

CROSS-ETHNIC MEDIUMS AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GESTURE  
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### Cross-Ethnic Mediums and the Autobiographical Gesture In Twentieth Century American Literature

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One of the most definitive aspects of twentieth century literary studies has been the move to group fiction by ethnic minorities into separate categories according to the authors' ethnicities. Among these categories, "African American literature" and "American Jewish literature" have emerged as two of the most prevalent. This study suggests that African American authors and American Jewish authors have resisted the confines of ethnic categorization by imagining themselves as each other and by using each other's cultural property within their writing. Previous scholarship on the literary relationship between African Americans and American Jews tends to position the two groups in conflict, but the subjects of this study—Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Fran Ross, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth—employ cross-ethnic mediums in pursuit of a common goal: to be considered as American individuals without the boundaries of their ethnic identities. The literary tactic that indicates each subject's struggle with the boundaries of their own ethnic identities is the autobiographical gesture—the artful use of one's own experiences. In each subject's use of the autobiographical gesture, the self as other serves as a means to work against the bounds of ethnic identity.

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## Introduction

I began this project thinking about Black-Jewish relations in the United States, and I was particularly interested in the discussion about the Jewish appropriation of Black music. I had been caught up in the Klezmer music revival. A band called Hasidic New Wave played regularly at The Knitting Factory on Leonard Street in New York City, and their music riffed Parker and Coltrane in combination with Jewish classics. Around the same time, Don Byron, an African American clarinet player, performed and recorded with the Klezmer Conservatory Band. What did it mean that Jewish musicians were playing Black music and Black musicians were playing Jewish music? Klezmer and Jazz seemed connected in many ways, yet the fusion never felt entirely comfortable; the sound abstracted for me something about the relationship between African Americans and American Jews in the twentieth century. I became hooked into trying to figure out what that sound meant.

Before I could get very far, I encountered a lot of scholarly anger on the subject of Jews and Black Music, and then I experienced some of my own. Nathaniel Mackey's essay "Other: From Noun to Verb" implied that authentic Black music possessed authentic qualities that Jews poorly imitated in order to capitalize upon Black cultural property. I thought to myself: it is much more complicated than that, isn't it? And then I found Jeff Melnick's *The Right to Sing the Blues*, a book which explains without forgiving the history of the Jewish commodification of jazz, ragtime, and the blues in the context of Black-White relations. Melnick theorizes that Jewish musicians used an involvement with Black music as evidence of their acceptability into white America. Yet unlike Michael Rogin, who contends in *Blackface, White Noise* that the Jewish

performance of Blackness was meant to signal the Jews' racial dominance, Melnick suggests that the production of Black art could serve as proof of the Jews' acceptability because Black expressive forms were highly sought after by the American mainstream. Furthermore, Melnick was one of the first scholars to point out that cultural imitation between African Americans and American Jews worked both ways, citing Booker T. Washington's *The Future of the American Negro* (1899): "Unless the Negro learns more and more to imitate the Jew in these matters [unity, pride, and love of race], to have faith in himself, he cannot expect to have any high degree of success."<sup>1</sup> Washington's statement reveals that African Americans sought influence and that copying the Jews seemed like a way to get it.

The next thing that happened—which might seem like a silly detail but actually had the most impact upon my decision to pursue this project—is that I realized after ten years of lessons that I would never be a great saxophone player. On the high school Jazz band festival circuit, I had won the coveted award for "Best Improvisation." We were playing a funk piece, and I stood up for my solo, closed my eyes, and suddenly I wasn't just a mousy Jewish girl anymore. I was anyone I wanted to be. My fingers were as free as Bird's, and there it was: transcendence. At the moment, I could have been Charlie Parker. But perhaps I was not ready to leave behind certain comforts I found in the limits offered by my identity, or perhaps I was tired of competing against other musicians who seemed more suited for music life. I remember my grandmother saying something like: "Nice Jewish girls play in Jazz clubs?" While all of my friends went off to study music, I decided to study literature, to search for a safer sort of transcendence there. And then what I found in literature was that a bunch of authors were essentially closing their eyes

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Melnick, *The Right to Sing the Blues* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 10.

and pretending to be someone else, or at least boundless versions of themselves. More specifically, I found American Jewish authors and African American authors imagining themselves as each other in order to escape the bounds of their own ethnic identities.

Philip Roth, the subject of my last chapter, was the author I found first. I read *Portnoy's Complaint*, a novel best remembered for the unabashed sexual exploits of its Jewish protagonist, so I understood the basis for Roth's reputation as a crass Jewish writer. Then I read *The Human Stain* when it came out in 2000, and I knew right away that Roth was much more important than that reputation allowed him to be. Yet when I proposed Roth as the figure I would study for my comprehensive exams, more than a few people in my department asked me, "Why Roth? He's one author I wouldn't want to shake hands with!" Sure, *American Pastoral* had just won the Pulitzer, and he'd received America's other three major literary awards in the years just before that, but Roth still had a negative stigma attached to his name: Philip Roth, American Jewish writer. He just couldn't get rid of it, and as every interview with him makes clear, he felt limited by that stigma.<sup>2</sup>

I call "American Jewish writer" a stigma because under the rubric of that two-part identity Roth would never be recognized more broadly as a great American writer like Melville, Hawthorne, or Thoreau. Though ethnic-American writers have indeed gained a place in the American canon, as Roth officially did when he became the second living author to be published by The Library of America series, the inclusion of the ethnic signifier creates a subtle hierarchy, or at least a perceptible division, in the realm of literary studies. It is not that the term "American Jewish writer" is anti-Semitic, but it

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<sup>2</sup> See Philip Roth's *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975) for a series of interviews in which he examines this topic.



does imply marginality and suggest how Roth's writing could be judged by a narrow set of standards. Right-wing American Jews were the first to inflict a narrow set of standards upon Roth. By expecting Roth to act as a representative and to be a proper spokesman for Judaism, they circumscribed his position as a writer of fiction. His fictional portrayals of less-than-pure-and-perfect Jews were met with reproach. Roth fought back in his essay "Writing About Jews": "...looking at fiction as they do—in terms of 'approval' and 'disapproval' of Jews, 'positive' and 'negative' attitudes towards Jewish life—they are likely not to see what the story is really about."<sup>3</sup> When Roth is dubbed an "American Jewish writer," his universal themes, such as human sexual nature, can become eclipsed by the sense that his work transmits some special knowledge about Jewish life.

Roth has tried to write and talk his way out of this predicament in many ways. Half of Roth's book *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) is dedicated to Roth's self-defense against critics seeking to undermine his individuality and writerly freedom. *The Prague Orgy* (1985) relays the idea that the tradition of Jewish writing begun among the Yiddish writers of the old world was not ideal and pure. *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), which at the very least was a push against the communal pressures that worked to rein him in, could also be seen as Roth's desperate attempt to get kicked out of the American Jewish community; if he could write something raunchy enough, offensive enough to figuratively desecrate the Sabbath—the holiest of Jewish holies—then maybe the Jews would revoke his communal membership, freeing him of their presumed right to constrain his creativity. After *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth continued to aim his sights on a broader perception of his work: *Everyman's* (2006) title gives away his intentions to

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<sup>3</sup> Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* 194.

invent something unmistakably human rather than just Jewish. But Roth's most successful escape from the limitations of his ethnic label was to make the struggle against ethnic limitations a universal problem in *The Human Stain* (2000). In that novel, Roth imagines himself as an African American man who has managed to live his adult life beyond the confines of his ethnic identity.

Before I go any further, I need to clarify that I am indeed making the argument that in *The Human Stain*, Roth imagines *himself* as African American, and by way of clarification, I need to introduce a term I have developed that is central to this project: the autobiographical gesture. The autobiographical gesture is the artful use of a genre that is most often perceived as factual. Unlike autobiography, the autobiographical gesture does not necessarily translate the actual events of a writer's life, although frequently, events that seem recognizable from an author's biography pop into the fiction he or she produces. Rather, the autobiographical gesture has more to do with the way the struggles of a writer's conscience and psyche make their way into their written products. The autobiographical gesture is a tactic a writer uses to reveal or experiment with his or her own connection to the broader theme being developed in fiction. It can serve as a means for an author to work out his or her uncertain relationship to that theme.

Of all the writers examined in my project, Roth engages most complexly with the autobiographical gesture. Not only does his subject matter often stem from the circumstances of his upbringing, his romantic relationships, and his career, but he creates alter egos, versions of himself, as the protagonists that enact and the narrators that frame the creative products of his conscience on these matters. Nathan Zuckerman, who first appeared in *The Ghost Writer* (1979) as a writer who had offended the Jewish

community, is Roth's most famous, or notorious, of these alter egos, but Zuckerman, as a version of Roth, is not true to life. For example, when asked if Zuckerman's rage at Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) expressed the emotions of Roth's real-life encounter with his detractor Irving Howe, Roth responded: "There was the real autobiographical scene, and it had no life to it at all. I had to absorb the rage into the main character... I wasn't going to get anywhere with a Zuckerman as eminently reasonable as myself."<sup>4</sup> Though the mention of Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson* evokes the actual events of Roth's life, Roth's autobiographical gesture is not simply to recall those events through Zuckerman, but to write an emotional response to those events that tests the possibilities of his own psyche. Perhaps Roth puts it best when he explains this kind of gesture as "how [a writer] feeds what's hypothetical or imagined into what's inspired and controlled by recollection, and how what's recollected spawns the overall fantasy."<sup>5</sup> The autobiographical gesture can be a fantasy based on the events and emotions recollected in one's psyche.<sup>6</sup>

When I say that Roth imagines himself as Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*, I mean that he uses a fantasy about an African American alter ego to engage with the issues of ethnic identity that have been part of his own experience. The twist in *The Human Stain* is that Roth's alter ego, Coleman Silk, passes as Jewish as a way to escape the limits of his African American identity. As Roth experiments with cross-ethnicity—the fantasy of self as other, and the self's (usually temporary) adoption of the other's

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<sup>4</sup> Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* 141.

<sup>5</sup> Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* 127.

<sup>6</sup> Even if Roth's public biography is one that he has manipulatively constructed—if his public biography is fictional—even a fictional commentary about ethnic identity deserves to be considered in conjunction with a novel about ethnic identity. Many critics would say that fiction cannot be evaluated according to the events and emotions in a writer's psyche, but Roth has spent too much time explaining the matter of his American-Jewish identity to make his own experience a non-issue in a work of fiction about ethnic identity.

ethnic properties—so does his Black alter ego. But why would a person who is trying to escape the limits of his ethnic identity do so by imagining himself as a person of another ethnic identity? Ironically, American Jews and African Americans take part in the exchange of ethnic property—which can include music, language, specific behaviors—in order to be more broadly acceptable in American society. It is similar to the kind of cross-ethnic phenomenon that Melnick works out in *The Right to Sing the Blues*: American Jews adopt African American ethnic properties in order to prove their acceptability in America, and African Americans adopt certain Jewish behaviors and paradigms as a means to gain influence in America. Furthermore, as in the case of Roth/Silk, cross-ethnicity enables one's foray into the realm of individuality. The ethnically-bound individual distinguishes himself from a group that is expected to engage in a set of similar behaviors by constructing an identity beyond the limits of those expectations.

Perhaps the frequency with which African Americans and American Jews imagine themselves as each other can be attributed to the rhetoric of shared oppression and even the rhetoric of a shared gene pool, which has already provided a sort of metaphoric interchangeability between the two groups. Then again, the language of Black-Jewish relations has more often than not characterized the two groups as completely opposite, especially in terms of social and economic class. In my third chapter, I juxtapose the (unfortunately obscure) writer Fran Ross with Bernard Malamud to reveal what the perception of these differences has to do with the divergent ways American Jews and African Americans practice cross-ethnicity and with the ways each group's practice of cross-ethnicity is received. Ross's novel, *Oreo* (1974), and

Malamud's novel, *The Tenants* (1971), are both written as cross-ethnic satire—the imagining of self as other in a humorous way to achieve a political effect. Like Roth, Malamud and Ross use cross-ethnicity and the autobiographical gesture as modes of resistance to the ethnic labels that categorize and limit their writing; each writer imagines the Self as Other as a means to escape communal identity and express individual identity. Furthermore, both writers' production of cross-ethnic satire acts as a commentary upon the context of waning Black-Jewish relations in their time. The major difference between Ross's "African American" novel and Malamud's "American Jewish" novel is this: Ross writes with a presumed right to use Jewish cultural property while Malamud writes fully aware that the Jewish use of Black cultural property is suspect.

The notion that Black cultural property is off limits to American Jews drives the plot of Malamud's novel. The problem in *The Tenants* is that the Jewish protagonist, a nominally Jewish writer named Harry Lesser who is feeling mentally limited and washed up, finds inspiration in the raw zeal and sexual energy of a Black writer, Willie Spearmint. Although Lesser knows better than to assume that he will be granted access to the privileges of Spearmint's enigmatic realm, he cannot keep himself away from its draw. Part of the problem is that Lesser cannot escape Spearmint, who seeks to exploit Lesser's special Jewish access to the ways of "whitey." Spearmint, however, is so protective over the authenticity of his work that he is never willing to accept Lesser's honest attempts at intervention. Though Lesser attempts to treat Spearmint as an equal, Spearmint expects Lesser's automatic penance based upon Lesser's affiliation with the white world. Spearmint has a Jewish girlfriend, but Spearmint punishes Lesser for consorting with an African American girl. Though Spearmint refers to himself as an

*alter cocker* (Yiddish for old guy), Spearmint criticizes Lesser for listening to Bessie Smith. The two writers cannot share their strengths because Spearmint resents Lesser's "white" ethnic status. Ironically, Spearmint so intently guards his Black cultural property because he believes that as a popular aesthetic it could afford him influence in Lesser's white world. But if Black cultural property is off limits to Jews, then the real irony of *The Tenants* is that Malamud produces Black syntax, among other aspects of Black cultural property, in order to compose the form and content of Spearmint's dialogue, thus subverting the ideology of the Black character he has so believably created.

While Malamud's novel intones the by now historical issue of the inauthentic Jewish use of Black cultural property in a way that is dark and acerbic, Ross's novel offers a humorous and rather adept sort of impersonation or embodiment of Jewishness which implies that the notion of separate cultural property in America is futile. The protagonist, Christine Clark Schwartz, a.k.a. "Oreo" for reasons that can practically be explained by her name, is the child of a Black mother and Jewish father. Though Oreo socially identifies as Black, she uses her repertoire of Yiddish and Jewish culture as the main *shtick* in navigating the multicultural obstacle course that is America. The irony of *Oreo's* plot is that the protagonist acquires most of her Jewishness from the Black side of her family, who passed down the knowledge of Jewish life they attained from their Jewish business clientele; in a reversal of the Jewish appropriation of Black cultural property, Oreo's Black grandparents made their living by overcharging Jews for *dreidels* and *hamataschen*.

Why is it funny when an African American protagonist speaks Yiddish, but oppressive when an American Jewish protagonist speaks the kind of non-Standard

English associated with Black English? Why is it okay for an African American writer to render the intimate details of Jewish culture while an American Jewish writer's portrayal of Blackness will forever be considered inauthentic and misunderstood? These questions apply not only to my chapter on Malamud and Ross; they also act as the subtext of this dissertation. To answer broadly, one might say that because the circumstances of slavery all but wiped out any sense of African American property, it is logical that African American cultural property would be well-guarded; moreover, African Americans require cultural property in order to be valued and rewarded for their contributions to society at large. If, as the Black Arts Movement proposed, Black cultural property could serve to unite African Americans, then it does not make much sense for people outside the fold get involved, especially not the Jews, who had been habitually regarded as greedy infiltrators. Of course, these thoughts are rather general, and as Melnick would agree, the problem with the discussion about Jews and the appropriation of Black cultural property is that it has become too general. Therefore, in each of my chapters, I question the relationship between cross-ethnic practices and the subject of cultural appropriation in order to provide a less blinkered view based on the particular circumstances of my subjects.

Like Melnick, I believe that the Black-Jewish trade of cultural property has been reduced to long-standing stereotypes that link Jews to social and economic greed, and while I recognize the many cases in which Jews have, indeed, used and abused Black cultural property for their own economic benefit, thus leaving African Americans unrewarded for their inventions, I also recognize that the blanket of stereotypes does not adequately cover many instances of cross-ethnic practice that have occurred on both sides

of the sometimes blurry color line between African Americans and American Jews. My intention is not to repair Black-Jewish relations, but I do hope to reveal that often African Americans and American Jews have imagined themselves as each other for similar reasons, reasons that go beyond the desire to make money from material that belongs to another. Cross-ethnicity itself is not the practice of appropriation, and cross-ethnicity does not necessarily imply that a member of one ethnic group wants to become a member of another ethnic group. Cross-ethnicity is the practice of diffusion, emulation, esteem, and fantasy; it tests the possibilities of what life might be like and how human experience might be expressed from an ethnic position outside of one's own.

One of the most interesting examples of an African American who engages in Black-Jewish cross-ethnicity is James Weldon Johnson, the subject of my second chapter. As Melnick points out, Johnson took an “integrationist stance” when it came to the race question in the United States; Johnson believed that “pure ethnic and racial products belonged to a ‘folk’ world that was quickly receding into the past.”<sup>7</sup> If Johnson had heard the combination of Jazz and Klezmer that inspired this project in the first place, he could have applauded his own foresight and the cross-ethnic sharing he saw as the inevitable, if not hopeful, result of the steps toward racial equality in American society. But in Johnson's time, an “integrationist” stance was not as popular with the African American majority as it was with American Jews. In Johnson's cross-ethnic imagination, the American Jewish behaviors often associated with Jewish assimilation—like diplomacy and social fluidity—served as a model for successful integration. Johnson employed what he rather openly identified as Jewish behaviors in the management of his identity and his career.

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<sup>7</sup> Melnick 142, 147.



Previous scholarship on the subject of Black-Jewish relations in literature, however, tends to focus on the ways African Americans and American Jews have imagined each other in contest or conflict. In Emily Miller Budick's *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation*, Budick finds that Blacks and Jews imagine themselves as each other in order to construct and preserve their own ethnic identities as separate:

mutualities of ethnic construction may evidence genuine conflict for cultural domination, as writers respond to, appropriate, and often displace each other's cultural materials... it may produce the repetition within each individual ethnic construction of those elements of the other's ethnic position (and of American culture generally) that each group, in insisting on its ethnic position, would most like to disown or displace.<sup>8</sup>

When Blacks and Jews use each other to contemplate their own ethnic identities, even the similarities between the two groups often become points of differentiation and hostility. As Ethan Goffman points out in *Imagining Each Other*, "the memorialization of trauma may become a site of contestation, of rivalry, as is occurring in debates about which people's experience constitutes the 'true' Holocaust."<sup>9</sup> Like Budick, Goffman suggests that a literary study of Black-Jewish exchanges reveals a pattern in which the two groups come together to come apart in the constant reinforcement of their heterogeneity. In the most recent book on Black-Jewish relations in literary studies, *Strangers in the Land*, Eric Sundquist contends that "It is possible now to attempt a comprehensive study of blacks and Jews not simply because the century has ended but because their special relationship has ended as well." Though the pattern of Black-Jewish relations in the twentieth century has ended in stalemate, it is an important subject of study, as Sundquist argues, because "we are still a long way from an era in which identity determined by

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<sup>8</sup> Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ethan Goffman, *Imagining Each Other* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000) 2.

membership in a bounded ethno-racial group, or several of them, does not appear to afford a special vantage and therefore to require a certain allegiance.”<sup>10</sup> To examine the history of Black-Jewish relations offers major insights into the ethnic-fractionalization—with its consequences positive and negative—of American society.

Without taking away from the imperative work of this previous strain of scholarship, my project focuses on Black-Jewish relations from a different perspective. The African American and American Jewish scholars and writers represented here are not proponents of ethnic factionalism. My first chapter traces the cross-ethnic autobiographical gestures of the anthropologist Franz Boas and his student Zora Neale Hurston and grounds this argument in a realm of cultural anthropology that has heavily influenced twentieth century American literature. The literary products of anthropological fieldwork at the beginning of the century claimed “cultures” to be scientifically knowable. Peoples were understood as separate entities, categorized according to the pluralist rhetoric eminent at the time. The sense that peoples were separate and knowable stimulated the popularity of local color fiction and ethnographic writing, which focused on the description of peoples with regional and ethnic differences.

The assumption largely remains that Boas’ antiracism was connected to the culture concept that has promoted the flourishing success of multi-culturalism and the movements to recognize separate cultural wholes; however, Boas’ antiracist ideals and the theoretical basis of his anthropological critique actually made him a vehement opponent of cultural pluralism—the idea that the many small ethnic groups in a large society maintain unique features and identities. Perhaps the best proof of Boas’ anti-pluralism is evidenced in his choice to elide his Jewish identity, to become ethnically

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 2, 16.

unaffiliated. Complicating this decision and this “proof” of Boas’ universalism was his sponsorship of Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnographic research. Under Boas’ direction, Hurston underwent the constant negotiation of a relationship between her individual identity and a Black collective. Her own universalist leanings were eclipsed, at times, by an *uber*-ethnic affiliation that Boas seemed to have thrust upon her.

Hurston’s resistance to racial and ethnic categorization has been often ignored because, as Ross Posnock argues, her refusal “to play by the racial rules of the game” ruined her chances for fame while she was alive. Even in the auto-ethnographic fieldwork she produced under Boas’ aegis, she “inhabited the unclassified residuum” and, ironically, became marginalized because she rejected ethnic classification.<sup>11</sup> She ended her career in obscurity, devoted to writing about the history of the Jewish people as a way to argue against a system of racial classification. She used the cross-ethnic example of Jewish assimilation into the American mainstream to make a case for her own mainstream acceptance, but not until she was rediscovered, reframed and reclaimed as an African American writer did she achieve literary success. Her cross-ethnic autobiographical gesture did not foment the post-ethnic reputation she desired.

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In closing, I need to acknowledge my use of the terms “African American” and “Black” rather interchangeably, though I am aware that each term evokes different sets of meanings, often depending on the context. Though the term “Black” tends to appear in the lower case, I capitalize the word “Black” in order to give it equal status to “Jew,” which tends to be capitalized in all cases where the term exists respectfully in noun form.

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<sup>11</sup> Ross Posnock, Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998) 212.

I also tend to conflate the terms “Jew” and “American Jew,” not only because it is clear that this project focuses on Jews in the United States, but because Jews, regardless of their location in the world, carry with them the same set of stereotypes. Finally, I should say that I have chosen the term “American Jew” rather than “Jewish American,” taking my cue from the journal *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, and perhaps as an offering of my own autobiographical gesture. Certainly, I have heard the terms “American Jew” and “Jewish American” used interchangeably and with similar frequency, but for me, the “Jew” in the noun position of the two part identity (as opposed to the adjective position) conveys my own sense of ethnicity in America. Despite my rational understanding that a post-ethnic age could spawn the kind of equality between peoples that would rid the world of much hatred and suffering, I still imagine myself and consider myself imagined by others as a “Jew” in America, not an American who is Jewish. And although I admire the efforts of the subjects of this project, it would feel false for me to close with the idea that America is ready to hear the message that the subjects of this project have put forth, partly because I myself am so aware and even protective of my own set of differences.

Franz Boas and Zora Neale Hurston:  
Universalist Thinkers and their Cross-Ethnic Paradigms

Franz Boas, a major force in American Anthropology, and his student Zora Neale Hurston, who eventually became recognized as a major American literary figure, both made their marks on the twentieth century American understanding of ethnicity by stressing the universality of peoples. It was very important to Boas to achieve his own sort of universality—in other words, an individual identity not based on hierarchical ethnic distinctions. Therefore, he tried to separate himself from his Jewish identity and to promote himself as an ethnically unaffiliated scientist, a sort of “free agent” in a nation fraught with a post-bellum awareness of difference that was heightened by rising immigration rates. He needed to theorize about the universality of peoples and deal with the subject of racial and ethnic distinctions, without appearing motivated by the prospect of his own social mobility or biased by some assumed ethnic predisposition. Meanwhile, Hurston negotiated a relationship between her individual identity and a Black collective. Her journey to prove the universality of peoples and to eradicate the concept of Black primitivism required, at times, an *uber*-ethnic affiliation that did not reflect her rather less static reality, a reality not bound by ethnicity. Her mission was to collect and put to use the genius of the African American people in order to demonstrate their equal contribution to culture at large; out of this universality of peoples could rise the opportunity for individual distinction, which, albeit posthumously, Hurston certainly achieved.

The irony of Boas and Hurston’s resistance to pluralist boundaries of ethnicity is that opposition to these boundaries necessitated recognition of and work within them. Though Boas might have chosen, perhaps by advantage of the color of his skin, to leave

his Jewishness invisible (if his detractors would have let him), he certainly found uses for preserving Hurston's connection to an African American collective. Boas sought to reconnect African Americans with the history of their own accomplishments and frequently employed an African American collective as a theoretical model, thus igniting the speculation that he had simply replaced Jewishness with Blackness in an effort to shift the focus from ethnically self-serving motivations. But Hurston's version of anthropology and her vision of its uses greatly differed from her teacher's theoretical model. Her insider ethnography did not produce the purely scientific results that Boas desired, but instead it produced a meta-narrative—existing as an autobiographical gesture in the space between fact and fiction—thus signifying a refusal to separate intellectuality from folk culture. However, this move did not signal Hurston's contempt for Boas' use of an African American collective as a theoretical model. After all, Hurston, throughout her literary career, used the history of the Jewish people as a way to argue against a system of racial classification, and she devoted the final years of her life to an analysis of Herod the Great, who symbolized for her the individual distinction that could emerge from the successful universality of peoples. In effect, Boas and Hurston preserved and honored the ethnic circumstances of the other, and by cross-ethnic application, they avoided granting ethnicity a reductive power.

### **Franz Boas: The Anti-Pluralist**

Walter Benn Michaels, whose seminal work *Our America* (1995) describes a society that is essentialist due to its pluralist ideals, devotes a rather long endnote to distinguishing Franz Boas as an exception to the pluralist rule. Though Boas operated on the principle that different peoples required diverse methods of critique, he believed that

all peoples were essentially the same—a stark contrast to pluralist thinking. Michaels concludes:

...although admirers of Boas's antiracism (*Anthropology and Modern Life* was mainly undertaken as an attack on contemporary racial thinking) often identify that antiracism with his presumed pluralism, it is, in fact, the racists Boas meant to oppose whose conception of culture was more purely pluralist. Boas himself was a universalist, in search of "psychological and social data for all mankind" and "basal for all culture" (207).<sup>12</sup>

Despite Michaels' intervention into Boas' reputation, the assumption largely remains that Boas' antiracism was connected to the culture concept that has promoted the flourishing success of "multi-culturalism" and the movements to recognize separate cultural wholes, including the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>13</sup> These movements have informed twentieth century reading practices by organizing literature into ethnic categories, like "African American Literature," "Jewish American Literature," "Native American Literature," and so on. Therefore, literary theorists have latched onto Boasian anthropology as a starting point of these divisions.

In many ways, positing Boasian anthropology as a reference point for pluralist reading practices makes logical sense if attached to an academic perspective with Jewish origins. Like Horace Kallen, whose essay "Democracy versus the Melting-Pot" (1915) helped to establish Kallen as "the father of cultural pluralism," Boas came to the United States as an immigrant to escape the limits of anti-Semitism. In Kallen's view, one of the

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 173. Michaels cites George Stocking Jr.'s argument from "Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective" (in *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* [Chicago, 1968]), which stipulates that "Boas was not a relativist in a consistent sense." Although Boas was a relativist in the sense that he did not believe in one standard by which to judge peoples, Boas was not a relativist because he believed that peoples were essentially the same in terms of progress and decline.

<sup>13</sup> See Brad Evans, "Where Was Boas During the Renaissance in Harlem? Diffusion, Race, and the Culture Paradigm in the History of Anthropology," *Central Sites, Peripheral Visions: Cultural and Institutional Crossings in the History of Anthropology*, ed. Richard Handler (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 70.

benefits of American nationality was that immigrants and their future children did have to fear the loss of “their ethnic individuality.”<sup>14</sup> Susan Hegeman notes that Kallen valued “ethnic enclaves, and specifically their cultural nationalisms, as bright spots of resistance to an encroaching threat: massification.”<sup>15</sup> Kallen’s interest in Judaism was not in maintaining the stringent Hebraic religious laws and traditions, but in continuing Jewish cultural life, specifically in terms of a Jewish intellectual tradition.<sup>16</sup> Boas, however, did not want to escape anti-Semitism so that he would be allowed a Jewish ethnic identity.<sup>17</sup> Still, his academic perspective was grounded in the *Haskala*, or Jewish enlightenment, and particularly the Jewish social scientific program that began with Heymann Steinthal and Moritz Lazarus’ study of *Volksgeister*. The study of *Volksgeister*, the unique geniuses of peoples, was meant to elucidate the specific contributions of particular groups to humanity. Steinthal and Lazarus promoted the encyclopedic categorization of various *Volksgeister* in an ethnology-related discipline they called *Volkerpsychologie*, the psychology of peoples. *Volkerpsychologie*, simply put, applied the discipline of psychology beyond the individual and toward a collective. Its founders intended *Volkerpsychologie* to exist as an improvement upon anthropology’s treatment of the *Volksgeist*, which, they maintained, “had neglected the core of human existence by explaining human diversity through external factors like environment and descent.”<sup>18</sup> In the pages of their journal, Steinthal and Lazarus sought to prove how the products of

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<sup>14</sup> Horace Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality,” *The Nation* (Feb. 25, 1915). 8 of 16. <http://www.expo98.msu.edu/people/Kallen.htm> Rutgers University Libraries. 6/21/2004.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Hegeman, *Patterns for America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 58.

<sup>16</sup> Carrie Tirado Bramen, *The Uses of Variety* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 92.

<sup>17</sup> See Douglas Cole, *Franz Boas: The Early Years, 1858-1906* (Vancouver: University of Washington Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Matti Bunzl, “*Volkerpsychologie* and German Jewish Emancipation,” *Worldly Provincialism*, eds. H. Penny Glenn and Matti Bunzl (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 53-54.



peoples gave credence to their diversity and served as evidence of a peoples' potential for growth.

Steinthal and Lazarus offered their systematic analysis of a variety of *Geister* with a focus on the linguistic and literary contributions of peoples, citing, for example, the peerless ingenuity of ancient Greek poetry and the French influence on modern drama. These accomplishments were showcased as moments that advanced *Bildung*, the upgrade of self and group cultivation, for peoples and, in turn, for the world at large. With hindsight, however, the eclectic collection of *Geister* appears as a contextual frame for Steinthal and Lazarus' central concern: to define the Jewish *Geist*. The conspicuous advertising of Jewish contributions and the meditative critiques aimed at Jewish reform were necessary, as Matti Bunzl points out, to German Jewish emancipation. In the mid to late 1800's, the *Haskala* presented Jews with a median between types of cultivation through education: the isolate, religious traditions and the wordly, secular innovations. Bunzl maintains that Steinthal and Lazarus used the journal to make a case for the national acceptance of Jews into German society, drawing on the traditions of their Jewish past as substantiation for their potential contributions to German *Bildung* and all humanity. Specifically, Steinthal and Lazarus credited the Jewish *Geist* with the invention of monotheism and with the Torah as Jewish history and literature.<sup>19</sup>

Like Steinthal and Lazarus, Boas hoped for a "liberal humanism," or at least a German society liberal enough to allow Jews to "overcome their difference" and be

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<sup>19</sup> Bunzl, "Volkerpsychologie and German Jewish Emancipation," 48-51, 70. The founding premise of the *Zeitschrift* was a epistolary discussion between Steinthal and Lazarus pertaining to the function of the Torah as literature. For example, Steinthal published a sixty page review of works by Bruno Bauer as a means by which to discuss the Old Testament as Jews' ancient poetry. The "deployment" of this discussion "functioned as an intellectual device designed to promote and safeguard the ongoing process of Jewish integration into German society" (51).

counted as valuable contributors to an overarching *Bildung*.<sup>20</sup> Boas' mindset upon arrival to the United States—one informed by the experience of anti-Semitism, the influence of *Volkerpsychologie*, and the understanding that science required context—provided the underpinnings for Boasian anthropology, especially as it applied to the “race problem” in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Thus Boas became known as the “Father of Cultural Relativism.” His guiding mission was to promote the idea that differences between peoples were the effects of historical, social and geographic conditions, and to prove that all populations have complete potential immeasurable by universal laws of culture in the sense of *Bildung*.

Though the *Bildung* concept foregrounds Boas' interest in specific cultures, it is too often conflated with his ideas on race. Had Boas imagined race and culture as one, perhaps then he could be considered a consistent pluralist. Kallen's pluralist thinking, according to Carrie Tirado Bramen, relied on “essentialism...as the rationale for imagining the permanence of identity culture...Kallen's nativist pluralism [was] a form of cultural protectionism, a way to limit the pliability of minority cultures through the

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<sup>20</sup> Bunzl, “*Volkerpsychologie* and German Jewish Emancipation,” 81-83. Furthermore, Bunzl notes, Boas cited Steinthal and Lazarus theories in two pieces of his early work, “The Aims of Ethnology” (1888) and “The History of Anthropology” (1904). See also Brad Evans, *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 164. Evans suggests, Boas' salvage of North American Indian folk tales reflects a break from the opinion of his mentor, Adolf Bastian, who dismissed the historical importance of the folk tales because they required psychological intervention. Evans notes that Boas' reasoning concerning the folk tales aligns with Steinthal and Lazarus' approach to ethnology, which insists that “psychological variation...must accompany the historical development of cultural material in specific places at specific times. [Boas] argued not for the psychological unity of mankind but for an understanding of universality in terms of the psychological differences between peoples resulting from historical factors.”<sup>20</sup> Though this system seems to preserve the hierarchies of essentialism, it allows for upward mobility toward human equality if social circumstances permit the recognition and potential growth of a peoples' *Bildung*. It also begins to challenge gross generalizations about biological differences based on race and even begins to subtly unravel the notion of scientificity.

