

PASSING AS JEWISH: THE MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES OF RACE AND THE  
PROPERTY OF WHITENESS IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY PASSING  
NOVELS

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Richard James Hurder (1938-2015); “You have always had a great big special place in my heart.”

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses passing and performing as Jewish in *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Jen, *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna, and *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth. In the introduction, I provide historical background on the development of the concept of race, Jewish American assimilation, and racial passing. In Chapter 1, I demonstrate that in *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen uses an intentionally asymmetrical juxtaposition between Jewish and Asian Americans and African Americans to argue that racial assimilation relies on the acquisition of whiteness. In Chapter 2, I discuss how Senna shows the development of American multiracialism as it relates to Jewish identity, and demonstrates the role of Jewish identity in constructions of race, ethnicity, and identity in *Caucasia*. In Chapter 3, I show that the protagonist's passing narrative in *The Human Stain* mirrors the path of the American Jew across the color line during the twentieth century, and that Roth uses the protagonist's ambiguous racial identity to show that it is impossible to escape societal labels and affiliations. In the conclusion, I provide a brief comparative analysis of how and why each text appropriates Jewishness. Ultimately, this thesis examines how other ethnoracial groups have interacted with Jewish Americans and how ethnic identity formations and designations are both complicated and dismantled by Jewishness. I conclude that contemporary representations of Jewish identity in passing narratives reclaim the power of Jewish identity to disrupt and dismantle the ideology of racial essentialism.

## INTRODUCTION

For the majority of American history, people have believed that race is an essential feature of identity. In the 1980s, however, legal scholars known as Critical Race Theorists began popularizing their social construction thesis, which “holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations” (Delgado and Stefancic 8). The social construction thesis is well-supported by the longstanding, overwhelming scientific consensus that race is not biologically real. Critical Race Theorists contend that, despite the fact that race is not biologically real and is socially constructed, the racialization of those perceived as “Other” has a material life in society and the law. While there are clearly material, social consequences of race, scholar Walter Benn Michaels contends that race is neither essential nor a social construct. Instead, Michaels argues that race is “a mistake” (143). He argues that just because race is not biologically real, it does not follow that it is socially constructed. Instead, he argues that race came into existence in society because people mistakenly believed it was a biological fact. While it may be the case that the concept of race was originally the byproduct of a mistake, Michaels is incorrect to say that race is not socially constructed. Since the original, mistaken conception of race, it has been socially reified and reshaped throughout American history.

Contemporary misconceptions about race originated with the belief that there is such a thing as “whiteness.” According to Ignatiev and Garvey in their collection *Race Traitor*, “The white race is a historically constructed social formation—historically constructed because (like royalty) it is a product of some people’s responses to historical circumstances; a social formation because it is a fact of society corresponding to no classification recognized by natural science” (9). This somewhat ambiguous definition

hints at the fluidity of racial identification and indicates that whiteness has not been and will never be a fixed identity category. As Karen Brodtkin explains, “before there were white and black people, there were Christians and heathens...’inferior’ religious cultures became inferior races” when the Americas were colonized and European settlers engendered the idea of race to differentiate themselves from Native Americans during the Age of Exploration. Race became a dominant force of social categorization with the institution of slavery. Contrary to popular assumption, “Africans were enslaved not because they were black but because Europeans and Native Americans were able to run away more easily” (Brodtkin). While Native Americans had tribes and Europeans had communities to protect them, Africans who were captured and brought to the New World often had no social ties and little to no understanding of the language and culture of the early Americas. Because of Africans’ vulnerability, “slavery made race and the ways race justified a regime of slave labor” (Brodtkin). Through the institution of slavery and the development of the concept of a black race, the white agrarian and working class organized the capitalist labor structure as we know it.

As the United States came to be and capitalism began to dominate both the economic and the social, European whites in the working class used their job positions to further distinguish themselves from non-whites. White workers refused to do jobs which were considered menial or dirty, leaving these jobs open to people of color. Whites then argued that other ‘races’ were inferior because of their willingness to engage in degrading work. Some ethnic groups, like the Irish, were originally considered to be non-white because of their differences from the dominant class and because of their status in the lower class. They became white, however, by demanding occupational superiority over

other groups, such as Chinese and Mexican immigrants and African Americans. Eventually, the American mainstream began to regard the Irish and many other ‘ethnic’ groups as white because of the ways they were different from (and supposedly superior to) non-European ethnic groups. This racial discourse necessitates that American races be demarcated by a limiting white/black binary, in which racial subjects are categorized exclusively as either white or black.

