even though Hankus’s disappearing act appears to perpetuate lesbian invisibility, her constant return marks the insistent affirmation of dissident desire.

In The Escape Artist magic is aligned with gender non-conformity as well as same-sex desire, making it a signifier of identities that are not only lesbian but queer.
Through Hankus, her cross-dressing protagonist, Katz participates in and celebrates a tradition of Jewish transvestism epitomized by Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) and Molly Picon (1898-1992). Bernhardt, the most famous actress of her day, took a number of male roles, including Shylock. Likewise, Picon - the star of Yiddish musical theatre - was renowned for playing boys. However, the most famous example of Jewish transvestism is found in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short story ‘Yentl the Yeshiva Boy’ (1962), popularized by Barbra Streisand’s film Yentl (1983), which follows the adventures of a Jewish girl who passes as a boy in order to gain access to the traditionally male sphere of religious scholasticism. Like Yentl, Hankus is liberated from the literal and metaphorical constraints imposed on women by female attire. As Sofia explains, ‘You didn’t mind the clothing part. You welcomed it, in fact. The dresses and pinafores you wore back at home always left you feeling confined’ (p. 88). Transvestism permits Hankus the freedoms enjoyed by men: ‘you were a woman unfettered by silk stockings and garters, free, it seemed, to walk the cobbled streets alone, day or night’ (p. 142). Moreover, cross-dressing suggests that gender, like magic, is an illusion. Just as Max and Motke encourage Hankus to ‘practice’ the art of illusionism (p. 90), so her masquerade as a man reveals that gender is a pretence, a series of acts made to seem real by repetition. Indeed, in Excitable Speech (1997), Judith Butler adopts magic as a metaphor for the performativity of gender when she relates Bourdieu’s concept of ‘social magic’ (the term he employs to characterize the way that certain kinds of speech act acquire the force of authority) to the body: ‘The way in which the interpellative call continues to call, to take form in a bodily stylistics that, in turn, performs its own social magic constitutes the tacit and corporeal operation of performativity’. Demonstrating that performativity works
‘social magic’ by producing what it names, in The Escape Artist a few careful sartorial choices transform Hankus into ‘a regular Jewish guy’ (p. 98).

In its ability to apparently accomplish the impossible, magic articulates the subversive possibilities of same-sex desire, non-normative genders, and queer diasporas. Castle notes that, historically, lesbianism has appeared in culture only ‘as an absence, as chimera or amor impossibilia - a kind of love that, by definition, cannot exist’. Reflecting this, the opening line of ‘Zeitl and Rickel’ (1968) frames Singer’s story about two Jewish lesbians in terms of impossibility: ‘I often hear people say “This cannot happen, that cannot be, nobody has ever heard of such a thing, impossible!”’. Although the narrator contests this view, the impossible is associated with sin and evil – ‘My grandmother used to say, “If the devil wants to, he can make two walls come together…”’ (p. 111) – and the impossibility of lesbian love is underlined when the story ends with the suicide of both women who, invoking the ur-text of tragic queerness, Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness (1928), throw themselves down the village well. Likewise, in Gender Trouble (1990), Butler proposes that gender identities that fail to conform to the norms of cultural intelligibility appear only as ‘logical impossibilities’ within a heteropatriarchal domain, and Gopinath asserts that queer female subjectivity is ‘impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and national imaginaries’ that are dependent on and reinforce heteropatriarchal structures of kinship and community.

Initially, The Escape Artist seems to illustrate the transgressive possibilities of diaspora that, as Meg Wesling notes, are often asserted in queer diaspora studies. Having been abducted by Tutsik Goldenberg, who lures Sofia’s parents into
relinquishing her into his care with the promise of marriage, Sofia is accompanied on her journey to Buenos Aires by Sara, a prostitute who masquerades as Tutsik’s aunt. The subversion of the norms of gender and sexual desire permitted by migration is epitomised by Sofia’s response to the sight of Sara smoking a cigar, a pleasure normally reserved for men, in the private coach that whisks them away from Warsaw towards the port: ‘In spite of my terror I found this absolutely thrilling…I felt a sudden desire for her to eat me alive’ (p. 35). Later, when Sara seduces Sofia on the ship, the boundaries of nation and desire are traversed simultaneously, exemplifying the liberation of the ‘sexile’, a queer figure who finds freedom in transnational mobility.31 Once ensconced in the brothel, Sofia is educated in the ‘business of sexual pleasure’ by Tutsik’s sister Madam Perle (p. 58), the woman rumoured to have been ‘George Sand’s favourite lover’ and who reads her ‘verses by the Greek poet Sappho’ (p. 66; p. 59). However, endorsing Gopinath’s thesis that diaspora endorses normative gender and sexual arrangements, Katz’s novel underlines the gendered conditions of migration and forms of labour undertaken by women in the Jewish community of Beunos Aires: Sofia is tricked into leaving home and imprisoned in a brothel where she is forced into compliance with compulsory heterosexuality by being made to serve as a sex slave. The purpose of Sofia’s ‘education’ is to prepare her for male clients (p. 55), and once she begins work her intimate liaisons with Sara and Perle cease. Thus The Escape Artist questions the notion that migration engenders emancipation for queer subjects.