<sup>21</sup> See also Brad Evans, “Where Was Boas During the Renaissance in Harlem?” 81. Evans notes that part of Boas' Jewish social science program was his affiliation with Felix Adler's “Ethical Culture Society,” another response to racism in Germany set along the course of *Bildung*.

permanence of biology.”<sup>22</sup> But Boas was not a pluralist because his theories emphasized first that similarities between racial groups were more common than differences, and second that “contact and conquest” brought different peoples together; Julia Liss credits this stance among Boas’ most successful arguments against racism.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Boas established that there was no permanent biology to cultural and racial categories, and that these categories were changing, only existent in passing historical moments and transformed by the constant movement of peoples. Therefore, Brad Evans suggests that scholars should replace notions of Boas as a pluralist with a more accurate understanding of Boas’ promulgation of diffusion. Diffusion fostered an overarching “humanistic concept of culture” that recognized “borrowing and exchange” between peoples, which unsettled hierarchical distinctions between peoples that were based on separation.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that although Boas’ response to racism was grounded in a Jewish intellectual tradition constantly defending against anti-Semitism—the same intellectual tradition that Kallen relied upon for cultural protectionism—unlike Kallen, Boas willed upon himself the “borrowing and exchange” of assimilation and diffusion.

Indeed, re-envisioning the Boasian culture concept through the lens of diffusion aligns more logically with Boas’ personal and ethical stance on the separation of peoples into static groups; however, it calls into question Boas’ promotion of Zora Neale Hurston’s anthropological research, especially her collection of folklore. After all, Boas’

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<sup>22</sup> Bramen 82. Bramen cites Kallen: “Men may change their clothes; their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot change their grandfathers.” Kallen believed that the “hereditary character of Jewishness cannot be diluted” due to intermarriage.

<sup>23</sup> Julia Liss, “Diasporic Identities: The Science and Politics of Race in the Work of Franz Boas and W.E.B. DuBois, 1894-1919,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13:2 (1998): 138.

<sup>24</sup> Evans, “Where Was Boas During the Renaissance in Harlem?” 86. Evans cites Boas’ “Introduction” to *The Handbook of American Indian Languages* to clarify Boas’ philosophy that “a whole array of cultural elements—language, material culture, traditions, folktales, and songs—simply did not match up with race or each other” (84).

study of diffusion revealed that folklore, once recognized as a distinguishing element between cultures and nations, was actually something that traveled across these boundaries. For example, Evans describes the variants of “Uncle Remus” stories “located not only in the black South, but also in the West among Native Americans, in South America, in Western Europe, and even in Asia.”<sup>25</sup> Hence, it seems incongruent with Boas’ anti-pluralism that he should encourage Hurston’s project. Yet ultimately, it was not that Boas failed to recognize “the amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life” implicit in Hurston’s collection of folklore in *Mules and Men*.<sup>26</sup> Rather, the problem was that Boas affirmed Hurston’s separate-ness by granting her special power to understand “the true inner life of the Negro.”

### **Boas’ Afro-centric Promotion of Zora Neale Hurston**

Boas’ relationship to Zora Neale Hurston appears to operate according to a double standard. While Boas avoided the Jewish cause, pleading no special need or power to investigate or preserve the internal ethnographics of Jewish life in America (though certainly that investigation was concurrent in local color and realist fiction by Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska, and later in Boas’ career, by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Henry Roth), Boas encouraged Hurston’s auto-ethnographic fieldwork, the collection of folklore from her home town of Eatonville, Florida and then New Orleans that produced “The Eatonville Anthology” (1926), “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934) and

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<sup>25</sup> Evans, “Where Was Boas During the Renaissance in Harlem?” 84.

<sup>26</sup> Franz Boas, Forward, *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston, in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1995).

*Mules and Men* (1935).<sup>27</sup> William S. Willis delineates Boas' endeavor to recruit African Americans into the field of anthropology specifically for the purpose of engaging in the study of Black life.<sup>28</sup> Hurston sometimes acted as a mere technician within the field of anthropology, conducting physical measurements of African American populations alongside Melville Herskovitz or collecting folklore using her superiority in "establishing rapport" with African Americans, but she was also appreciated for her "insider" advantage when it came to deciphering the material she collected.<sup>29</sup> Considering the importance of psychological aspects in defining collective dimensions, a method Boas had sustained since the days of Steintal and Lazarus' *Volkerpsychologie*, the logic followed that African American perspectives would be valuable for a sensitivity to psychological nuance of their own people. This logic is questionable because, as we shall see, insider ethnography, or auto-ethnography, is fraught with tensions concerning the authority of a representative to interpret the psychology of a group. But the more immediate question is this: why would Boas promote Hurston's connection to an African American identity while making it a rule to forfeit his own collective identity?

Marshall Hyatt might respond with his contention that Boas, "though committed to equal opportunity for the races, was not a full-fledged egalitarian."<sup>30</sup> Hyatt suggests that Boas was "haunted" by the idea that the Negro race was "slightly (but inherently) inferior," based on the fact that Boas never proposed the complete equivalence of races.

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<sup>27</sup> Citations of these texts will appear as EA for "The Eatonville Anthology," CNE for "Characteristics of Negro Expression" and MM for *Mules and Men*, and page numbers refer to *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Frank A. Salamone, "Franz Boas: The Construction of Race," *CrossRoutes—The Meanings of "Race" for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds Paola Boi and Sabine Broeck (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003) n12, 100. Salamone retrieved this information from Willis's notes. Willis passed away before he could complete the manuscript on Boas on which he had been working.

<sup>29</sup> Salamone 67.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall Hyatt, *Franz Boas-Social Activist: The Dynamics of Ethnicity* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 88.

Yet Hyatt also maintains that Boas believed, like Booker T. Washington and other civil rights leaders, in the potential for a full equality of races if the conditions necessary for cultural development could be met. Finally, Hyatt notes that the “revisionist view of slavery, which points to a vibrant slave culture, calls this view into question.”<sup>31</sup> It seems clear, however, that by sending Hurston into the field to salvage folklore, Boas heralded the revisionist view of slavery. He hoped to evince the Black *Volksgeist* by circulating folklore as proof of a vibrant Black culture. The conditions necessary for the acceptance of African Americans as well as the inner development and group improvement of African Americans required an understanding of the historical contributions of Black people. Perhaps Boas believed that Jews and the world at large had easier access to Jewish contributions, 1) because much of the Jewish Diaspora spread Jews throughout Europe, thus exposing the West to Jewish history and development while allowing time for the possible integration of Jews into the ways of the West, and 2) because as Steinthal and Lazarus had noted, the religious text and ethic central to Western civilization had its roots in the Torah. Although these conditions had not guaranteed Jews’ equality, the Jews in America had experienced more privileges than African Americans. Moreover, until two generations post-Enlightenment, most Jews had been educated in the traditions and history of Judaism, even if many had eventually rejected it. In other words, Jews had access to a sense of continuity that African Americans did not.

Because slavery had abruptly severed African Americans from most knowledge of *Bildung* on the African continent, African Americans often found it difficult to have faith in and promote their own potential. Boas sought to reconnect African Americans with their heritage of accomplishments. In “What the Negro Has Done in Africa” (1904),

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<sup>31</sup> Hyatt, *n27*, 101.

Boas revealed the achievements of kingdoms in Ghana and Songhai to support his claim that populations of African descent were capable of profound social networks and creativity. Intrigued by Boas' method of presenting facts as inspiration for racial uplift, Du Bois invited Boas to confer the commencement address to the students of Atlanta University in 1906. Boas' speech, entitled "The Outlook of the American Negro," gave scientific credence to the struggle for African American equality by recalling a past of ancient African *Bildung* that had surpassed the European accomplishments of the time, including technological advances in metal work, farming, political frameworks, and financial systems. Du Bois felt that Boas had granted him the freedom from shame of his African past.<sup>32</sup> Boas' speech helped inspire Du Bois to locate an identity unique to African Americans. Although Boas and DuBois had both personally experienced marginality and exclusion, Du Bois' response was to write about himself in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Dusk of Dawn: The Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940) as the means to afford African American identity; Julia Liss points to this difference between Boas and Du Bois when she says: "Boas...succeeded in institutionalizing his ideas at Columbia University, whereas the stigma of race meant that Du Bois's academic career remained circumscribed."<sup>33</sup> The stigma of race, or the lack of a publicly accepted *Bildung*, made it difficult for Du Bois to speak with authority outside of his own experience.

Of course, it was not easy for Boas to speak outside of his own experience either. During the House Committee hearings responsible for the increased restrictions on immigration in 1924, Lathrop Stoddard, who wrote "The Rising Tide of Color Against

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Helbling, *The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999) 22.

<sup>33</sup> Liss 130.

White Supremacy,” dismissed Boas’ findings as “the desperate attempt of a Jew to pass himself off as ‘white.’”<sup>34</sup> Stoddard’s comment foreshadows Michael Rogin’s contentious theory that Jews sought to elevate themselves by way of contrast to Blacks.<sup>35</sup> Stoddard’s charges against Boas imply not only that Boas was encroaching on white academic territory, but that like the proponents of racist theories, Boas had placed himself above the race problem by being in the authoritative position of studying it. Even contemporary critics, like Hyatt, maintain that in order to front a critical distance from the race problem, “Boas used the Afro-American as a substitute.” Hyatt continues,

When he challenged pseudoscientific theory alleging black inferiority, he was reacting to his personal experience. Jews had progressed in all areas of American life, yet anti-Semitism remained alive, fanned by the emotional fires of traditional prejudice. Boas had experienced this firsthand in his dealings with the WASP scientific community, which sought to exclude him. By focusing on blacks, he could lay siege to the underpinnings of all forms of racist thought while maintaining scientific objectivity. He surmised that if he could abolish racism as it pertained to Blacks, Jews would also benefit.<sup>36</sup>

Hyatt’s assessment aligns Boas with the pluralist agenda that Kevin MacDonald finds particularly troubling:

Jewish identifications and the pursuit of perceived Jewish interests, particularly in advocating an ideology of cultural pluralism as a model for Western societies, has been the “invisible subject” of American anthropology—invisible because the ethnic identifications and ethnic interests of its advocates have been masked by the language of science in which such identifications and interests were publicly illegitimate.<sup>37</sup>

The real accusation underlying Stoddard, Hyatt and MacDonald’s comments is that Boas is at fault for not acknowledging his Jewishness, for leaving his Jewishness as something

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<sup>34</sup> Salamone 74.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jews in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Rogin’s theory was that Jews used Blackface to make themselves appear whiter by contrast.

<sup>36</sup> Hyatt 97.

<sup>37</sup> Kevin MacDonald, *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (London: Praeger Press, 1998) 23.



“invisible.” However, the critics’ comments reflect their own pluralist mindsets, while Boas’ invisible ethnicity reflects a decidedly non-pluralist agenda.

It is not that Boas ignored Jewishness as a collective dimension; after all, it should not be forgotten that much of Boas’ anthropometric work, especially his measurements of children, investigated “Hebrews.”<sup>38</sup> It is because Boas elided a personal connection to “Hebrews” as part of his public life that critics feel uneasy. Even if Boas experienced a disconnection from his Jewish identity on many levels, he was still expected to forge a persona based on it. Perhaps like many academics, who feel, figuratively, that they are on the outside looking in, in constant analysis of their surroundings, Boas was not a “joiner”; this idea jibes with Liss’s contention that “Boas’s forging of academic anthropology in part reflected his own sense of perpetual marginality and experiences of rootlessness, especially by normalizing the perspective of the participant-observer method as the central mode of disciplinary practice, if not his own fieldwork.”<sup>39</sup> Or perhaps, along the lines of his theory on heredity and environment, his academic environment had influenced him to meld his Jewish identity with an academic dimension. The bottom line is that in an era of anthropology inspired objectification and classification of peoples—in science, literature and art—Boas’ resistance to static categorization was unacceptable. His non-pluralist agenda was a threat to an American social contract in which races were “invisibly” ranked, and that is exactly what he wanted.

Though Boas maintained an interest in the geniuses of peoples, he staunchly opposed general classifications to the point that he avoided the establishment of scientific

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<sup>38</sup> Franz Boas, Race, Language and Culture (New York: The Free Press, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> Liss 129.

laws, concentrating instead on the exceptions to the rule, the understanding of individuality despite group identity. Ross Posnock notes Boas' incorporation of a Diltheyan legacy which stipulates that "the individual's understanding is inseparable from experience," and Posnock cites the opposition to "premature classification" in Boas' statement: "the object of our study is the individual, not abstractions from the individual under observation."<sup>40</sup> Yet the striking contradiction between these terms and Hurston's role within anthropology is that Boas valued a Du Boisian trajectory—the use of personal experience—as central to the establishment of unique African American contributions. During the time Boas worked with Hurston at Barnard (1925-1927) and later, during the compilation of *Mules and Men*, Boas figured Hurston as a key player in translating the African American experience to the rest of the world because of her personal understanding of the population on which she was to report. Boas had hoped that Hurston could produce something particularly in-depth, and he was frustrated when she collected a "repetition of the kind of material that [had] been collected so much," which he referred to as "content." He wanted Hurston to deliver "the form of diction, movements... the methods of dancing, habitual movements in telling tales or in ordinary conversation... the manner of rendition."<sup>41</sup> Boas desired something similar of Ella Cara Deloria, an American Indian ethnographer who conducted her research largely on the Dakota people: "the point is to show how motor habits in different races are established by social habits."<sup>42</sup> Yet Boas' instructions to Margaret Mead request that she study the

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<sup>40</sup> Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 210.

<sup>41</sup> Franz Boas, letter to Zora Neale Hurston, 3 May 1927, Franz Boas Papers, Firestone Library Collections, Princeton, New Jersey.

<sup>42</sup> Franz Boas, letter to Ella Cara Deloria, 21 October 1929, Franz Boas Papers, Firestone Library Collections, Princeton, New Jersey. For further information, see Roseanne Hoefel, "Difference By Degree" *American Indian Quarterly* 25:2 (Spring 2001). Ebsco Host, Rutgers University Libraries.

following aspects of Samoans: “how young girls react to the constraints of custom... the bashfulness of girls in primitive society... the crushes among girls.”<sup>43</sup> These instructions require of Mead’s feminine instincts, but they do not ask for stylistics or a particular insider interpretation. Moreover, Boas was incredibly protective over Mead’s health, and he acknowledged how the unfamiliar surroundings and climate might negatively influence her work:

Let me impress upon you first of all that you should not forget your health... be careful in the tropics and try to adjust yourself to conditions and not work when it is too hot or too moist in the daytime. If you find you cannot stand the climate, do not be ashamed to come back. There are plenty of other places where you could solve the problem on which you propose to work.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, he assumed that Hurston would already be acclimated to her surroundings, despite the tropical weather in the deep South of the United States. Hurston had to remind Boas of the difficulty of her working conditions, including the particular problem of transporting her heavy typewriter around the oppressive countryside.<sup>45</sup> Boas, however, seems frustrated and unimpressed with the prevalence of excuses in Hurston’s letters despite the fact that there were not “plenty of other places” where Hurston could do her insider work.

While it may have been Hurston who had imagined her anthropological projects and ultimately decided to “go and collect Negro folk-lore,” Boas’ Forward to *Mules and Men* frames Hurston’s fieldwork as a valuable resource for understanding “the Negro’s reaction to everyday events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions” (MM 3), thus encouraging generalizations about Black identity. Hurston’s folklore collections might

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<sup>43</sup> Franz Boas, Letter to Margaret Mead, 14 July 1925, Franz Boas Papers, Firestone Library Collections, Princeton, New Jersey.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Hoefel 3 of 18.

have appeared responsible for promoting the *Psychologie* of “Blackness” as a separate whole, insinuating that as a Black woman, she was specifically different from non-Blacks. Of course, Boas was careful not to assume Hurston’s consummate affiliation with a composite Black identity. Boas recognized that Hurston was collecting the folklore of rural Southern African Americans, whom Hazel Carby defines as the “subaltern group” that “established a folk heritage as the source of, and inspiration for, authentic African American art forms.”<sup>46</sup> In his forward, Boas writes that Hurston was “as one of them,” or in other words, like one of them, but his language seems careful to imply that she was not actually one of them; she “was fully accepted as such,” but was not actually “such.” He does allude to the fact that the color of Hurston’s skin and her roots in Eatonville were advantageous in allowing her acceptance in ways that White observers would be forbidden, but because Hurston was not actually “such” since she had migrated North and had been influenced by mass urbanity, the forward also implies that it was Hurston’s skill as a fieldworker that enabled her insider work. Boas clearly tries to maintain his professional equability in promoting Hurston, but he transgresses some of his staunchest non-pluralist ideals in the hopes that her research will locate a unique African American identity.

### **Hurston’s Compromised Universalism**

Zora Neale Hurston’s career in anthropology as a fact-finder and documentarian in the pursuit of a collective African American past is ironic because she was prone to fiction and preoccupied with the construction of herself. Although she was born in Alabama in 1891, Hurston invented the story of her birth in Eatonville in 1901, thus

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<sup>46</sup> Hazel Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 74.

establishing her academic research and connection to the African American collective under false pretenses. Cheryl Wall hypothesizes that Hurston subtracted ten years from her age for practical reasons: to improve her chances at being awarded competitive scholarships, to promote the “up-and-coming image” requisite to potentially iconic figures, to shake suspicions that she had been married, and to present the picture of someone who had been systematically educated according to the norm.<sup>47</sup> The fictional details of Hurston’s birth also made the research package she delivered a neat product. Folklore, particularly in the 1930s, was a commodity, an object circulating among an American mainstream hungry for knowledge about others—the rising number of immigrant enclaves and the post-bellum conditions of African Americans. Hurston participated in the Federal Writers’ Project under the Works Progress Administration, which helped to fund the production of this knowledge by soliciting writers to collect oral histories from undocumented locales in the United States.<sup>48</sup> Fitting herself perfectly into the African American collective she described in Eatonville avoided the clutter of the object with her personal differences. In the first lines of her introduction to *Mules and Men*, the collection of folklore produced by her fieldwork, Hurston makes a great effort to portray herself as a member of the Eatonville community, calling it her “native village” and positioning herself as an insider: “just Lucy Hurston’s daughter... just Zora to the neighbors” (MM 9). Hurston characterizes the folklore—the tale of Brer Rabbit and the Squinch Owl—as the “negroism” into which she was born. She also makes it clear that it was not Boas’ idea, but her own, to find a “cross-section of the Negro South in one state.”

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<sup>47</sup> Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 144.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher D. Felker, “‘Adaptation of the Source’: Ethnocentricity and ‘The Florida Negro,’” *Zora in Florida*, ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991).

Hurston, the inside ethnographer, often found herself, in reality, as an outsider, yearning for moments of union with her subjects, but not for a life exclusively based on nostalgia or race. She reacted to this qualified disconnection with strategic manipulations of her individuality in particular circumstances—the fiction of her birth story being one, the tactical erasure of her “Barnardese” during ethnographic research another. In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston’s use of the phrase “going to” reaches out to an educated audience (MM 10). During her recital of the folklore she collects, she reveals the insider voice that she employed to elicit the trust necessary to the rural folk’s honest telling over of the folklore; in conversation with the people of Eatonville, “going to” becomes “gointer” (MM 19). Hurston would not be able to procure what Boas truly desired – “manner rather than matter, style rather than substance”—if she approached her subjects as a white collector would. Robert Hemenway suggests, “what Hurston could discover, since informants would be more natural with a member of their own race, was the actual folk style. ‘Habitual movements in telling tales, or in ordinary conversation,’ [which Boas wanted], would be more open to Hurston’s observation than in a performance with white folks.”<sup>49</sup> Hurston’s linguistic performance was half childhood memory and half mimicry or performance. It was an uncomfortable space “in between,” and at times, Hurston resented the false notions of anthropological objectivity and classification that had put her there.

The increasingly resentful, or at least confused, relationship between Hurston’s chameleonism and her fieldwork is illustrated in 1934, when she published “Characteristics of Negro Expression” in *Negro: An Anthology*. Hurston’s essay plays

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 91.

with a synthesis of field observation and with the ways that anthropology finds deep structure and transhistorical themes in seemingly mundane details of everyday life. Her scholarship represents a reconceptualization of fieldwork that critiques and undermines the pretension to objectivity that frames the discipline as a whole which responds to Hurston's place within anthropology as a race representative. "Characteristics of Negro Expression" begins with a discussion of "mimicry" as "something that permeates [the Negro's] entire self." Thus Hurston begins a mimicry of anthropological study which claims to depict the general classification of the Negro race—something Boas allegedly wanted to avoid despite his request for "style." Hurston goes on to present the features of Black identity such as dancing, asymmetry in art, cultural heroes in folklore, the jook house, and dialect. The dialect section is particularly interesting with special attention to Hurston's placement of herself as both insider and outsider of the Negro race:

If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of "ams" and "Ises." Fortunately we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself.

I know that I run the risk of being damned an infidel for declaring that nowhere can be found the Negro who asks "am it?" nor yet his brother who announces "Ise uh gwinter." He exists only for a certain type of writers and performers.

Very few Negroes, educated or not, used a clear clipped "I." It verges more or less upon "Ah." I think the lip form is responsible for this to a great extent. By experiment the reader will find the sharp "I" is very much easier with a thin taut lip than with a full soft lip. Like tightening violin strings.

If one listens closely one will note that a word is slurred in one position in the sentence but clearly pronounced in another. This is particularly true of pronouns. A pronoun as a subject likely to be clearly enunciated, but slurred as an object. For example: "You better not let me ketch yuh." (CNE 846)

Paying special attention to the pronouns, one notices that Hurston has located her own identity as part of the "we" (an educated, liberal readership, not insiders to Negro speech) versus "them" (those responsible for inaccurate racial stereotyping). Hurston is trying to

maintain a sense of anthropological objectivity by positioning the Negro as someone she must “go to,” someone with a voice entirely separate from her own. Interestingly, the first person voice she slides into fears “being damned an infidel,” perhaps because she has given up her insider loyalty to the Negro subject. Yet, Hurston’s pronoun affiliation becomes even more unclear when she claims that the writers of Negro dialect are inaccurate, because Hurston herself includes that Negro dialect in her nuanced presentation of Negro folklore within the very essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” Unless Hurston momentarily considers herself an insider to Negro speech, it appears that she may be aligning herself with the “them” responsible for racial stereotyping. The discussion which follows this confusion, centers on the concept of pronouns in Negro speech; these paragraphs are the stage for Hurston’s performance of her chameleonic identity. In order to hear the linguistic differences in pronunciation between “Ah” and “I,” the reader must imagine the writer articulating the two sounds aloud. The reader must also perform these sounds herself, thus performing his or her own biology. What Hurston is proving by “speaking” in the first person inside the reader’s head is that African Americans can certainly produce the “clear clipped ‘I,’” and by extension, that difference of physical type does not affect linguistic ability. This point challenges the “two-ness” Boas imposes on Hurston. Through the abstract discussion of pronouns, clear as the “subject” but slurred as the “object,” Hurston struggles with the prerogative of status of the ethnographer who objectifies his or her informants.

Hurston was uncomfortable with the duality that Boas’ participant-observer method required because Hurston did not separate intellectuality from folk culture. As Hazel Carby suggests, “Hurston identified herself as both an intellectual and as a



representative figure from the folk culture she reproduced.”<sup>50</sup> The Boasian disjuncture between academia and the folk culture it aimed to interpret implied a hierarchy of academia over folk culture; Hurston interpreted this hierarchy as “class contradiction.” For this reason, Hurston deferred from the dominant Harlem Renaissance ideology espoused in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, which signified a push to “carry ‘folk gifts to the altitudes of art,’” or to elevate the products of folk culture toward a more universally recognizable art form.<sup>51</sup> Hurston opposed the compromise of the folk’s authenticity and the inevitable erasure of folk art’s nuances necessary to its commodification. Ideally, Hurston wanted folk culture to be accorded artistic status without having to meet the class influenced standards of an urban aesthetic. Dana McKinnon Preu finds that Hurston was among the first to argue that orality and non-literacy were non-pejorative, not indicators of a Black “primitivism.”<sup>52</sup> Karen Jacobs locates Hurston’s move against the concept of primitivism as her most salient break from Boasian anthropology, which had not fully worked out the kinks of cross cultural analogies present in the participant-observer method.<sup>53</sup> Hurston did not imagine folk culture as subaltern; in her opinion, it did not need to be raised “to the altitudes of art” because it was already whole, an “alternative standard of civilization and aesthetic accomplishment.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Carby 75.

<sup>51</sup> Hemenway 50.

<sup>52</sup> Dana McKinnon Preu, “A Literary Reading of *Mules and Men*, Part I,” *Zora in Florida*, eds. Seidel and Glassman (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991) 47.

<sup>53</sup> Karen Jacobs, *The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). Jacobs writes, “Boas’s insistence that individual cultures be studied on the basis of their distinctiveness and particularity didn’t insulate him from producing distorting cross-cultural analogies, any more than his adherence to the participant-observer method prevented him from compromising ‘pure’ observation with subjective perspectives. The primary vehicle for such distortions... is Boas’s retention of the cultural category of the primitive, the institutional origins of which were inevitably linked with an evolutionary model of cultural and racial development, and which were arguably methodologically imbricated in the objectifying gaze of anthropology’s participant-observer practice and its structurally implicit hierarchies as well” (117).

<sup>54</sup> Jacobs 123.

The problem was that Hurston could not navigate a path that circumvented moments of conflicting ideology between the standards of civilization in the rural South and the urban North. In order to expose the oral folklore of Eatonville, Hurston had to write it down, thus implicitly changing its form. Initially, she chose an anthropological framework as her strategy of interpretation. That Hurston was never fully satisfied with this strategy was due in large part to the sacrifice of authenticity, especially as it applied to cross-cultural appropriation of rural Black folk culture. Hemenway notes Hurston's frustration with the commercialization of the African American musical heritage she was trying to preserve, and how she struggled with the financial forces that converted her research into an inauthentic commodity. For example, Hurston gained access to recording equipment through the sponsorship, as she recalled, of "two very enthusiastic Jews who want to take the Spirituals for commercial purposes." She warned her research partner, "We can't let all that swell music get away from us like that... of course I am not going to lead them to the fattiest and juiciest places nohow."<sup>55</sup> The catch, however, is that Hurston intended to use the materials she collected in her own playwriting and fiction. She privileged her personal interpretations of Black folklore as authentic, despite their inevitable filtration through an urban-minded publisher and the promotion of her commercial success among an urban-minded readership.<sup>56</sup> Hurston needed the modern world for self-preservation, not just for the preservation of Black folk culture. Moreover, Hurston felt that she owned the privilege of deciding what to create out of the materials she collected; perhaps Hurston felt that she would not distort the materials in light of her personal connection to her research.

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<sup>55</sup> Hemenway 274-275.

<sup>56</sup> To Hurston's credit, one of the reasons she fell into obscurity is because her creative products did not always meet the objectifying standards of the publishing world.

It was Hurston's ironic penchant for authenticity and her claim to the privilege of representation that caused her to embed an autobiographical gesture into almost every piece of writing she produced, including her ethnographies, political essays, and fiction. The autobiographical gesture—the artful manipulation of an allegedly factual genre—infuses a text with the sense that the events and feelings being reported by the author actually occurred and are based on the author's experience. To locate the meaning of “autobiography” through its root words (*autos* as “self,” *bios* as “life,” and *graphein* “to write”) is, as James Olney suggests, misleading because the central term, “life,” could refer to 1) a person's history 2) a person's present 3) the “mythic history and psychological character of a whole group of people” or 4) a person's “psychic development,” among combinations of these definitions and other possible interpretations of the term “life”; according to Olney, the only promise of autobiographical writing is that “it cannot fail to reflect and reveal the autobiographer as he is and understands himself to be and wishes himself to be as he sets pen to paper.”<sup>57</sup> That the meaning of “life” is so utterly controlled by the perspective of the writer holding the pen troubles any text's potential for accuracy and scientific pure objectivity. Yet Hurston chose to insert herself into her writing as a move toward accuracy based on first-hand experience. Hurston sets up *Mules and Men* by establishing her perspective on the meaning of Negro life as being the only legitimate one:

...the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see, we are a polite people and do not tell our questioner, “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. [...] I knew that even *I* was going to have some hindrance

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<sup>57</sup> James Olney, “The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies: African vs. Western Autobiography,” *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William Andrews (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993) 213-214.

among strangers. But here in Eatonville, I knew everyone was going to help me.  
(MM 10)

Not only is Hurston the privileged insider because she is Black, but because she purports to know the people whom she is going to study. Instead of her preconceptions of her subjects being problematic, she positions herself as the perfect fieldworker, able to go where no ethnographer has gone before. In the numerous instances when Hurston's "between-story conversations," or the contextual transitions between folk tales, appear contrived, the reader, situated as outsider, has no recourse except to believe Hurston, because, after all, she is the insider.<sup>58</sup> This "immersion" strategy is key because, arguably, the "between stories" are what draw the reader into the scenario, making the reader feel like she has been privileged to witness the conversation during the revealing of the contextual stylistics that Boas encouraged.<sup>59</sup> As participant, Hurston removes one level of distance between the reader and the action: if the reader is observing Hurston as a participant instead of reading Hurston simply as an observer, then the reader is the ethnographer/observer and Hurston is the friend who allows the reader to watch. In this way, Hurston's inclusion of self in an ethnographic text is not a presentation of autobiography, but merely an autobiographical "gesture" in the same way that sending flowers, for example, is an acting out of a sentiment for communicative efficacy.

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<sup>58</sup> Marc Manganaro challenges Hurston's "between-stories" as they appear in chapter 2 of *Mules and Men*; he asks, "was there really a church meeting nearby that led to the telling of tales about preachers, which segued into gender talk that was broken by a prayer from the church (exactly textually rendered), followed by the ring of the Baptist church bell, followed by a discussion on the diversity of 'denominations' and debate over the whether the church was built on solid rock, followed by, in a sense verified by, a tale of how the Christ 'was built it on a rock, but it wasn't solid... and on and on?" See *Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 182. For a discussion of Hurston's "between stories," also see Robert Hemenway, "That Which the Soul Lives By," *Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea Press, 1986) 92.

<sup>59</sup> Manganaro uses the term "immersion" to suggest that what makes Hurston's work different from Malinowski's is that she could get inside "the native's point of view" and inhabit it (185).

Hurston's use of the autobiographical gesture in combination with ethnography produces "autoethnography," a study that allows a reader intimate knowledge of a group of people by way of one of its member's story of self. The term "autoethnography" carries with it a history of critical debate that is well-rehearsed in James Buzard's essay "On Auto-Ethnographic Authority."<sup>60</sup> As Buzard backtracks through the evolution of autoethnography, he pauses to find that the concept maintains the kind of essentialist theory that scholars since the 1960s and 1970s hoped to eliminate, that it falsely assumes a peoples' shared mentality "overriding all (epiphenomenal) internal differences."<sup>61</sup> Buzard then reads the scholarly discourse between James Clifford and Mary Louis Pratt and ultimately challenges Pratt's conception that autoethnography is "the ways colonized people portray themselves using a mix of imported and indigenous terms, symbols, and genres, reinventing their cultures through critical engagement with external representations."<sup>62</sup> Pratt's definition, Buzard contends, ignores peoples' mobility, thus confining a collective dimension to a certain place and time and allowing the collective only a static voice, which in turn, produces a very limited understanding of a peoples' diversity and potential. In other words, if a people can import terms and be influenced by an external force, then it follows that their cultural status is not as fixed as autoethnography makes it out to be. Clifford's response to Pratt in "Traveling Cultures" and *Routes* promotes the idea that culture is "trackable" through the ability of people to tell their own stories; Clifford is aware that his reliance on "culture" evokes the essentialist rhetoric of human differences, yet he argues anyway for "discrete cultural repertoires having the capacities to *inter-act*," communication based in ethnic identity

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<sup>60</sup> James Buzard, "On Auto-Ethnographic Authority," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16.1 (2003).

<sup>61</sup> Buzard 63.

<sup>62</sup> Buzard 67.

politics.<sup>63</sup> Clifford tries to hold onto a moral high ground of “culture” that at least affords the opportunity for “cultures” to speak for themselves through their own representatives. Buzard’s problem, however, lies beyond Pratt and Clifford’s essentialism with the contention that there are “insiders” who can be trusted to convey their own differences: “we need to know more about why we should trust this particular insider’s angle of vision on his own culture. We need to look at the rhetoric by means of which autoethnographers indicate their fitness for their task, and even at the degree to which *they* take for granted their right to perform that task.”<sup>64</sup>

Logically, Buzard turns to Hurston’s version of autoethnography for the answer; he finds that Hurston’s work offers an alternative version of Pratt’s autoethnography, citing Françoise Lionnet’s view on Hurston’s work: “[the] author ‘opens up a space of resistance between the individual (*auto-*) and the collective (*ethno-*) where the writing (*graphy-*) of singularity cannot be foreclosed,’ in which that author ‘simultaneously appeals to and debunks the cultural traditions she helps to redefine.’”<sup>65</sup> In this sense, Hurston’s version of autoethnography could be characterized as a constant negotiation between the self and the group, a discussion meant to elicit an agreement between self and group that is never resolved. In the case of Hurston’s autoethnography as negotiation, the discussion is enough to produce an idea of the group that is not static because it is being implicitly challenged by a member of the group who signifies the dissent or difference among the group. As Hurston’s work models autoethnography as negotiation it dissolves the Boasian requirement of “pure objectivity” due to its

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<sup>63</sup> Buzard 70-71.