Assimilation, like that of the Irish, often comes at the cost of parts of the immigrating groups’ cultures. Since Jews began immigrating to the United States, there has been pressure for Jews to mitigate their cultural differences and instead present their central distinction as one of religious faith. In her article "Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism," Professor Laura Levitt argues that Jewish assimilation into the dominant American culture comes at the cost of their unique secular identity outside of the white/black binary. In order to become American, Jewish immigrants “had to give up these forms of Jewish cultural expression to become a part of the dominant culture. To assimilate into the dominant Protestant culture of the United States, Jews were required to identify their Jewishness as a form of religious faith to remain visible as Jews” (822). Those Jews who did not become religious thereby became invisible as Jews, or “white.” Throughout the article, Levitt chronicles the history of the American Jew in order to “think about the ways Jews do not fit into the now long accepted litany of differences ... how the presumed “whiteness” of some Jews has served to make invisible the ways Jewish difference continues to make a difference in how Jews figure in U.S. culture” (807). For the

American Jew, to be a part of the dominant culture has always meant eschewing ethnic difference.

Part of the reason for the successful assimilation of Jewish Americans is that, despite their longtime status as “simultaneously intermediary figures poised between racial designations,” they are, “subsequent to World War II at least, indisputably” white (Glaser 1470). The construction of Jewish whiteness came about in part “by contrasting Jews as a model minority with African Americans as culturally deficient” (Brodkin). Much like the Irish, Jews became white by virtue of their perceived difference from other marginalized ethnic groups. Jews became white and their perceived Otherness was limited to their religion and culture. As Jews became white, their updated cultural position was used as a new way of defining whiteness. Since Jewish immigrants were able to fully assimilate into the white mainstream, other immigrants and ethnic Others came to emulate Jews as a way to attain privileged status. As Brodtkin notes, “The construction of Jewishness as a model minority is part of a larger American racial discourse in which whiteness, in order to understand itself, depends upon an invented and contrasting blackness.” This socially constructed distinction explains the ongoing proximity between Jewish Americans and African Americans.

Unlike the majority of American Jews, very few African Americans enjoy the privileges of whiteness. In order to gain these privileges, many African Americans have made the difficult decision to pass for white. Passing was only a possibility for the select few men and women of color with facial features and complexions consistent with European whiteness, and those who did pass often faced criticism and ostracization from their own African American communities. Passing exposes the fiction of race, because it

“makes one part of a person’s ancestry real, essential, and defining, and other parts accidental, mask-like, and insignificant” (Sollors 249). African Americans who passed attempted to gain the privileges of white identity, just as Jews had successfully done. Passing into whiteness was necessary for gaining these privileges because of the white/black binary of American race relations and the history of the “one-drop rule,” which claimed that having any black “blood” or ancestry made an individual black, regardless of how they looked.

Because of the fundamental mistakes in our collective cultural understanding of race, Michaels argues that “we ought to give up the idea of racial identity altogether—we should, like the inauthentic Jew, deny that there are such things as Jews, or blacks, or whites” (142). In this context, the “inauthentic” Jew is the Jewish person who does not believe Jewishness to be an essential feature of identity. Michaels’ argument focuses on the notion of race as a mistake, rather than an essence or a social construct; He misses the fact that race was socially constructed after the initial mistake of ‘discovering’ race. He does, however, aptly recognize that Jewishness offers insight into what race actually is and how it functions. Jewish Americans in particular were first non-white, but they eventually became white. Their assimilation into whiteness helped to solidify the strict white/black binary that came to govern race relations. This binary is socially constructed, both in that it privileges whiteness and in that it recognizes only two major racial categories. In addition, the fact that Jewish Americans changed their assigned spot in the racial hierarchy demonstrates the constructed nature of racial categorization.

Both the concept of passing and the Jewish American assimilation into whiteness challenge racialized discourse. Although most African Americans who passed chose to

pass generally as white, some chose to pass as Jewish. There is cause for other marginalized groups, including Asian Americans and African Americans, to emulate Jews because they were able to effectively transform from non-white to white. This thesis will analyze three late twentieth-century American passing novels that each feature protagonists of color who use the liminal, gray area of Jewishness to cross the color line. In Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), the main characters' performance and passing as Jewish ultimately show that race is socially constructed and performative, not fixed and essential. Each of these novels were written in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, but look back to the protagonist's life earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and each consider how passing and performance shape individual and cultural identity. Through these novels, we can see the ways in which Jewish American identity informs and constructs other ethnoracial identities, how ethnic identities have evolved in the American cultural imagination, and how postwar passing narratives continue to bear relevance today.