Tutsik likewise demonstrates that conservative models of gender and desire prevail in the Jewish diaspora. Tutsik, a ‘dandy’ (p. 29) and a ‘mama’s boy’ (p. 67), who is always ‘spotless’ and ‘neat-as-a-pin’ (p. 16; p. 67), takes ‘little pleasure’ in
looking at women and finds himself ‘just a little too excited at the thought of seeing a man’s penis’ (p. 67; p. 68). Yet he represses same-sex longing and staves off suspicions roused by his effeminacy by self-consciously adopting the key signifiers of heterosexual masculinity: sexual dominance and violence against women. He learns ‘how to look a woman up and down’ (p. 67), and ‘how to hide and handle a blackjack’ and a ‘sharp knife’ (p. 68). Further, Tutsik’s response to the revelation that Hankus is a woman and that Sofia and Hankus are lovers - ‘Impossible!’ (p. 267) - not only echoes the opening of ‘Zeitl and Rickel’ but also illustrates Gopinath’s point that the patriarchal and heterocentric logic at the heart of conventional formulations of diaspora renders same-sex desire between women unimaginable. In this context, magic, the achievement of apparently impossible feats, articulates a longing for the realization of what Gopinath terms ‘impossible desires’. By making the impossible possible, conjuring and escapology resist a conception of diaspora that renders queer women inconceivable.32

Despite the apparently empowering potential of magic, The Escape Artist suggests that the freedoms secured through prestidigitation are ultimately illusory rather than real. The dangers of false forms of freedom are epitomized by the novel’s various ‘escape artists’. Seeking diversion from the horrors of her life in the brothel through opium, Sara wastes away and develops a ‘dead look in her eyes’ (p. 77), and suicide is ‘a secret key she keeps tucked behind her tongue’ (p. 78). Tutsik wants Hankus to make him rich, enabling his escape from financial dependence on Perle: ‘You will be my key to freedom’ (p. 112). Perle seeks to escape the sins of prostitute and madam by building a grand synagogue: ‘Through this excellent deed, Perle Goldenberg would at last be liberated from the old ghosts if Poland….she would shed
her old sin-filled skin like the moth-eaten fur coat it had become, and stand before God naked and renewed’ (p. 116). Yet the novel stresses that magic is ‘fake’ (p. 12): Max and Motke teach Hankus to ‘secretly pick a lock so it looked like you did it by magic’ (p. 89); Hankus’s clothes have ‘hidden pockets’ and long sleeves ‘to hide your pick locks, your matches, your white doves and roses’ (p. 96; p. 141), and she carries ‘marked cards’ (p. 109); the theatre where she performs her first major show also has a ‘false floor’ and ‘trap doors’ (p. 231). Sofia recognizes that the ‘fabulous world’ conjured by Hankus is not real but ‘a kind of romance’ (p. 121). Also, underlining the counterfeit quality of magic, on the night that Hankus rescues Sofia from the brothel, she masquerades as ‘Dr Katterfelto’ (p. 211), a Prussian conjurer whose name has become synonymous with charlatanism. By stressing that magic is a sham, Katz implicitly subverts the anti-Semitic stereotype of the ‘Magic Jew’, a figure said to deploy special powers in nefarious plots to take over the world, whilst also questioning the subversive potential of models of queer diaspora that, like magic, exclude or elide women.33

For women, the subversive or empowering potential of magic is compromised by its androcentricism. For example, as Mangan notes, escapalogy is considered ‘a particularly masculine mode of magic performance, demanding muscularity, physical prowess and what Conan Doyle called ‘the essential masculine quality of courage’.34 While Hankus’s female sex subverts this essentialism, the necessity of passing as a man in order to practice magic endorses Karen Beckman’s assertion that the magic stage is ‘a site of patriarchal authority’.35 While several women perform magic in the novel, the status of magician is reserved for men: Tamar executes the vanishing groszy trick, Marianna works ‘a magic of her own’ when she lays the table on the eve
of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year (p. 122), Madam Perle practices ‘carnal sorcery’ (p. 159), and Sofia performs narratorial sleight of hand by withholding information from the reader at various points in the novel. Nonetheless, women, when allowed on stage at all, are relegated to the traditional female role of glamorous assistant. Illustrating that magic maintains conservative gender roles, Perle, who aspires to be ‘a man’s footstool in heaven’ (p. 158), says of her forthcoming marriage to a rabbi in Europe: ‘you will feel the magic of our union all the way here in Beunos Aires’ (p. 159). Further, magic, as practiced by men, demands the subjugation of women’s bodies. In Warsaw, Sofia and Tamar watch a magician saw a woman in half; Tutsik’s ‘magic act’ involves the deception of women who are lured into sexual servitude (p. 105) - the chapter that describes his abduction of Sofia is titled ‘Transatlantic Wedding Trick’ (p. 25) – and, pointing to his penis, Sofia’s first ‘client’ instructs her, ‘Lie down on the bed little virgin, and I’ll show you the tricks it can do’ (p. 63).