<sup>64</sup> Buzard 71.

<sup>65</sup> Buzard 79.

“dialogical style.”<sup>66</sup> Hurston presents an entire sequence of reactions which are consecutively influenced by turns; she must offer her contributions to the discussion based on her constant introspection in order to reach the depths of group members in response.<sup>67</sup> That Hurston was expected to turn out an academic product, which forced her to tailor these sequences to fit a model, constrained her work’s authenticity.

Deborah Gordon suggests that Hurston, known as a “literary artist / folklorist” instead of an anthropologist, never attained the academic status of the men in her field due to her race and gender, unable to gain the financial support to finish her doctorate due to her marginal social and political position.<sup>68</sup> Part of the explanation for Hurston’s marginality is that she dismantled her academic authority in the field in order to better negotiate, the result coming off as too much identification with her allegedly subaltern subject, not enough critical distance, and ultimately the inability to negotiate her research with the academic community.<sup>69</sup> Hurston’s expression as a literary artist is most successful because, ironically, her fiction is the truest mode for her cultural representation. Though Alice Walker distinguishes Hurston as a “cultural revolutionary,” she implies that Hurston’s cultural representation lies not in her “weird” politics, but in her prose: “I think we are better off when if we think of Zora Neale Hurston as an artist,

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<sup>66</sup> Roseanne Hoefel, “Different By Degree,” American Indian Quarterly 25:2, Academic Search Premier. (Spring 2003): 5 of 18.

<sup>67</sup> See Benjamin Orlove, “Surfacings: Thoughts on Memory and the Ethnographer’s Self,” Jews and Other Differences, eds. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Orlove reflects on his experiences as an ethnographer in Peru and evaluates the moments when he made the decision to open himself up to his subjects in order to glean their most honest responses.

<sup>68</sup> Deborah Gordon, “The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston,” Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text, ed. Marc Manganaro (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 150.

<sup>69</sup> Perhaps it is for these same reasons that, as Liss maintains, Du Bois’ academic career was circumscribed.

period—rather than as the artist/politician most black writers are required to be.”<sup>70</sup>

Critics wary of Walker’s statement understandably fear that it dismisses the political significance of Hurston’s work.<sup>71</sup> But the merit of Walker’s assertion is that it does not privilege Hurston’s version of “culture”—nor does it assume that Hurston’s personal motivations can always be trusted to supply a supremely representative version of “culture”—over other emerging definitions of “culture,” none of which define the term completely. Hurston’s version of “culture” is deeply rooted in the literary arts, which is not only evident in her quest to transform folklore as the African American *Geist* into a literary art, but also in her presentation of facts in, to use Marc Manganaro’s term, a “meta-narratological” context, and in her continuing application and production of folklore in her drama and fiction.<sup>72</sup> Hurston, it seems, found the literary arts to be the soul of culture because the space between the (arti)facts and one’s personal take on them produced fiction, which could capture the indefinable essence of what shaped a person’s identity.

### **Jewishness and Hurston’s Soul of Culture**

In the Introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston recalls a piece of folklore from her childhood that is meant to preface or characterize her mindset upon entering her fieldwork in Eatonville. As she imagines herself about to embark on the study of the genius of a people, Hurston remembers how God made souls for people, but did not hand them out; God reasoned: “Folks ain’t ready for souls yet...if Ah give it out it would tear

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<sup>70</sup> Alice Walker, *I Love Myself When I am Laughing*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: Feminist Press, 1979) 3.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Timothy Caron, *Struggles Over the Word: Race and Religion in O’Conner, Faulkner, Hurston and Wright* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000) 87.

<sup>72</sup> Manganaro, *Culture, 1922*, 183. In other words, Hurston constructed a narrative to guide her ethnography, and there was not a clear distinction between literature and ethnography in Hurston’s work.



them shackly bodies to pieces.” For thousands of years, people’s souls existed only as “talk” and “songs” in the winds above the mountains, images that foreshadow the centrality of oral lore and music to Hurston’s soul of culture. In Hurston’s tale, “De white man...De Indian and de Negro” already existed as separate groups although they had not yet been granted the soul, thus an insinuation of the difference between race and culture. These groups were enticed by the soul; it was “de light of diamonds,” but none would try to acquire it, until “De Jew come past and heard de song from de soul-piece then he kept on passin’ and all of a sudden he grabbed up de soul-piece and hid it under his clothes, and run off down de road.” The Jew had no special right to it, and his taking it evokes stereotypes of Jews as inherently greedy—biologically greedy since race is different than culture. The soul-piece, Hurston writes,

burnt [the Jew] and tore him and throwed him down and lifted him up and toted him across de mountain and he tried to break loose but he couldn’t do it. He kept hollerin’ for help but de rest of ‘em run hid ‘way from him. Way after while they come out of holes and corners and picked up little chips and pieces that fell back on de ground. So God mixed it up with feelings and give it out to ‘em. ‘Way after while when He ketch dat Jew, He’s goin’ to ‘vide things up more ekal. (MM 11-12)

This passage portrays the Jewish people in Diaspora, leaving pieces of the “soul-piece” wherever the journey took them. That God mixed up the pieces of the soul “with feelings” before distributing them to the other groups implies that each group receives some feeling or genius that makes its own soul unique. Even when God finally grants other peoples their share, the Jew retains a disproportionate amount of soul. The promise—or threat—to divide things more equally symbolizes the guiding force of Hurston’s research: Hurston’s inclination as she began her expedition, it seems, was to discover Eatonville’s share of culture, perhaps before the Jews claimed it. Yet the Jewish

genius or “soul-piece,” which included the tales of Hebrews in the Old Testament, was one that Hurston often claimed as her own.

Hurston’s gathering of folklore was fruitful, especially when sown into her first two novels, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The titles and content of these novels, as well as her later novels *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph on the Swanee* (1948), reflect the education of her Baptist upbringing and preoccupation with Old Testament religious sensibilities. But Hurston did not endorse a particular religious deity; John Lowe suggests that as Hurston matured, “she was increasingly drawn to a form of Deism, if not agnosticism,” following a trajectory away from forms of Black religion as it existed apart from folk culture, performance and trope.<sup>73</sup> Hurston was, however, keenly interested in religion and the Old Testament as a historical past. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and Hurston’s unfinished assessment of Herod (upon which she was toiling at the time of her death) illustrate her aim to use the lessons of a biblical past toward the revision of the present and future. While *Moses* retells the Exodus narrative as a metaphor-laden instruction manual on communal deliverance and individual emancipation from hegemonic oppression, her pedantic work on Herod offers step by step guide on “How to Achieve Success as a Minority.” These works reflect what Ross Posnock calls Hurston’s “psychological identification with Jews,” not in terms of religious belief or custom, but in terms of her sense that Jews struggled “to live their lives in their own way.”<sup>74</sup> Jewish identity, in Hurston’s view, simultaneously allowed a person a collective identity as well as individuality; Hurston maintained that the Jewish people possessed an “exceptional aesthetic genius” from

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<sup>73</sup> John Lowe, “Seeing Beyond Seeing: Zora Neale Hurston’s Religion(s),” *The Southern Quarterly* 36.3 (Spring 1998): 77.

<sup>74</sup> Posnock 214.

which the world could learn.<sup>75</sup> Hurston, however, does more than simply learn by example from Old Testament parable and Jewish governance. She codifies her perspective, like a great Talmudic scholar, one influenced by African tradition.

In *Moses*, Hurston appropriates the Exodus narrative—resuscitates it by the mouth of Africa and her own pen—as a metaphor through which to confront and cure the self-loathing, non-productive slave mentality perpetuated by the American South’s Jim Crow laws designed to prevent African American autonomy.<sup>76</sup> She describes, for example, emasculated slaves fist-fighting each other to settle a dispute over the best way to gain autonomy from Pharaoh; Moses, who had a week prior killed their Egyptian taskmaster, observes that the slaves are not heeding the newly appointed Hebrew foreman and intervenes:

The foreman approached Moses respectfully and shook his head sadly as he explained, “Some of them want to knock off early to hold a protest meeting, and the others agree with me that it just wouldn’t do. It would look very bad to my over-boss that just as soon as a Hebrew got to be foreman, the men left work whenever they got ready to hold meetings.”

“Your foreman is right,” Moses agreed, speaking to the men. “This sort of thing is just what I am working for. Hebrew foreman first and keeping up the line until you have Hebrew state officials. But if you start leaving work and creating disturbances, you will find yourself worse off than before.... You must be united among yourselves and you must obey your foreman. You must respect yourselves if you want others to respect you.” (*Moses*, 69)<sup>77</sup>

This advice, rather, this plea for advancement through unity, comes through the mouth of Moses, but is actually what Mark Christian Thompson locates in *Moses* as Hurston’s simultaneous “critique of fascist power and her model of black cultural nationalism,”

<sup>75</sup> Lowe, 85, quoting from “Herod.”

<sup>76</sup> In her own introduction to the text, Hurston sets up the Mosaic myth as an international inheritance, but characterizes her own vision of it as heavily influenced by the legends passed along from the African continent. I use the word “resuscitate” here because she writes of an African version of the Mosaic myth: “Then Africa has her mouth on Moses.” I wrote the word “resuscitate” in the margins of my own text during a class with Alicia Ostriker in 2001, but I do not remember if there was a more original source for this note.

<sup>77</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

paradoxical because both fascism and black cultural nationalism require “the demonization and the murder of the racialized other.”<sup>78</sup> The difference, Thompson suggests, between fascism and Hurston’s brand of black cultural nationalism is that Hurston does not perceive the enemy as a “biologically racialized other.” For this reason, *Moses* reaches beyond the meaning of James Weldon Johnson’s canonization of the Exodus narrative in his poem “Let My People Go,” which evokes the familiar imagery of triumph shared between Jews and African Americans in recognition of their similar histories of oppression. Hurston’s version, in 1939, provides a timely commentary on the Hitlerian politics of racial purity as they applied in Egypt, the American South, and Europe.

The Moses in Hurston’s understanding of the Exodus narrative, after all, is not necessarily Jewish, but Egyptian, the tale of his being taken up as a Hebrew castaway by the Egyptian princess probably nothing more than Miriam’s childhood fantasy. Intra-novel discussions of Moses’ uncertain racial ancestry are important, Deborah McDowell suggests, because “in sustaining the ambiguities of race throughout the text, Hurston effectively argues against a system of racial classification whose validity she disputes. This tactic squarely positions the novel against Nazi blood myths and for those Jews who lost their lives to this mythology.”<sup>79</sup> The confusion over the novel—perhaps one reason it is disparaged as Hurston’s least important work of fiction—is that it contains this abhorrence of biological essentialism but appears to “essentialize race along cultural lines,” a move that Thompson recognizes as a departure from her Boasian training since

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<sup>78</sup> Mark Christian Thompson, “National Socialism and Blood-Sacrifice in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*,” *African American Review* 38.3 (2004): 407.

<sup>79</sup> Deborah McDowell, forward, “Lines of Descent/Dissenting Lines,” *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991) xvi.

it does not realize the potential for human equality that Boas imagined.<sup>80</sup> Timothy Caron suggests that *Moses* does push for a separation of peoples along cultural lines.

Through his encounters with the Book of Koptos and the burning bush, Moses' accumulation of power serves as another analogy of the struggles of southern blacks: his folk beliefs (i.e. his conjuring skills) both augment and adapt the regions dominant religiosity (the Christianity of the burning bush) so that African Americans might have the necessary anthropological means for constructing a separate, nurturing community.<sup>81</sup>

By extension, Hurston appears to imagine herself as a Moses figure, using her conjuring powers (i.e. ethnographic fieldwork) to fully emancipate African Americans: whereas Moses' conjuring powers establish community through magic, Hurston's conjuring powers establish community through folk culture and its application in *Moses*.

If Hurston's revision of the Exodus narrative did not achieve this end, *Moses* can still be lauded for its attempt to voice over the Protestant American South's "racist hermeneutical strategies" of biblical interpretation.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, Hurston was very concerned with providing "the revision of our Sunday School literature" when she began planning a book on Herod the Great between 1945 and 1947.<sup>83</sup> Initially, Hurston imagined the book would be called "Just like Us," ostensibly a move to analogize the African American and Jewish experience. The book, Hurston told Carl Van Vechten, "[would] be highly controversial. I want to write the story of the 3,000 years struggle of the Jewish Peoples for democracy and the rights of man." She also characterized it as a book about "the history and philosophy of the Hebrews," serving to "alter the slovenly and inimical attitude towards the modern Jew." Ultimately, her research led her to the

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<sup>80</sup> Thompson 408.

<sup>81</sup> Timothy Caron, "'Tell Ole Pharoah to Let My People Go:' Communal Deliverance in Hurston's *Moses*," *The Southern Quarterly* 36.3 (Spring 1998): 55.

<sup>82</sup> Caron, "Tell Ole Pharoah to Let My People Go," 49. Caron discusses the Protestant use of biblical stories to support the institution of slavery.

<sup>83</sup> Hemenway 343. This is how Hurston herself characterized and marketed the idea to her publisher. For all subsequent quotes in this paragraph, refer to this citation.

conclusion that Herod was not ethnically Jewish, but in fact assimilated into the ways of Hellenism and quite secular for his time; he was simply a great man who happened to be responsible for Western Civilization. As Hemenway describes it, Hurston was utterly obsessed with Herod, her manuscript of material on Herod spiraling out of her control. Perhaps her fascination with Herod's persona at the end of her life reflects her disillusionment with the kind of success Hurston never felt she accomplished. Hurston imagined herself as an important player in the quest for human equality and civil rights; she desired to bring about as a major change in public policy, and worked to be a leader in establishing a productive African American cultural movement. Certainly, Hurston admired Herod for his ability to achieve similar gains as a person unbound by social categorization, for at the end of her life, she fought for a rejection of the racial labels that she Alain Locke and Richard Wright had accused her of perpetuating.<sup>84</sup>

What most interests me here is that Hurston's yearning for "individualism unharnessed to race or to fixed identity," as Posnock defines it, led her to a defense of and identification with the Jewish people. She writes in "Herod," "even their earliest history shows the Jews to have been an individualistic and free-minded people, as even Moses found out to his annoyance. They followed no man blindly."<sup>85</sup> John Lowe finds that "Hurston seems to be making a case for a people who have been given only one role in history, which consequently eclipses their considerable accomplishments."<sup>86</sup> Lowe is correct in alluding to Hurston's view of Jewish history as a model for African American

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<sup>84</sup> See Posnock, 214. He quotes Hurston: "I do not wish to close the frontiers of life upon my own self. I do not wish to deny myself the expansion of seeking into individual capabilities and depths by living in a space whose boundaries are race and nation." Posnock goes on to note Locke's complaints of Hurston's "oversimplification" in *Their Eyes are Watching God* in her presentation of the "pseudo-primitives" that populate her work. Posnock cites Wright's argument that Hurston had revived "the minstrel technique" that delights the "white folks."

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Lowe, 85.

<sup>86</sup> Lowe 86.

potential, but I would suggest that Hurston's relationship with the Jewish people is manifest in two ways more salient than this analogy. First, if Steinthal and Lazarus had distinguished the Pentateuch as proof of the Jewish contribution to the world at large, and Hurston had distinguished folk culture as a defining African American contribution to the world at large, then Hurston had commandeered the Jewish contribution as a guiding ideology, especially in all four of her fictional works, in combination with and often as a basis for African American folklore. During an era in which American Jews have been placed under scrutiny for an appropriation of Black art forms, Hurston serves to exemplify the productive sharing and transformation of cultural contributions. Second—and this is something I feel is even more impressive—what Boas tried to do for the advancement of African Americans, Hurston tried to do for the advancement of the Jews. If Boas has been accused of using African American studies as a way to ameliorate the situation of the Jews, then Hurston can be accused of using Jewish history as a means to ameliorate the situation of African Americans. Really, these accusations should be considered as acclamations for the Black-Jewish effort for equal human rights, the Black-Jewish cultural contribution to the United States and the world at large.

### **Conclusion**

Boas and Hurston's contribution to United States literature was to challenge the pluralist aesthetic turn to divide literature into fixed ethnic categories. This contribution has been confused by cultural theorists in literary studies who connect the popularity of local color and ethnic fiction with the presumed pluralism of Boasian anthropology. The confusion is understandable considering Boas' tendency toward the Afro-centric promotion of Hurston, but scholars should note that Boas' intentions were to secure the

acceptance of African Americans based on their cultural contributions so that those contributions could be recognized for their diffusion into a universalist society. Hence, any American readership that locates Hurston solely as an “African American writer,” without considering her individual identity and her cross-ethnic leanings, is missing out on the cross-ethnic paradigm that Boas and Hurston present. This cross-ethnic paradigm—specifically as it works between African Americans and Jewish Americans—is one in which other ethnically categorized writers, including James Weldon Johnson, Philip Roth, Fran Ross and Bernard Malamud, take part as a method of avoiding the limitations of ethnic boundaries. It is significant that this cross-ethnic paradigm does not elide the fact that ethnicity exists, and it helps explain why Boas could recognize ethnic boundaries while being a universalist. Writers engage in cross-ethnic rhetoric as a means of sharing and diffusion, empathy and esteem, and most importantly, recognition of similarity. A pluralist definition of ethnicity seeks to protect differences, and a universalist definition of ethnicity seeks to acknowledge and honor difference through adaptation. The universalist definition does not pretend that there exists a pure and separate set of ethnic boundaries to protect.

It is also significant that Hurston and the writers listed above engage in this cross-ethnic paradigm in the realm of fiction produced specifically out of personal experience. Boas tried to approach ethnicity as a science outside of his personal experience.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, Hurston’s brand of science—auto-ethnography—and its expression in her

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<sup>87</sup> However, as Arnold Krupat defines it, Boas “operated according to an ironic paradigm of a sort that was inconsistent with the establishment of any kind of science whatsoever.” Krupat contends that Boas’ scientificity was thoroughly ironic, a vein of *aporia*, or doubt; his objectivity was relative, and so he produced what Krupat calls “a sort of realist / scientist modernism.” In other words, Boas sometimes produces a simulacrum of science, similar to the way realist literature produces a simulacrum of real life. See Arnold Krupat, “Irony in Anthropology: The Work of Franz Boas,” Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text, ed. Marc Manganaro (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 135-144.



fiction, produced a version of ethnicity in literature often valued as authentic ethnic representation. Though Boas, and a major contingent of Hurston's readership, have considered Hurston's perspective as representative of African American ethnicity, Hurston managed to produce a literature less totalizing because of its connection to her separate, personal experience. First person ethnic writing should be viewed as resistance to collective representation, despite reading practices that locate truths about ethnic collectives based on some authentic vision in first person ethnic writing. Moreover, when first person ethnic writing exists as fiction, there can be no pretense for the objective facts required in scientific ethnic categorization; thus, fiction more accurately represents ethnicity because it recognizes no real ethnic boundaries, no objective collective truths. First person ethnic fiction actually works to deny its author's ability for totalizing representation because it is, factually or not, aligned with only one experience.

“Make Me a Jew:”  
James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiographical Gestures

**Introduction**

As James Weldon Johnson composed his autobiography *Along This Way* (1933), he felt compelled to consider charges that he, like the protagonist in his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), had a desire to be a member of the white race. After a great deal of hesitation and introspective angst—carefully crafted, no doubt, to diffuse any offense which his revelation might arouse, and to build suspense toward his grave conclusion—Johnson forced upon himself an ultimatum:

All of us have at some time toyed with the Arabian Nights-like thought of the magical change of race... If the jinnee should say, “I have to come to carry out an inexorable command to change you into a member of another race; make your choice!” I should answer, probably, “Make me a Jew.”<sup>88</sup>

The quote above appears as a final thought in Johnson’s contemplation of race-shifting in *Along This Way*. The words “Make me a Jew” have no precedent in the discussion and are left hanging without further comment. Too easily and too suddenly, Johnson shifts into a new paragraph about his career ambitions, as if “Make me a Jew” was nothing more than a playful musing. But Johnson’s decision deserves further evaluation, especially in conjunction with the publication history of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and the politics of first-person representative writing that make his novel so intriguing. “Make me a Jew” suggests Johnson’s belief that Jewish identity afforded the kind of social fluidity that he willed upon the narrator of his novel and upon himself as an author.

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<sup>88</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along this Way* (1933; New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1968) 136.

Though there is little evidence for this theory in the plot of *The Autobiography* itself, the ex-colored man's only encounter with a Jewish man serves as a key moment in the text. Johnson's nameless narrator meets the Jew along with a "cross section" of types in the smoking car of a train, a setting which negates segregation and allows for a colorful discussion of the race question. He describes him as a "fat" and "Jewish-looking" businessman whom he decides is "probably" Jewish, though the businessman never officially displays or acknowledges his Jewishness. Despite the ex-colored man's rather anti-Semitic assumptions about Jewish identity, he observes the Jewish man's actions with high regard: "In his discussion of the race question, the diplomacy of the Jew was something to be admired; he had the faculty of agreeing with everybody without losing allegiance to any side... Long traditions and business instincts told him when in Rome to act as a Roman" (AECM 158). The Jewish "traditions" he recognizes here—diplomacy and social fluidity—inform the ex-colored man's ultimate decision to blend into White New York and "neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race" (AECM 139). Moreover, diplomacy and social fluidity are the two main elements Johnson himself considered tactful in the writing and marketing of *The Autobiography*, and in the writing of his autobiography *Along This Way*.

In "Passing Like Me," Daniel Itzkovitz characterizes the Jews' successful performativity of dominant American culture in terms of diplomacy and social fluidity using the early 20<sup>th</sup> century language that ascribed to Jews "chameleonic blood," which allowed them to modify their behavior in terms of their environment, yet still granting them a mysterious, separate quality. The difference, Itzkovitz argues, between the Jewish use of chameleonism and the Black use of chameleonism is this: "the Jew's skill at

blending into his surroundings is attributed to both ‘tradition’ and ‘instinct’” but Black passing is deemed the “betrayal” of “true race.”<sup>89</sup> Certainly, Johnson was aware of these pitfalls of diplomacy and social fluidity; therefore, Johnson strategically marketed *The Autobiography* in 1912, choosing anonymous authorship and a small white publishing firm as his own means of chameleonism. But proof that Johnson had authored *The Autobiography* became public in the early 1920’s, and the official acknowledgement of Johnson’s authorship in the 1927 edition of the novel invited speculation about the differences between facts and fictions in the novel; more importantly, Johnson’s “Black” authorship made public stimulated reflection upon the role of representative authorship and of racial categories as identity markers. Though Johnson’s audience was willing to accept the novel’s events as fictive, many readers believed that *The Autobiography*’s nameless narrator was Johnson’s mouthpiece for political views on race and ethnicity. Johnson’s autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), was, in part, his attempt to differentiate himself from the nameless narrator in his fiction. Yet as the ambiguity of “Make me a Jew” implies, Johnson’s diplomacy tended to cloud the meaning of his autobiographical gestures, whether he presented them as artful or factual. The following chapter traces the diplomatic and often manipulative nature of Johnson’s autobiographical gestures during this two-decade period to show how Johnson used the chameleonism he attributed to Jewish identity as a means to escape the limitations of his own ethnic identity. The autobiographical gesture allowed Johnson to construct his own identity rather than allow it to be thrust upon him from outside forces.

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<sup>89</sup> Daniel Itzkovitz, “Passing Like Me,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 98:1-2 (Winter/Spring, 1999) 38-42. Itzkovitz explains that “The commonsense notion that Jews were ‘highly imitative and adaptable’ as one *Atlantic Monthly* author put it, permeated American culture in films, high-modernist texts, popular fiction, and the press.”

## **The 1912 Edition of *The Autobiography*: The Diplomacy and Social Fluidity of Anonymity**

As *The Autobiography* first came to fruition, Johnson himself orchestrated its anonymous authorship very carefully for a variety of reasons. His most crucial move was to choose a small, white-run publishing firm that agreed to keep his identity a secret. Not only did Johnson wish to avoid the possible complication of his position as a foreign consul and to protect his burgeoning music career, but as Jaqueline Goldsby asserts in her critical account of the novel's publication history, "[Johnson] wanted readers to believe that the phenomenon of a racially mixed man passing as white was one that was widespread and possibly at play in every community (and, possibly, in any and every white family) throughout the country."<sup>90</sup> By implying that the ex-colored man and the anonymous author were the same person, Johnson challenged the apriorism of segregation and the one drop rule that limited African Americans' social fluidity. If, as Izkovitz argues, Jewish chameleonism is "culturally and naturally determined" since "the 'natural place' of the Jew is in passing," then Johnson's anonymous authorship signaled that African Americans' chameleonism is also a part of their "tradition" and "instinct."

The tradition of anonymous authorship has roots in the slave narrative, so it was easy for Johnson to provide a credible justification for his narrator's namelessness as well. As Robert Cataliotti explains,

The narrator relates that he was born in a 'little Georgia town... because there are people still living there who could be connected with this narrative' (4). He actually calls his story a 'narrative,' and his refusal to reveal names echoes the anonymity that Douglass and other slave narrative writers often employed to

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<sup>90</sup> Jaqueline Goldsby, "Keeping the 'Secret of Authorship': A Critical Look at the 1912 Publication of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, eds. Danky and Wiegand. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 257.

protect those left behind in the South, as well as those seeking refuge in the North.<sup>91</sup>

This explanation for necessary anonymity was so convincing that Jessie Fauset, in her 1912 review of *The Autobiography* for *The Crisis*, described the book's anonymous authorship as what "might be expected."<sup>92</sup> The false marketing of the novel's authenticity as a slave narrative has a complex connection to the history of the publication of slave narratives. According to Ann Fabian, "'true stories' of slavery... helped to counter increasingly vocal slaveholders," but the accuracy of these first-person narratives were tested by anti-abolitionists who sought to catch fugitive and freed slaves in lies, thus proving the natural inferiority and depravity of the Black race.<sup>93</sup> Former slaves' testimonies were doubly scrutinized because in print and on the abolitionist lecture circuit, former slaves had often confessed to duplicitous behavior in the course of their servitude and as a means of escape. Slaveholders contended that the slave narratives continued the former slaves' tactics of mendacity and manipulation, but under the aegis of their abolitionist sponsors, the former slaves insisted on the truth of their stories and argued that even though they had lied in the past, they had reformed their moral standards in accordance with their human status in freedom. Indeed, Johnson's protagonist deals with a similar set of challenges to his veracity: though he characterizes himself as a gambler and admits to duplicitous tactics in his passing over the color line, he maintains that his account in *The Autobiography* is true. Johnson published his novel through the small Boston firm because, Goldsby suggests, the author of an autobiography

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<sup>91</sup> Robert Cataliotti, *The Music in African American Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995) 59.

<sup>92</sup> Jessie Fauset, "[Review of] *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*." Reprinted from *The Crisis* 5 (November 1912): 38, in *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson*. Kenneth M. Price and Lawrence J. Oliver, eds. (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1997) 21.

<sup>93</sup> Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 80.

would likely have chosen a publisher that accommodated “amateur” authors. Furthermore, the protagonist would have selected a white firm because “going to a black job printer would have signaled the ‘ex-colored man’s’ return to the world he had forsaken in order to pass for white.”<sup>94</sup> Like the Jew on the train car who never actually revealed his Jewishness, Johnson had to act out the central lie of *The Autobiography*—his own racial identity had to be hidden—in order to for the novel to be accepted by a double audience.

*The Autobiography*’s publication through a white publishing house is also significant considering the publication history of slave narratives in the two decades that surround Johnson’s 1912 publication. Between 1900 and 1922, twenty-six slave narratives are known to have been published in North America.<sup>95</sup> Of these twenty-six narratives, seven cite the author as the publisher, fourteen were printed by small job printers, three were printed by small Christian publishing houses, and two, both by Booker T. Washington, were published by Doubleday, a major publishing house.<sup>96</sup> One would infer that these post-bellum narratives, except the two books by Washington, were privately funded and not widely circulated.<sup>97</sup> That *The Autobiography* was taken on by a publisher, albeit a small one that neither publicized the book nor circulated it, is a step that legitimized and elevated it as Black writing of the autobiographical genre in the larger literary sphere.<sup>98</sup> It is true that Johnson had African American forbears who had published with distinguished firms and enjoyed widespread circulation: William Wells

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<sup>94</sup> Goldsby 255.

<sup>95</sup> See [Documenting the American South](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/chronautobio.html#1900), University of Chapel Hill, May 9, 2006.

<sup>96</sup> Doubleday published Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) and *My Larger Education; Being Chapters from my Experience* (1911).

<sup>97</sup> Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* is a highly modified version of the slave narrative in that it describes the development and philosophy behind the Tuskegee Institute.

<sup>98</sup> Johnson probably could have been published by a major publishing firm, but that would have destroyed the credibility of his plot.

Brown's *Clotel, or, the President's Daughter* (1853) was eventually published by MacMillan in 1855, Charles W. Chesnutt had published *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) with Houghton Mifflin, Paul Lawrence Dunbar's *The Sport of Gods* (1902) was published by Dodd Mead, and W.E.B. Du Bois had received widespread circulation and praise for *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and had published the much reviewed but less critically successful novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). However, these texts had not been marketed as autobiography, even if they did rely heavily on the author's personal experience and use the slave narrative as a prototype.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, as William Andrews explains, these texts did not "resolve the dilemma that their double audience presented for them—the one demanding protest against racial injustice, the other expecting a pleasant excursion into black life as local color."<sup>100</sup> Though Andrews contends that Johnson decided to disguise his novel as autobiography based on his belief that American whites were more receptive to black autobiography, the publication statistics cited above make it clear that fiction that utilized the autobiographical gesture—not more straightforward versions of autobiography—were widely received by the white public and publishers alike. It may be that the white public was more interested in fiction because "the pleasant excursion into black life" did not as directly indict them as participants in racial injustice. Still, by marketing the novel as autobiography and connecting it to slavery, Johnson falsely maintained the superiority complex of a readership that felt safe in their assumptions that Black writers would always, even in a

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<sup>99</sup> See Marva J. Furman's "The Slave Narrative: Prototype of the Early Afro-American Novel," *Art of the Slave Narrative*, eds. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (Illinois: Western Illinois University Press, 1982)

<sup>100</sup> William Andrews, introduction, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson (New York: Penguin, 1990) xvi.



removed way, maintain the status of slaves and therefore occupy a lower place in the literary realm.

Yet Johnson's attempt at diplomacy through anonymous narrative, or more specifically, his attempt to please a double audience, gives a false sense of agency to readers. On the receiving end of any story, readers are in the position to cast judgments upon the characters and the author. When reading autobiography, a reader's inclination to judge is amplified by the one-on-one relationship of reader to author. Johnson intensified this relationship by setting up the novel in such a way that readers feel like they are being made privy to a secret. Johnson opens the novel: "I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded more carefully than any of my earthly possessions" (AECM 3). The ex-colored man, in his singular form, was meant as someone divulging the secret of an African American collective, a reading practice that fits with the widespread interest in representative writing by ethnic minorities popular at the beginning of the century.<sup>101</sup> The commodification of local color fiction and ethnographic writing—writing that focused on descriptions of peoples with regional and ethnic differences—fed the middle-class, urban American appetite for an ethnographic transcendence into alterity. White readers' sense of agency is spurious, not only because the character they judge is not authentic, but because they are being tricked into believing that their transcendence into alterity is authentic. Ironically, white readers' false sense that they are being allowed access to the ways of a Black collective speaks against the social fluidity of whites.

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<sup>101</sup> Prominent examples include Sui Sin Far, Zitkala Sa, Abraham Cahan, and Anzia Yesierska.

But Johnson's reach for a double audience had potentially worse consequences for his African American readers, who feared they would be unfairly represented as a collective. As Goldsby explains,

What distressed these readers was precisely what most piqued white readers' attention: the depictions of the "inner life of the Negro." Relating the text of Father John Brown's soul-stirring sermon, verbally diagramming the exuberant high steps of the cakewalk, or explaining the complicated rhythms and chords of ragtime piano were cultural habits that merited description... But delving into the dens of gambling and drinking, celebrating the shams of thieves and con artists, analyzing the bigoted attitudes of blacks towards one another—these were cultural secrets that ought not to have been exposed, especially to a white readership.<sup>102</sup>

For Johnson's African American readership, the narrator's namelessness causes him to be "prototypical" in white readers' imaginations, part of what Houston A. Baker, Jr. calls the "nameless abyss in which all black Americans at one time or another find themselves."<sup>103</sup> Johnson enhanced the individuality and universal appeal of the narrator by giving him plenty of space to offer first-person confessions of his human nature, including general accounts of first love, insecurity, and self-loathing. Whereas slave narratives and other early writing by African Americans rarely discuss moments outside "the narrator's troubled social identity," *The Autobiography* is powerful, as Henry Louis Gates points out, because Johnson ventures "to show that even the most race-conscious character experiences the world, on a daily basis, as does every other human being."<sup>104</sup> In effect, the narrator's merits are more believable in the context of his less virtuous admissions, and the story seems less controlled by an agenda.

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<sup>102</sup> Goldsby 258.

<sup>103</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr. "A Forgotten Prototype: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Invisible Man*," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 49 (1973): 434.

<sup>104</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., introduction, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) xxii.