In Chapter 1, I demonstrate that in *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen uses an intentionally asymmetrical juxtaposition between Jewish and Asian Americans and African Americans to argue that racial assimilation relies on the acquisition of whiteness. The novel ultimately shows that the assimilation of Jewish and Asian Americans is facilitated by the improbability of African American acquisition of whiteness. In Chapter 2, I discuss that Jewish identity is alluded to, appropriated, and abandoned throughout *Caucasia*. Through the protagonist, Senna shows the development of American multiracialism as it relates to Jewish identity, and demonstrates the role of Jewish identity in constructions of race, ethnicity, and identity in America. In Chapter 3, I show that the

passing narrative in *The Human Stain* mirrors the path of the American Jew across the color line during the twentieth century. Roth uses his protagonist's ambiguous racial identity to show that it is impossible to escape societal labels and affiliations. Finally, the conclusion will include a brief comparative analysis of how each text appropriates Jewishness, and to what end. This thesis will demonstrate how Jewish Americans have gained widespread acceptance in the United States, will dissect how other ethnoracial groups have interacted with Jewish Americans, and will discuss how ethnic identity formations and designations are complicated and dismantled by Jewishness. Ultimately, this thesis will show how contemporary representation of Jewish identity in passing narratives reclaim the power of Jewish identity to disrupt and dismantle the ideology of racial essentialism, thus directly contradicting anti-Semitism's attempts to codify and organize racial and ethnic discrimination. Just as Jews were once considered a universally reviled outsider, in the novels discussed Jews are regarded as universal insiders. In contrast to how anti-Semites have used Jewishness as a method for describing the Other, marginalized groups use Jewish identity as a lens for understanding what it means to be a part of the American mainstream.

## CHAPTER 1

### PERFORMATIVE IDENTITY AND WHITENESS AS PROPERTY IN GISH JEN'S

#### *MONA IN THE PROMISED LAND*

Asian American literature has often either been unfairly seen as representative of Asian American culture as a whole, or not seen at all. Kandice Chuh, however, suggests in the introduction to her landmark critical text *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique* that the field of Asian American studies can benefit from considering Asian and other ethnic American literatures within the realm of theory, rather than solely as literature. In this sense, “theory” refers to the tools and principles we use to understand and interpret literature. If Asian American literature is theory, then works of Asian American literature may alter the reader’s understanding of literature’s power to represent culture and identity. Defining ethnic American literature as theory “potentially effects both the disruption of the multiculturalist sedimentation of Asian American and other minoritized literatures as seemingly transparent vehicles of authentic otherness, and the unbounding of ‘theory’” (Chuh 19). In other words, considering ethnic American literature as theory escapes the problem of the Eurocentric, male-dominated canon and simultaneously broadens the realm of literary theory. Chuh argues further that redefining Asian American and other ethnic American literatures as theory:

...prompts a reconceptualization of culture from something one has either by nature (for “the multicultural” or “ethnic”) or refinement (for “the literary”), to that which is a site in which the affiliation of meaning to individuals, ideologies, and social structures occurs in negotiation with the material conditions of

existence shaped by politics and economics. ...here culture is understood as the locus in which signification has a material life. (19)

This is to say that in deconstructing the distinctions between the study of literature and the study of theory, scholars can come to understand and subsequently challenge the structures of oppression which subordinate Asian American and ethnic American literatures and cultures. If culture is redefined and is thus neither innate nor elitist, then it is accessible to all. By reframing Asian American literature as theory, scholars may learn more about how social constructs of race, ethnicity, and culture create material consequences in Othered individuals' everyday lives and how these consequences can be ameliorated or eradicated.

Asian American literature is a theory of cultural creation. The texts do not translate or merely represent Asian American culture; Asian American literature actively participates in the very production of Asian American culture. This culture production arises because of the diverse narratives and forms within Asian American literature. As Critic Fu-Jen Chen argues, "Though there is a long tradition of confronting issues of class and race in Asian-American literature, Asian-American literary works shift toward investigating the possibility of a fluid, decentered identity," thus, "challenging the very notion of a stable identity of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity" (para. 4). As a result, contemporary Asian American literature is uniquely poised to be understood as critical theory. In this chapter, I will argue that Gish Jen's 1996 novel *Mona in the Promised Land* is an example of Asian American literature functioning as cultural theory because Jen uses an intentionally asymmetrical juxtaposition between so-called model minorities— Jewish and Asian Americans—and African Americans to argue that racial

assimilation relies on the individual and collective acquisition of whiteness. While the novel at first seems like it uses Jewishness as a lens to explore Asian American cultural identity in particular, in introducing African American characters who experience the material consequences of race, Jen complicates the characters' and the reader's notions of ethnic assimilation and the formation of American cultural identity. Although the novel lacks a satisfying conclusion, the novel is ultimately a success because it makes clear that the assimilation of Jewish and Asian Americans is both made visible and made possible by the near-impossibility of African American acquisition of the property of whiteness.