Illustrating that conjuring is complicit with male hegemony, The Escape Artist suggests that magic maintains female invisibility. Beckman notes that the vanishing lady trick, first performed in 1886, found popularity in a period when women in Britain and the United States were campaigning for equal rights. According to Beckman, the vanishing lady not only reflects a desire to make the emerging political voices of women disappear, but also ‘participates in a misogynistic discourse that fantasizes the complete eradication of all women’. Exemplifying this point, Tutsik ignores women, ‘as if we’, Sofia states, ‘the women of the house, were invisible and his food and drink…appeared by magic’ (p. 21). Likewise, after escaping from the brothel and becoming Hankus’s assistant, Sofia realizes that her role as assistant is
overlooked, despite its significance: ‘to be the man was to get all the glory, but without the woman, what would he be but sawing an empty box?’ (p. 232). She is ‘horrified and insulted’ when her name hardly appears in the publicity for their show (p. 236). While Hankus apologizes for this, her desire for fame compels a continued collusion with patriarchy. Demonstrating Wesling’s point that the mobility of diasporic subjects may be queer, but it is not necessarily disruptive of dominant ideologies,37 as a magician Hankus appropriates rather than subverts male privilege until she relinquishes her ambition and abandons her career as a magician in favour of a life of equality with her lover.

_The Escape Artist_ also resists the androcenticism of the world of magic by offering a feminist revision of Singer’s _The Magician of Lublin_ (1960). In Gopinath’s terms, Katz’ treatment of Singer’s novel can be understood as a diasporic ‘translation’ that ‘instantiates new regimes of sexual subjectivity even as it effaces earlier erotic arrangements’.38 There are broad parallels between the two texts: like Singer’s protagonist Yasha Mazur, Hankus is a Polish acrobat, illusionist and escapologist who longs for fame but ultimately renounces magic. However, Katz subverts the gender roles in Singer’s story. Yasha’s insistence on male superiority and sexual difference - ‘what could a mere woman know of the male appetite?’39 - is undermined in Katz’s novel by the fact that Hankus, who is female, shares his physical abilities and sexual desires. Katz also rewrites the fate of Singer’s female characters. Envying Yasha’s liberty, his lover Zeftel longs to be a man.40 Hankus not only achieves Zeftel’s dream of freedom by passing as a man, she also fulfils the artistic potential of Magda, Yasha’s assistant. Magda demonstrates considerable physical agility, turning somersaults and spinning a barrel on her feet but is never permitted to be the star of
the show and, endorsing Evelyn Torton Beck’s point that strong, assertive and independent women always come to a bad end in Singer’s fictional world, ultimately commits suicide. In contrast, Hankus develops her conjuring and acrobatic skills to assume centre stage.

In her revision or ‘translation’ of *The Magician of Lublin*, Katz challenges the patriarchal paradigms endorsed by both the world of magic and Singer himself. Whereas the lustful Yasha resents what he perceives as the ‘enslaving power’ of women, *The Escape Artist* makes clear, through its depiction of the horrors of the lives of women imprisoned in the brothel, that it is women who are enslaved and sexually exploited by men. Beck notes that anger at the desire aroused by women is a persistent theme in Singer’s fiction, and Yasha sadistically punishes his lovers mentally and physically for the control that he is convinced they exert over him. However, according to Singer, this only makes Yasha’s many mistresses love him more. In contrast to *The Magician of Lublin*, in which Yasha, however mean and aggressive, is presented as irresistibly attractive to emotionally weak and masochistic women, *The Escape Artist* refuses to romanticize male violence: the manipulative and abusive Tutsik, although ‘a handsome man’ (p. 14), is ‘detestable’ (p. 21) and ‘horrible’ (p. 28). Further, in contrast to Singer who, Mark Spilka argues, not only sympathises with his heroes, but also relishes the punishment of his sensual female characters, Katz celebrates female sexuality and punishes Tutsik, who is shot by Marek Fishbein, ‘gangster and kingpin of the Buenos Aires flesh trade’ (p. 200). In addition, while evil is personified as a woman, a ‘she-devil’, and the demonic is ‘whorish’ in *The Magician of Lublin*, *The Escape Artist* humanizes ‘whores’ by telling the story of vulnerable and sexually exploited women from a female
perspective. Finally, whereas Yasha eventually chooses to abjure women on the grounds that they represent temptation and sin, Hankus ultimately embraces womanhood when she relinquishes her career as a magician and ceases to pass as a man.