In 1912, Johnson was aware of the way that white abolitionists had delimited the slave narratives by exerting editorial control and shaping stories to suit their own agendas. Frederick Douglass made his anxiety over this practice well-known in his 1855 autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in which Douglass revealed the abolitionist pressures that led him to conform his self-portrayal to that of a stereotypical ex-slave in his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845).<sup>105</sup> However, as Priscilla Wald suggests, Douglass did not always follow the abolitionists' dictates in his first autobiography; in the *Narrative*, "his discomfort surfaces... in textual disruptions: a revealing word, a surprising juxtaposition, an awkward sentence through which the repressed—or the suppressed—returns. These disruptions shape his narrative, as they tell an alternative story about his enslavement and his authorship."<sup>106</sup> By extension, for those who could read Douglass's subtly planted innuendos, Douglass told the truer story of his beliefs beneath the false context.<sup>107</sup> Like Douglass, Johnson feigned adherence to the prescribed form of autobiography, thus appeasing audiences that do not want a harangue about the "race-problem." In this historical moment, the autobiographical form has the power to be taken seriously as a kind of anthropological evidence, but Johnson's false autobiography—his fabrication of scientific data—is, as he termed it on the first page, a "practical joke on society" (AECM

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<sup>105</sup> In his factual account of his own experiences, *Along This Way* (1933), Johnson acknowledges the intensity with which he read Douglass, and he recalls the inspiration he felt hearing Douglass speak at the "Sub-Tropical Exposition" in Jacksonville, FL.

<sup>106</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995) 15.

<sup>107</sup> For example, Wald cites a moment in the *Narrative* when Douglass cannot hide his cultural critique of the North. "... 'I was quite disappointed at the general appearance of things in New Bedford' (*NFD*, 101). The word 'disappointed' is a dramatic irony, turning on the expectation of the fugitive slave that nonslaveholding whites must be poor, as such a class is in the South... But the narrator quickly recounts his inability to find work among the practitioners of his trade, ship caulkers, who refuse to work alongside a black man. The word 'disappointed' lingers as an echo, a whispered critique of Northern racism just under the surface of the text" (Wald, 87). Douglass is not just writing a narrative, but rather slyly leaking denunciations of the North from his well of frustration over not having full editorial control.

3). Johnson used the autobiographical form, like Douglass in the *Narrative*, to trick readers into thinking they were not getting a denunciation of race-relations even though they were.<sup>108</sup> For example, there is nothing overtly remarkable about the following passage from *The Autobiography*, in which the narrator ponders the “slave songs” he hears in Georgia:

As yet, the Negroes do not appreciate these old slave songs. The educated classes are rather ashamed of them and prefer to sing hymns from books. This feeling is natural; they are still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced; but the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro. (AECM 182)

However, Eric Sundquist suggests that this passage “sounds like an extract from an editorial rather than a novel” and notes that Johnson reiterated this viewpoint in his non-fiction introduction to the first *Book of American Negro Spirituals*.<sup>109</sup> Johnson chameleonicly slides between his roles as a fiction writer and editorialist almost imperceptibly.

A similar sort of chameleonism is found in the Preface to the first edition of *The Autobiography*, which frames the text with an agenda that is allegedly offered by the publishers:

Special pleas have already been made for and against the Negro in hundreds of books, but in these books either his virtues or vices have been exaggerated; this is because writers, in nearly every instance, have treated the colored American as a *whole*, each has taken some one group of the race to prove his case; not before has a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relations with each other and to the whites, been made... it is as though a veil has been drawn aside: the reader is

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<sup>108</sup> Goldsby cites Johnson’s intentions as he revealed them to his publisher: “No one can read this book without feeling that he has been given new light on the complexities of this social problem; that he has had a glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama which is here being enacted; that he has been taken upon an elevation and has caught a bird’s eyes view of the conflict which is being waged” (Goldsby 257). The publishers use Johnson’s words to introduce to the 1912 publication of the novel.

<sup>109</sup> Eric Sundquist, *The Hammer of Creation: Folk Culture in African American Fiction* (Athens: Georgia University Press, 1992) 1-2. For a full explanation of the editorialist voice, see F. Patton Walker’s “The Narrator’s Editorialist Voice in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*,” *CLAJ* 41.1 (1997): 70-92.

given a view of the inner life of the Negro in America, is initiated into the inner freemasonry, as it were, of the race<sup>110</sup>

This preface overtly references W.E.B. DuBois' concept of "the veil" from *The Souls of Black Folk*, which suggested that white audiences would not be able to glean a true understanding of Black life. When white publishers promise that the "the veil" has been swept aside, they affirm that *The Autobiography* serve to make a true understanding of Black life finally available to a white audience, themselves included. The twist to this particular preface, however, is that Johnson himself "dictated" this agenda in a letter to his publishers that describes the way he wants the novel to be read; the publishers had asked for a statement from which they could "extract" their own preface, but then formatted Johnson's text from letter to preface verbatim. As Donald Goellnicht notes,

The Preface...declares this autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man to be more representative of black life than the earlier narratives of ex-slaves, thus positioning the text as anthropological, but it also consciously evokes the authenticating prefaces common to slave narratives... Such prefaces, written by white patrons or publishers, seek to verify the authorship of and the facts presented in the tale; they thus serve as authorizing texts that themselves vie for control of slave narratives, just as the Liberal white publishers of the North reaped profits from anti-slavery and abolitionist writing.<sup>111</sup>

Knowing now what one could not have known in 1912—that Johnson's text is fiction, and that he composed what serves as the preface—the preface is complicated on two closely related levels.<sup>112</sup> First, it is unclear whether or not Johnson actually intended for the novel to be representative in its sweeping aside of "the veil," if he simply meant to parody the format of previous Black autobiography, or if his trick reifies the notion that a

<sup>110</sup> James Weldon Johnson, letter to Sherman, French & Company, 17 February 1912, James Weldon Johnson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>111</sup> Donald C. Goellnicht, "Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *African American Review* 30.1 (1996): 4 of 17, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCO, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Lib System, Feb. 2006.

<sup>112</sup> Both of these conditions were called into questions in 1927 when Johnson publicly revealed his authorship of the text, but only recently has information about Johnson's authorship of the Preface been publicly widespread.

white audience will never decode that which is hidden in Black writing.<sup>113</sup> He was either assuming the right to portray his race, or deriding the notion that one can represent an entire race. Second, if the storyline of *The Autobiography* claims that the narrator is passing, then a Preface in which Johnson's writing passes as the writing of white publishers implies that Johnson, like his protagonist, was successful at crossing the color line. In order to push against the representation of African Americans as a homogenous population, both Johnson and his narrator required the social fluidity to move among the "various groups and elements" of the population. After all, the novel offers a "composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race" into which neither Johnson nor the narrator fit.

Regardless of whether Johnson intended or simply allowed his words to be published under white pretenses, his chameleonic behavior is like that of the Jewish businessman he described in *The Autobiography*. Johnson and the Jewish businessman passively pass; that is, neither actually pretended to be white, but just wanted to be socially equal. Neither wanted to be limited by an ethnic categorization, and both use business instincts to make themselves socially fluid. For example, Johnson's choice of a small job printer did not offer "prestige," but because Sherman, French did not usually publish literature on the race question, it helped to disseminate Johnson's message to a variety of audiences. Goldsby writes that Johnson's choice of publisher "would legitimize the book's non-partisan approach to a thorny and disquieting political problem."<sup>114</sup> The difference between the Jewish businessman and Johnson as

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<sup>113</sup> Here I am adopting Goellnicht's use of the word "parodic," which he gets from Bakhtin's dialogic: an "internally dialogized interillumination of languages [in which] the intentions of the representing discourse are at odds with the intentions of the represented discourse" (Goellnicht 4 of 17).

<sup>114</sup> Goldsby 255.

businessman is part of the anti-Semitic stereotype that causes the ex-colored man to identify the Jew on the train car as Jewish: Jews in business are expected to be manipulative out of greed. Johnson as a businessman, manipulative in his quest for literary equality, would be described with the same inventiveness of Olaudah Equiano, who masterminded the promotion of his self-published autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vasses, the African. Written By Himself* (London 1789), on the commercial book market. Vincent Carretta explains that Equiano's text was a groundbreaking addition to the African-British canon in 1789 because, even though there already existed a tradition of African-British autobiography at that time, Equiano was the first author to strategically market his narrative in ways that undermined white authority over his text.<sup>115</sup> Unlike Johnson, Equiano proved especially ingenious when it came to keeping the financial profits of the book for himself instead of routing them through a white publisher, who may have exercised editorial control over the book's content.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Vincent Carretta, "'Property of Author': Olaudah Equiano's Place in the History of the Book," *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, eds. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

<sup>116</sup> To circumvent an outside publisher, Equiano "convince[ed] buyers to commit themselves to purchasing copies of his book prior to its publication, with booksellers effectively acting as agents in accepting subscriptions, probably receiving a commission for doing so" (Carretta 132). Collecting advanced payment on his book was possible because Equiano, well known, as Johnson was, for his advocacy for racial equality, banked on his controversial persona whereas Johnson could not. Partially, this difference reflects the discrepancy between writerly climates for non-whites in England and America. After writing caustic editorials against pro-slavery newspaper articles in 1788, Equiano "mentioned in print that he might soon 'enumerate even my own sufferings in the West Indies, which perhaps I may one day offer to the public, [though] the disgusting catalogue would be almost too great for belief.' The advertising ploy is almost too obvious" (Carretta 131). Equiano even advertised and followed through with the inclusion of his picture on his book's frontispiece to entice voyeuristic curiosity. Equiano's publicity—literally, his public self and the selling of himself—are precisely what caused his book to achieve non-autobiographical ends: an abolitionist campaign under Black authorial control. Johnson, on the other hand, to make the autobiography seem more authentic and get his political message across, must accept the loss of income he may have received from a more established firm, suffering economic disenfranchisement and silently claiming victory in the sphere of judgment.

The most important element of Equiano's publication history in relation to Johnson's project was that Equiano registered his publication as the "Property of Author," thus asserting his intellectual property rights and taking the phrase "Written by Himself" to an unprecedented level in the genre of Black autobiographical narrative. As Wald notes, "'Written by Himself,' a convention of slave narratives, of course underscores the narrator's literacy, an important part of his story of liberation, and it asserts his authenticity to a characteristically dubious white audience."<sup>117</sup> In titling *The Autobiography* at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson did not need to use this convention, but he was trying to demonstrate the capabilities of Black literacy and to achieve a sort of literary liberation. After all, the philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance, which Johnson helped to cultivate, stipulated that representations of African American creativity "contribute to a reassessment of African Americans, and that such a reassessment might help undermine the racism that was still prevalent in American society..."<sup>118</sup> Johnson's anonymous authorship of *The Autobiography* kept his text from fully achieving these goals. Just as the phrase "Written by Himself" denotes an implicit social inferiority when Equiano and Douglass used it, Johnson's anonymity produced the same effect that Wald attributes to "Written by Himself." Wald explains that "Himself" is a substitute for the author's name, and the nameless author, in the very act of trying "to preserve a sense of his identity," risks "disappearing into a historically reconstructed unrecognizability."<sup>119</sup> In order to take hold of his intellectual property, thereby fulfilling

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<sup>117</sup> Wald 85.

<sup>118</sup> Anne Carroll, "Art, Literature, and the Harlem Renaissance: The Messages of God's Trombones" *College Literature* 29.3 (Summer 2002) 57.

<sup>119</sup> Wald 85.



the ultimate goal of *The Autobiography* as an artful work, Johnson attached his name to the text for its 1927 republication.

### **The 1927 Edition: Johnson as an African American Representative**

By the time Knopf republished *The Autobiography* in 1927 with Johnson's name on the cover, it was the height of the Jazz Age, and Black aesthetics had become popular as a mainstream urban aesthetic. African Americans such as Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, to name only a few, produced fiction and poetry that participated in a burgeoning Black literary tradition that reached Black and white audiences between 1919 and 1940. Johnson's name on the 1927 edition of *The Autobiography* signaled that African Americans had been successful in their artistic literary endeavors during Reconstruction and the New Negro Renaissance from 1865 to 1919, before the mainstream popularity of a Black urban aesthetic. The republication of *The Autobiography* laid claim to a literary tradition that had evolved from the form and marketing practices of the slave narrative into a space for Black voices to express themselves on their own terms and topics. Indeed, Johnson himself recognized this turning point in his essay "Negro Authors and White Publishers," which appeared in the *Crisis* in 1929.<sup>120</sup> In this piece, Johnson repudiated the claim that white firms only published Black writers who depict Africans-Americans as a "lower" race. First, Johnson explained that Black writers' use of "lower" characters made for a more dramatic story, perhaps in a subtle self-defense of his not always upstanding protagonist in *The Autobiography*. Second, Johnson listed Black authors' fictional and non-fictional work published by white firms since 1920, and confirmed that more Black writing about the "upper" echelon of African American life had been produced. Finally, Johnson

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<sup>120</sup> Reprinted in *The Crisis Reader* ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Random House, 1999) 263-266.

concluded: “I believe that Negro writers who have something worth while to say and the power and skill to say it have as fair a chance today of being published as any other writers.” Interestingly, in his list of fictional works by Black writers, Johnson omitted Knopf’s 1927 republication of *The Autobiography*, though he included his anthologies of Black poetry and spirituals in the non-fiction list. Perhaps Johnson did not include his novel because its original publication date did not correspond to the timeline of his list, but if he had listed it, he would have signified *The Autobiography* as a text that made it possible for Black writers to attain the literary equality that his essay professes. After all, Johnson’s name on the novel brought it from the slave narrative genre connected to the “lower” status of African Americans into the “upper” level of creative genius possessed by celebrated writers in general. His business instincts had been right on track.

Yet as Johnson officially attached his name to the autobiography in 1927, Jews were busy changing their names to sound less ethnic, less representative of Jewish identity. Al Jolson (a.k.a. Asa Yoelson) has just gotten a big break as the star of the first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer* (1927). The film’s plot affirms the practice of Jewish assimilation happening at the time of its release: Jolson plays a cantor’s son who chooses to perform in blackface rather than lead Yom Kippur davening. On one hand, Jolson’s blackface was originally intended to be a largely inconsequential convention of the movie. The ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin cites that by 1927, Al Jolson’s blackface was merely an atrophied version of minstrelsy that vaudeville talent brokers took advantage of because a “pseudo-southern accent” obscured Yiddish-English.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, Michael Rogin suggests that the Jewish performance of blackface utilized a regression in racial status in order to ultimately elevate Jewish social status on par with white

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<sup>121</sup> Mark Slobin, “Putting Blackface in its Place,” Unpublished Draft, 2002. 44-45.

Americans.<sup>122</sup> The median of these two theories is Itzkovitz's idea that by performing an identity other than one's own, the Jewish person actually accentuates his own Jewishness: "Successful assimilation...made the Jew *more Jewish*" because it reinforced his reputation as elusive, manipulative and transient, and impossible to define among various diasporic contexts.<sup>123</sup> If Jews like Jolson were using blackface to obscure their ethnic identities in one way or another, then perhaps Johnson had the idea that he could evade his role as an African American representative by adopting the resistance to ethnic definition attributed to Jews.

After all, though Johnson had met one challenge of the 1912 edition of *The Autobiography*—to secure the widespread reception of the Black novel—in 1927, he was left with the problems that came with serving as a representative of the African American population. *The Autobiography* had achieved its reputation as fiction, which protected Johnson from being criticized for his protagonist's decision to pass as white, especially since Johnson was head of the NAACP in 1927.<sup>124</sup> However, Carl Van Vechten's introduction to the 1927 edition obscures the lines between the facts and fictions of the novel and situates Johnson as the autobiographer of an entire people:

The Autobiography, of course, in the matter of specific incident, has little to do with Mr. Johnson's own life, but it is imbued with his own personality and feeling, his *views* of the subjects discussed, so that to a person who had no previous knowledge of the author's own history, it reads like a real autobiography. It would be truer, perhaps, to say that it reads like a composite autobiography of the Negro race in the United States in modern times.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Rogin writes: "Blackface emancipated the jazz singer from Jews and blacks by linking him to the groups he was leaving behind... By giving Jack his own voice, blackface propels him above both his father and African Americans into the American melting pot... Jack Robin plays a person of color instead of being confused for one. By painting himself black, he washes himself white" (100-116).

<sup>123</sup> Itzkovitz 45.

<sup>124</sup> Goldsby 263-264.

<sup>125</sup> Carl Van Vechten, "Introduction to Mr. Knopf's New Edition." Reprinted in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) xxxiii-xxxiv.

This paragraph is problematic because Johnson's "views" are conflated with the "real autobiography" of an individual. This notion is problematized further when Van Vechten attempts to correct himself, equating an individual's story to "composite autobiography," giving an individual power to represent the "views" of a collective. The distinction between facts and fictions would have helped Johnson to realize his ambitions to prove the creative capacities of Black writers and establish a literary tradition of fiction; instead, Van Vechten's framing of the text finds fiction by one person representative of an entire collective, thus promoting the very homogeneity of populations that Johnson specifically wanted to avoid.

Van Vechten might have been purposely confusing in his introduction in order to tantalize a readership drawn to Modernist voyeuristic reading practices that objectify "the Other" in the name of anthropological research. But Van Vechten's introduction was equivocal when he further conflated "the Autobiography," the form, with *The Autobiography*, the novel:

When I was writing Nigger Heaven I discovered the Autobiography to be an invaluable source-book for the study of Negro psychology. I believe it will be a long time before anybody can write about the Negro without consulting Mr. Johnson's pages to advantage. Naturally, the Autobiography had its precursors. Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1900) is a splendid example of autobiography...<sup>126</sup>

Throughout his introduction, Van Vechten refers to *The Autobiography* as "the Autobiography," and when he cites "the Autobiography" here his intentions are to cite Johnson's book. But the lower case "t" opens up the possibility that Van Vechten is talking about an entire genre, not a singular novel, especially when he equates it to *Up from Slavery*, in which Booker T. Washington is more directly discussing the events of

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<sup>126</sup> Van Vechten xxxv.

his own life. Van Vechten believes, from the perspective of a white writer, Johnson's book offers a peek behind "the veil" of "Negro Psychology," and he suggests that "anybody," even a black writer, needs to consult Johnson's book for information about the Black community. These ideas show that the autobiographical gesture, fiction or fact, is a literary mode that is privileged with the power to create the reputation of a collective. White readers are expected to find definitions of Black people from which to learn, and Black readers are expected to find definitions of themselves in Johnson's book.

Johnson's protagonist attempts to evade being a representative at all; after witnessing the lynching of an African American, he makes the decision to avoid identifying himself as a member of any particular race. The ex-colored man confesses:

All the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action or opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. (AECM, 190-191)

Though Cataliotti suggests that "The Ex-colored Man ultimately cannot stand being 'identified with a people;' he cannot handle being an individual tied to a community," the ex-colored man's explanation for passing implies that he does not have a problem being associated with the people who lynch.<sup>127</sup> If he really is not bound by the confines of racial identity, then the narrator can ostensibly gain equality as a writer: ultimately, he can write without being limited by allegiances to either side of the race-drama and can strive for the kind of truth that strong fiction delivers by being responsible to no one. He can be, in a more universal sense, a writer. The irony is that the narrator's racial history is given away in the title of the book, and even as an "ex-colored man," his writing, at the

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<sup>127</sup> Cataliotti 71.

outset, is still considered to come from a black perspective.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, the narrator's chosen separation from his people does not disqualify him from offering the "bird's eye view" of African American life that is promised in the introduction to the first edition, nor does it keep Van Vechten from promoting "how a colored man lives and feels" in the second edition once Johnson's name is attached to *The Autobiography*. In fact, one might say that the narrator's chosen separation from his people gives him the distance needed to offer the bird's eye view.<sup>129</sup>

If Johnson presumed that Jewish identity could solve the dilemmas that representative authorship posed, then parallel problems in the fiction of Abraham Cahan negate that notion. For example, Abraham Cahan's auto-ethnographic fiction *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) is comparable to *The Autobiography* because it provides a first-person account of social transformation in America. As Werner Sollors points out, *McClure's Magazine*, where *Levinsky* first appeared in 1913, advertised Cahan's insider-ethnography as "the most intimate knowledge of Jewish life... his story reproduces actual characters, occurrences, and situations taken from real life... as no invention could do."<sup>130</sup> The protagonist, David Levinsky, adapts from greenhorn Jewish immigrant from Russia into an assimilated American business man, who experiences pangs of remorse about the Jewish identity he leaves behind. Cahan's portrait of the Jewish immigrant experience is based on his own experience as a Russian immigrant and his insider knowledge of the Lower East Side Jewish population he serves as editor of *The Daily Forward*. In *The*

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<sup>128</sup> The revealing of his ties to community, as the ex-colored man explains, is his way of "seeking relief" from his unsatisfactory choice to hide them (AECM 3).

<sup>129</sup> It might be said that the narrator's decision to pass actually reinforces his identity as Black; after all, Johnson's preface describes passing as a "Black" activity, an activity in which other races do not partake as often.

<sup>130</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 168-169. Taken from *McClure's Magazine* (April 1913: 92-93).

*Daily Forward* and in other syndicates, Cahan published numerous short stories, in which the formula was always the same: “the superior narrator explaining to the reader, whose values he presumably shares, some inside information about the Jewish immigrant culture in America.”<sup>131</sup> When Cahan’s audience is limited to a Jewish readership, his stories are met with a sentimental recognition. Once Cahan aims to share values with those beyond a Jewish readership, he goes from being an editor/reporter to being a writer, aloof from his community. In *The Autobiography*, the “bird’s eye view” of “how a colored man lives and feels,” even though it evidently comes from a fictional narrator in the guise of autobiography, is read as Johnson’s personal knowledge once he attaches his name to *The Autobiography* in 1927. Whereas the ex-colored man’s offering of his insider knowledge affirms that he is a member of the African American community, Johnson’s offering of insider knowledge distances him from the community he portrays. In order to supply a “bird’s eye view,” he appears to have elevated himself above the community in social status through judgment and betrayal.

Perhaps this sense of betrayal in Johnson and Cahan was exacerbated by the fact that they had attached themselves to famous white writers. William Dean Howells, who Cahan revered as something of an American literary guru, mentored Cahan through the writing of *Levinsky*; for Cahan, identification with a well-known American writer meant that he himself was more than just a Jewish writer. It is not that Cahan wanted to cast off his Jewish identity in favor of a fully assimilated one, but that in commodifying the experiences of Jewish immigrants, he automatically became more American, more *Levinsky*. Despite Cahan’s vehemently anti-Capitalist posture, his superior narrator

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<sup>131</sup> Jules Chametzky, *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: Massachusetts University Press, 1977) 49.

syndrome made him susceptible to what Brad Evans identifies as “local color’s charge within the space of the market—a space filled with mobile and consumable cultural forms...”<sup>132</sup> For Johnson, the white perspective of Van Vechten’s 1927 preface, and Van Vechten’s framing of *The Autobiography* as a source of insider knowledge about Black life, sparked the novel’s “charge within the space of the market.” The catering to a market bent on the gathering of anthropological evidence took away from the genius of the fiction, and Johnson’s name on the cover became equated with his narrator’s views. For example, during the ex-colored man’s visit to the South, where he hopes to immerse himself in the ways of black people for musical inspiration, he critiques poor Black communities for their living conditions: “everybody slept on pallets on the floor...The food was at times so distasteful and poorly cooked that I could not eat it. I remember that once I lived for a week on buttermilk, on account of not being able to stomach the fat bacon, the rank turnip-tops, and the heavy damp mixture of meal, salt and water which was called corn bread” (AECM 169). Here, the narrator is not a social scientist, but a social critic. Moreover, the narrator invests in a first experience of black life in order to capitalize on black tradition in his own work.

Critical response to *The Autobiography* in the past decade has been particularly interested in framing Johnson’s text as a sort of documentary on Black music—as does the cover art to the 1989 Vintage edition, which features a piano keyboard—especially since Johnson himself was an accomplished, and published, musician.<sup>133</sup> Edward Berlin, a historian of music, cites Johnson’s description of ragtime as definitional: “Although this

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<sup>132</sup> Brad Evans, *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) 114.

<sup>133</sup> See Christina Ruotolo, “James Weldon Johnson and the Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Musician,” *American Literature* 72.2 (June 2000).



passage is from a work of fiction, its serious justification as a historical document is justified.”<sup>134</sup> The reception of *The Autobiography* as an artifact that authenticates a Black musical tradition engages in the popular debate over the appropriation and commodification of Black music, similar to the way that locating *The Autobiography*'s roots in the slave narrative takes part in a reading that acknowledges a set of controversial historical circumstances in which abolitionists are held accountable for the appropriation and commodification of Black writing. In major works on the subject of the Black musical tradition, American Jews have been pitted as the chief appropriators and commodifiers of ragtime, blues and jazz.<sup>135</sup> Nathaniel Mackey locates Jews' performance of Black music as the cause for “the erasure of Black inventiveness” and the sterilization of Black music.<sup>136</sup> In this particular build up of social circumstances, *The Autobiography* becomes a testimonial in the case of Black-Jewish relations, with the narrator's views set in comparison with Johnson's views. If Johnson would command “Make me a Jew,” then it is important to make the appropriate distinctions between Johnson's views and his narrator's views about the Jewish appropriation of Black music.

In *The Autobiography*, Johnson's narrator searches for the roots of ragtime music so as to develop a musical tradition with origins in the Black South because he realizes it is being appropriated by non-Black musicians. Though the narrator does not specify the race of the musician who causes him to reclaim ragtime as a Black art form, he describes him as “a big, bespectacled, bushy headed man.” The raceless-ness of this person is coupled with other stereotypically Jewish characteristics. The narrator says, “I made up

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<sup>134</sup> Edward Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>135</sup> See Jeffrey Melnick's *A Right to Sing the Blues* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>136</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb,” *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 514.

my mind to go to the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink my inspiration first-hand. I gloated over the immense amount of material I had to work with, not only rag-time, but also the old slave songs—material which no one had yet touched” (AECM 142). Echoing this sentiment in his preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry, Johnson expounds upon the influence of ragtime on popular American music, locating its origins in spirituals and Negro Folk Songs; he writes, “These Negro folk songs constitute a vast mine of material that has been neglected almost absolutely...And there will yet come great Negro composers who will take this music and voice through it not only the soul of their race, but the soul of America.”<sup>137</sup> This call for Black artists to claim the tradition of their art, to prove its legitimacy among a general public, is precisely what Johnson’s narrator gave up “for a mess of pottage” that equates to Jewish racelessness (AECM 211).

If the ex- colored man, or Johnson himself, were to choose Jewish racelessness, not only would he then be ineluctably cut off from Blackness, but he would be the nemesis of Blackness. But a different reading of *Along This Way* and *The Autobiography* questions the very idea that there can be a purity of “Blackness” and reveals that Johnson’s musical metaphors promote the idea that Blackness necessitates fusion with aspects of an American mainstream if it is to succeed. Though Johnson does mourn, in his preface to *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, that “The first so-called Ragtime songs to be published were actually Negro Secular Folk songs that were set down by white men, who affixed their names as composers,” thus validating the past existence of a separate Black culture and lamenting the loss of credit for its popularity in the American

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<sup>137</sup> James Weldon Johnson, preface, The Book of American Negro Poetry, ed. James Weldon Johnson in The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997) 868.

mainstream, he does not mourn the music's development into a national music.<sup>138</sup> In *Along This Way*, Johnson says of Ragtime: "This lighter music has been fused and then developed, chiefly by Jewish musicians, until it has become our national medium for expressing ourselves musically in popular form, and it bids fair to become a basic element in the future great American music."<sup>139</sup> Jeffrey Melnick reads Johnson's rhetoric as characteristic of Johnson's general thinking. When Johnson says that "With Jews serving as intermediary, African American music has become the only truly national art that exists in America," then Johnson is evoking the "one constant of [his] aesthetic system," which is "that transcendent art came from a group process filtered through an appropriate medium to become singular expression."<sup>140</sup> Like the ex-colored man, who needed to realize that his musical vision was filtering through another musician's hands before he could reclaim it, Johnson was willing to allow the successful fusion of Black traditions into an American mainstream before reclaiming them. This kind of organic timing is the reason Johnson could publish *The Autobiography* anonymously and then wait until later to attach his name to it.

Werner Sollors' reading of *The Autobiography* alongside Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* reveals that the fusion of Black traditions into an American mainstream and the fusion of Jewish traditions into an American mainstream proceeded along much the same course, which is evidenced by the autobiographical gesture produced by both writers. Sollors identifies this trend as a genre of "bluish" (Black and Jewish) literature. The bluish writers' strategy, according to Sollors, of "presenting fiction as truth..."

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<sup>138</sup> James Weldon Johnson, preface, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals: Including the Book of American Negro Spirituals and the Second Book of Negro Spirituals* ed. J.R. Johnson (New York: Da Capo Books, 1969) 11.

<sup>139</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 328.

<sup>140</sup> Melnick 149.

promise[s] a symbolic initiation into ethnic riddles” for a mainstream American audience. This “symbolic initiation into ethnic riddles” is also an initiation for the writers themselves, who must prove their worth as writers within an explanation of their difference, because the writers’ difference is what provokes and captivates their readership. The writers’ literary products are symbolic as attempts to gain equal recognition in an age of cultural relativism, which allowed for difference but aimed for a “melting pot” of acceptance. As Sollors suggests of Johnson and Cahan, “Their ideal vision was that of a synthesis of specific descent and cosmopolitan consent, a synthesis best expressed in musical metaphors.”<sup>141</sup> Perhaps reading Johnson’s depiction of music as a metaphor versus reading his depiction of music as a history is the closest we can come to defining the difference between reading *The Autobiography* as fiction versus reading it as fact.

### ***Along This Way: Staging the Facts***

Reading *The Autobiography* as Johnson’s life story made no sense in 1927; after all, the ex- colored man did not write as the United States’ consulate to Venezuela, which was Johnson’s position at the time of the novel’s inception. The more pressing issue was to discover whether or not Johnson’s narrator was a mouthpiece for Johnson’s political views on the race question. But in *Along This Way*, Johnson stages “the facts” with the same kind of diplomacy that he employs in *The Autobiography*. Hence, readers may not be getting at an authentic Johnson in the pages of his factual autobiography any more than they are getting him in his novel. *Along This Way* reads with what Robert E. Fleming calls a “temperate tone,” where the social commentary is not a “vitriolic” editorial on race relations but a diplomatic interpretation of particular moments which

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<sup>141</sup> Sollors 173.

Johnson aims at a double audience.<sup>142</sup> This form is clearly one that Johnson had practiced in *The Autobiography* and thus, *Along This Way* does not clarify Johnson's views as well as it could.

The ex-colored man, for example, manages to extol the virtues of an openly racist Texan in an effort to show an understanding for both sides of the race question. As Fleming discovers in Johnson's notes for *Along This Way*, Johnson writes, "Southern white people—as a whole—I hate so cordially it is going to be very difficult for me to be fair with them." Yet this hatred never surfaces in his autobiography. Johnson makes it very clear in *Along This Way* that his philosophy, even as a song writer, had always been to reach the widest possible audience. He explains why the tune "The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes" had been popular enough to make a profit:

It needed little analysis to see that a song written in exclusive praise of blue eyes was cut off at once from about three-fourths of the possible chances for universal success...So we worked on the chorus of our song until, without making it a catalogue, it was inclusive enough to make any girl who sang it or to whom it was sung to fancy herself the maiden with the dreamy eyes.<sup>143</sup>

His books, like his song, aim for universal success, which would not be granted to someone who favors or disfavors particular racial groups. By catering, even in the lyrics of "Dreamy Eyes," to many racial groups, Johnson had successfully marketed his talent. Moreover, the song lyrics proclaim that a maiden's inner-thoughts cannot be represented by the color or shape of her eyes; it is the "dreamy" quality of the maiden's eyes that reveals her true thoughts. He thinks beyond race into the universal themes of courtship and love. In contrast to *The Autobiography*, however, with its emotional account of first

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<sup>142</sup> Robert E. Fleming, "James Weldon Johnson's *Along This Way*: Text and Subtext," *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson*, eds., Price and Oliver (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1997) 225.

<sup>143</sup> Johnson, 180. The lyrics of the song are as follows: "There are eyes of blue,/ There are brown eyes too,/ There are eyes of every size/ And eyes of every hue;/ But I surmise/ That if you are wise/ You'll be careful of the maiden/ With the dreamy eyes."

love, *Along This Way* does not expose the intimate details of Johnson's experiences in his private life; for example, Johnson acknowledges his wife, Grace Nail, if only to thank her for her support. The "temperate tone" of Johnson's autobiography makes it feel like much is being held back from the reader.

If Johnson ever felt anti-Semitic due to Jewish involvement in the production of Black music or otherwise, he never revealed it in *Along This Way*. Despite the fact that Johnson worked alongside many Jews in the music business and in the NAACP, Johnson labeled only one figure in his autobiography as Jewish, "the strikingly beautiful woman" who, for a stint, was his friend D—'s girlfriend:

D— took in the homage I silently paid her... When she had gone, D— proceeded to enlighten me fully on what I had already guessed to be the main point. The young lady was a Jewess; she belonged to a very nice family; she knew that he was colored but her family did not; he was deeply in love with her; she was deeply in love with him. He enlarged on the last two points.<sup>144</sup>

Johnson, like his protagonist, seemed to have some special radar for recognizing Jewish people. (Perhaps Jews are not as chameleonic as the stereotype makes them out to be.) Like the Jew on the train car, there was nothing overtly Jewish about this woman, whose "face was symmetrically perfect." Yet somehow, Johnson had "already guessed" she was Jewish. The main point that Johnson does not highlight but insinuates is that his friend D— had once again been on intimate terms with people outside his own race, people who were "very nice" when he was passing, but who might not have accepted him otherwise. Jewishness did not have the same status as whiteness, but there was enough of a social separation between D— and the Jewish woman to merit a relationship that needed to be kept from her family. Johnson's tone reveals his suspicions about D—'s affairs, but he otherwise keeps his judgments to himself. Just as D— chooses to emphasize "the last

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<sup>144</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 241.

two points,” Johnson diplomatically keeps much to himself. He never displays the kind of anti-Semitic assumptions in *Along This Way* that the ex-colored man does in *The Autobiography*, which could signal that Johnson inserted the anti-Semitism typical of the era into the novel though he did not feel anti-Semitic himself. But considering Johnson’s statement, “Make me a Jew,” and the close dealings he had with so many Jewish people, the absence of Johnson’s discussion of Jews is surprising.