*Mona in the Promised Land* is about Mona Chang, a young girl who is in the early stages of discovering her identity, independent from her parents and their expectations. She begins to adopt the cultural identity of her friends in order to separate from her parents and to fit in with her peers, but eventually her new identity illuminates for Mona the nature and consequences of various ethnic identities in America. The novel is a bildungsroman, but more important to the text as a whole than Mona's coming-of-age is the maturation of an American multiethnic consciousness. In the opening pages of *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen's unique third person, omniscient narrator states that Asian Americans are "the New Jews, after all, a model minority and Great American success. They know they belong in the promised land" (Jen 3). The sardonic tone of the narrator's initial commentary and the narrator's presence itself indicate that the novel is aware of its place within the theoretical framework of American Ethnic Studies, and throughout the novel the narrator interjects to provide commentary, analysis, and critiques of the novel's own characters and themes. The narrator's initial remarks establish that the contemporary moment (for the narrator, the 1990s) is different from the

time in which the novel begins (1968); while the 1970s featured “the multicultural atmosphere of the end of the civil rights movement” (Ho 29), backlash against identity politics and political correctness in the 1990s prompted a reevaluation of racial and ethnic categories. The narrator thus tells the story retrospectively, according to Jen, because “from our latter-day perspective, the invention of ethnicity is an interesting thing to look at, because in our time it seems so obvious that one is essentially (fill-in-the-blank)-American, when twenty years ago there was no such label. It’s a very recent and very American construction” (Jen Interview).

The narrator’s assertion that Asians are “the New Jews” also implies that there are some minorities who are not “model minorities” and who do not always feel that they belong in America, thus establishing that one of the novel’s central themes is the proximity between Asian Americans and Jewish Americans, and foreshadowing the eventual proximity between Asian Americans, Jewish Americans, and African Americans that becomes clear later on in the novel. For these reasons, the narrator acts as the voice for theoretical and critical reflection within the novel. The narrator also serves as Jen’s own witty mouthpiece, since Jen stated in a 1996 interview that she wanted the novel “to address broader concerns about the nature of ethnicity, so I did set it quite purposefully [sic] in the late 1960s, when ethnicity was being invented, because it occurred to me when I looked back on my high school years that I had been a witness to that process of invention, on the heels of the civil rights movement” (Jen Interview). The narrator’s mature, retrospective insight thus allows readers to recognize that—while the protagonist herself is often unaware of the broader implications of her performance as Jewish and her individual experiences with ethnicity, culture, race, and the material consequences

therein—both the author and the novel itself intentionally provide a critique of the ideologies and societal structures in the United States which enable racial and ethnic inequity.

The narrator describes the life of Mona, who struggles with coming-of-age in a Chinese-American household. Both because “she’s sick of being Chinese,” and because her best friend has recently decided to embrace her own Jewish heritage, Mona decides to convert to Judaism (Jen 29). Her conversion is an opportunity not only to distance herself from her parents, but also to become more like her Jewish American friends and classmates. Likewise, according to Caroline Rody, “the very fact that Mona feels impelled to convert signals identity trouble, the difficulty of resolving identity within U.S. ideological parameters” (91). This difficulty arises in part because of the limiting white/black binary of American racial discourse. Mona believes that American identity means both fitting in socially and inventing one’s own identity. While she does not see herself as American when she is overwhelmed with a sense of Chinese difference, Mona conversely recognizes Jewishness as a way of being American in that it is both other and white, both a minority and a part of the mainstream. Mona’s belief in the liminality of Jewishness is timely, according to Will Herberg in his 1963 article “The Integration of the Jew Into America's Three-Religion Society,” because American Jews “have become a religious community, in which the remaining ethnic elements, are subsumed in the religious identification” (32). This is to say that by the 1960s, Jews are well within the process of becoming white, and their difference is seen as merely religious—not ethnic, racial, or national. The social standing of American Jews at this time directly contrasts that of Chinese Americans, who are generally seen as wholly foreign. Despite her

attitudes about identity performance, Mona feels conflicted by her desire to assimilate into American society while still being recognized as an individual. Jen includes this tension in order to demonstrate the confines of the white/black binary of American race relations and to show the marginalization of minority groups who do not possess whiteness as property, “the set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white” (Harris 1713). Mona’s identity construction is both an attempt to define an identity independent of her parents and a way to feel like a part of American mainstream cultural identity.