Since conjuring and escapology offer only the illusion of liberation in *The Escape Artist*, Hankus must forsake magic before real freedom can be achieved. Likewise, although Sofia initially plans to ‘trap’ and ‘trick’ (that is, blackmail) Hankus into helping her escape from the brothel (p. 164), after they kiss, she no longer thinks of Hankus as ‘my key to freedom’ but ‘my darling’ (p. 172). When she and Hankus flee the gangster dens of Buenos Aires for Moisesville, they give up the tricks that help to maintain the illusion of heteronormativity in order to embrace queerness. Even though Sofia continues to refer to her lover by the name she first knows her, Hankus registers at the People’s Housing Authority in Rosario as ‘Hannah’ (p. 281), indicating that she no longer identifies as a man. Yet, although now living as a woman, Hankus still makes use of her skills as an escapologist by becoming the village locksmith, a job traditionally reserved for men. Likewise, Sofia escapes both a life of ‘tricks’ (‘trick’ being the slang term for a prostitute’s client) and the norms of gender and sexual identity enforced by prostitution to become a gaucho farmer and ‘cowboy’ (p. 93), a figure who has achieved iconic status as a queer subject, as the front cover of Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith Halberstam’s *The Drag King Book* (1999) attests.46

Such a conclusion makes Katz’s novel a subversive sequel to Sholom Asch’s *The God of Vengeance* (1907), a play about two women brought together by a
brothel. When Yekel, who runs a bordello below his family home, discovers that his daughter (Rivkele) has entered into a relationship with a prostitute (Manke), he banishes her downstairs, an action meant as punishment but one that permits the lovers to continue their relationship, albeit within the confines of the brothel. Prostitution is not glamorized and Yekel is punished for his corruption by losing his daughter. Arguing that the play offers a sympathetic portrayal of its lesbian characters, Alpert imagines the lovers running away and speculates about the life they share ‘after their escape from the brothel’. The Escape Artist transforms Alpert’s speculation into a story, expanding the subversive potential of Asch’s play through an ending that features the lovers living happy and free.

Further, in contrast to Streisand’s film Yentl, which, as Marjorie Garber notes, resolves gender confusion when the eponymous protagonist reverts to conventional female attire, The Escape Artist subverts rather than reasserts the binary structures of gender when Hankus ceases to cross-dress. In both Singer’s story and Streisand’s film the transvestite subject that generates what Garber terms a ‘category crisis’ ultimately disappears whereas the queerness of Katz’s central characters is amplified rather than elided in the concluding part of the novel when Hankus and Sofia forgo passing for tresspassing. Highlighting the fluidity of gender, the women look like ‘two brothers’ (p. 221) during the escape from the brothel and then like ‘sisters’ (p. 281) as they board the train out of Buenos Aires. Demonstrating the mutability and multiplicity of gender, at Moisesville, Hankus wears either ‘a long skirt’ or a ‘linen shirt’ and ‘black trousers’ (p. 282), and Sofia dons ‘proper gaucho cothes: a broad-brimmed hat, wide pants, a jacket made of wool’ (p. 93; p. 282). By blending masculinity and femininity, Hankus and Sofia reinvent the vanishing lady trick,
performing real magic when their queerness takes the mutually exclusive binary categories of gender to vanishing point. Herein, the novel suggests, lies the promise of true freedom. Whereas the escape artist, as Adam Philips notes, ‘takes it for granted that getting free is the adventure’, \(^{50}\) by giving up magic, Hankus trades breaking free being free. As the last line of the novel - ‘Now at last we are free’ (p. 283) - indicates, liberation can only be achieved only when the restrictive binary categories of gender that underpin heteropatriarchy are vanished.