What is not being said about Jews in *Along This Way* is not being said for a reason. Perhaps diplomacy kept Johnson from making offensive judgments, or perhaps he chose to judge people as individuals, the way he would want to be judged himself, without the static racial and ethnic stereotypes. Moreover, many Jews in the throes of the assimilation process did not call attention to their own Jewishness, so it makes sense that Johnson did not call attention to it either. But in subtle ways, Johnson does call attention to the difference of racial status between Jews and African Americans. At one point in his autobiography, Johnson recalls Florenz Ziegfeld, the famous vaudeville producer known for “Ziegfeld’s Follies.” Johnson recalls an incident in which he and his brother Rosamond, because of their race, were denied access to the elevator that would take them up to Ziegfeld’s apartment for a business meeting:

Ziegfeld came down at once and for some minutes had the stormiest kind of scene... He protested and threatened. Mr. Ziegfeld escorted us to the elevator, ushered us in, stepped in himself and ordered the boy to take him up to his apartment. Up we went... This incident was indicative of Zeigfeld’s attitude on race. As a producer, he not only recognized that there was Negro talent, but he dared to give that talent an opportunity.<sup>145</sup>

Johnson never mentions Ziegfeld’s Jewishness because Ziegfeld had fully assimilated into show business much the same way that Jackie Robin did in *The Jazz Singer*.

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<sup>145</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 181.

However, the driving subtext of the scene above is that Ziegfeld has the racial status to literally elevate the Johnson brothers. Johnson says nothing about how about the frustration and anger he must have experienced while being denied the use of elevator without Ziegfeld's sponsorship. Johnson does not use this moment to complain about the unfair position of Jews as the middlemen of Black success. Instead, he praises Ziegfeld's daring attitude on race. As Olivier Asselin explains in "Autofictions, or elective identities," it is plausible that "any autobiography contains elements of fiction."<sup>146</sup> When remembering actual events, the process of imagination is imperfect in the retelling of a situation as it actually occurred. In the case of *Along This Way*, Johnson causes the reader to get a skewed sense of his actual feelings; he "remembers" events in a way that fits with his diplomatic agenda, thus manipulating facts to produce a more broadly appealing self.

The process of writing fictional alter-selves was integral to Johnson's creation of the autonomous self he presented in *Along This Way*. In Joseph T. Skerret's seminal essay "Irony and Symbolic Action," Skerret close reads *Along This Way* in juxtaposition with *The Autobiography* in order to reveal that Johnson's narrator is not a mouthpiece for Johnson's views, but rather an ironic version of Johnson's psyche, which "served as a therapeutic—or symbolic—slaying of a hesitant and reluctant old self, and fortification of confidence for the years of leadership work that lay ahead." Skerret finds that "The narrator...is a projection of Johnson and his alter ego, D.; through the duality of the tragic/ironic narrative, Johnson 'outers' and then exorcises the weakness he saw so clearly in (and shared with) D.—the temptation to desire and to seek a less heroic, less

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<sup>146</sup> Olivier Asselin, "Autofictions, or elective identities," Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine 105.1-3 (January, 2002): 10-19.



painful identity than their blackness imposed upon them.”<sup>147</sup> Indeed, Johnson draws upon experiences of his life and aspects of his psyche in creating fiction, as do most, if not all, fiction writers. But the ex-colored man is not an embellishment of Johnson’s demons; he is a means for Johnson to follow those demons to their logical end in order for Johnson to know why and how he must reject them. Like the continually passing back-and-forth narrator, and the stereotypically chameleonic Jew, Johnson tests out multiple possibilities of self-definition.

If *Along This Way* clarified nothing else except the fact that Johnson had multiple selves—and that he indeed valued his chance to play a rather extreme variety of roles such as educator, writer, musician, leader, scholar and politician so long as he got to reach a variety of people—this information should have been enough to daunt a readership intent on exfoliating Johnson’s texts down to some pure truth despite the layers of façade. Yet perhaps when Johnson wished upon the jinnee to make him a Jew, he was not simply craving to be “that which could become anything,” but to be that which remained mysterious and unknowable.<sup>148</sup> Johnson could have chosen Jewishness for the quality that kept them as constant “outsiders,” because that way he could write without having to be representative. But Black authors and Jewish authors share the problems inherent in representative writing by ethnic minorities. As we shall see, when Bernard Malamud, Fran Ross, and Philip Roth develop the “autobiographical gesture” as a signatory strategy—without any notion of diplomacy—they deal with even harsher consequences of ethnic representation.

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<sup>147</sup> Joseph T. Skerret, “Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*,” *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson*, eds. Price and Oliver. (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1997) 85-86.

<sup>148</sup> Itzkovitz says, “the wish to become a Jew might be read here as a desire to become that which would become anything—not unlike wishing for an unlimited number of wishes” (42).

Bernard Malamud and Fran Ross:  
Satirical Definitions of Self as Other

In most categories commonly employed to distinguish identity—including gender, race, and class—Bernard Malamud and Fran Ross have nothing in common; they do not even share writerly status. While Malamud’s *oeuvre* has earned him a widespread popular and academic readership, a serious body of critical response, a Pulitzer Prize for fiction and two National Book Awards, Fran Ross’s lone novel—despite its genius—is practically cast off as a literary fluke born out of her desire to be a comic writer for Richard Pryor, and it has been just barely rescued from the obscurity that left Ross impoverished at the end of her lifetime. Yet the unlikely juxtaposition of Malamud’s *The Tenants* (1971) and Ross’s *Oreo* (1974) not only helps to resurrect Ross’s important contribution to American literature, but it also reveals the shared tactics of a “Jewish” author and a “Black” author who reject the limits of ethnic labels. In both texts, satirical inversions of Self as Other (Jewish self as Black other and vice-versa) express the ironic realities of multi-cultural sampling in America, thus challenging the divisive nature of ethnic identity. *The Tenants* and *Oreo* are certainly timely in addressing the contexts of 1970s America: post-war ethnic identity, the consequences of the Black Arts movement, and waning Black-Jewish relations. But Malamud and Ross also use cross-ethnic satire as a mode of resistance to the ethnic labels that categorize and limit their writing; each writer imagines the Self as Other as a means to escape communal identity and express individual identity.

**The Historical Context of Cross-Ethnic Satire in the 1970s**

Malamud and Ross take up the theme of Black-Jewish relations in the 1970s as the foundation of their novels. Though Jewish citizens were by no means free of anti-

Semitism in the United States, they were, by and large, catapulted out of the marginal space that African Americans were left to occupy after World War II. Though elements of cross-resonance remained, Black-Jewish relations often became synonymous with Black-White relations, in which Jews were an ethnic extension of an overall white oppressor that denied Blacks from participating in the growing middle class and post-war economic boom.<sup>149</sup> In *The Tenants*, Levenspiel, a Jewish landlord, seeks to renovate and upscale the tenement which serves as the setting for the novel, thus displacing the poor ethnic population that inhabited it. Meanwhile, he refuses to renovate his property in Harlem and balks about rent control in Black neighborhoods; his antagonism toward African Americans evokes images of the Jewish slumlord in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Amiri Baraka's "owner-jews" in his poem "Black Art" (1969), both of which criticize Jewish-Americans for the post-war opportunism that Levenspiel exemplifies. Malamud's creation of Levenspiel, however, is clearly type-driven; Levenspiel's over-zealous use of Yiddishisms and "the Jewish guilt trip" are intended as a satire on Jewish stereotypes. After all, he does not share these characteristics with the other Jewish characters in the novel. Translations of the name "Levenpiel" further suggest that he is a symbolic character designed to play a part. The name Levenspiel is reminiscent of Philip Roth's character Dr. Spielvogel from *Portnoy's Complaint* (a novel which certainly employs satirical typecasting). Both names derive from the Yiddish for "a play" or "to play." Spielvogel and Levenspiel are stereotypically Jewish characters,

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<sup>149</sup> To some extent, Black-Jewish relations already followed this paradigm, but before the war, it was more probable that Blacks and Jews related on terms of minority status. See two essays on "Historical Impressions of Black-Jewish relations prior to World War II" in *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States*, eds. Maurianne Adams and John Bracey (Amherst: Massachusetts University Press, 1999) 34-50. These essays explore the tensions and cross-empathies of Blacks and Jews before the war.

the Freud-like intellectual and the greedy landlord/businessman, who are, as Edward Abramson suggests, *leben spiel*, “playing life” to fit into a non-Jewish world.<sup>150</sup> I would suggest that *Levenspiel* might also translate into *lavan spiel*, “playing white,” enforcing a binary that makes him racially superior to the African American tenants who will take the Jewish place in the ghetto. *Oreo* plays on a reversal of this binary. Ross begins her novel with a genealogical description of her protagonist’s Black maternal grandfather, James, who hates Jews: “After the war, James had enough money saved to start his own mail order business. He purposely cultivated a strictly Jewish clientele, whom he overcharged outrageously... His mind usually jumped then to ways in which he could take advantage of Jewish children” (Ross 5, 16).<sup>151</sup> The products central to James’ mail order business, which include *latkes*, *dreidels*, *hamantaschen* and dartboards that feature “all the men you love to hate from Haman to Hitler,” commodify Jewish identity (Ross 6). When Ross sets up the African American who takes on stereotypical opportunistic characteristics of the Jewish-American, she reveals the nature of and diminishes the power of the stereotype. The fact that Ross knows so much about Jewish identity demonstrates that cross-ethnic trading is more common than the stereotype suggests.

That Ross’s knowledge is cross-ethnic—that it is not constrained by ethnic identity—challenges certain aspects of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. The Black Arts Movement promoted the creation of a Black aesthetic meant to capture the essence of the Black experience as a means of uniting the Black population in diaspora. This occurred in tandem with many ethnic groups’ reclamation of ethnic identity; because the war had made ethnics feel American, it had also made them feel it was acceptable to

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<sup>150</sup> Edward A. Abramson, *Bernard Malamud Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993) 94.

<sup>151</sup> Fran Ross, *Oreo* (1974; Greyfalcon House, Inc.; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).

be ethnic-American. It was especially important in the post-war United States to honor ethnic distinction in direct opposition to the kind of thinking that led to the genocide of the Holocaust.<sup>152</sup> Despite the harsh resistance to desegregation, the aims of the Civil Rights Movement were achieved partly because they resonated with country's post-war desire to espouse anti-Hitlerian ideology. There was a new kind of national value placed on ethnic distinctions, a pluralism that further divided the arts into the ethnic categories established during the rise of local color fiction.<sup>153</sup> The African American aesthetic was particularly representative of the times because the struggle for equality and ethnic pride symbolized post-war sentiment.

It is important to note, however, that the Black Arts Movement did not produce a singular aesthetic. Rather, an array of political countercurrents within the movement formed something fuller and more elastic: a complex set of ideologies and modes of expression that managed to serve the diversity of the Black population rather than reduce it to "race." Hence, I will discuss the products of the Black Arts Movement and the Black aesthetic as "ethnic"—despite the fact that BAM experts typically link the Black aesthetic with race.<sup>154</sup> Ethnicity is created when differences come in contact. A group might be defined by its difference in relation to other groups by an aesthetic that is a product of racial difference, but an aesthetic is only concerned with the biology or

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<sup>152</sup> This is true despite the fact that the United States never fully recovered the losses of the Asian-Americans who were rounded up and held in internment camps.

<sup>153</sup> See James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005). Smethurst examines the connection between the Black Arts Movement and the Chicano, Nuyorican, and Asian American movements: "The continuing influence of African American, Chicana/o, and Asian American nationalism can be seen in literature produced since 1975" (2). Literature is categorized by the ethnicity of the person writing it.

<sup>154</sup> The Black Arts Movement, as Smethurst defines it, emphasized "the need to develop, or expand upon, a distinctly African American or African culture that stood in opposition to white culture or cultures" (15). Though Smethurst's use of the term "white" invokes race as the basis for "culture or cultures," the terms "African American or African" categorize Blackness in terms of nationality. Moreover, the plurality of the term "cultures" ascribed to whiteness dismantles the essentialist or race-based linkage of culture and race.

physiology of a race itself insofar as the racial experience is part of a social or political realm. The evolution of an aesthetic is not genetic, but social.<sup>155</sup> If it is transregional, it is due to circulation and commodification, not blood. As I hope to demonstrate, Ross's novel seems set up to reveal that because a group's aesthetic remains in contact with other aesthetics, the aesthetic is constantly adopting and diffusing "difference." Her response to the 1960s search to capture the Black experience is a satire on the notion of deterministic group identity.

When Malamud approaches this problem from the other side of the color line, he explores the Jewish attraction to the Black ethnic aesthetic. For Jewish-Americans coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s—the first post-Holocaust generation in America—making sense of the Black experience in America was a way to make sense of events that, although they occurred on a different continent, deeply affected their ethnic identity in America. Before the war, many Jews in America had calculated that assimilation was necessary in order to achieve economic and social equality. Edward Shapiro maintains that after the war, "traditional Jewish defensiveness was replaced by a vigorous espousal of Jewish interests," and that a renewed dedication to the upkeep of old world traditions and to equal rights was especially prominent among Jews because "assimilation appeared to be a cowardly betrayal of the six million European Jews who had been murdered."<sup>156</sup> Yet it is more evident that while post-Holocaust guilt/inspiration among American Jews may have sparked up pride in ethnic identity, few returned to old world practices of

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<sup>155</sup> See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993). Paul Gilroy's seminal work, *The Black Atlantic*, concludes by juxtaposing Blacks and Jews to examine the way that diaspora produces, specifically, "ethnic identity;" he cites Benjamin's argument that "social memory creates the chain of 'ethnic' tradition." The Black Arts Movement was, indeed, concerned with publicly remembering and drawing upon a shared past and experience as a means of reconstructing communal identity. 212.

<sup>156</sup> Edward S. Shapiro, "World War II and American Jewish Identity." *Modern Judaism* 10:1 (Feb. 1990) 73.

Jewish observance. Rather, many Jewish-Americans pursued various agendas of social action in connection with the concept of *tikkun olam*—fixing the world. Jewish-Americans participated in the Civil Rights Movement in alignment with *tikkun olam*, but also because the African American struggle for social equality helped Jews to come to terms with their own past in a way that was current. In other words, most traditional symbols of Jewish life—*tzit-tzit*, the *yarmulke*, Jewish women’s hair coverings, klezmer music—did not become vogue inside or outside the Jewish community from the 1950s through the early 1970s. The Black aesthetic—which included the *dashiki*, the Afro, jazz—was a current expression of the struggle for ethnic equality, one that was widely copied and commodified. For all these reasons, *The Tenants*’ Jewish protagonist maintains a guilt-ridden and fraught relationship with the Black writer despite the obvious disdain and disrespect the Black writer shows him. But if *The Tenants* portrays the Black aesthetic as an unattainable vogue, Ross makes the Jewish culture vogue as well. Ultimately, though, Malamud and Ross illustrate the faultiness of ethnicity and ethnic stereotypes as vogue and trendy.

Malamud and Ross’s use of cross-ethnic satire is meant to advocate post-ethnic identity. Post-ethnic identity does not require the absolute abandonment of ethnicity or complete assimilation into a unified national identity, but rather it permits ethnic categories to be fluid, less binding, and open to forces of cultural diffusion. In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors’s discussion of ethnic writing is useful as a way into an examination of post-ethnic identity:

Writers of national fame or of striking formal accomplishments or of international fame are often categorically excluded from the realm of ethnic writing... Ethnic writing is equated with parochialism... The forms of American ethnic literature surely deserve to be treated more seriously than if they were humble and

involuntary by-products of ‘genuine’ ethnic themes or unmediated results of a minor author’s parentage.<sup>157</sup>

If to be considered equal is to have an equal chance at being considered truly great, then according to Sollors, ethnicity is a hindrance to the potential for equal recognition. But Sollors goes on to say that ethnicity does not actually limit writing; rather, ethnicity provides opportunities for authors to play different roles for insider and outsider audiences, and ethnic identity also affords authors special insight into sub-cultural innovations and *avant garde* movements. Malamud and Ross, it seems, use cross-ethnic identity as an escape from the trap of static identity, but simultaneously they rely on conventions of ethnicity to be innovative. Cross-ethnic satire connotes that an author’s art is “mediated;” when Malamud and Ross employ ethnic materials not their own, they are not dismissive of ethnicity as a major force in American life; they simply circumscribe the boundaries of their minor parentage. Both *The Tenants* and *Oreo* rely on protagonists that reflect the author’s Self as Other in experiment with post-ethnic identity.

### **The Autobiographical Gesture as Post-Ethnic Self-Fashioning**

Unlike Philip Roth, whose autobiographical gesture is transmitted through his overt employment of doubles and alter egos, Malamud and Ross have a less open relationship to their protagonists. The autobiographical gesture has thus far been defined as the infusion of an author’s “real life” experiences into a text 1) as a means for that author to work out personal issues in the space of fiction or 2) as a series of “meta-narratological” moments. Marc Manganaro describes “meta-narratological texts” as those that shift between fiction and fact because the facts are actually more easily relayed

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<sup>157</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 241-243.



through fiction.<sup>158</sup> Malamud and Ross employ the autobiographical gesture in these ways, using fiction as political protest against the ethnicized roles into which they have been cast. Malamud, however, strictly opposes the presumption that his protagonists serve in any way as *doppelgangers* despite the personal details that seem to inform their creation; yet, in *The Tenants*, the protagonists' signification of Malamud's particular craft of writing and its connection to ethnicity is impossible for critics to ignore. Similarly, Ross's Black female protagonist in *Oreo* could be considered an alter ego. It is not the details of Oreo's life that make this so, but the political message that Ross has breathed into her. It is not that the protagonists equal their authors, but that both novels work on a "meta" level, reflecting on their own creativity in a sort of artistic self-promotion. In other words, both Malamud and Ross construct fictional texts that relay their own circumstances concerning the fraught relationship between writing and ethnicity.

*The Tenants* takes on the Black Power politics of its literary era, as well as issues concerning Jewish literary assimilation and appropriation, by positioning protagonists Harry Lesser and Willie Spearmint together in an allegorical Jamesian (i.e. American) House of Fiction. As Lesser painstakingly attempts to perfect his third novel, which is to be the redemption text after his bomb of a second book, he suffers two major distractions. Lesser's landlord, Levenspiel, wants Lesser out, but Lesser is afraid that to finish the book elsewhere would interrupt its continuity. Lesser fends off Levenspiel but is again antagonized when Willie Spearmint, a Black writer pounding out a first book on an old typewriter, squats in the otherwise abandoned building a few floors below. Lesser's relationship with the Black writer is fraught on both sides with racism, self-hatred, and confused but sometimes friendly moments of cross-ethnic identity appropriation.

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<sup>158</sup> Marc Manganaro, *Culture, 1922* (Princeton University Press, 2002) 183.

An examination of the autobiographical crossovers between Malamud and Lesser reveals that Lesser embodies Malamud's own writerly fears. As Emily Miller Budick explains it,

the story of the Jewish writer, whose Jewish identity extends no further than his identifying himself as genetically Jewish and taking offense at the occasional anti-Semitic utterance, is an allegory of Malamud's own career as a nominally Jewish writer... *The Tenants* expresses the worry that the fertility and vitality of the American Jewish imagination may be doomed to sterility...<sup>159</sup>

Certainly, as *The Tenants* was coming to fruition in the late 1960s, Malamud could recognize the mainstream influence and popularity of the Black Arts, and the waning sense of "otherness" that characterized the Jewish subjects of his fiction. Malamud did not regard himself as Other. He usually denied self-identification with his Jewish characters, claiming them only as a means to tell an all-American story.<sup>160</sup> Malamud maintained that his Jewish characters were not true depictions of his insider knowledge, but symbolic and without the ability to be part of the American New World in which Malamud imagined himself. Besides, Malamud's nominally Jewish identity, shortly after the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, generally qualified him as white according to mainstream American society.<sup>161</sup> However, Malamud's writerly identity was constantly classified as Jewish because of his Jewish subject matter and due to the aesthetic turn to classify American literature according to an ethnic rubric. Furthermore, American Jews felt the right to claim Malamud as part of their ethnic collective with or

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<sup>159</sup> Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 15-16.

<sup>160</sup> See Alan Cheuse and Nicholas Delbanco, *Talking Horse: Bernard Malamud on Life and Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Malamud explains, "the story of the Jews, their history and culture, and the Jews themselves as people, are so rich in the ingredients of drama, so fruitful as a source image, idea, and symbol, that I feel I can at present more fully, even more easily, achieve my purpose as an American writer by writing of them" (184).

<sup>161</sup> See Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *How Jews became white folks and what that says about race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 138-174.

without his consent because they felt fortified by the mainstream success of his Jewish subject matter. As Evelyn Avery suggests, despite Malamud's claim that he was "'a writer who happened to be Jewish'...he had been adopted to represent a tribe of wanderers, the tribe of American Jews."<sup>162</sup> Malamud's representation of the condition of wandering Jews defined them as part of a place and a historical moment, which paradoxically diminished the condition of Jews as outsiders. *The Tenants* does less to describe Lesser's "Jewish" homelessness and more to emphasize the quality of Spearmint's "African American" homelessness. Lesser's Jewish landlord, for example, offers to pay him to move out of the tenement into the real world, yet Spearmint is never even legitimately allowed into the tenement. The quality of Jewish wandering that Malamud represents has been passed along to other outsiders in America.

In some ways, the connection between Malamud and *Yiddishkeit* simply typifies the American trendiness of collective ethnicity. He says,

As for collective experience as a subject matter, there are sometimes advantages of great inspiration, as well as scope, if one is committed to a cause he wants to write about. For instance, if one has talent, and is committed, it is for obvious reasons an advantage to be black now, as it was to be Jewish (and is diminishingly) when I began to write. I say "if one has talent" because I am told by some editors that too many manuscripts by young blacks are little more than agit-propaganda. Thus far there is only one Ralph Ellison. Not all blacks, merely because they are black, can write well about the racial and political problems of blacks.<sup>163</sup>

Malamud's explanation here translates into Lesser and Spearmint's experience. For Lesser, this means that his old methods of writing are out-dated; he admires Spearmint's writing for the raw, fresh edge that his own lacks. Each time he is about to land the perfect ending to his novel, thoughts of Spearmint—his Blackness especially—fill Lesser

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<sup>162</sup> Evelyn Avery, introduction, *The Magic Worlds of Bernard Malamud* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001) xvii.

<sup>163</sup> Cheuse and Delbanco 115.

with self-doubt about his writing. Yet like Malamud, Lesser recognizes the flaws in Spearmint's approach, especially his inexperience with form; for Malamud and Lesser, Black writing is not good writing just because it is contemporary to the social sympathies or aesthetics of a moment. Malamud is not insinuating that there will always be "only one Ralph Ellison" due to lack of talent, but rather pointing to the problems inherent in naïve representations of collective identity that sell because "race and ethnicity" are fashionable forces in popular culture.

In an attempt to escape the fate he might encounter as a prototypical Jewish writer, Malamud uses Lesser and Spearmint to experiment with the relationship between ethnic aesthetics in American fiction and to philosophize on the ways that writing creates ethnicity and ethnicity creates writing. Certainly, their writerly issues reflect Malamud's own experience. However, throughout *Talking Horse*, a compendium of interviews and insights that perhaps stands in for the autobiography Malamud never wrote, Malamud does not mask his annoyance with readers who locate his work as autobiographical. Malamud sums up his intentions for *The Tenants* by claiming that he just meant to "say a word" about Black-Jewish relations in the sixties, and offers an emphatic (read: sarcastic) "Oh, no!" when asked if he is anything like the two main characters in the novel.<sup>164</sup> Yet I maintain that Lesser and Spearmint are vehicles through which Malamud extends an autobiographical gesture. Lesser serves as a means to explore the craft of writing from a nominally Jewish perspective. Spearmint is Malamud's African American double—an

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<sup>164</sup> Cheuse and Delbanco 126. In *Talking Horse*, Malamud says, "There are people who always want to make you a character in your stories and want you to confirm it" (11); he complains that although *Dubin's Lives* evolved significantly from autobiographical details, readers interested in his personal connections to the text are basically prone to "gossip" (121). Malamud's easy explanation here, however, begs re-examination, especially coming from a writer who ardently warns "that one ought not to trust the author's explanation of the tale" (51). During a telling moment between the writers inside *The Tenants*, Lesser says to Willie, "The book has the tone of autobiography, but even if it's pure fiction the point is that something is not coming off right or you wouldn't have asked me to read it" (73).

*uber*-ethnicized vehicle through which to explore the craft of writing. The Malamud-Spearmint doubling most saliently emerges when Malamud must imagine himself as a Black writer to compose the lines that Spearmint writes as a Black writer. The Malamud-Lesser doubling echoes this aspect of the Malamud-Spearmint doubling because Lesser imagines himself as Spearmint in an attempt to capture the raw zeal of Spearmint's Black literary voice and to gain inspiration from Spearmint's masculinity and sexual energy.

*The Tenants* can be read as a sort of meta-novel in which the doubling of characters symbolizes Malamud's tedious drafting process. In his real life creative writing workshops, Malamud had stressed the importance of the tedious drafting process and maintained that he composed "many more than I call three" drafts of each idea.<sup>165</sup> Malamud takes both his novel and his characters through this struggle step by step; hence, readers of *The Tenants* get to see at least three different endings, which are difficult to place as belonging either to Lesser's novel or Malamud's.<sup>166</sup> The first ending that *The Tenants* includes comes after only 20 pages of text and relays a sense of resignation due to failure.

The writer stands on the roof in the midst of winter... Up goes the place in roaring flames. The furnace explodes not once, but twice, celebrating both generations of its existence. The building shudders, but Harry, at his desk and writing well, figures it's construction in the neighborhood and carries on as the whining fire and boiling shadows rush up the smelly stairs. Within the walls lit cockroaches fly up, each minutely screaming. Nobody says no, so the fire surges its inevitable way upwards and with a convulsive roar flings open Lesser's door.

END OF NOVEL (Malamud 23)<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Cheuse and Delbanco 23.

<sup>166</sup> See Edward A. Abramson, 99. In the larger discussion of *The Tenants*' multiple endings, many critics seem to work off of or along the same lines as Abramson's perspective on the issue.

<sup>167</sup> Bernard Malamud, *The Tenants* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). All references to this text will be cited with the author's name and page number.

In this passage, Lesser seems to be imagining his own death, or killing himself off with his imagination—unless there is someone else writing his death, like a publisher, a harsh critic, or some alternate narrative voice in Malamud’s self-doubting creative mind. It could simply be Malamud’s voice that stipulates “END OF NOVEL,” making him a character in his own novel. But if it is the end of one novel, it is the beginning of something else; on the next page, the Black writer enters the text, thus commencing Lesser and Malamud’s re-casting of self as the Black writer.

The relationship between the re-casting of Self as Other and the autobiographical gesture is key to the doubling that occurs in *The Tenants*. If it were up to Malamud, his drafting process would not stop at his text. In trying to emphasize the importance of drafting to a group of writers in Knoxville, Malamud admits: “What you say the first time is generally off the top of the head... This is why you write second drafts... For example, if I could reinvent myself, I would re-invent myself with more thought between what I say and what I think.”<sup>168</sup> In *The Tenants*, Lesser’s yearning to reinvent himself echoes Malamud’s own sentiments concerning self-revision. For example, after one of Lesser’s socially awkward attempts to communicate with socially hip African Americans, we get a first person stream of Lesser’s conscience: “I write it right but I say it wrong, Lesser thought. I write it right because I revise so often. What I say is unrevised and often wrong” (Malamud 124). This quest for reinvention is what interests me most in terms of Malamud’s autobiographical gesture; Lesser expresses Malamud’s frustration with a socially non-progressive, played out Jewish voice. In *The Tenants*, Malamud experiments with the Black aesthetic in order to make his voice new again. Elisa New

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<sup>168</sup> Cheuse and Delbanco 119.

credits Malamud with the “watershed moment when the tendency to a particular ‘impurity’ in Jewish art became a defining feature.” She writes,

...it was Malamud more than any other Jewish writer who opened the novel to emerging forms of representation and did so precisely by narrowing novelistic scope... [*The Tenants*] traded the edifying moral persuasion that had been Malamud’s earlier specialty for simple, often bluntly violent force—the same force we now associate with rap videos, or with Spike Lee joint productions.<sup>169</sup>

While many critics link discussions of *The Tenants* with “Angel Levine” (1955) and “Black Is My Favorite Color” (1963), the two short stories that foreground Malamud’s interest in Black-Jewish relations, New seems to recognize *The Tenants* as a point of departure from these earlier, more equality-based expositions of the issue. Malamud’s novel has a vendetta more personal than a story and wants to find a way to say something that Jewish literature was too polite to say before. The novel keeps trying to end in order to express something beyond what narrative form can contain, which is why Spearmint’s Black aesthetic, despite its questionable form, has such power. Spearmint, indeed, evokes the “bluntly violent force” of which New speaks; Malamud and Lesser imagine themselves as Spearmint in order to integrate that force into re-cast and revised selves.

Yet Malamud is ultimately cynical about the cross-ethnic recasting of the Self as Other because the ethnic labeling of individuals is inevitably devious. In a highly cinematic ending—the second ending of the three major endings in *The Tenants*—Malamud presents the violent deaths of both Lesser and Spearmint:

One night Willie and Lesser met in a grassy clearing in the bush. The night was moonless above the moss-dripping, rope entwined trees. Neither of them could see the other but sensed where he stood. Each heard himself scarcely breathing.

“Bloodsuckin Jew Niggerhater.”

“Anti-Semitic Ape.”

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<sup>169</sup> Elisa New, “Film and the flattening of Jewish-American fiction: Bernard Malamud, Woody Allen and Spike Lee in the City,” *Contemporary American Jewish Literature* (Fall 1993) v34 n3, 425.

Their metal glinted in hidden light, perhaps starlight filtering greenly through the dense trees. Willie's eyeglass frames momentarily gleamed. They aimed at each other accurate blows. Lesser felt his jagged ax sink through bone and brain as the groaning black's razor-sharp saber, in a single boiling stabbing slash, cut the white's balls from the rest of him.

Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other.

THE END (Malamud, underline mine, 230)

The “grassy clearing” is a neutral space outside of the tenement as house of marginalized American fiction; the adjectival description of this space evokes the universality of the writerly imagination. Both writers are equally threatened here, however, by the ambiance of a lynching among “rope-entwined trees,” trapped by ethnic perceptions of themselves and each other. The protagonists feel an intense need for revenge. Blinded by anger and pride, each accuses the other of the same crime with a sort of puerile, preemptive insult that evokes the negativity of ethnic labeling. The twist in this ending, as both Black and Jew relate to each other's anguish, is the mysterious “writer” who forgets to stop recording the voice-over of events in his mind; he serves to imagine the climactic moment of empathy between two writers who understand the universal quality writing. Whether or not Malamud has written his actual voice into the text as this mysterious writer, or as the writer who officially closes the scene with “THE END,” he has extended his opinion on the divisiveness of ethnic labeling among writers in *The Tenants*. Hence, the novel truly ends with the landlord's plea for “mercy” repeated on the final page 113 times. Readers are not only meant to hear the call, but to visualize it—to see something that Malamud has not been able to convey in the novel's form: a quality of universalism among peoples in which the human imagination exists transcendent of forms and boundaries.



Ross's novel responds to some of the more exclusionary definitions of ethnicity within the Black Arts movement in the 1960s, a large branch of which sought to establish a Black literature and culture as a separate sort of nationalism. One trend within the Black Arts Movement was to define Black difference through an angry casting out of anything lacking Black authenticity. Ross Posnock describes Amiri Baraka's propagation of this ideology: "Rejecting white, embracing black: these are the exclusionary moves mandated by his zero-sum 'supremacy game.' The absolutism... testifies to his need for expiation and the futility of finding it."<sup>170</sup> *Oreo*, the story of Christine Clark Schwartz, speaks to the futility involved in locating and living according to an originary ethnic identity. As her protagonist's name suggests, and as the nickname "Oreo" reifies, Ross portrays the opposite of singular ethnicity. Though Oreo, on the surface, socially identifies as Black, she is endowed with a special ability to employ a variety of dialects and languages—an American melting pot of communicative modes. Her task is to learn "the secret of her birth" via a mock Hellenic epic journey aimed at locating her Jewish father. Along the way, Oreo manages to dominate a diverse range of encounters by drawing upon her cross-ethnic knowledge. Ultimately, her experiences and talents reveal that the "secret of her birth" is something akin to the genetics of multicultural America. She survives her journey because she refuses ethnic classification.