When Mona announces her newfound Jewish identity, her mother asks, “How can you be Jewish? Chinese people don’t do such things” (45). Her mother thereby reemphasizes the strict expectations of Chinese identity from which Mona seeks to escape. Mona replies, much to her mother’s chagrin, “I guess I must not be Chinese then” (46). As Amy Ling argues in her article “Cultural Cross-Dressing in *Mona in the Promised Land*,” Mona regards boundaries between different ethnic identities as “barriers set up by bigots who feel superior to others unlike themselves” and believes that “To cross these boundaries is to demonstrate that you do not accept the hierarchical values associated with their erection” (229). This is to say that Mona is eager to cross ethnic boundaries both in order to embrace other cultural identities and to escape from the prescriptive barriers of her own. Ling explains that Mona is “cross-dressing” by performing Jewishness, rather than “passing” in the traditional sense, because she is unable to disguise her stereotypically Asian physical features. The difference between Mona’s performance and acts of passing is significant, both in that her physical features limit her performance and in that her race does not require actual passing. Mona’s

eagerness to renounce her assigned ethnoracial identity and the associated ancestral culture is simultaneously indicative of typical teenage rebellion and of her underlying desire to assimilate into the supposed “melting pot” of American society.

Initially, Mona converts to Judaism because she sees Jewish identity as a pathway to American identity. Mona seems to think that in America “nationality and culture have switched from the predetermined and immutable *prix-fixe* column of the identity factors menu to the *à la carte* column” (Ling 227). She proudly proclaims that she is American and “American means being whatever you want” (Jen 49). Mona thinks that American teenagers have more freedom to choose their identities than Chinese or Chinese-American teenagers, who she thinks are bound by their traditional culture and strict parents. Though she states she “happened to pick being Jewish,” her decision to convert to Judaism is strategic, not incidental (49). For one, “Jewishness is an available middle term, neither black nor precisely white, nearly parallel and thus comically comparable to Asianness” (Rody 122). Mona cannot simply proclaim herself white, but she can convert to Judaism and adopt Jewishness. Mona chooses Judaism as her pathway to Americanness because as a Chinese American, she is a minority “like it or not, and if you want to know how to be a minority, there’s nobody better at it than the Jews” (Jen 53). Perhaps without realizing the implications of her decision, Mona chooses Jewishness because to be Jewish is to be both ethnic and white, both American and Other. She subconsciously comprehends and takes advantage of the fact that “the dual nature of Jewishness as both religion and ethnicity makes it handily and anomalously an ethnic minority condition to which one can formally convert” (Rody 93). Jewish Americans simultaneously assimilate and remain distinct; they are visible but included. This type of

minority standing is what Mona seeks, in contrast with the less favorable minority status of African Americans, who lack the property of whiteness. This distinction is significant; Mona is only willing to embrace a particular minority category—Jewish American—because perhaps becoming Jewish will afford her the privileges of whiteness, despite her inability to truly ‘pass’ as white.

Mona’s subconscious decision to distance herself from African Americans mirrors her parent’s aversion to African Americans. The narrator remarks that Mona’s parents “don’t want to have too much to do with blacks,” because “they don’t want to turn into blacks” (Jen 118). In other words, they feel that “Their vulnerable social position, as Asian Americans, is threatened by association with those of the lowest class and racial status” (Rody 64). This perceived threat is tied to the history of Irish, Jewish, and other once-non-white ethnic assimilations, because those individuals also had to distance themselves from the Other. Mona tells her mother that they cannot turn black because to be black is “a race, not a religion” (Jen 49), thus signaling that at the beginning of the novel, she regards blackness as an essential, immutable fact of black individuals’ identities. Mona’s initial belief in racial essentialism contrasts her belief that ethnicity and culture can be disavowed, adopted, and developed so long as the identity is a subset of American identity. While she believes that the umbrella identity “American” encompasses a variety of malleable, interchangeable identities, she struggles with her desire to be granted the property of whiteness, her fear of being black, and her conflicting desires to be both recognized as a distinct individual and afforded the privileges of assimilation.

Interestingly, despite her desire to become American, Mona's decision to perform a Jewish identity is consistent with what the novel's narrator describes as a feature of Chinese culture. The narrator claims that "what mattered" for traditional Chinese people is "not these people's inner selves, but their place in society" (123). The emphasis on belonging within Chinese culture is replicated when Mona alters her identity in order to feel a sense of belonging within American culture. For this reason, "now that she's Jewish, she feels like more of a Chinese than ever" (66). While Mona's pursuit of Jewish identity is an attempt to escape from the "Chinese" label, she is re-labeled as "Changowitz," the Chinese Jew, after she converts and begins performing Jewishness (56). The irony of Mona's newfound identity is multifaceted; there is the obvious irony that becoming Jewish makes her feel more Chinese, but it is also ironic because she joined a new social group despite the fact that at least part of her intent was to break from her assigned identity and become an individual. "In a fine paradox," Rody argues, "Mona's decision to 'switch' seems to arise from her insight that, inasmuch as she stands out from the Jews, the lone Asian among them, so she is like them" (99). It is not surprising, however, that Mona feels Chinese when she performs Jewishness because both ethnic groups are in turn considered the "model minority." Mona literally sees Jewish identity as a model of how to be a minority in America.