By making Moisesvilles their ‘new home’ (p. 281), Hankus and Sofia demonstrate that queer diasporas challenge established models of both diasporic and queer experience. Initially, Sofia thinks of herself as an ‘exile’ (p. 13). She is ‘heartbroken’ to be taken from Warsaw (p. 13), and the name given to the theatre that the Varsovia Society builds for the Jewish community of Buenos Aires – the ‘Broken Heart Theatre’ (p. 201) – suggests that her sadness and sense of loss are shared by many. Yet, supporting Gopinath’s contention that ‘queer desire reorients the traditionally backward-looking glance of diaspora’, \(^{51}\) whereas Tutsik and Perle nostalgically long for the ‘old country’ (p. 183), Sofia and Hankus make a life for themselves in the New World. In the context of the novel’s moment of publication, shortly after Eliezer Schweid’s assertion that Jews should negate the Diaspora by supporting the establishment of Israel as the Jewish national homeland, \(^{52}\) Katz’s resistance to the notion of home as a place to which Jews ‘return’, as enshrined in Israel’s Law of Return, echoes the post-Zionist queer perspective advanced by Lawrence Schimel and Judith Butler. \(^{53}\) Motke defines Moisesville as ‘like Palestine only without the religious clap-trap’ (p. 94), and Sofia’s description of the settlement as ‘the new Zion on the pampas’ underlines the possibility of multiple centres of
Jewish life (p. 96). Like Schimel, *The Escape Artist* also questions the location of a queer home in the metropolis. Whereas gay men and lesbians have historically tended to gravitate towards urban centres in the U.K. and the U.S., Hankus and Sofia reverse the conventional trajectory of queer migrations by moving from the city to the country, Moisesville being a small rural community in the farmlands of Sante Fe.

*The Escape Artist* not only relocates but also reinvents home, a site from which, as Anne-Marie Fortier notes, queer subjects are often excluded. According to Fortier, for queer subjects who feel exiled or estranged from the heterosexual family, home is ‘not an origin but a destination’. Home is ‘mobile’ and always ‘in the making’, part of ‘an ongoing process of becoming’. Likewise, *The Escape Artist* suggests that for queer diasporic subjects freedom is achieved not by leaving home, as in the tradition of Western ‘coming out’ narratives, but by ‘coming home’, as Fortier suggests, or rather by ‘coming homo’, that is, by re-making home in all its forms – family, community, nation - so that it accommodates queerness. The transformation of home in Katz’s novel is symbolized by the contrast between the *Shabbes* dinners near the beginning and end of the narrative. At one, Sofia is exhorted to act like a ‘lady’ (p. 16), forced to wear ‘lipstick’ (p. 16), and promised in marriage to Tutsik, whereas Hankus and Sofia share the other with their Moisesville neighbours in the home they inhabit together. The woman who registers Hankus and Sofia in Rosario may ‘stare’ in disbelief when they give their full names (p. 282), making clear their intention to set up home together not as sisters (because they have different surnames), but the *Shabbes* dinner described in the ‘Epilogue’ suggests that in Moisesville the lovers find acceptance, even though transvestism and homosexuality are forbidden by Jewish law. Earlier in the novel such laws lead Max and Motke to consider dressing
Hankus as a boy a ‘shandeh, a shame and a sin’ (p. 93), and prompt Sofia to recognize that while Perle wears ‘fringed tsitsits close to her body, like a man’ she will be forced to ‘eschew these male accoutrements’ upon marriage (p. 190). Likewise, Tutsik is enraged by the suggestion that Hankus, who has small wrists and refuses to have sex with a prostitute, is a ‘fag’ (p. 167). However, the Shabbes dinner that Hankus and Sofia enjoy with neighbours suggests the successful integration of sexuality and ethnicity, and confirms their home in Moisesville as a site where cross-gender identification and same-sex desire are affirmed, bearing out Motke’s view that Moisesville offers the opportunity to create ‘a new way of life’ (p. 93). Thus, exemplifying the pattern of queer diasporic narratives identified by Gopinath, in The Escape Artist home is mourned then reimagined, or – to use Gopinath’s own term – ‘conjured’ into being.58

The Shabbes dinner at Moisesville also confirms Naomi Scheman’s observation that contemporary Jewish lesbian fiction is characterized by its central characters’ ‘(re)discovery and (re)affirmation of their Jewishness, not, as one might expect, a new or heightened estrangement from it’.59 At the same time, neither Hankus nor Sofia adhere strictly to Judaism. In contrast to the Old World, to which the increasingly pious and conservative Perle returns, the New World is presented as a site where Jewishness, like home, can be refashioned. Supporting Gopinath’s assertion that queer diasporic subjects articulate new modes of collectivity and kinship that reject ethnic and religious absolutism (p. 20), Hankus is a ‘New World Jew’ who gives up eating kosher food and observes Jewish holidays ‘in his heart’ (p. 98). Also, like the other Jews of Argentina, Hankus and Sofia engage syncretically with a Hispanic national culture. Hybridity is epitomized by Marianna’s ‘Spanish-
Jewish cooking’ (p. 168), which encompasses ‘the best of all worlds’ (p. 77), Perle’s wedding veil - ‘a combination of traditional Spanish styling…and Eastern European wedding ritual’ (p. 181) – and Moisesville, known as ‘Palestine on the pampas’ (p. 94). Hybridity is reflected in the language of the novel, which blends English and Yiddish to create Yinglish, which is combined with Spanish. As the title of the epilogue that describes the couples’ happy life in Moisesville suggests, hybridity offers a route to liberation: ‘El Escape Maravilloso Final’ (p. 279).