Ross's novel, as a third person narration of one's search to discover identity, is not a typical example of autobiographical fiction, but as in *The Tenants*, its form and genre lend to a pervasive sense of construction and an ethno-political self-fashioning

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<sup>170</sup> Ross Posnock, Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998) 247.

behind the construction. As feminist scholars Susan Stanford Friedman and Anne Goldman argue in their respective essays “Women’s Autobiographical Selves” and “Autobiography, Ethnography and History,” traditional models of autobiography—usually first person narratives by white, heterosexual males—do not take into account the communal labels that usually prevent women and minorities from competing in the market of purely “individualistic paradigms” of self-expression.<sup>171</sup> Just as often as societal forces categorize women’s autobiography and auto-ethnography as collective representations despite their personal natures, many autobiographical minority writings appear willing to speak for a collective and come across in alternate, non-first person narrative forms—such as cookbooks, labor histories, and fiction—seeking audiences that will identify with the author’s personal experience. This genre might include elements of history and folklore with the voice of social critique in Sandra Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” or Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston’s autobiographical gesture in *Their Eyes* could be most closely related to Ross’s in *Oreo*. Ross parallels what Elizabeth Meese calls Hurston’s “performative quality...of oral narrative” where “[Hurston’s] aim...is to transform the separate texts within her text into an integrated text; that is, she melds Janie’s orality and the narrator’s intertexts into a unitary self-contained text that symbolizes ‘a form of feminist self definition.’”<sup>172</sup> In her discussion of *Their Eyes*, Nellie McKay points out that the male-centered tradition of autobiography is founded on an “unsituated” self, whereas female autobiography exists as

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<sup>171</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” and Anne Goldman, “Autobiography, Ethnography and History: A Model for Reading,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Smith and Waston (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

<sup>172</sup> Nellie McKay, “Crayon Enlargements of Life’: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography,” *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 56.

a representative self written as a “cultural act.”<sup>173</sup> A straightforward version of the “I” is not a requirement for Hurston or Ross in their autobiographical gesture, their female form of self-definition.

Ross specifically comes through her character—not just in terms of the personal details she incorporates into the novel, including her own journey from her hometown of Philadelphia to New York—but more importantly concerning a message about the fate of Black Arts and her relationship to it as a writer. In her self-reflexive gestures, Ross 1) speaks as a Black female writer 2) through a Black female protagonist 3) without allowing that character to become idiosyncratic of a Black female collective 4) in response to the exclusionary practices of the Black Arts movement. In *Oreo*’s introduction, which is the seed of the single article previously written about Ross, Harryette Mullen describes the author’s photograph on the original dust jacket. She is “a youthful-looking black woman with full lips and a kinky fro hairstyle, wearing hoop earrings, a necklace of large beads, and a garment that might be a dashiki... The epitome of Afrocentric style.”<sup>174</sup> These emblems of essential Blackness serve as a subversive manipulation of the essentialist popular aesthetics of the Blacks Arts Movement. Like her protagonist, Ross’s racialized exterior is, on one hand, belied by the possibilities within; the paradox is that she looks Black on the outside dust jacket and writes Jewish on the inside; hence, the book itself is an “oreo,” black on the outside and white on the inside. But Ross’s costume also claims Jewishness—and whatever else is inside—as a part of the Blackness on the outside. In effect, the oreo cookie has been all chewed up: Ross’s costume undermines essentialist conceptions of both Blackness and Jewishness.

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<sup>173</sup> McKay 52.

<sup>174</sup> Harryette Mullen, forward, *Oreo* by Fran Ross (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000) xvi.

Like Hurston, who did not write in the same vein as Alain Locke or Richard Wright—two of her harshest critics—Ross did not produce writing according to the prevailing ideological stance of the Black protest tradition.<sup>175</sup> As Mullen accurately terms it, Ross’s writing is “more eccentric than Afrocentric” (Ross xii) in its witty confrontation of the Black Arts’ paradoxical relationship to white America:

as much as it was concerned with defining the cultural distinctiveness of African Americans, the Black Arts movement also helped to create unprecedented opportunities for the creative expression of African Americans to enter and influence “mainstream” American culture. Sometimes the more “black rage” was vented in the work, the more the writer was celebrated... The more fluent in standard English, or other European languages, the more immersed in established literary culture, the more likely one might be accused of forsaking one’s own traditions, or abandoning the black community—by writing works it could not comprehend, or enjoy, or draw upon for inspiration in the coming revolution that radical activists envisioned. (Ross xii)

Ross responds to this situation by evoking the “Great Books” and Western ideals of form and by taking the canon’s Hellenic underpinnings to extremes. She presents the novel’s sequence of events as based on the events of Theseus; however, *Oreo* is more reminiscent of *Ulysses* than anything resembling a Hellenic system intending lucid form, order, and clarity. Therefore, the novel concludes with a three page summary called “A Key for Speed Readers, Nonclassicists, Etc.,” which offers a “Cliff’s Notes” breakdown of the plot reorganized to reveal its relationship to the Theseus myth. Ross offers *Oreo*’s mother, Helen, as the Aristotilian model of mathematically logical language. When Helen finds herself on the road missing her children, she characteristically expresses herself by using an equation that tries to quantify an intangible feeling:

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<sup>175</sup> In his introduction to *New Essays on Their Eyes...*, Michael Awkward explains that Wright and Locke criticized Hurston for failing to produce literature “that explored America’s historical mistreatment of blacks, boosting black self-esteem and changing racist white attitudes of African Americans in the process” (3).

$$C = H - MB^2$$

Where C = catharsis, psf  
 H = homesickness, cu ft  
 M = meanness, mep  
 B = Bell telephone, min (Ross 64)

Helen's mathematical genius and cerebral emotion are meant to refute stereotypes of African American emotionality over rationality. Furthermore, these equations within the text, as well as the visual layout of pictures, charts, symbols, and various fonts, are a way to break up the uniformity of typeface and are, instead, reminiscent of Ishmael Reed's eccentric collage in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972).<sup>176</sup> Reed's text, like Ross's, succeeds by manipulating mythologies. For the same reasons Ross parodies Western myth, Reed purposely highlights non-Western mythologies from Haiti and Egypt. Daryl Dickson-Carr explains that these "barbs at the sacred figures and ideas of Western cultures [are] not merely for the sake of humorous nihilistic destruction of each ideology, but instead to force the reader to question their hegemony."<sup>177</sup> Ross questions Western hegemony by drawing from as many traditions as she can to create a protagonist who can surmount a multicultural obstacle course. *Oreo* contains Yiddish (a remnant of Ross's frequent visits to her Jewish neighbor's corner store), cha-key-key-wah (a nonsensical and mocking mix of slang and highbrow speech), French, Italian when necessary, something akin to classical Hellenic syntax and various forms of Black English.

Ross infuses the novel with such a range of languages and cross-cultural information that there is no reader "cultured" enough to fully understand it. The five

<sup>176</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

<sup>177</sup> Daryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 152-153. For further discussion on Reed's use of mythology, see John Carlos Rowe's *The New American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 24.

page menu that *Oreo*'s grandmother creates for, ironically enough, a "home"-coming dinner, is a metaphor for the entire novel; among its foreign delicacies and mockery of "American and/or Jewish foods," it features "Leberknodel, samaki kavu, leche de coco, salami surprise Moshe Dayan, and Apple Pie with Oreo Crust" (Ross 68-72). In Ross's vision of American literature, home cooking gives new meaning to the term "melting pot." Werner Sollers's chapter, "Melting Pots," describes the iconography and typology that defines America as a cauldron or "alchemical laboratory" which produces a "trans ethnic" fusion of cohesive national character. Sollers also notes the way melting pot ideology can serve to unite regional and ethnic groups in resistance to large scale national fusion.<sup>178</sup> In the first view, there is a sense of lost individuality, a devaluation of ethnic origins. In the second, the prediction is that an ethnocentric group will not venture to experience dissimilarity. But *Oreo*'s dinner menu promotes a healthier model of cross cultural appreciation and diffusion in which individuality is valued and cross cultural knowledge is an art.

That *Oreo* makes recourse to many dialects and languages, though it might seem like a challenge to Afro-centrism, has roots in African American tradition. Her linguistic arsenal calls to mind Houston A. Baker's discussion of African American minstrelsy and the necessity for African American performers to speak in ways that resonate differently for different audiences. He writes:

Obviously, an Afro-African spokesperson who wished to engage in masterful and empowering play within the minstrel spirit house needed the uncanny ability to manipulate bizarre phonic legacies. For he or she had the task of transforming the mask and its sounds into negotiable discursive currency.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Sollers 83-99.

<sup>179</sup> Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 24.

If Ross is taking part in a kind of minstrel linguistic legacy, then the name “Oreo” might indicate that the dark cookie crust—to follow the metaphor—is a sort of mask. Christine uses her skin color and the societal assumptions that go with it just as much as her speech when it comes to passing. In the novel’s final resolving scene, Oreo finds herself needing to play the part of a stereotypically uneducated Black servant in order to convince the white worker at her father’s sperm bank to hand over the vials of her Jewish descent:

“He jus’ gib me de ‘scription. Say fill it.” She had decided to use Hap’s economical sentence structure and Louise’s down home accent... “I work fo’ ‘em... Send me fo’ ‘scriptions all de time,” she added, just loud enough to lead him to believe that she had not meant him to hear her...

“Now, what Mr. Sam’s las name?” she asked herself. “Begin with a *S*. Don’t tell me. I get it shortly.” She bit her lip. “Schwartz,” she said triumphantly. “That what it is—Schwartz.” [...] said Oreo, smiling her cookie smile. (Ross 203-204)

Like the name “Levenspiel,” which highlights ethnic identity as role playing, a way of “playing life,” the oral performance here conveys Ross’s mockery of the idea that there is “‘scription”—or prescribed way of being part of a race. The offensive nature of the minstrel-like performance is basically underplayed by the fact that Oreo performs that prescription as a transcription, and that the white desk clerk was foolish enough to fall for the act. Ultimately, the irony of her Black mask, and the oreo-cookie smile that evokes the stereotypical image of bright white teeth famed by a corked blackface, is that she uses it to dupe the white clerk while obtaining proof of her own white-Jewish ancestry.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> When I use the term “white-Jewish,” I am pointing to the unique case of Jewish identity as separately racial and ethnic. At the beginning of the 1900’s, Jews were considered a separate racial group regardless of skin color, yet somewhat based on stereotypical physical characteristics and customs. As Jewish identity assimilated to meet American cultural norms, Jewishness basically blended into the whiteness of the American majority; however, whiteness and Jewishness never became totally synonymous because Jewishness retained a stigma of ethnic “otherness,” and certain physical characteristics, such as a “Jewish nose,” bordered on being grounds for sub-racial classification. Additionally, not all Jews are considered “white” because not all Jews are of European descent. In *Oreo*, the surname Schwartz, which ironically means “black” in German, classifies the protagonist’s bloodline as European, which translates, in America,

Beyond this, she writes as a woman, so that what seems like a deprecation of “black rage”—like the Shaft-meets-Jackie Chan fighting technique she calls *hwip ass*—is actually a female adaptation of attitude and a celebration of women’s liberation.

If *The Tenants* can be understood as a cinema-inspired challenge to the limitations of Jewish writing, Oreó’s rendering of feminist attitude *is* to be confused with the depictions of Black superwomen out for revenge in blaxploitation films like *Coffy* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973). *Coffy*, played by Pam Grier, is the story of a self-appointed undercover investigator out to nab the crook responsible for her sister’s crack addiction. In *Cleopatra Jones*, Tamara Dobson stars as a one-woman police force, protecting Black neighborhoods from drug pushers through a mix of kung-fu and sex appeal. Oreó’s ultimately vengeful mission to discover her father’s rather scummy habits has the silly cinematic feel of these movies: frame-by-frame comic book caricatures, often of sex-crazed men, whom Oreó engages in contests of wit. The scene in which Oreó takes on a Black pimp named Parnell could be taken directly from *Coffy*, who dresses the part of a Jamaican prostitute in order to kill a mob boss. Oreó’s undercover work throughout the book exercises her ability to affect the trans-ethnic accents that *Coffy* uses as a means to pull off her Jamaican disguise, but Oreó’s sensuality is not as integral. The male writer and director of *Coffy* exposes Grier’s chest whenever possible and, during the prostitution scene that corresponds with Ross’s, *Coffy* defends herself by ripping off the other prostitutes’ shirts in a softly pornographic manner. Meanwhile, Ross’s female writing and directing puts a parodic spin on nudity during her bout with, Kirk, the pimp’s gimp:

She had stripped except for her mezuzah, sandals, and brassiere... She left the mezuzah on for irony’s sake, the sandals for comic affect, and the bra... because

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into “white.” The term “oreo” usually signifies someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside—not Jewish on the inside. Yet “white” and “Jewish” are being used interchangeably here.



she was going to be taking advantage enough of Kirk without adding unrequited lust to his handicaps, an unavoidable state of mind, she felt, once he got hind sight of her perfect twin roes (Song of Solomon 4:5), to say nothing of Parnell's reaction and—who knew?—a couple of the girls' besides. Oreo reached into her handbag and pulled out a protective device she carried with her at all times. She wedged it into her wedge. She was ready. (Ross 159)

The sexual empowerment here directly opposes the overtly exploitative framing of Blackness that occurs in all films of this genre in the 60's and 70's, regardless of the main character's gender. In the face of films made in the revolutionary vein of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which celebrates a Black male prostitute's triumph over "the man" as white women line up to experience his talents, Ross symbolically keeps Oreo's bra on—not to suggest that sensuality is something to hide, but rather something to guard. Ross's satirical moves call for the honor of Black bodies. Her use of cross-ethnic satire is not a deprecation of Blackness, but a means to question the prescribed roles into which African Americans have been cast. Hence, Oreo keeps the "mezuzah on for irony's sake" in order to challenge hyper-sexualized depictions of Black women by displaying the symbol of Jewish piety and modesty; yet when she cites Song of Solomon 4:5, she evokes the sexuality of Jewish women, and thus refrains from labeling Jewish women as prudish exceptions where sexuality is concerned.

Ross's use of satire is particularly pioneering in response to the question of Black innovation and humor in the 1970s because of the way it intersects with concurrent feminist issues. As Stephen Kercher notes in his description of satire in the 1970s: "With their concern over the deleterious effects of social conformity and their antipathy toward 'feminine' consumer culture and American women in general, liberal satirists by and large represented the prerogatives and individualist ethos of the mid-century middle-class

male.”<sup>181</sup> The masculine enterprise of satire found its most popular venues in publications like *Playboy*. Ross’s sometimes porno-cinematic imagination as a version of female sexual empowerment seems like an attempt to enter the *Playboy* arena, a tactically mimetic move to be heard among the male voices. Yet Oreo’s self-control—the way she honors her body without dismissing her own sexuality—implicitly challenged the middle-class male culture of *Playboy* and the foundations of mid-century male consumer culture. Though satire—which Kercher defines as “forms of humorous expression that... deploy irony to criticize vice and raise awareness”—seems the most fitting genre for someone like Ross and her causes, there was little if any public precedence for Ross’s brand of Black female rebellion; perhaps Ross’s gender and gender politics made it difficult for her to successfully satirize notions of deterministic racial and ethnic group identity.

### **Cross-Ethnic Satire and the Black-Jewish Divide over Cultural Appropriation**

I will further address the connections between race and gender because they surface as key elements in *The Tenants*’ use of cross-ethnic satire, but first, I would like to discuss a bit more broadly the term cross-ethnic satire and examine its importance as an aspect of Black-Jewish relations, especially as it concerns debates about Jewish appropriation of Black culture. Cross-ethnic satire is the imagining of Self as Other in a humorous way to achieve some political effect. Emily Miller Budick writes that “for a significant number of African and Jewish American writers, the other group becomes a vehicle by which to think through their own ethnic identities.” A significant element of cross-ethnic imagination, according to Budick, is the conflict that emerges when “each group, insisting on its own ethnic position, would most like to disown or displace” the

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<sup>181</sup> Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 3.

Other, and Budick characterizes resistance to the Other as a mode of self-preservation through group-preservation that is distinctly American.<sup>182</sup> But Malamud and Ross use cross-ethnic satire to reveal tensions and diffuse differences between groups, to undermine ethnic and racial divisions. They were part of the satirist movement that Kercher describes as a reaction to a failing American postwar Democratic liberalism:

The moral position that liberal satirists adopted on liberalism's failures—and on Democrats' failure to push the issue of racial equality in particular—was in many cases an outgrowth of the position they occupied as Jewish Americans or African Americans. While several important satirists were African American, a larger number were Jewish...<sup>183</sup>

Kercher suggests that satire serves as a natural form of expression for Jews especially because they were “from an ethnic background that was historically persecuted and excluded from positions of cultural authority, raised in a culture that prized wit and deflationary humor.” Darryl Dickson-Carr, however, describes a specifically African American tradition of satire, an “absurd, obscene milieu [that] repeatedly installs, subverts, then reinstalls racism as the agent of ideological and political irrationality and chaos, ending with a pessimism that suggests the permanency of racism.”<sup>184</sup> Certainly, Ross and Malamud's satiric novels are quite different in their framing, and as I will demonstrate, they utilize and examine the differences between Jewish and Black satirical forms. The trading of these forms is part of the cross-ethnic satire aimed at dispelling notions of deterministic group identity.

In *Oreo*, Ross dismantles these notions of deterministic group identity by thinking about hybrid ethnicity; the novel is structured around a protagonist with both Black and Jewish descent. One might say, however, that the protagonist is not “really” Jewish, if

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<sup>182</sup> Budick 1-5.

<sup>183</sup> Kercher 2.

<sup>184</sup> Dickson-Carr 32.

one believes in the matrilineal descent required by Jewish law. Hence, part of the satire is that Oreo does not have the genealogically proper Jewishness, and yet she possesses the full repertoire of Jewish knowledge. According to the novel's plot, Oreo acquires much of this Jewish knowledge from the Black side of her family (remember her Black grandfather's Jewish mail order business). But actually, Ross—the “Black” writer—is the one who furnishes her protagonist with the Jewish knowledge. The most striking irony of the text is that the third person narrator speaks like the “Borsht Belt” comedians, who told jokes in a mix of Yiddish and English in a sort of self-deprecating effort toward assimilation that maintained a sense of cultural hybridity. Ross's opening chapter, “Mishpocheh” (“Family” in Yiddish), begins:

When Frieda Schwartz heard from her Shmuel that he was (*a*) marrying a black girl, the blood souged and staggered in all her conduits as she pictured the chiaroscuro of the white-satin *chuppa* and the *shvartze*'s skin; when he told her that he was (*b*) dropping out of school and would therefore never become a certified public accountant—*Riboyne Shel O'lem!*—she let a out a great *geshrei* and dropped dead of a racist/my-son-the-bum coronary. (Ross 3)

Non-Yiddish speakers get the gist of Ross's Yiddish syntax considering its prevalence in popular culture as a comedic medium. There is also a parallel syntax working here—“the blood souged and staggered in all her conduits as she pictured the chiaroscuro”; this high level Standard English signals that the infusion of Yiddish is part of a performance. Ross conveys that ethnicized modes of communication are learned, not genetic. Moreover, the integration of different syntaxes suggests that the complete expression of one's cultural and ethnic hybridity requires more than one type of language. In other words, to adequately tell the story of the American “melting pot,” cross-ethnic syntax is necessary.

Ross's promotion of cross-ethnic syntax, and specifically, her truly masterful use of Yiddish vocabulary and word order, figures as something of a role reversal in the context of debates over Jewish appropriation of Black ethnic forms. For example, Nathaniel Mackey argues that, traditionally, Jewish entertainers perform Black speech patterns and music in order to capitalize on the popularity of the Black aesthetic. Furthermore, Mackey camps artists like Benny Goodman with other musicians who were the "product of a culture which could *place* Louis Armstrong, but could never understand him."<sup>185</sup> One could say that Ross, as a "Black comedian," is appropriating Jewish speech patterns to capitalize on the popularity of Jewish humor. One might go on to question the authenticity of Ross's Jewish "performance," or suggest that she is simply making fun of Jews instead of displaying any real insider Jewish ethnic knowledge. I would argue, however, that Ross is able to write Jewish syntax not because it is an author's job to be able to write convincingly about things "outside" her experience, but because she has, in fact, internalized Jewish syntax as part of her American experience.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, her protagonist thoroughly enjoys the moments when her hybrid of knowledges can serve her. When Oreo finds herself at a Tay-Sachs fund raiser among a "rothschild of rich people," she engages in an exchange of Black-Jewish jokes (about Tay-Sachs and Sickle Cell Anemia) with a Jewish boy, the only character in the book that can keep up with her cross-ethnic wit. This experience leaves her feeling that she has met someone who possesses the same "vice-verbal" quality for linguistic performance and the same

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<sup>185</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb," in Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross Culturality, and Experimental Writing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 266.

<sup>186</sup> I would venture to say that Ross's "Jewish knowledge" is actually atypically in-depth. Ross's knowledge could stem from the region in which she lived. I am not sure how many secular Jews or people outside the New York tri-state area could access the intricacies of this text. It is perhaps the inaccessibility of this text—the sort of Joycian Ulysses quality of it—that kept it from achieving a widespread audience.

vulnerability to genetic disease (Ross 120-121). In her own recognition of the similarity of Black and Jewish experience in America, she credits the Jewish boy with the ability to understand the nature of her Black-Jewish hybridity. As Mullen puts it, “Oreo suggests the potential...opportunity for mutual empathy and political solidarity of two historically oppressed minorities...(and) confronts the differential status of African Americans and white ethnic Jews, which often works against sympathy and empathy” (Mullen 2).

*The Tenants* suggests the possibility that if only Willie and Lesser could somehow align talents and share experience rather than exploit themselves to create temporary literary hierarchies, then they could move out of the tenement and into a more permanent house of fiction, undivided by ethnicity and class. But as tenants at the mercy of a landlord, Lesser and Spearmint share second-class status; they heavily rely on this marginality for inspiration, which is why Lesser cannot move away from the tenement while writing.<sup>187</sup> As the Black writer composes his novel, the deepening of his marginality is apparent to his Jewish girlfriend, who says, “The more he writes, the blacker he becomes” (Malamud 119). Lesser envies Spearmint’s Black aesthetics, including the linguistic codes of communication between Spearmint and his community. He strives to emulate an ethnic identity, to create himself as part of something, without simply copying or becoming an accessory to Spearmint’s Blackness. Lesser actually tries to prove that he and Spearmint’s Jewish girlfriend, Irene, share Jewishness, and therefore, he makes a fool of himself greeting her outside the museum with an atypical “shalom” (Malamud 113). That Lesser cannot successfully bond with a Jewish girl signifies the disintegration of Jewish community due to assimilation; there is nothing special enough

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<sup>187</sup> See Eileen Watts, “The Art of Racism: Blacks, Jews and Language in *The Tenants*,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 15 (1996): 42-48.

about Jewishness in America to pull Irene and Lesser together. Yet for Irene to maintain a relationship with a Black man is fashionable in the white world because it symbolizes her social awareness, her participation in her generation's liberal political agenda. When Lesser's attempt to connect with Irene falls short, Lesser tries his luck with Mary Kettlesmith, the Black girlfriend of a member of Spearmint's posse. Her name indicates her symbolic position in the novel; she is a Black (as a kettle) Mary (holy prostitute) whose body represents the sacrifice of Black women's bodies for white power. He sleeps with her (without sexually satisfying her), and he is punished by the posse for trying to steal what does not belong to him. His attempted encroachment of Mary's body as "Black territory" has the opposite social effect of Irene's relationship with a Black man. Still, Lesser covets the status of sexual prowess a relationship with Mary Kettlesmith would afford.

Lesser's sexual inadequacy and inability to love women in a way that satisfies them plays into stereotypes that cast Jewish men as sexually impotent in comparison to superior Black male virility. After all, the symbolism of the second ending in which Spearmint kills Lesser by castrating him suggests that Spearmint's power over Lesser is his stereotypical Black masculinity, his pervasive sexuality, and his emotionality. Spearmint serves as a dominant male in *The Tenants* because he knows more about true love than Lesser. Anna Petrov makes the "connection between Lesser's creativity and his sexuality," citing that Lesser's writing gets better when he feeds off of Spearmint's sexual energy (148). As Lesser tries (and fails) to write from a distance about love, Spearmint has drawn a Jewish girl into the experience of love. Lesser succeeds in taking Spearmint's girl when Spearmint is engulfed by the process of his own writing, but

Lesser cannot fulfill her desires for a relationship; he cannot live out the truth of his feelings for her because he is stuck in the world of his book—detached from true love. Meanwhile, Spearmint’s intellectual pursuits cause him to lose the love in his life; and when he is forced to stop writing and the full vigor of his emotions return, his jealousy—his loss of emotional control—causes him to castrate Lesser. But Lesser is symbolically castrated before that: when Lesser returns to his writing after a brief emotional commitment to Spearmint’s girl, his intellectuality takes over, and she leaves him. Without her, Lesser has no means of continuity. Without a balance between what is represented as Black emotionality and a stereotypical Jewish intellectuality, the writers cease to exist. The novel’s inclusion of weird metaphorical descriptions of genitalia as white on the outside, but full of black semen (i.e. the means of continuity) speaks to writerly seeking of an emotional-intellectual balance. In one description, Malamud writes of “yesterday’s snow standing seven stiff inches on the white street, through which indigenous soot seeped” (Malamud 5). The phallic images transfer to the process of Lesser’s writing, where the phallus is the white man’s fountain pen, and the black semen is the ink.<sup>188</sup> The names Lesser and Willie Spearmint are particularly potent in this context: Lesser is left feeling a “less” than adequate sense of manhood in the shadow of Willie Spearmint’s phalluses: his “willie” or “spear” as his “pen.”

But Lesser’s power over Willie is, more literally, his “pen”—his writerly ability. Lesser may be sexually and emotionally inadequate when compared to Spearmint, but Spearmint is certainly the inferior writer. Spearmint asks Lesser for help with his novel because he is insecure about his ability to produce viable writing, and he uses Lesser

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<sup>188</sup> Lesser feels best about his writing when he writes it out longhand with his pen, as opposed to when he types it. He wonders, “Who was it who had said he thought with his right hand?” in an ironic reference to Roth’s writing in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (Malamud 16).



because Lesser is the only person he knows who has published; he hopes to “learn something from whitey and do it better as a black man” as well as to gain insight into the “rat-brained” Jewish publishers who turned down his manuscript (Malamud 82, 75). Certainly, Spearmint’s anger reflects the post-war class divide between Blacks and Jews, where Jews occupy positions of power to which Blacks have been denied access. After all, this class divide was largely the result of the fact that the educational opportunities afforded by the G.I. Bill were not extended to Blacks after the war; the feeling that he lacks standard education must feed into Spearmint’s insecurities as a writer. It is also possible that because Jewish writers have less marginal ethnic identities than Blacks in the 1970s, there is an underlying assumption that Jewish writers have better access to the kind of universal themes that would be more accepted into the American canon. Lesser finds, as any reader would, that Spearmint’s writing is so angry that it lacks form. The problem with Spearmint’s form, according to Lesser’s critique, is that “The book has the tone of autobiography, but even if it is pure fiction, something is not coming off right” (Malamud 73). That the Black writer cannot produce literature without “white” assistance plays on the stereotype that his emotionality overrides intellectual ability. Hence, in *The Tenants*’ murder scene, Lesser kills Spearmint by slicing an ax through his brain because it evokes the strength that the Jewish writer has over the Black writer in his final moment: the Jewish writer has the superior intellectual ability. However, Spearmint’s fictional autobiography, flawed in form, is the same kind of thing Malamud himself produces with *The Tenants*, which has endings in the middle of the book and an inconsistent narrative voice.

This goes to show that Malamud does not actually buy into these stereotypes. After all, *The Tenants*' truly final ending calls repeatedly—113 times to be exact—for “mercy” between Blacks and Jews. The nature of cross-ethnic satire here is that Malamud refutes stereotyping by engaging in it, experimenting with what it means to write the stereotypes on both sides of the color line. For example, in *The Tenants*, Malamud includes a “Black” version of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* when he imagines Spearmint’s emerging novel *Black Writer*. The title *Black Writer* plays on the representative nature of each text. Both Roth’s novel and Spearmint’s novel-in-progress have the tone of autobiography and similar story lines. In the closing scene of *Call It Sleep*, the young protagonist is found by police and escorted back to his parents’ tenement flat amidst a clamor of concern and worry. The Irish-American police ask the protagonist his address in the dialect of the immigrant slum: “Say, w’ere d’yuh live?” The protagonist tells the police, and he arrives home to a chorus of Yiddish speaking women who huddle around his frantic mother: “Schreckts ach nisht!...Sis im goor nisht gesheben!” The Jewish characters also speak English with a Yiddish accent and syntax: “Yuh shoulda seen vod a fighd dere vus heyuh!”<sup>189</sup> In Malamud’s Black recasting of this scene, the Black protagonist will not answer the white police officers when they ask him his address. They call in a Black cop: “Can’t you talk, boy?...[the boy nods]...Then talk and tell me where do you live at?...[he still does not answer]...If you was mine I would blast you ass.” When they finally find his mother, alone and naked in her bed, she says nothing. The striking dissimilarity between the scenes’ content is that a community of people seem to care about the Jewish protagonist, but the Black protagonist’s own mother is overwhelmed and hopeless. The Black protagonist and his mother refuse to speak at

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<sup>189</sup> Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2000) 434-436.

all in this scene; the Black characters are voiceless as compared to the vociferous Jews in *Call It Sleep*.

Whereas Roth's narrating voice (unlike his characters' voices) is written in Standard English, the Black police officer's non-Standard English is the same as Spearmint's narrating voice of the scene. In Spearmint's text, the first-person narrator describes his mother's boyfriend: "an ofay who liked to pretend to talk nigger talk. It made him feel good to do it though it was fake black talk...I know he didn't buy her no shoes" (Malamud 101-103). The linguistic distance between narrator and characters in the "Jewish" novel does not exist in the "Black" novel; this is Malamud's depiction of Black writing as more raw and closer to truth, but it also intimates that Spearmint lacks the intellectual capacity to write in Standard English. After writing the Black voices of the novel, Malamud seems to be ironically positing himself in the role of the mother's boyfriend who speaks "fake black talk." Despite James A. McPherson's disputed claim he, not Malamud, wrote the Black voice of the novel, it is ultimately Malamud as author who takes responsibility for imagining Spearmint's syntax and grammar. Popular theories—like those, for example, in Michael Rogin's *Black Face, White Noise*—might contend that when Malamud writes in Spearmint's voice, he is continuing a tradition of Jewish appropriation of Black identity, which started in the music and film industry at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Ross, however, writes like a Borsht Belt comedian, there is no such accusation. There seems to be an implicit willingness to accept Ross's Yiddish as natural to her self-expression, or at least natural as a medium for her brand of sarcastic humor; meanwhile, Malamud, through Lesser, conveys frustration over claims that originary authenticity is necessary for the use of the "Black aesthetic." While

Spearmint adopts Yiddish phrases (in one case to describe himself as an *alter cocker*) it is rather humorous, but when Lesser listens to Bessie Smith, or when Malamud imagines himself as a Black writer and rewrites Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* using Spearmint's Black English, it is often called appropriation. The multi-ethnic linguistic representations in *Call It Sleep*, however, are much like the performance of various "phonic legacies" that Baker ascribes to African American tradition.

Historically, bilingualism and diglossia have been necessary to the survival of both Blacks and Jews in Diaspora, and they have been integral parts of the literature both groups have produced. Hana Wirth-Nesher suggests that "Bilinguism and diglossia pose interesting mimetic challenges for the writer who aims for a community of readers beyond those who are competent in all of the language variants employed in the text."<sup>190</sup> The mimetic challenge for *The Tenants* and *Oreo* exists simultaneously for writer and audience; "the mimetic challenge" is the overriding subject of each work. Ross and Malamud challenge their audience to decide if representations of the Other are imitations or if they could be considered innate to both the authors and the characters those authors create. Yet in order for readers to make educated decisions, they themselves need to be multi-lingual and to understand the nuances of various cultures. Differences in the novels' framing and form might account for the fact that Ross's novel meets the mimetic challenge more successfully. Ross's protagonist genetically possesses access to the repertoire of two different communities, and Malamud's protagonists—one Black and one Jewish—interact from opposite sides of the tensions that surround race, ethnicity,

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<sup>190</sup> Hana Wirth-Nesher, afterword, "Between Mother Tongue and Native Tongue in *Call It Sleep*," *Call It Sleep*, by Henry Roth (1934; New York: Farrar, Giroux and Straus, 2000) 444-445. Wirth-Nesher defines bilinguism as the "alternate use of two or more languages by an individual" and diglossia as "the existence of complementary varieties of language for intragroup purposes."

masculinity and aesthetics. Readers like Ross's protagonist who can rely on a span of knowledges within themselves will react more readily to cross-ethnic satire than readers who experience difference as confrontation like Lesser and Spearmint.

The way Ross combines stereotypes of Blackness with stereotypes of Jewishness within single characters is simply easier to laugh at than the confrontational way Malamud sets up these same stereotypes. While Ross maintains much of the collage form that Dickson-Carr ascribes to African American satire like Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*—which includes pictures and various fonts—the Borsht Belt style comedy in Ross's text directs and commands that collage. For example, the first page of *Oreo*:

When James Clark heard from the sweet lips of Helen (Honeychile) Clark that she was going to wed a Jew-boy and would soon be Helen (Honeychile) Schwartz, he managed to croak one anti-Semitic “Goldberg!” before he turned to stone, as it were, in his straight-backed chair, his body a rigid half swastika,

[insert Ross's picture of a half swastika]

discounting of course, head, hands and feet. (Ross 3-4)

If Ross's satiric collage is guided by this Borsht Belt comic voice, then Malamud—though he maintains elements traditionally known as Jewish comedy, like Spearmint calling himself an *alter cocker*—has traded in the tone of Jewish comedy for Dickson-Carr's defining features of African American satire: the “absurd, obscene milieux [that] repeatedly installs, subverts, then reinstalls racism as the agent of ideological and political irrationality and chaos, ending with a pessimism that suggests the permanency of racism.” Near the end of *The Tenants*, Malamud rather randomly inserts a fantasy, more like a drug induced trip, of a double wedding between Mary and Lesser, Irene and Spearmint. It is a bizarre conglomerate of African tribal customs and Jewish tradition

with an impossible cast of characters, yet it serves as a rare moment of Black-Jewish compromise. Spearmint speaks the Hebrew words of Jewish betrothal, and Lesser dances in a raffia skirt before a tribal chief. A Litvak rabbi in a traditional black fedora stands with a man from Harlem beneath a wedding canopy held up by a eucalyptus tree. The double wedding of mixed couples could be Malamud's own experiment with the production of Black-Jewish hybridity, but the scene is overly contrived and guided by a tone of pessimism, especially the ending:

Irene asks Lesser, as they dance a last dance together, "How do you account for this, Harry?"