Mona initially gets the idea to convert to Judaism from her best friend, Barbara Gugelstein. Barbara decides to become a practicing Jew, thus inspiring Mona to join her. Unlike Barbara and Mona, Barbara's mother does not want to spend time with "too many Jews" because "they spent their whole lives getting out of the ghetto, why should they go back" (125). This cross-generational conflict is indicative of the fact that "the third

generation of American Jews,” unlike their parents, began to “*reassert* their Jewish identification and to *return* to their Jewishness” around this time (Herberg 33). In keeping with her generation, Mrs. Gugelstein’s aversion to her own and her daughter’s Jewishness is made apparent when she pressures Barbara to get a nose job, thereby eliminating her stereotypical physical marker of Jewishness, distancing herself from Jewish identity, and allowing her to more easily assimilate into mainstream (i.e. white) American society. Ling argues that Barbara’s nose job constitutes a “vertical” cultural crossing—from minority to majority—“which implies shame and denial of the self” (232). Barbara’s crossing is more similar to an attempt at passing than is Mona’s because her crossing is partially intended to erase the physical characteristics which might prevent someone from recognizing her as Jewish. This type of crossing or passing “can only have a detrimental effect” (Ling 232), as evidenced by the fact that Barbara ultimately regrets the decision to alter her appearance and erase what once seemed essential and material about her Jewish body and identity. This injurious effect is also, perhaps, the result of Barbara having been pressured to permanently erase her phenotypic Jewishness, rather than having freely chosen to cross into another identity and maintain the possibility of going back, like Mona’s Jewish performance.

Like Mrs. Gugelstein, the Changs refrain from introducing their daughters to an overabundance of their culture in order to ensure that they become American. Ironically, this is not the ‘American’ thing to do; multiculturalism is becoming the norm and it is on the verge of being fashionable to be a hyphenated-American. The girls begin to embrace their Chinese culture only when Mona’s older sister, Callie, shares her dorm at Harvard Radcliffe with Naomi—a bright African American girl who is interested in issues of race,

ethnicity, and culture. Callie remarks that “she didn’t understand what it meant to be Chinese until she met Naomi,” who educated her on Chinese language and cultural tradition in ways her parents never had (168). “Naomi, perhaps even more than Mona, is the ultimate cultural crosser,” according to Ling, because she is “a woman with an omnivorous cultural appetite” (230). Ling’s insight is significant, because it shows the way that passing, performance, and identity appropriation can occur unintentionally. Naomi “thinks it’s great for Callie to be in touch with her ancestry,” despite her parents’ desire for their daughters to become American. Ironically, Naomi suggests that Callie “Forget [her] parents” and continue pursuing more knowledge of Chinese culture, despite the fact that her parents are clearly her ancestors. Naomi “believes that our ancestors do not have to be related by blood; we can choose them” (230). While Naomi chooses for herself diverse mock-ancestors, she influences Callie to select ancestors who reinforce the assumptions of her outward appearance. Naomi also tells Mona that she is “*yellow. A yellow person, a yellow girl,*” and that in being non-white she is “colored” and thus “involuntarily stuck to” other people of color (Jen 170). As Chen argues, “While Naomi highlights identity as performance as free choice, she at the same time essentializes and simplifies racial identity in terms of color” (17). This is to say that Naomi subconsciously ascribes to the kind of racial essentialism that is characteristic of American culture in the 1970s. Despite the fact that she is idolized by Callie and Mona, and presented in a generally positive light by the narrator, the novel invites the reader to question Naomi’s espousal of an ideology of racial essentialism.