Hybridity and queerness are both reflected in the style of the novel, which is written with ‘the bent notes and dizzying rhythms of a klezmer tune’. The importance of klezmer is underscored by Hankus’s name, which invokes Hankus Netsky, director of the Klezmer Conservatory Band, founded in 1980. In Klezmer America (2008), Jonathan Freedman employs ‘klezmer’ as a term to describe the distinctive quality of the Jewish interface with American modernity. Noting that traditional Yiddish music is a ‘resolutely impure cultural form’, one influenced by Jazz and, in the 1990s, increasingly by music from Central and Latin America, Freedman adopts klezmer as a metaphor for the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and hybridity of Jewish culture. Further, citing the Klezmatics as an example of a band that intertwines the queer, the diasporic, and the Jewish, Freedman argues that Klezmer epitomizes the ‘syncretism of a queer diasporism’ that challenges simple, reductive, conceptions of national, ethnic, racial or religious identity. Written in the 1990s, a decade that witnessed both the revival and revision of klezmer music, The Escape Artist is a ‘klesmerical’ novel that exemplifies what Freedman terms ‘postklezmer radical Jewish culture’. However, while Freedman’s account of queer diasporic Jewish culture is theorised principally through male klezmer musicians and
the plays of Tony Kushner, Katz’s woman-centred novel embodies a queer diasporic aesthetic and politics that is emphatically ‘klezbian’.

As a historical novel, a feminist counter-history of Jewish migration that conjures up queer figures lost in or erased by heteropatriarchal accounts of the past, *The Escape Artist* exemplifies Gopinath’s point that an archive of queer diasporic experience ‘allows us to memorialize the violences of the past while also imagining ‘other ways of being in the world’. As Sarah Waters notes, throughout the twentieth century, lesbian writers have enjoyed a ‘special affinity’ with historical fiction, a relationship that stems from the desire to ‘map an alternative historical landscape’ that offers a redemptive recuperation of non-normative social and sexual arrangements suppressed or elided in the ‘traditional male-centred historical narrative’. In *The Escape Artist*, this is particularly clear in the novel’s treatment of the ‘white slave trade’. As well as rewriting ‘Yentl’ and *The Magician of Lublin*, Katz invokes and revises Singer’s ‘Hanka’ (1974), a short story set in Buenos Aires, which alludes to ‘gruesome tales’ about a pimp who ‘would carry a poor girl, an orphan, away to this wicked city and try to seduce her with baubles and promises, and, if she did not give in, with blows’, and *Scum* (1991), a novel about a man who returns from Buenos Aires to Poland, where he becomes embroiled in the sexual trafficking of women. Despite Singer’s enduring interest in prostitution, the unfortunate fate of women sold into brothels is never the main focus of his tales. In contrast, in *The Escape Artist* the female story is primary: Sofia’s tale opens the novel and she relates it in her own voice, transforming the prostitute from a passive sexual object to an active subject in charge of her own narrative.
The ‘white slave trade’ also features in Sholom Aleichem’s short story ‘A Man from Buenos Aires’ (1909), which hints that its mysterious central character, a rich businessman who refuses to reveal what he buys and sells, is a sex trafficker or ‘white slaver’.

As Nora Glickman notes, this character is ‘glamorized’ by Aleichem’s story. The narrator finds him ‘good company’ and, as he boasts of success, he appears to grow, ‘younger, handsomer’ (p. 128; p. 138). Like Aleichem’s man from Buenos Aires, Tutsik wears a diamond ring and, just as the narrator of Aleichem’s story wonders if his companion deals in ‘false diamonds’ (p. 136), so Tutsik falsely claims to export ‘diamonds and other fine jewels’ (p. 18). However, in contrast to Aleichem, Katz shifts the narrative focus from pimp to prostitute, highlighting the brutal and degrading reality of her life. Further, Katz undercuts Aleichem’s glamorization of a man who profits from sexual slavery: although Tutsik looks like ‘a real gentleman’, he is a psychotic thug, ‘a lady killer in the truest sense of the word’ who enjoys the ‘thud, the slap, the crunch and pop of real muscle and bone’ (p. 104).