"It's something I imagined, like an act of love, the end of my book, if I dared."

"You're not so smart," says Irene.

#### THE END

This scene is one of false endings of the novel. Though compromise and hybridity are imagined here with some sense of potential, "an act of love" as a happy ending, the novel does not actually end here. The undercurrent of the double wedding scene is that when Lesser imagines himself as Black, he lets go of his inhibitions, recognizes that love is lacking in his nature, and aims to correct his faults. But as Irene's final statement implies, Lesser will not change, there will be no love or compromise, and racism will prevail.

Ross's novel ends with the hope that Malamud's false ending passes up. Oreó's yearning for identity and self-definition causes her to seek out her Jewish father who left her when she was young. However, Oreó's father dies before she can establish a relationship with him, and she pieces together the story of her birth and bits about the kind of person he was without him. The novel ends with Oreó's realization that she is not

distressed about her father's death; like Theseus, Oreo is what Mullen calls "a prototype of modernist self-fashioning."<sup>191</sup> Her genetic past has nothing to do with her individuality or her various ethnic behaviors, and ultimately, an examination of her Jewish roots will not change who she is. Yet the novel ends with "an opportunity for a Judeo-Negro concordat" (Ross 207). Oreo's next move will be to find her rich paternal grandfather, who refused to bequeath his funds upon the birth of an "unkosher" grandchild. She plans to give him a second chance to accept her as a *zayde* should, with love and affection. This final scene is an effort toward positive Black-Jewish relations: if only everyone could realize what Oreo comes to learn, that genetics need not predict social identity and individuality. If, however, Oreo's Jewish grandfather reacts with hostility, Oreo plans to destroy his only chances for purely Jewish genetic continuity by spilling out the last vials of her father's sperm. Hence, the book ends with the idea that there is no future for a separation between Self and Other.

In both *The Tenants* and *Oreo*, cross-ethnic satire serves two purposes: 1) it frames a commentary on Black-Jewish relations, especially concerning debates over identity appropriation, and 2) it releases Malamud and Ross from the aesthetic bounds of their ethnic communities when incorporated into their meta-fictions. The reason both authors manage cross-ethnic satire so successfully has to do with their aptitude for bilingualism beyond the language itself; each takes into account the nuances of social, historical, and even religious dimensions of the language. That level of cross-ethnic understanding—perhaps even just the honest attempt at it—is enough to inspire a sense of freedom from notions of deterministic group identity, one that has the potential to affect how we categorize American literature according to ethnicity. Though *Oreo* is

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<sup>191</sup> Mullen 3.

situated in “The Northeastern Library of Black Literature,” it is just as much Jewish—and everything else—as it is Black. *Oreo* demonstrates the kind of ethnic diffusion—borrowing and exchange of ethnic materials—discussed in chapter one, and *Oreo* aims toward the same universalist definition that Zora Neale Hurston sought through similar cross-ethnic tactics. There is no reason to hope that Ross’s rediscovery will land her the posthumous fame granted to Hurston, yet *Oreo* might be considered the result of Ross and Hurston’s similar tactics and thinking about race and ethnicity in the United States. Certainly, as we shall see in the following chapter, Malamud’s tactics could be connected to Philip Roth’s own imagining of Self as Other. Both Malamud and Roth seek recognition as American writers—rather than “Jewish” writers—through Black alter-egos.



Philip Roth and the Autobiographical Gesture:  
Resurrecting the Self through Others

**Introduction**

In Philip Roth's short story "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings" (1957), a first person nameless Jewish narrator recounts his experiences in a high school "Occupations" class, in which a "Preference Test" determines on the basis of morals and values that the narrator is meant to be a lawyer.<sup>192</sup> Ironically, during the test that reveals his inner hankering for the pursuit of justice, he gets bullied into sharing his answers with Albie Pelagutti, the "big, black and smelly" (234) ex-con from the other side of Newark whom he secretly admires for being everything that he is not.<sup>193</sup> Since Albie shares, however falsely, the narrator's career path, the teacher sends the two students on a field trip to the local courthouse. The courthouse reminds Albie of his past—that he is not, in truth, destined along the narrator's life path—and he plots revenge against the teacher by organizing the class in an uprising of song. The narrator empathetically goes on to explain the teacher's fate; he was fired for refusing to answer a few McCarthy-ite questions about his brief involvement with a Marxist organization in college. Though the narrator writes a letter to the Board of Education in defense of his teacher, he has learned through his involvement with Albie the futility of hoping to be trusted once one has been pigeonholed as a traitor.

"You Can't Tell a Man..." first appeared in the Jewish publication *Commentary*, as Roth's discoverer Norman Podhoretz recalls, "in a department that used to run in the magazine under the rubric 'From the American Scene,' and that was devoted mainly to

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<sup>192</sup> Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959; New York: Random House, Inc., 1995).

<sup>193</sup> See Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvator Salerno, *Are Italians White?* (2003), and Thomas Gulgielmo, *White on Arrival* (2004), who draw the parallel between Sicilian heritage and Blackness. The significance of Albie's Sicilian heritage is a way for Roth to engage with "dark others," mocking their inherent criminality.

non-fictional accounts of immigrant Jewish life... we were treating it like a memoir (the locale in this case being the Weequahik neighborhood of Newark, to which Roth would never cease returning in his work).” Though Roth “made no objection to this categorization,” he published “You Can’t Tell a Man...” as a piece of fiction two years later in *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959).<sup>194</sup> That the genre of the story changed without much notice demonstrates something about literary representations of Jewish life: it is acceptable, common, and perhaps even expected that writers of Jewish descent will reveal personal experiences in representing what is considered collective Jewishness. A Jewish readership forms a circular relationship with these texts and their authors; the idea is that a Jewish readership will relate to and learn from representations of Jewish values, thus affirming a sense of community by a mutual affirmation of the text’s validity.

Philip Roth did not know when he wrote this story in his early twenties that it (and its publication history) would symbolize, in more ways than one, the story of his own career. On one level, “You Can’t Tell a Man by the Song He Sings” is prophetically allegorical; in the face of the half century long debate over Roth’s representation of Jewish identity in fiction, Roth has more than not been convicted of fraud and treachery by a Jewish jury. However, “The Song He Sings” in his satirical approach to Jewish stereotypes does not stem from self-hatred but Roth’s pursuit of individuality in the face of ethnic collectivity. On another level, “You Can’t Tell a Man by the Song He Sings” treats the theme of race in 1950s America, which Roth continues to rewrite throughout his career. Finally, “You Can’t Tell a Man...” (which is quite ironically

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<sup>194</sup> Norman Podhoretz, “The Adventures of Philip Roth,” *Commentary* 106.4 (1998): Academic Search Premiere. 1 of 13.

“universally...regarded as the least significant story,”) <sup>195</sup> is important because “it might have been either a memoir or a short story: it was foreshadowing in that much of the author’s later work is hard to tell.”<sup>196</sup> Roth, indeed, is best known for his dancing on the line between fact and fiction with his autobiographical gestures. These three functions of his short story—representation of Jewish identity, outrage over racial tension and censorship, and the use of the autobiographical gesture—are fundamental in understanding his career.

The following chapter jumps forty years ahead of “You Can’t Tell a Man...” in order to examine how these three elements of Roth’s short story have evolved into his latest trilogy of Zuckerman novels, including *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and, most saliently, *The Human Stain* (2000).

### **Roth’s Cross-Ethnic Experiment in *The Human Stain***

In *The Facts*, Roth describes “the most antagonistic social opposition of his life”: It was 1962, and Roth was invited to be part of an open panel discussion on “The Crisis of Conscience in Minority Writers of Fiction” at Yeshiva University alongside Ralph Ellison and Pietro di Donato. The Yeshiva University audience, “angry middle class and establishment Jews, and a number of eminent rabbis,” accused Roth of being “anti-Semitic and self-hating” in his fiction. They relentlessly interrogated Roth without paying attention paying attention to the other authors until Ralph Ellison came to his defense. Roth recalls,

I heard him [Ellison] defending me with an eloquent authority that I never could have hoped to muster from halfway out to oblivion. His intellectual position was almost identical to mine, but he was presenting it as a black American, instructing examples from *Invisible Man* and the ambiguous relationship that novel had

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<sup>195</sup> Bernard F. Rodgers, Philip Roth (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) 20.

<sup>196</sup> Norman Podhoretz, 1 of 13.

established with some vocal members of his own race. His remarks seemed to appear to the audience far more credible than mine...

With me relegated pretty much to the sidelines, the evening shortly came to an end... I was immediately surrounded by the element in the audience most antagonistic to my work, whom Ellison's intercession had clearly curtailed only temporarily. The climax of the tribunal was upon me... I listened to the final verdict against me, as harsh a judgment as I ever hope to hear in this or any other world... somebody, shaking a fist in my face, began to holler, "You were brought up on anti-Semitic literature!"... "English literature!" he cried. "English literature is anti-Semitic literature."<sup>197</sup>

If this experience was Roth's "trial," the pinnacle of accusations meant to undermine his morality in his representation of Jewry, then Ellison was his lawyer. The audience would not let Roth represent himself because he had at once been claimed as part of a Jewish collective and disbarred from that collective. Roth had chosen to assert his individuality in ways that did not fit with the representative role that had been thrust upon him by the Jewish community, and so the Jewish community had chosen to hear him no longer. To be fair, the audience at Yeshiva University did not represent a cross-section of Jewish life; even in 1962, the Yeshiva University population and those affiliated with it veered toward American modern Orthodoxy, its conservatism and separatism signs of post-Holocaust fear and protectiveness. Many Jewish people whose ancestors had been in America since the turn of the twentieth century and before felt less threatened by Roth's writing and even found his depictions of assimilation humorous. The Yeshiva audience's judgment that Roth had been brought up on "anti-Semitic" literature was partially a charge that he had given in to the assimilative process and had thus become part of a majority that, in their eyes, was still looking for any excuse to criticize the Jewish people.

Ellison, however, was allowed to speak—and even to give the same defense that Roth would have given—not only because the Yeshiva audience had no communal

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<sup>197</sup> Philip Roth, The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography (New York: Vintage International, 1988) 128-129.

expectation of him, but also because they imagined that African Americans were not prone to the assimilative process; in other words, they did not expect that someone with Black skin could or would escape the bounds of ethnic status. If Ellison could explain that even African American writers were prone to desire the rights of individual expression, then the Yeshiva audience could comprehend the problems of representative writing by ethnic minorities with critical distance. Despite Ellison's defense, the controversy surrounding Roth's representation of Jewish life has marked Roth's career and has often sent him into a defensive introspection about his own Jewishness and his relationship to Jewish community. Since the 1960s, Roth has tried to evade his status as a representative writer by claiming: "I am not a Jewish writer; I am a Jew who is a writer."<sup>198</sup> Yet he is still claimed, like Malamud, as a member of the Jewish writers circle because he pulls from his own ethnic experience and continues to write about Jewish characters, often challenging the invisible boundaries of Jewish subject matter with tales of sexual perversion and transgressive writing related to the Holocaust. His career has been like an ongoing wrestling match between those who wish to claim him as a Jewish writer and his sense of himself as an individual who happens to be Jewish.

In his novel, *The Human Stain* (2000), Roth finally takes as his main subject the complicated negotiation of ethnic boundaries, and true to Rothian method, he creates an alter ego to work out the confusion of his own subconscious.<sup>199</sup> Though Nathan

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<sup>198</sup> See Timothy L. Parrish, "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's Jewish American Pastoral," Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels, eds. Jay Halio and Ben Siegel (Newark: University of Delaware Press) 2005. 131. Parrish traces Roth's Jewish identity since the 1960s.

<sup>199</sup> For a general discussion of Roth's use of alter egos, see Ben Siegel, "Reading Philip Roth: Facts and Fancy, Fiction and Autobiography—A Brief Overview," Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels, eds. Jay Halio and Ben Siegel (Newark: University of Delaware Press) 2005. Roth openly, perhaps strategically, promotes the examination of his relationship to alter egos such as Zuckerman. The scholarship on Roth's alter egos is far too much to replicate and debate here, though I will treat some of it in more detail throughout this chapter.

Zuckerman, Roth's most famous alter ego, tells the story of *The Human Stain*, Roth creates yet another alter ego as the novel's African American protagonist: Coleman Silk. Just as Roth needed Ellison to provide his defense from a critical distance at the Yeshiva University panel discussion, Roth needs Coleman to reveal his plight as an individualist in the face of communal expectations. While some critics point out Coleman Silk's likeness to the famous *New York Times* book reviewer, Anatole Broyard, little else has been said about Roth's cross-ethnic alter egos in *The Human Stain*, perhaps because the relationship between Roth, Zuckerman and Silk is so complicated. There are three pairs of doubles in the novel: Roth and Zuckerman, Roth and Silk, and Zuckerman and Silk. The Roth and Zuckerman connection that has developed since *The Ghost Writer* (1979) is established along the lines of their shared Newark origins, literary pursuits, erotic relationships with women, and Jewish identity. Roth and Silk also share a coming of age in Newark and its suburbs, university careers in literary fields, erotic relationships with women, and, once Silk decides to pass, Jewish identity. The relationship between Zuckerman and Silk connects the open points of this triangle: Zuckerman must imagine himself as Silk—literally, he must try to write from inside Silk's thoughts—in order to tell the story of Silk's life.

Coleman Silk, who grows up as part of an African American family, decides to pass as Jewish because being Black feels like a sacrifice of his individuality, especially once he decides to attend a Black college in the segregated South.

Overnight that raw I was part of a we with all of the we's overbearing solidarity, and he didn't want anything to do with it or with the next oppressive we that came along either. You finally leave home, the Ur of we, and you find another we? Growing up in East Orange, he was of course a Negro, very much of their small community of five thousand or so, but boxing, running, studying, at everything he did concentrating and succeeding, roaming around on his own all over the

Oranges, and with or without Doc Chizner, down across the Newark line, he was without thinking about it, everything else as well. He was Coleman, the greatest of the great pioneers of the *I*. (HS, 108)

Silk's crossing of the color line into Newark is especially symbolic because he is crossing into Roth's hometown, thereby beginning his transformation into Roth's likeness. That Silk chooses to adopt Roth's Jewishness perplexes critics who want to understand why an African American trying to escape "the oppressive we" would associate himself with yet another collectivity.<sup>200</sup> It seems a rather circuitous approach to employ the self, or a simulacrum of the self, in direct imagination of the Self as Other, as a catalyst for individuality: why trade in one set of stereotypes for another? Like Roth, whose brand of Jewishness is at odds with stereotypes and communal expectations, Silk chooses an ethnic identity on his own terms, "the greatest of the great pioneers of the *I*." But for both Silk and Roth, the "I" is ironic, because the "I" cannot tell a story divorced from the other's ethnic community; Silk and Roth have simply traded ethnic perspectives on the same problem.

In the complicated twist on the phenomenon of passing—in which Roth imagines himself as an African American who is passing as an American Jew—there is lots of room for humor and irony. To start, that Roth chooses the name "Coleman" (i.e. Coal Man) as the black counterpart to "Zuckerman" (translation: Sugar Man) is racially symbolic. For the stereotypical Jewish writer to occupy a social position akin to the whiteness of sugar is ironic because whiteness is not the same as Jewishness; Coal, which turns white when burned, would be an apt name for an African American passing as Caucasian; however, neither Zuckerman or Silk pass as white, though their names

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<sup>200</sup> See Debra Shostak, Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 256-260.

suggest whiteness. In extension of American racial politics, it is funny that Roth's response to the accusation that he had been brought up on "anti-Semitic literature" is to make Coleman Silk a Classics professor at Athena College, a move that plays on the notion that canonical literature is "WASP" academic territory and is here being encroached upon not only by the Jew that Silk pretends to be, but by the African American that Silk really is. After all, for a Jewish person to pass into white territory is a lot more typical than it is for an African American person. As Zuckerman chronicles the importance of Silk's career, it becomes evident that Silk used Jewish identity in ways that were pioneering for Jews, and unheard of for African Americans:

Coleman was one of a handful of Jews on the Athena faculty when he was hired and perhaps among the first Jews permitted to teach in a classics department anywhere in America; a few years earlier, Athena's solitary Jew had been E.I. Lonoff, the all-but-forgotten short story writer whom, back when I was myself a newly published apprentice in trouble and eagerly seeking the validation of a master, I had once paid a valuable visit here. Through the eighties and into the nineties, Coleman was also the first and only Jew ever to serve at Athena as a dean of faculty... Coleman had taken an antiquated, backwater, Sleepy Hollowish college and, not without steamrolling, put an end to the place as a gentlemen's farm by aggressively encouraging the deadwood among the faculty's old guard to seek early retirement, recruiting ambitious young assistant professors, and revolutionizing the curriculum. (HS 5)

Roth shows the main difference between passing for Black and Silk's passing as Jewish when he acknowledges the racial hierarchy in America that has granted Jews access to opportunity before African Americans. The central irony of the novel is that Silk's revolutionary career at Athena comes to a tragic end when he describes two students on his roster as "spooks" since they had never attended his class; it turns out that the missing students are Black, and his comment on their absence is misconstrued as racist. Because he is passing as Jewish to make Athena less racist, he cannot rely on his membership of the minority he has mistakenly offended to get him out of trouble. Silk's career as



classicist is symbolic because, like Oedipus, he cannot outrun his destiny, which is to be cast out of the Athena faculty for reasons of race.

Yet during Silk's reworking of the "gentleman's farm" at Athena, he made way for his hiring of Herbert Keble, whom he describes "not just as the first black in the social sciences but as the first black in anything but a custodial position" (HS 16). Silk needed the in-between-blackness-and-whiteness of Jewishness in order to hire someone not passing. When Silk approaches Keble for his minority support after the "Spooks" indictment, Keble tells him, "I can't be with you on this Coleman. I'm going to have to be with them" (HS 16). Keble's decision resounds divisions between African Americans and American Jews after the Civil Rights Movement; American Jews felt that African Americans betrayed them when the bonds of minority status and shared memories of wounded-ness fell through. Had Silk revealed his African American ancestry at this moment, even in secrecy to Keble alone, perhaps his position could have been strengthened by the formation of a racial communal bond with Keble. But Keble may have scoffed at Silk's years of passing; moreover, Silk did not want to believe that his genetics should matter in the "spooks" incident, or ever.

It is Keble, however, who ultimately characterizes Silk's plight best; in his eulogy for Silk, Keble comes to his defense "to say, as the senior African American member of the Athena Faculty: Coleman Silk never once deviated in any way from totally fair dealings with each and every one of his students for as long as he served Athena College" (HS 310). Keble continues,

"What he was forced to undergo—the accusations, the interviews, the inquiry—remains a blight on the integrity of this institution to this day... Here, in the New England most identified, historically, with the American individualist's resistance to the coercions of a censorious community—Hawthorne, Melville, and

Thoreau come to mind—an American individualist who did not think that the weightiest thing in life were the rules, an American individualist who refused to leave unexamined the orthodoxies of the customary and of the established truth, an American individualist who did not always live in compliance with majority standards of decorum and taste—an American individualist *par excellence* was once again so savagely traduced by friends and neighbors that he lived estranged from them until his death, robbed of his moral authority by their moral stupidity.” (HS 310-311)

For both Silk and Roth, Keble acts as a defense lawyer delivering this closing statement. Just as Ellison stepped in to be Roth’s voice during the Yeshiva conference, Keble gives voice to Roth’s understanding of himself and his placement among the great individualist American writers Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau. Keble, as the “senior African American,” says what Silk could not say as African American and says what Roth or Zuckerman could not say as a Jew. Keble, “the senior African American,” thinks he is defending a Jew, which raises the question of whether or not he would have been so forgiving of a member of his own race who had chosen to pass and who had partaken in scandalous activities. Yet it is precisely the cross-ethnic justification of the other’s position that makes it so powerful. If Keble had been a Jew defending a fellow Jew, it would have seemed like a self-defense. By extension, if Roth had defended himself against charges that he was a “self-hating Jew” using a Jewish double, it would have seemed too obviously a self-defense.

Through Zuckerman, Roth reveals the strategy behind this writing practice. Just as Roth needs Silk to tell his story from a cross-ethnic perspective to give his story credence, Silk asks Zuckerman to write the story of his experiences at Athena College. Zuckerman recounts, “I had to write something for him—he all but ordered me to. If he wrote the story in all of its absurdity, altering nothing, nobody would believe it, nobody would take it seriously, people would say it was a ludicrous lie, a self-serving

exaggeration... But if *I* write it, if a professional writer wrote it..." (HS 11). When one is put in the position to tell the story of another, it is to give the story the credence of an alibi. Furthermore, the cross-ethnic exploration of the problem makes an individual's refusal to be bound by the expectations of ethnic communities a universal problem. That is the goal of the "professional writer," to be an expert in vicarious experience, to make experience universally accessible. But there is something more to the issue that Silk turns to Zuckerman to write his memoir, and it is not just the fact that he wants a "real" Jew to invent the story of his Jewish life. Silk says to Zuckerman,

"I can't do what the pros do. Writing about myself, I can't maneuver the creative remove. Page after page, it is still the raw thing [Read: the Roth Thing]. It's a parody of the self-justifying memoir. The hopelessness of explanation...Kissinger can unload fourteen hundred pages of this stuff every other year, but it's defeated me. Blindly secure though I may seem to be in my narcissistic bubble, I'm no match for him. I quit." (HS 19)

Silk is like Roth in turning to Zuckerman as a vehicle for "the creative remove," in other words, the "Roth Thing." Both Silk and Roth need Zuckerman as a channel for their parodic memoir, and to figure out what it means to be a writer and what it means to be Jewish. For example, Roth uses Zuckerman in *The Ghost Writer* to be the Jewish writer who is pigeonholed by critics, at odds with his family, lustfully fantasizing about Anne Frank thereby making a mockery of the Holocaust—the writer everyone thinks Roth is—in order to make sense of the charges against him. Meanwhile, Silk needs Zuckerman because although he gives the impression of being a Jew with too much power, like a Kissinger only at the university level, he needs someone else to serve as the Jew everyone else thinks he is in order to make sense of the charges against him.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Another reason that Silk turns to Zuckerman is that he wants him to organize his volumes of ranting anger caused by the events leading up to his disgraceful reputation. It is telling that in both The Tenants and The Human Stain the Black writers ask for help from their Jewish doubles in order to tell their stories:

It seems apt, here, to credit Kafka as Roth's inspiration in creating doubles as a means of engaging with his own problems of general existence. In his critique of Roth entitled *The Imagination in Transit*, Stephen Wade explores the way that "Kafka (and other related writers) participate in Roth's enterprise of self-scrutiny." He writes:

The first step is to relate the reasons why a range of concepts all linked with the idea of what Dostoievsky called 'doubles' figure in much of Roth's fiction. There are the following in the novels of Jewish identity: transformations of the imagination; accounts of other lives comparable to the narrator-persona; biographical parallels within fiction; deliberate crossovers of fact and fiction; and even metafictional representations introducing a shared fantasy.<sup>202</sup>

Wade's list confirms the history of Roth's experimentation with these methods, all of which crop up in *The Human Stain*, as a means of understanding his relationship to "Jewish identity." Almost three decades before Roth creates Silk as an alter ego, Roth's most overt emulation of Kafka happens in *The Breast* (1972, revised 1980), which experiments with the same sort of parabolic human transformation that occurs in *The Metamorphosis* (1915), except that Roth substitutes a breast for Kafka's insect.

Professor David Kepesh—note the "K" for Kafka—is another of the narrators comparable to Roth himself, and Kepesh's employment in *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire* (1977) initially corresponds to Roth's notorious love affair with Claire Bloom. When Kepesh becomes a 155-pound-literature-professor-turned-breast, it is Claire Ovington (some alias!) who stays by his side throughout the ordeal and who has helped Kepesh to heal from a debilitating first marriage just like the one Roth touts for its

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that the Black writers cannot tell their own stories seems to play on an ethnic stereotype that their emotions override their intellectual ability. In *The Tenants*, Spearmint uses Lesser because Lesser is the only person he knows who has published; he hopes to "learn something from whitey and do it better as a black man" as well as gain to insight into the "rat-brained" Jewish publishers who turned down his manuscript (Malamud 82, 75). Lesser finds, as any reader would, that Spearmint's writing is so angry that it lacks form. Both Spearmint and Silk are insecure about their ability to produce viable writing despite the puffed up images they exude on other levels. The Jewish writers, in both cases, have less to be angry about.

<sup>202</sup> Stephen Wade, *The Imagination in Transit: The Fiction of Philip Roth* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 57.

autobiographical crossovers in *When She Was Good* (1967) and *My Life As a Man* (1970). These details about Roth's love-life are important because in 1973, when Roth contemplates Kafka in a tribute to the students of his own literature class,<sup>203</sup> he focuses on the biographical connections between Kafka's writing and his relationships to Dora Dymant and Milena Jesenka-Pollak. Roth writes of that Kafka's story "The Burrow" is:

Another grim tale of entrapment, and of obsession so absolute that no distinction is possible between characters and predicament. Yet there is more here than a metaphor for the insanely defended ego... It is an endlessly suggestive story of life in a hole. For, finally, remember the proximity of Dora Dymant during the months that Kafka was at work on "The Burrow" in the two underheated rooms that were their illicit home.<sup>204</sup>

Roth can see the universal message in Kafka's story, but he locates a deeper truth about the story in speculating its connection to Kafka and Dymant's sexual relationship. In *The Breast*, Roth uses Kafka's model of parabolic transformation to examine the self by judging a situation from the perspective of some metaphoric form. In Wade's words, "the human character grows in proportion to its awareness of the constant mental construction of the 'other.' We gain insights by allowing the parable to progress."<sup>205</sup> Roth's enormous mammary exacerbates but centralizes the perversity for which he has been attacked, and he makes sense of himself in fantasy by setting it in the context of real experiences. Ultimately, Roth's imaginative introspection is simultaneously as serious as it is absurd.

This early version of the Kafka-esque method makes the transformations and alter-egos in *The Human Stain* seem less extreme, but the growth of the characters and their creator is equally dependent on "the constant mental construction of the 'other.'"

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<sup>203</sup> Philip Roth. "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting"; or, Looking at Kafka." 1973. Reprinted in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage International, 2001).

<sup>204</sup> Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 289-90.

<sup>205</sup> Wade 60.

For example, look at how Roth re-examines the cross-racial and cross-ethnic politics of his first marriage through Silk's affairs with Steena and Faunia, beginning with the way Roth describes his real-life first wife:

The exoticism wasn't solely in her prototypical blue-eyed blondeness... it wasn't in her prototypical gentile appearance, though she was gentile in a *volkisch* way... it wasn't in her Americanness either... she was a more likely fair-haired heroine for the scrutiny of Ingmar Bergman than for the sunny fantasies of M-G-M.

Despite her avowal of gruesome victimization at the hands of yet another merciless *shagitz*, my grandparents might have surmised that the woman, having discovered that she was emotionally incapable of mothering anyone, had herself effectively let the two children go. She would have seemed to them nothing more or less than the legendary old-country shiksa-witch, whose bestial inheritance had doomed her to become a destroyer of every gentle human virtue esteemed by the defenseless Jew.<sup>206</sup>

Steena and Faunia are both versions of Josie. Steena is the blue-eyed blonde, all-American girl, who is the Silk family's worst nightmare (or so they think until Coleman marries a Jewish girl), and Faunia is the beat-up "shiksa-witch" who loses her children. Roth is attracted to Josie because a relationship with her breaks down the racial<sup>207</sup> and ethnic<sup>208</sup> boundaries by which he feels fettered. In *The Human Stain*, Roth explores these same tensions through Silk, whose Blackness intensifies these issues with Steena and, as Zuckerman surmises, elicits Faunia's empathy for a fellow victim of an unfair world. Roth might be exploring the idea that Silk's Blackness would elicit more sympathy than his Jewishness does, or that issues of race and ethnicity as they apply to Jews are more

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<sup>206</sup> Roth, *The Facts*, 82-84.

<sup>207</sup> I am using the term racial here because Roth distinguishes Josie as "Aryan" and holds onto the "old- and new-world" racial mythology that classifies Jews as specifically non-Aryan and thereby racially separate.

<sup>208</sup> This term reflects religion as a specific aspect of "ethnicity," which can be defined as the boundaries that are "constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality." Ethnicity, however, is not any one of these aspects by itself. See Joanne Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture." In Michael W. Hugly, ed., *New Tribalisms: The Resurgence of Race and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 237. Roth is not what one might call a practicing or observant Jew; therefore, he is not so much interested in the interfaith nature of his union with Josie as he is in the ethnic boundaries being broken down.

understandable in *Black and White*. Either way, it seems that Roth's experiments with Blackness as an 'other' are an extension of what he does in *The Breast*; just as he analyzes sexual tension by transforming the Roth/Kepesh penis into a breast in a complex cross of gender lines, he analyzes racial/ethnic tension by transforming himself into the epitome of the 'other.' The complication of Roth's transformation into the 'other' is that the 'other' finds it easier to pass as a Jew—and not just any Jew. He is passing as a Jewish literature professor whose career is sabotaged.

Of course, Roth's career was not actually sabotaged by his detractors. If anything, the charges against him led him to define himself as an individual, a rather universal quest that Roth develops in two major ways throughout his body of work: in his portrayal of maternal figures and in his contentions with God. In *The Human Stain*, Faunia Farley is the strangely backwards idealization of a lover who symbolizes both. As part of her maternal trope, Faunia works as a cleaning woman; she picks up after people at the local post office (where Silk and Faunia meet for the first time) and cleans toilets at Athena College, a symbol for changing diapers. Faunia also works and lives on an organic dairy farm, and she milks cows while Silk watches lustfully from outside the stall saying nothing. Silk watches Faunia milking the cow in a metaphorical extension of breastfeeding, with, of course, sexualized Freudian overtones. On one occasion, Silk even brings Zuckerman to watch. Zuckerman is an outsider, observing Silk on the periphery looking in at Faunia, and he tries to imagine what Silk must be feeling:

She knew he was watching her; knowing she knew, he watched all the harder—and that they weren't able to couple down in the dirt didn't make a scrap of difference. It was enough that they should be alone together somewhere other than his bed, it was enough to have to maintain the matter-of-factness of being separated by unsurpassable social obstacles, to play their roles as farm laborer and retired college professor... It was enough to be able to conduct themselves like

two people who had nothing whatsoever in common, all the while remembering how they could distill to an orgasmic essence everything about them that was irreconcilable, the human discrepancies that produced all the power. It was enough to feel the thrill of leading a double life. (HS 47)

In Silk's "double life," it is as if Silk has turned Faunia into a more ideal mother; she is the opposite of his birth mother, whose expectations that Silk would take pride in upholding genetic responsibilities seem limiting. Faunia is an opposite of the stereotypical Jewish mother readers find in *Portnoy's Complaint*; Faunia does not try to change Silk's "human discrepancies." There are no prescribed roles to fulfill; race and class have disappeared. As Zuckerman imagines Silk's double life, he is living a double life of his own. In *The Human Stain*, prostate cancer has left Zuckerman impotent, a sharp contrast to the Zuckerman whose sexual exploits and fantasies were the basis for previous Roth novels—the ones that got Roth in trouble with his more orthodox Jewish readership. As Zuckerman writes about the milking scene, he is a voyeur whose own experiences are no longer at the center of interest to his readers; hence, he has evaded acting as a representative writer.

Now, he imagines that he is Silk, ostensibly a virile Black man who has replaced him. Silk, at 71-years-old, is still fit and trim; when Zuckerman and Silk get together to discuss Zuckerman's writing of Silk's story, Silk appears shirtless, "on display" (HS 21). Zuckerman notes the out of place exhibition of Silk's body, but only the reader fully realizes that Silk is trying to seduce Zuckerman into writing for him, not through a homosexual advance, but through a kind of transference of virility as the stuff of life. When the shirtless Silk asks Zuckerman to dance, Zuckerman recalls:

There was nothing overtly carnal in it, but because Coleman was wearing only his denim shorts and my hand rested easily on his back as if it were the back of a dog or a horse, it wasn't entirely a mocking act. There was a semi-serious sincerity in



his guiding me about on the stone floor, not to mention a thoughtless delight in just being alive, accidentally and clownishly and for no reason alive. (HS 26)<sup>209</sup>

Zuckerman's contact with Silk's body brings him back in touch with life. Silk's virility reminds Zuckerman that the function he had lost was central to the core of existence, that which "keeps us everlastingly mindful of the matter we are" (HS 37). Silk's seduction works; Zuckerman, after the sleepless night that followed their dance, decides to write the book.

The pervasive sexuality that has characterized Roth's work is exactly that which most offended his Jewish detractors. In *The Human Stain*, Roth makes a case that humans are innately sexualized beings, and that his sexualized writing is in no way "disobedient" to God, but a reflection of God. This is the theme of the novel's title, which comes from the following passage. Zuckerman omnisciently reconstructs Faunia's reflection on a black crow that has been hand raised; when the crow attempts to re-enter the wild, the other crows try to kill him.