Because of her conversations with Naomi, Mona begins contemplating race and culture. In an attempt to better understand race, Mona and Barbara begin what they term

their “comparative tragedy project” (140). While the girls think that they want to understand which racial or ethnic category is the most disadvantaged in American society, in reality their experiment is an attempt to understand how they each fit into American race relations. As a result of the American black-white binary paradigm which “effectively dictates that nonblack minority groups must compare their treatment to that of African Americans” (Delgado and Stefancic 75), the girls seek to learn more about what it is like to be black. Mona and Barbara thus begin to talk more with Alfred, an African American cook at the Chang’s restaurant. They talk about the upward mobility of Jewish and Asian Americans, much to Alfred’s chagrin. Alfred is frustrated because the girls both seem to think that their people have worked hard and succeed as a direct consequence, and that African Americans could easily do the same. Alfred responds to their naïveté by saying, “We’re never going to have no big house... We’re never going to be Jewish... *We be black motherfuckers*” (Jen 137). According to Chen:

Alfred's reply points out the problem of identity performance. No matter how hard they try, the lower classes are stuck to performing one single role. If identity, as Mona and Barbara claim, amounts to no more than a matter of performance and a free choice of lifestyle, the lower classes in the novel should be held responsible for their own social status. That is, their status must be due to their incompetence in performance and to weak minds in making choices. In this view, class antagonism simply dissolves. (22)

At this point in the novel, Mona and Barbara simultaneously recognize inequity and believe that these inequities are the responsibility of the oppressed subject; they do not understand that social and structural inequalities limit African American identity

performance and upward mobility. Alfred, on the other hand, recognizes that “the model minority myth” exists “in order to allege that all Americans of color could achieve the American dream,” without taking into account historical and structural systems of black oppression (Chou and Feagin 13). Unlike Alfred, Mona and Barbara fail to recognize that the upward mobility of Jewish Americans is the direct result of their acquisition of whiteness. Mona and Barbara perpetuate the damaging myth of the model minority in part because they do not know better, but also because this myth espouses a belief in the exceptionalism of Jewish Americans, and will someday benefit Asian Americans in a similar manner. By including both the girls’ ignorance and Alfred’s attempted rebuttal, Jen allows the reader to recognize on her own what the characters themselves may not fully comprehend: Alfred and black Americans at large are “never going to be Jewish” (Jen 137) because they cannot easily adopt a new, non-black social identity and thereby attain the privileges of whiteness.

Through the juxtaposition of Mona and her friends with the novel’s African American characters, Jen shows that minority groups must identify themselves in relation to African Americans. First in the girls’ friendship with Alfred and later in Mona’s friendship with Naomi, Rody argues that “what starts as a novel about Chinese and Jewish American teens seems almost inevitably to turn into a novel about the relationship of these groups to African Americans” (105). In fact, this juxtaposition is the novel’s greatest accomplishment. The reader is able to see what the girls themselves fail to fully recognize: there is no comparison between their peoples’ historical tragedies and the ongoing tragedy of anti-black discrimination in America. Throughout the novel, Jen imagines Jewish identity as a cultural pathway for other minority groups, while

acknowledging that this pathway is not generally available to African Americans. While critics have emphasized the proximity between Asian Americans and Jewish Americans within the novel, the novel's success is its representation of how African Americans are not upwardly mobile like non-black minority groups. Mona's conversion to Judaism and subsequent assimilation into the white mainstream reinforce the system of oppression which privileges white over black; when new groups manage to effectively become white and attain the privileges of possessing whiteness as property, they fail to disrupt the status quo which disadvantages non-white citizens.

Although Alfred implies that there are structural and social barriers to African American upward mobility that other racial and ethnic minorities do not face, he also maintains that "White is white, man. Everything else is black." (Jen 155). Alfred thus alludes to the inescapable binary which governs American race relations and oppresses those who are considered black (Delgado and Stefancic 75). Though the girls fail to understand it at the time, Alfred communicates that there is a material reality of blackness that has so far been nearly inescapable in American society. While he may not necessarily believe in racial essentialism like Naomi, Alfred understands that if a group of people is *not* impacted by the material consequences of blackness—such as social discrimination and structural inequality—then they must be white. Alfred therefore regards both Barbara and Mona as white girls, despite their ostensibly non-white ethnic and cultural identities. In this way, Alfred acts as the voice for Jen's cultural theory and demonstrates that so-called model minority groups have attained or can provisionally attain the property of whiteness.

As they come to know one another better, the girls unintentionally reinforce Alfred's belief that there is a significant racial distinction between them. In a show of good will to Alfred, who was recently thrown out of his apartment by his ex-girlfriend, Barbara and Mona offer to let him stay in the Gugelstein's home while Barbara's parents are away on vacation. The home has a clandestine underground entrance, which Barbara was told was once part of "the Underground Railroad" but which appears to be a bomb shelter or wine cellar (150). The mention of the Underground Railroad alludes to the material and practical consequences of race, and "the subterranean tunnel becomes the racial unconscious of the book" (Rody 106). The home also boasts what used to be "servants' quarters," where Alfred is to stay because Barbara's cousin, Evie, who is staying with her for the summer, is unlikely to go there. Though this placement serves a practical purpose—discretion—it also serves the symbolic purpose of making Alfred feel that he is not a guest in the home but instead a second-class citizen, a slave, or a prisoner. The servants' quarters, where Alfred is to have very little light or entertainment and is not to make any noise, "begins to feel like solitary confinement" (Jen 153). As a result, Alfred begins to play music, venture into other part of the house, and even invite his friends over without Barbara and Mona's permission in order to exercise his autonomy and rebel against his 'white' oppressors.