While The Escape Artist offers a woman-centred revision of patriarchal accounts of the past and recovers queers hidden from history, it also entails a queering of the discourse of history itself. In Queer Fictions of the Past (1997), Scott Bravmann proposes that narratives about gay men and lesbians that are animated by postmodern theories of history are ‘performative’ rather than descriptive in the sense that they reconstruct rather than chronicle the past. Rejecting the search for historical certainty, queer fictions of the past are speculative, suggest that truth is subjective and provisional, and refuse to adhere to the codes of realist representation. Reflecting this, Katz establishes a non-realist frame for her story and challenges
hierarchies of historical knowledge that privilege fact over fiction by using a quotation from Rukeyser’s *Houdini: A Musical* as an epigraph. The narrative also suggests that the past is invented. Sofia imagines scenes she has not witnessed, such as Tutsik’s discovery of her escape from the brothel, and the meeting in which Fishbein and Perle strike a deal over who will act as impresario to Hankus: ‘I can imagine how they worked it’ (p. 163); ‘in my mind’s eye I saw it all’ (p. 242); ‘Here is what I think happened next’ (p. 259); ‘Let us now imagine other thugs…as they likely found themselves’ (p. 261). In this way, Sofia’s narrative points to the creative processes at work in all accounts of the past, which are always constructed through acts of interpretation and imagination. Likewise, Sofia’s narrative indicates that the fallibility of memory means that all historical narratives are unreliable and incomplete: ‘It was likely damp and chill, but who remembers?’ (p. 51). Similarly, because certain details of her ‘actual’ escape from Buenos Aires with Hankus are ‘no more than a blur in my memory’ (p. 221), Sofia is forced to invent her account of this event.

Bravmann argues that ‘queer fictions of the past are interventions in the present’ and considers ‘historical representation as a way of struggling over and addressing current social problems.’ Similarly, Laura Doan and Sarah Waters propose that in recent lesbian historical fiction ‘history becomes the means to explore contemporary culture’. Endorsing this view, in its representation of the ‘white slave trade’, *The Escape Artist* can be read as a text concerned with the significant rise in the global trafficking of female sex workers that occurred in the 1990s. Following the collapse of Communism and the opening of borders for free trade, the number of women from Eastern Europe unwittingly recruited or coerced into migratory sex work
reached epidemic proportions. Recent accounts of false promises, abduction, forced transportation to a strange place, isolation, imprisonment, deprivation, abuse, and violence, all echoed in Sofia’s story, support Wesling’s assertion that far from confirming the liberatory potential of a globalization that is celebratorily ‘queer’, sex trafficking illustrates that migration often endorses normative, patriarchal sexual arrangements.78 Thus, The Escape Artist refuses to romanticise the disruptive potential of migration even as it asserts the transformative possibilities engendered by queer diasporas.

Katz’s representation of the past also reflects the prevailing concerns of a specifically Argentinean present. Published not long after two terrorist attacks on the Jews of Buenos Aires (the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and a Jewish community center in 1994), as a historical novel The Escape Artist represents a desire to preserve a community under threat. Further, the novel’s concern with memory connects the history of the diasporic Jewish community of Argentina with that of all Argentineans. Following Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’ (1976-1983), the campaign of state-sponsored violence against left-wing radicals and suspected subversives (which included queers), the people of Argentina struggled to resist official attempts to deny or erase the crimes of the past.79 As Diana Taylor notes in a book about the ‘Dirty War’, Disappearing Acts (1997), published the same year as Katz’s novel, following the pardon issued by President Carlos Menem in 1990 to Jorge Rafael Videla, the military dictator imprisoned for the human rights abuses carried out by his regime, the years that followed saw a preoccupation with national memory and forgetting.80 Although set prior to the ‘Dirty War’, The Escape Artist alludes to this major episode in Argentinean history through both the name of its magician and the motif of magic.
'Hankus’ invokes Singer’s ‘Hanka’, a story set ‘not long after Peron had been ousted, and Argentina was in the midst of a political and perhaps economic crisis’ (p. 10) - in other words, in the period just prior to the advent of the ‘Dirty War’ - and the vanishing tricks that Hankus employs to make himself disappear evoke the term given to the thousands of people who were abducted, tortured and murdered during the ‘Dirty War’: ‘the disappeared’. By drawing parallels between the pogroms enacted against Jews and Argentineans, The Escape Artist endorses Joan Nestle’s point that to ‘be a Jew is to have a history and to be queer is to have another history, just as to be a woman is to have yet another history…but respect to these stories of oppression and resistance is best paid when we refuse to separate them out of the full human story of resistance’. 81

In conclusion, in Katz’s novel magic functions as a metaphor for both the negative and positive effects of diaspora. Moreover, conjuring, which represents the miraculous accomplishment of the impossible, and escapology, which symbolizes a desire for freedom, articulate the specific concerns of queer diasporic female subjects trapped in a heteropatriarchal regime that can only conceive same-sex desire in terms of impossibility. As Mangan notes, magic offers up the possibility - however light-heartedly, however insincerely – that boundaries may be breached’. 82 Nonetheless, as he goes on to observe, and as Katz’s novel demonstrates, magic - like diaspora - often confirms those boundaries that appear to be challenged, and is ultimately conservative rather than revolutionary, particularly in terms of gender. 83 In contrast, The Escape Artist celebrates the truly transformative potential of a queer Jewish diaspora that affirms klezbian identity and desire.