"That's what comes of being hand-raised," said Faunia. "That's what comes of hanging around all his life with people like us. The human stain," she said, and without revulsion or contempt or condemnation... *That's how it is...* that is all Faunia was telling the girl who was feeding the snake... Impurity, cruelty, abuse, excrement, semen—there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone... The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It's why all the cleansing is a joke... The fantasy of impurity is appalling. It's insane... She's like the Greeks, like Coleman's Greeks. Like their gods... All their Zeus ever wants to do is fuck—goddesses, mortals, heifers, she-bears—and not merely in his own form but, even more excitingly, as himself made manifest as beast... Not the Hebrew God, infinitely alone, infinitely obscure, monomaniacally the only god there is, was, and always will be, with nothing better to do than worry about Jews. And not the perfectly desexualized Christian man-god and his uncontaminated

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<sup>209</sup> The music in this scene and in the lovemaking scenes with Steena and Faunia implies that Black sexuality is supreme, which plays on Zuckerman's insecurities of "Jewish trepidation... on the erotic battlefield." Steena and Faunia both perform strip tease dances "prompted by a colored trumpet player [Roy Eldridge]" (HS 115).

mother... Instead the Greek Zeus, entangled in adventure, vividly expressive, capricious, sensual, exuberantly wedded to his own rich existence... Instead the *divine* stain. A great reality-reflecting religion for Faunia Farley if, through Coleman, she'd known anything about it. (HS 242-243).

The passage above criticizes the limitations of Judeo-Christian religious existence and praises a “reality-reflecting religion,” the kind that Roth practices in his writing. To begin with the words “hand-raised” conjures up the Jewish backlash that came with Roth’s representation of Jewish masturbation in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Roth justifies his sexualized writing by reversing the events in the Garden of Eden to be more realistic: instead of the snake tempting the girl, the girl is feeding the snake. In other words, humans are not led astray but are innately sexual beings, as Faunia is. Here, Faunia is a holy mother alongside a trinity-like, or at least god-like, set of men: Zuckerman as ghost writer (alter ego) and Silk as the extension of Roth the creator. Roth’s autobiographical gesture comes through Zuckerman and Silk because, like Zeus, Roth takes on other forms. He does it not only to engage in sexual fantasy, but also as a way to resist his role as a Jewish representative. Both Faunia and Roth can come to an understanding of themselves and their sexual natures “through Coleman,” Roth’s Black double.

This discussion would be incomplete if it left out the mention of Anatole Broyard, the famous *New York Times* book critic, who critics have located as the inspiration for Silk’s character.<sup>210</sup> Broyard was “resolved to pass so that he could be a writer, rather than a Negro writer,”<sup>211</sup> and the salient connection between Broyard, Silk, and Roth is the ideal of living unfettered by societal expectations about what it means to belong to or

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<sup>210</sup> See Elaine B. Safer, “Tragedy and Farce in Roth’s *The Human Stain*.” *Critique* 43.3 (March 1, 2002): Academic Search Premier. She writes, “John Leonard, who had been Broyard’s colleague at the *New York Times*, guesses that ‘the idea of Coleman Silk was inspired by the case history of [...] Anatole Broyard... I am told that he and Roth were almost neighbors in Connecticut.’ If Broyard was a major source for Coleman, then the portrait attests to Roth’s consummate imaginative ability to capture the spirit of such a man in his fiction” (Page 9 of 13).

<sup>211</sup> Gates 184.

represent a racial or ethnic community. Indeed, there are many small parallels between Silk's fictional experiences and the biographical details that Henry Louis Gates describes in his essay "The Passing of Anatole Broyard."<sup>212</sup> Silk's sister, Ernestine, for example, is respectfully "baffled" but willing to accept passing, as was Broyard's sister, Shirley.<sup>213</sup> Gates, several times, depicts Broyard's legs as a defining feature, and Roth takes time to do the same with Silk—"the girls, in turn, liked his legs;" Steena composes a poem about them (HS, 109-110). That Silk and Zuckerman are New England neighbors also corresponds to the proximity of Broyard and Roth, but in fiction it is Zuckerman, not Silk, who is struck with the cancer that killed Broyard. Even Silk's coming-of-age sexual experiences with Steena in a Greenwich Village apartment call to mind the autobiographical story Broyard managed to write, while still keeping his race a secret, in *Kafka Was the Rage*.<sup>214</sup> The likenesses between Broyard and Silk go on to include similar histories of military experience, failed attempts at writing personal stories, and lies to offspring whose genetic inheritance did not betray their secret passing.

Whereas Broyard somewhat successfully passes to avoid being a racial representative because his appearance allows him to, Roth begins his career as a Jew, with a noticeably Jewish name, and writes about Jewish identity; therefore he encounters just the kind of communal limitations that Broyard feared. It is ironic that Broyard could to some extent escape this fate, but that Roth could not, especially considering the fact that one issue that has weakened American Jewish and African American relations is the

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<sup>212</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. (New York: Random House, 1997) 180-214.

<sup>213</sup> Gates, 213. Safer notes this similarity as well.

<sup>214</sup> Anatole Broyard. *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Carol Southern Books, 1993). Notice that Kafka, known for his creation of alter egos, appears in the consciences of both Broyard and Roth.

accurate notion that Jews have an easier time passing. Roth's recourse, it might seem, is to pass as Black; however, Silk obviously does little to actually help him shed Jewishness since—and this is the unbridgeable difference between Silk and Broyard—Silk suffers a Jewish fate. As Elaine Safer notes, “Coleman, who sought freedom under the fabricated identity of white and Jew, now ironically, is killed by the anti-Semite Les as much for being a Jew as for being Faunia's lover.”<sup>215</sup> The universal message in *The Human Stain*, a novel that Roth writes, on one level, in his constant struggle with personal and communal issues of Jewish identity, is precisely that there is a universal message in the seeking of individuality, and that, as was Broyard's mantra, literature operates “on more than one level.”<sup>216</sup>

### **Roth, Race and The Autobiographical Gesture**

*The Human Stain* works to resolve the tensions between communal and individual identity because *I Married a Communist* (1998) provides the foundational discussion of race relations and assimilation in the United States. Despite the difference in the names of the characters, *I Married a Communist* practically picks up where “You Can't Tell a Man...” leaves off. The novel begins as Zuckerman narrates the story of how his high school English teacher, Murray Ringold, was blacklisted, but the novel concentrates on the blacklisting of the teacher's brother, a radio star and political activist who changed his more Jewish sounding name, Ira Ringold, to Iron Rinn. His assimilationist name essentially spells out the word “irony,” and the closest irony available in the novel is that a man with such strident conviction for freedom and equality in American would feel the need to change his name in order to achieve it. Like Silk, Iron Rinn changes because he

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<sup>215</sup> Safer 3 of 13.

<sup>216</sup> Gates 183.

can and wants to avoid being pigeonholed. Rinn's philosophy, he tells a young Zuckerman, has been influenced by Thomas Paine:

Paine had ended his days alone as well, old, sick, wretched, and alone, ostracized, betrayed—despised beyond everything for having written in his last testament, *The Age of Reason*, “I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor any church I know of. My mind is my own church.” Reading about him had made me feel bold and angry and, above all, free to fight for what I believe in. (IMAC 26)

However, the tactic of non-affiliation backfires as both Silk and Rinn fight for the equality of people who cannot pass. The pervasive fear of being outed while fighting for the acceptance of differences is paradoxical. Hence, the overall allegorical irony of *I Married a Communist* is that Rinn is eventually marked as a traitor by society. Of course, that Rinn is the heroic figure of the novel makes it clear that both Zuckerman and Roth do not condone Rinn's blacklisting. However, the idea that one can never forsake one's ethnic identity means this: while Roth may not want to play by the rules of collective identity, he necessarily lives as a person quite affiliated with Jewishness, especially for its importance in his own fight for ethnic and racial equality.

*I Married a Communist* is more typical of Roth's treatment of racial equality and Black-Jewish relations than *The Human Stain*; both novels originate from Roth's childhood city, Newark, New Jersey, and *I Married a Communist* describes race relations there with the same historical tone that Roth has consistently displayed since *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959. Zuckerman attributes his open-mindedness to his expeditions around Newark with Iron Rinn:

We took trips around Newark together so that Ira could show me the non-Jewish neighborhoods I didn't really know—the First Ward, where he'd been brought up and where the poor Italians lived; Down Neck, where the poor Irish and the poor Poles lived—and Ira all the while explaining to me that, contrary to

what I might have heard growing up, these were not simply goyim but “working people like working people all over this country...”

We went into Newark’s Third Ward, where the Negroes had come to occupy the streets and houses of the old Jewish immigrant slum. Ira spoke to everyone he saw... asked what they did and how they lived and what they thought about maybe “changing the crappy system and the whole damn pattern of ignorant cruelty” that deprived them of their equality. He’d sit down on a bench outside a Negro barbershop on shabby Spruce Street, around the corner from where my father had been raised in a Belmont Avenue tenement... and begin to talking to them about their equality...

[...]

The two of us, white and surrounded by some ten or twelve black men, and there was nothing for us to worry about and nothing for any of them to fear: it was not we who were their oppressors or they who were our enemies—the oppressor-enemy by which we were all appalled was the way the society was organized and run. (IMAC 90-93)

The passage above reflects Jews’ successful assimilation; while the Italians, Irish, Poles, and African Americans still live in poor city neighborhoods, the Jews have moved out to the suburbs. This picture of Black-Jewish relations is idealized and sentimentalized throughout the novel. Jews are situated as the inspirators or middlemen of Black equality, yet the implication that the Jews are better off than the Blacks who “had come to occupy the streets and houses of the old Jewish immigrant slum” is smoothed over by the idea that Zuckerman’s own father had not long ago moved away from the region, and Roth portrays his heroic protagonist as a Jew sticking up for his fellow underdogs. Jews may be “white,” but it is not the same whiteness of the oppressive government.

Despite what might be deemed today as the romanticism of race relations, Roth is prized for his immortalization of Newark; in fact, even his most idealized descriptions echo what his neighbors there like to remember about Newark. In 2005, Roth’s efforts to capture the spirit of Newark were rewarded when the mayor and the city’s Preservation and Landmarks Committee leader fastened a plaque on his childhood home and dedicated a nearby intersection as “Philip Roth Plaza.” The New Jersey Jewish News featured an

article describing this occasion: “Joining the dignitaries were 75 fans of his work. For two hours prior to the dedication, they had traveled through city streets on two chartered buses, pausing along the way to hear volunteers read relevant passages at the site of places mentioned in many of his works.”<sup>217</sup> This passage reveals again Roth’s interweaving of historical facts in his fiction, but more importantly highlights the way in which people receive those facts; his fans constantly search for the realities of his fiction and turn to him as the chronicler of American Jewish experience and American history.

The New Jersey Jewish News article is especially telling in the way it frames its Roth story. First, that the Jewish News featured the article at all shows that a Jewish collective has kept tabs on Roth throughout his career, exonerating him of indecent exposure, celebrating and even claiming his success as a Jewish writer. But what is more intriguing is that the newspaper subdivides the article with a bold heading that says “Blacks and whites together,” thus accepting and performing the message in Roth’s work. The article cites a black professor, Jane Davis, who attended the ceremony:

“I grew up in the Weequahic section of Newark on Watson Avenue in the 1960s,” she said. “On Bergen Street, there were still blacks and Jews together. When I was in grammar school I thought that’s what the world was like — blacks and whites together. Harry’s grocery store was right across the street from where I lived. He was Jewish. The people who owned the dime store where we went every week, they were Jewish. In my family we just valued the idea that everybody was together.

“For me Philip Roth, unlike any other American author, shows the importance of place and of home, even after it has changed to the point where you feel it doesn’t exist,” Davis continued. “He shows that what you knew, it still lives.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup>Robert Weiner, “‘Newark is My Stockholm:’ A thrilled Philip Roth is honored by the city that he put on the literary map,” *New Jersey Jewish News* October 2005.

<<http://www.njjewishnews.com/njfn.com/102705/njphiliproth.html>>

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

Besides pitching race relations, this excerpt authenticates Roth's version of Newark for readers who want to know if his descriptions are historically accurate from the other side of the race line.

This endorsement is fascinating in the context of arguments over Roth's allegiance to Newark after the crumbling of Black-Jewish relations and the Newark race riots in the 1960's. Larry Schwartz' essay, "Roth, Race and Newark," characterizes Roth memories as selective:

Roth and his reviewers are disturbingly uncritical about race and its legacy in Newark. His recent American trilogy (*American Pastoral* [1997], *I Married A Communist* [1998] and *The Human Stain* [2000]) when taken together with the two non-fiction works that preceded the novels (*The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* [1988] and *Patrimony: A True Story* [1991]) offer a very blinkered view of Newark and its racial politics. In these books, there is a willingness to stereotype post-1965 Newark as a crime-ridden burnt-out city of Blacks and, unfortunately, to contribute to a liberal, racist mentality about Newark as an unlivable city especially when contrasted to "the good old" days of the 1940s and 1950s...

Roth, like many other white, middle-class liberals, turned his back on Newark...<sup>219</sup>

Schwartz goes on to offer research that Newark was completely segregated, and he suggests that the condition of the Black housing districts would make the equality Roth imagines impossible. Schwartz's article shows, at least, what is at stake when fiction becomes memoir, and memoir is read as history.

The argument over Roth's allegiance to Newark, and by extension, the Jewish forsaking of Newark, is by itself illustrative of the way Black-Jewish relations have become a literary conversation.<sup>220</sup> In other words, a set of fictional responses to a very real set of tensions has become a dialogue. It is especially useful to juxtapose Roth's

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<sup>219</sup>Larry Schwartz, "Roth, Race and Newark," *Cultural Logic*. 2005.  
<<http://eserver.org/clogic/2005/schwartz.html>>

<sup>220</sup> Term comes from Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).



sketch of Black-Jewish relations and the Communist party to that of Chester Himes in *Lonely Crusade* (1947).<sup>221</sup> In Himes' novel, the protagonist Lee Gordon is a Black union leader whose anxious interactions with a Jewish Communist, Abe Rosenberg, eventually evolve into a friendship. Lee Gordon's initial response to Rosenberg is blatantly anti-Semitic:

...he jerked a look down at Abe Rosenberg's bald head in the sunshine. Sitting on a disbanded wooded casing, feet dangling and his froglike body wrapped in a wrinkled tan cotton suit, Rosie [Rosenberg] looked the picture of the historic Semite. Lee's reaction was an alerting, a quickening of defensives, a sharpening caution.<sup>222</sup>

This depiction of the Jew is based on classic stereotypes that reduce Jewish men to weak, emasculated creatures, and this passage is often cited in scholarly criticism that designates Himes' work as a "tirade against Jews."<sup>223</sup> However, what Himes portrays in this stereotyping of the Jew is a very stereotypical picture of Black anti-Semitism, one that indicts Gordon for his own racism and paranoia; Himes positions the stereotypical figures in conversation with each other in order to expose the irrationality of the fear between them. Himes' writing does not necessarily reflect his personal views; he portrays anti-Semitism as part of the historical context of his novel.

Still, the picture of Black-Jewish relations and the Communist party in Himes' novel is very different from the one in Roth's work. As Ethan Goffman suggests, Himes reveals a Black anti-Semitism that is linked with a subliminal fear of objectification that extends even to parallel groups that are themselves objectified.

...Gordon's repulsion is probably due to a secret, terrified identification, since Blacks too are reduced in dominant imagery into creatures hardly fit for the

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<sup>221</sup> Chester Himes, *Lonely Crusade* (1946; New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986).

<sup>222</sup> Himes 151

<sup>223</sup> For example, see Steven J. Rosen, "African American Anti-Semitism and Himes' *Lonely Crusade*," *MELUS* 20.2 (summer): 47-68.

category of human. In the figure of the Jew, the African American, beset with anxiety regarding masculinity and social acceptance, sees his own self-image threatened from without and within.

A corollary to Gordon's anti-Semitism is a hatred of communism, an ideology that explicitly supports a systematic attempt to change the course of history on a global scale, a conspiratorial undertaking similar to that rumored regarding the Jews... it prefigures criticism that an ideology ostensibly helpful to Blacks in fact objectifies them as one component of a world revolution. The conflation of communism and Jewishness is a result not only of Communist Party demographics but of the assertive role of both groups in articulating African American rights.<sup>224</sup>

Roth's rendering of Jews and Black-Jewish relations, then, seems like some utopian hallucination.<sup>225</sup> In *I Married a Communist*, Iron Rinn offers a vision of alliance and equality while working at a factory "in the heart of Chicago's black-belt," though as a Jew he is considered white:

"First off, the colored people knew that any white the UE sent to this plant was either Communist or a pretty faithful fellow traveler. So they weren't inhibited. They knew that we were as free from race prejudice as an adult in this time and society can be...

"The characteristic I was most aware of among the Negro people is their warm friendliness. And, at our record factory, the love of music. At our factory, there were speakers all over the place, amplifiers, and anyone who wanted a special tune played—and this is all on working time—just had to request it. The guys would sing, jive—not uncommon for a guy to grab a girl and dance... About a third of the employees were Negro girls. Nice girls. We'd smoke, read, brew coffee, argue at the top of our voices, and the work went right along without a hitch or break." (IMAC 93)

Ironically, both *Lonely Crusade* and *I Married a Communist* have been celebrated for their historically-centered storylines, and both deemed, to some extent, to be historically accurate. Perhaps the "truth" about Black-Jewish relations is discovered only by reading these novels together as part of a Black-Jewish conversation that happens through a

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<sup>224</sup> Ethan Goffman, *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000) 42.

<sup>225</sup> The disparity might be explained by the fact that Roth's version of Jewishness throughout this trilogy is represented by characters like Iron Rinn and Swede Levov, who are athletic, masculine, heroic figures.

similarly introspective style of literature.<sup>226</sup>

Since Himes published his two-volume autobiography (v. 1, 1972, v. 2, 1976), Himes' writing, especially in *Lonely Crusade*, has been held to the same scrutiny of personal details as Roth's writing. At the end of his article on Himes' use of doppelgangers and doubles (which are, of course, Roth's chosen literary devices), critic Ralph Reckley ultimately equates Himes' doubles as Himes' surrogates.

...Himes, like his creations, affirms that he not only believed himself able to commit murder but that he might be forced to commit murder in order to defend his honor or his life. All three of the characters had stormy affairs with white women. Himes' first autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*, seems to be concerned for the most part with white women.

In addition to the similarities, there are psychic features and/or social experiences that Himes shares with each of the fragmented characters. Luther, for example, is given to bursts of violent temper... And Himes said that while he was living in Spain, he suffered from "blind fits of rage in which it seems my brain [had] been demented." Luther spent time on a Mississippi chain gang and Himes spent time in the Ohio State Penitentiary. Like Lester, Himes had attended college, and like his intellectual double, he could not find a job for which he had been trained.

...Himes was jealous of his wife's success... In the novel, Lee, the protagonist, and Ruth, his wife, have the self-same problem.

...It is fair to conjecture, then, that the characters, individually and as a composite represent aspects of Chester Himes and that they function as surrogates for Himes. Like Richard Wright, Himes felt the need to release his aggression... he created combative characters and lived vicariously through them.<sup>227</sup>

That Himes' critics consistently comment on the relationship between Himes' personal

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<sup>226</sup> It should be clear that this statement does not mean to equate Himes' personal values with anti-Semitism. In fact, Goffman suggests that Himes' tense interactions between Rosenberg and Gordon set up a space for their reconciliation. Himes portrays Rosenberg as "patient" in his "willingness to question the social circumstances behind Gordon's anti-Semitism," and Goffman explains that this is how Rosenberg wins Gordon over (Goffman, 44). The question, however, is whether or not Goffman himself is trying to win over Himes in the same way. The Black-Jewish literary conversation lies as much in the criticism as it does in the novels themselves.

<sup>227</sup> Ralph Reckley, "The Use of the Doppelganger or Double in Chester Himes' *Lonely Crusade*." *College Language Association Journal* 20 (1977): 448-58. 456.

experiences and Himes' fiction,<sup>228</sup> and that Roth's critics do the same, is telling of a common trend between Black and Jewish use of doubles and the autobiographical gesture in American literature. Both Black authors and Jewish authors, whether they like it or not, become representatives for the racial and/or ethnic communities of which readers assume them to be a part, especially when the authors write from the position of their respective backgrounds. Their literary depictions of these communities, even when fictional, come across to readers as a sort of insider ethnography, especially when texts are narrated or driven by characters that are recognizable doubles of the authors themselves. The academic trend of designating works by Black authors or Jewish authors under the rubric of "Black literature" or "Jewish literature" shows that authorship corresponds to a text's authenticity in being part of a category of literature. Members of Black or Jewish communities often desire to claim the achievement of their author-representatives in a similar way, perhaps verifying the accuracy of representation to take communal credit for the product. However, because both communities are prone to fear discrimination and disintegration, fictional representations that, in effect, have the reputation to offer outsiders a voyeuristic position from which to make judgments, or that express to outsiders and insiders a supposedly liable critique, are dangerous to members' individual survival and group cohesion. The vulnerability of self-objectification is part of what makes minority literature in general so provocative, and Black authors and Jewish authors are often complicit in exploiting the lines between themselves and the racial/ethnic collective they represent. The use of autobiographical details in minority literature is doubly manipulative because it forms an imperceptible boundary between

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<sup>228</sup> For another example of this trend see the forward to the volume of *Lonely Crusade* that I cited above. The author, Graham Hodges, reveals that "Jean Himes, seeing too much of herself in the role of Ruth Gordon, the hero's wife, threatened divorce after seeing the manuscript" (vii).

truth and fiction amidst the already impenetrable confusion of racial/ethnic identities, and the power of a racial/ethnic representation lies wherever the reader can most easily grasp a moment of something that seems like it could be real. The peril of the autobiographical gesture lies in the reader's temptation to conflate the qualities of the author, or the author's double, with a racial/ethnic collective.

It seems that New Criticism, which reads a text in strict disconnection with its author, could solve this problem. Certainly, Roth's trilogy is and can be read without knowledge of Roth's biographical information, but because his work is a commentary on Jewish identity, critics need to locate the angle from which he participates. Moreover, New Criticism is not the game Roth wants readers to play. He bookends his autobiography with letters to and from Zuckerman in a direct effort to confuse the differences between himself and Zuckerman. He writes a series of books, including *The Plot Against America*, which takes place in his childhood home, that are narrated by "Philip Roth." In *Operation Shylock*, where the major theme is Jewish identity, the Philip Roth narrator is doubled by a Philip Roth imposter. This list names only a few of the ways that Roth has guided critics to consider the strategy behind his autobiographical gesturing.

For example, Norman Podhoretz's interest in *I Married a Communist* is not based on what he considers to be "every liberal cliché about America at the height of the Cold War," but what he dubs as the novel's "main" intention: "to get back at Claire Bloom for her attack on him in *Leaving a Doll's House* (just as he had done to Irving Howe through the character of Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson*), and to tell his side of the story of

their affair and marriage.”<sup>229</sup> Podhoretz goes on to untangle the “transmutations” of Roth’s life into his art:

...Instead of being a British film actress who made her mark on the stage and screen, the Claire Bloom character (Eve Frame) becomes an American who once starred in silent films and shifted to radio... The daughter to whom Claire Bloom was so attached, and who was apparently one of the main sources of her problems with Philip Roth, is a singer in real life... whereas Eve Frame’s daughter is a harpist... Yet so closely does Roth hue to the details of Bloom’s indictment in defending himself against her that it is almost impossible to understand what certain elements of *I Married a Communist* are doing there without first having read *Leaving a Doll’s House*.<sup>230</sup>

Indeed, reading Bloom’s autobiography helps reveal what is otherwise the better, but poorly executed, theme in *I Married a Communist*: racial and ethnic identity in America. In *Leaving a Doll’s House*, Bloom describes Roth’s anger against her assimilationist politics and her “self-hating, Anglo-Jewish family.”<sup>231</sup> Considering Bloom’s accounts of Roth, and the knowledge that *I Married a Communist* is written in reaction to her indictment of him, the novel seems less about Communism and more an expression of Roth’s anger over Bloom’s attempted blacklisting of him, her attempts to align his Jewish identity with a sexual misconduct and selfish ego in contrast to her non-subversive intentions and genteel attributes. Roth underscores *I Married a Communist* with a denunciation of Bloom’s assimilative practices, which sell him out as a disgusting Jew in order to rescue and even elevate her status by comparison. Eve Frame, who changed her name from Chava Frommstein in order to secure her Hollywood status, is one of Roth’s most evil villains.

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<sup>229</sup> Podhoretz, 11.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Claire Bloom, *Leaving a Doll’s House: A Memoir*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company) 1996. 183. He depicts Claire’s family in *Deception*, in which the original name of the Philip Roth narrator’s wife was Claire. Claire responded to her portrayal as follows: “I told him he had used me most shabbily. I told him I wanted my name out of the book... He tried to explain that he had called his protagonist Philip, therefore to name the wife Claire would add to the richness of the texture.”

Preceding *I Married a Communist*, the first novel in the trilogy, *American Pastoral*, treats the theme of assimilation in a way that prepares Roth to begin his reconciliation with his ethnic identity after so many years. It is the story of Swede Levov, a Jewish athletic star at Roth's legendary Weequahic High School who, as an adult, suffers innumerable losses that begin to accrue after he marries Miss New Jersey, a non-Jewish woman. Swede's life drops to its nadir when his only child, Merry, blows up the post-office/general store local to her family's upscale suburban New Jersey home, thereby murdering a man inside. Merry disappears, joins a cult, and when Swede finally finds her, he is appalled at his legacy. *American Pastoral* portrays the American dream gone wrong as a result of assimilation. Particularly potent is *American Pastoral's* symbolism of the Jewish owned glove factory in downtown Newark, in which the protagonist's father manufactures leather gloves as a perfectly snug second skin for the entire American market. The sale of the second skin signals that Americans can buy assimilation, can purchase the perfect skin in order to hide ethnic origins that do not conform to the mainstream. It is the success of the Jewish father who makes this second skin possible for his own son; he makes possible the Swede's all-American opportunities, even insofar as he is successful enough to marry someone of non-Jewish origin. But the extent of his son's assimilation was never his intention. In a telling scene, the Jewish father chastises his son's attempts at tanning leather: "A skin must be preserved *properly*. Properly! [...] Can I teach you once and for all... how to preserve a skin?" The Swede's inability to preserve his Jewish identity, his father's identity, leads to his downfall. Swede's daughter, after all, chooses to commit an act of political terrorism because she is otherwise directionless. Having been confused by her maternal grandmother's strange

attempts to sway her toward Catholicism and her father's ambivalence about his heritage, Merry searches for something to guide her, something to believe in. She chooses radical activism and the cult life with religious passion, but it is clear she will not survive very long having made these decisions.

Coleman Silk, at the end of the trilogy, has also failed to preserve his father's skin, and it is the connection between this hypocrisy and his illicit affair with Faunia that foreshadows and justifies his tragic death. But the real weight of the novel is what Zuckerman knows—not just that Coleman Silk was passing as Jewish, but that he told Faunia his secret. She was worth dying for because for the first time in his life Silk was comfortable enough to present himself on his own terms in relation to the ethnicity of his birth. It is for this reason that Silk can serve as Roth's alter ego: For Roth, the successful negotiation of communal expectations and individual identity, needs to be possible. Silk has made peace, if only in the confidence of one person, between the self born into a set of expectations based on race, and the self that exists despite those expectations.

This kind of doubling—the imagining of the self as another—is a successful writing practice for Roth because it emulates the process of reading. The common trope that reading is “an escape” is based on the idea that by reading one can imagine the self as the protagonist, or at least become privy to a world outside one's own. Ethnic literature, over the course of the past century, has been especially attractive because readers yearn to transcend “unsurpassable social boundaries,” to be provoked by alterity, and ultimately, I think, to locate the points of universal, human connection that affirm general existence despite difference. If Roth is a writer of ethnic literature, then he is writing ethnic literature in promotion of shared experience, not separate “Jewish”



experience.

### Coda: Post-Ethnicity Goes Global

In 1942, Franz Boas stood before his colleagues at the Columbia University faculty club and began to deliver a speech in vehement reproach of Nazi policy. It is sad but eerily fitting that at the climax of his address, Franz Boas collapsed into the arms of his student, Melville Herzkovits, and died from a heart attack. Boas' final words—his passionate rejection of anti-Semitism and racism—reflected his very beginnings. He may have escaped anti-Semitism when he left Germany, and he may have circumvented a traditional Jewish identity, but he never forgot what it meant for a person to be judged as different and inferior according to his ethnic origins. It is of utmost importance that Boas, as indicated not only by the topic of his final speech, but also by his mission to reconnect African Americans with their past on the African continent and even by his early fieldwork, which caused him to travel to remote locations, imagined the similarities between peoples on a global level.

At first glance, it may not be obvious why a project inspired by Boas' fundamentally anti-racist but complicated relationship with cultural pluralism serves as the basis for a discussion about Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Fran Ross, Bernard Malamud, and finally, Philip Roth. In this coda, I can only hope that it has come to the attention of my readers that the intentions of Boas' ethnographic research and his sponsorship of autoethnographic research have been widely misunderstood by scholars who credit Boas with the promotion of that which has come to be called "multiculturalism" or "multicultural awareness." Indeed, multiculturalism, as an esteemed concept, is responsible for much of the rhetoric in twentieth century literary studies, which tends to define authors by their connection to their ethnic origins. If Boas'

invention of American anthropology has left scholars with the notion that the ethnic divisions between peoples are cause for their impermeable categorization into separate and static ethnic groups, then perhaps he failed—particularly in the case of Zora Neale Hurston—to clarify his ultimate goals. Boas’ truer purpose foreshadowed the post-ethnic inclinations of the subjects of this project.

If post-ethnicity, as described by David Hollinger in his seminal work *Postethnic America* (1995), “favors voluntary over involuntary affiliation... promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds” and “resists the grounding of knowledge and moral values in blood and history,” then Hurston and Malamud, despite their post-ethnic desires, have never achieved a post-ethnic reputation.<sup>232</sup> Though Hurston’s posthumous fame had earned her canonical standing in American literary history and beyond, she has been framed, pervasively, as an African American writer. And Malamud, especially of late (thanks to a few poorly constructed biographies), has been portrayed as resistant to the American-Jewish writers’ circle in ways that actually make him seem more Jewish.<sup>233</sup> Fran Ross, as well, fell prey to ethnic labels—or rather her perceived inability to produce according to expectations of her ethnicity and gender—and therefore never achieved the recognition she deserved.

Boas, however, did achieve, for himself at least, a post-ethnic reputation, and in large part, that accomplishment can be attributed to his global perspective. Boas was not simply an American anthropologist. He was, as Hollinger would term it, a citizen of the

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<sup>232</sup> David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 3.

<sup>233</sup> As Itzkovitz contends, the Jew’s resistance to categorization is often perceived as the Jewish attribute of chameleonism discussed in chapter two.

world with roots.<sup>234</sup> Boas never denied his Jewish heritage, and in fact, he relied on a Jewish intellectual tradition at the foundation of his analytical system; however, Boas refused, on all accounts, to be limited by Jewishness. He was open to diffusion in ways that granted him universality. The same can be said for James Weldon Johnson and Philip Roth. Johnson, in his position as foreign diplomat, certainly gained a global perspective and standing. But beyond that, Johnson upheld an integrationist stance that encouraged diffusion and cross-ethnic sharing because it gave him the control to choose the aspects he wanted to incorporate into his identity rather than to allow others to make those choices for him based on his ethnicity. Moreover, Johnson's personal project was a model for much that was outside of himself. His skilled diplomacy in the NAACP pushed toward racial equality based on the universality of peoples.

Philip Roth, as Ross Posnock proposes in "Planetary Circles: Roth, Emerson, Kundera," has escaped the confines of ethnic rhetoric by writing as part of a global literary conversation. Posnock contends that Roth's success—particularly the success of *The Human Stain*—stems from Roth's "practice of appropriation." He writes, "the appropriation model combats a reductive tendency—promulgated by anthropology, embedded in separatist multiculturalism, and deeply influential upon literary study—of regarding cultures as self-contained systems, discrete bounded groups—monads, in short."<sup>235</sup> Though I would not identify the cross-continental sharing and diffusion between Roth and Kundera as "appropriation," my understanding of cross-ethnic practice as an ultimately post-ethnic activity leans in Posnock's direction. Cross-ethnicity

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<sup>234</sup> Hollinger writes, "As 'citizens of the world,' many of the great cosmopolitans of history have been proudly rootless. But postethnicity is the critical renewal of cosmopolitanism in the context of today's greater sensitivity to roots" (5).

<sup>235</sup> Ross Posnock, "Planetary Circles: Philip Roth, Emerson, Kundera," *Shades of the Planet*, eds. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Bell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 144.

promulgates a “fertility of affiliations” more capable of expressing one’s individuality and the web of human interconnectedness across ethnic, and by extension, national boundaries.<sup>236</sup> Hence, what Irving Howe once deemed the “thin personal culture” of Roth’s writing—a reference to the weakness he perceived in Roth’s autobiographical gesturing—is actually quite layered in *The Human Stain*.

Cross-ethnicity comes closest to post-ethnicity when it operates on the global scale. If we could read, for example, Hurston’s study of Herod in what Posnock identifies as the “spiraling circles of ‘world literary space,’”<sup>237</sup> similar to the way that Mark Christian Thompson reads the Black-Jewish connections in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* as Hurston’s response to the global events of her time, Hurston’s cross-ethnic practices could still potentially free her from the claims of ethnicity she disavowed. The consideration of cross-ethnic practice and the rhetoric of individuality in this project denotes an authorial strategy that occurs as part of a continuum aimed toward post-ethnic criticism in literary studies. Global trends in the twenty-first century are sure to increase the cases in which cross-ethnic practice is employed by American authors who seek universal recognition.

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<sup>236</sup> Posnock, 164.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

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