Katz was nominated for a Lambda Award for her first novel *Running Fiercely Toward a High Thin Sound* (New York: Firebrand, 1992).

Judith Katz, *The Escape Artist* (New York: Firebrand, 1997), p. 237. Published the same year as *The Escape Artist*, Ann Patchett’s *The Magician’s Assistant* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1997) also features a lesbian magician. Set in California, it tells the story of Sabine, a magician’s assistant who, following the death of her partner, Parsifal, takes up magic and falls in love with his sister, Kitty.

Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896. Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2009) is regarded as the classic tale of Jewish migration to the States, but this story has been told many times, even from a woman-centred perspective, as in Marge Piercy’s *Sex Wars* (London: Piatakus, 2005), and from a lesbian perspective, as in Elana Dykewomon’s *Beyond the Pale* (1997. London: Onlywomen Press, 2000). Published the same year as *The Escape Artist*, Dykewomon’s novel follows two Jewish women who journey from a Russian shtetl to New York’s Lower East Side.


Mangan, p. 9.

Felman and Laub, p. 63.

Ibid., p. 78.

Ibid., p. 71, emphasis added.


Ibid., pp. 7-8, emphasis added.

Ibid., p. 46.
24 Picon took the part of the eponymous hero in the stage play *Yenkele* (1922-25), a role that she performed on and off from the age of 15 to 80. Picon also cross-dressed in the Yiddish films *Ost und West* (1923), and *Yidl Mitn Fidl* (1937), in which she plays a girl who dresses as a boy so that she can travel around the country as a musician in a klezmer band. See Joanne Green, *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* [http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/picon-molly], accessed 15 July, 2009.
26 Castle, pp. 30-1.
29 Gopinath, p. 11.
33 This is not the only Jewish stereotype Katz undermines. For example, debunking the myth that Jews are particularly adept with money, Tutsik wants to be a ‘respectable businessman’ but is a ‘financial failure’ (p. 186). Also, while Tutsik conforms to the stereotype of the effeminate Jewish man, Marek Fishbein subverts it. In contrast to Tutsik, who is ‘clean’ (p. 16), Fishbein is ‘filthy’ (p. 139), and where Tutsik is ‘tidy and immaculate’ (p. 69), Fishbein is a ‘slob’ (p. 156), a ‘mess of a man’ (p. 69).
34 Mangan, p. 162.
36 Beckman, p. 6.
37 Wesling, pp. 34-5.
40 Ibid., p. 40
43 Beck, p. 247.
44 Spilka, p. 433.
45 Alpert, p. 432.
48 Alpert, p. 125.
51 Golosh, p. 3.
55 Anne-Marie Fortier, ‘“Coming Home”: Queer Migrations and Multiple Evocations of Home’, 
56 Ibid., p. 405, p. 409, p. 414.
57 A ‘man’s item shall not be on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman’s garment; whoever does 
such a thing is an abhorrence unto Adonai’ (Deuteronomy 22.5).
60 Katz, backcover.
61 Ibid., p. 17.
62 Ibid., p. 18.
63 Ibid., p. 88.
64 Ibid., p. 22.
65 Ibid., p. 73.
66 Ibid., p. 93.
67 Ibid., p. 90.
68 Gopinath, p. 21.
69 Sarah Waters, ‘Wolfskins and Togas: Maude Meagher’s *The Green Scamander* and the Lesbian 
70 Isaac Bashevis Singer, ‘Hanka’ in *Passions and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 
2001), 7-25, p. 12.
73 Nora Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Racquel Liberman* (New 
74 Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge: CUP, 
75 Bravmann, p. 97; p. 113.
76 Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, ‘Making Up Lost Time: Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the 
Invention of History’ in David Alderson and Linda Anderson eds., *Territories of Desire in Queer 
77 See Siddharth Ashok Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* (New York: 
Columbia UP, 2009), p. 25.
78 Wesling, p. 40.
features a queer man, Molina, imprisoned for ‘perversion’ during the ‘Dirty War’.
80 Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’* 
81 Joan Nestle, ‘How a “Liberationist” Fem Understands Being a Queer Jew, or How Taking Advice 
from a Prophet, Even a Jewish One, is (Un)transformative’ in David Shneer and Carvyn Aviv eds., 
82 Mangan, p. vx.
83 Ibid.