Eventually, Barbara, Mona, and Mona's boyfriend, Seth, come home early to find that Alfred has not only been inviting people over to the Gugelstein's house, but that Evie has long been aware of Alfred's presence and has even begun having an affair with him. Once Barbara, Mona, and Seth overcome their initial shock and anger, they begin spending time talking with Alfred and his friends. The group includes Alfred, "Luther the

Race Man, Big Benson, Ray, and Professor Estimator,” as well as Mona, Barbara, Seth, and Evie (197). The group’s talks become regular meetings of diverse individuals, fondly termed “Camp Gugelstein” (200). The discussion “revolves around politics, or drugs, or the war” and Luther in particular often incorporates race into the conversation (200). Through these conversations, “Mona and her friends constitute an idealistic, socially-conscious group of young people who seek to live their beliefs in a more equitable world” (Ling 231). At first, the conversations are productive and the group seems to have formed an interethnic utopia, and against all odds “a cross-race encounter generates something approaching real dialogue and real mutual leaning” (Rody 63). When a valuable flask goes missing from the Gugelstein’s home and Barbara confronts the group about what may have happened to it, however, Camp Gugelstein falls apart. The black men feel that they are being accused because of their race, and they are no longer willing to associate with the nonblack members of the group. Mona, Barbara, and Seth are adamant that the accusation is not about race, and to some extent, they are correct. Rody argues that “When Mona and her friends take it upon themselves to investigate race, they unwittingly come upon the barrier of class difference” (63). In other words, they suspect the men of stealing the flask not because they are black, but because they are poor (perhaps they are poor because they are black, as Alfred seems to understand, but Mona and her friends do not consider this possibility). According to Ling, “Despite the generosity and equitable impulses of the younger generation, the gulf between haves and have-nots is wide and deep, and perhaps unbridgeable” (232). In other words, the material consequences of race (namely low socioeconomic status) which plague African

Americans more dramatically than they do Jewish or Asian Americans can strain and ultimately destroy even the most well-intentioned cross-cultural relationships.

After Camp Gugelstein disintegrates—both falls apart and loses the integration of races—Seth begins to think “It was naïve to think it could work” (Jen 207). Scholar Jennifer Ho notes that Seth’s “naïveté lies not just in believing that their interracial group could last but also in his not seeing the way that his privilege as a white man and his lack of recognition of that privilege contributed to the end of his friendships” (39). Because Seth is unaware of his white privilege, he fails to recognize that he contributed to the end of Camp Gugelstein by sitting idly by when Barbara accused only the poor, black members of the group of stealing her father’s flask. After their racial experiment comes to an end, Seth recounts the vision he had of “a house with no walls between the rooms” (Jen 208). The house represents both Camp Gugelstein itself and Seth’s idealistic vision for an American future in which there would be no barriers between different racial and ethnic groups. The real house as well as the metaphorical is, unbeknownst to Seth, haunted both by “violent histories” and “by the history of cross-race freedom work” (Rody 107). Camp Gugelstein is effective in that it is “a house of American multiethnic coexistence, even if one haunted by violent histories and far too grand in ambition, as it turns out, for anyone to own for long” (Rody 25). Though Seth may be correct that he was naïve not to recognize the ghost of history within their utopian project, Camp Gugelstein is nonetheless a temporary success.

During the same summer as the establishment and collapse of Camp Gugelstein, Mona takes on another racial “project” with Naomi and Callie (Jen 170). The girls “are secretly studying” the white guests at the country club where Naomi and Callie work as

waitresses. The project is somewhat funny because of the “uniform they wear,” which “involves a kilt and polo shirt, clearly a Scottish theme” and many of the guests find it amusing to ask them what part of Scotland they are from (170). Callie and Naomi take note of the words and actions of the guests, and Mona resolves to do the same. She takes Naomi’s advice “to make herself invisible” in order to best observe the guests (171). Just when Mona thinks she has mastered inconspicuousness, she is recognized by her classmate, Eloise Ingle. This recognition reemphasizes that Mona can only perform, not truly pass, as Jewish or white. Naomi encourages Mona to spend time with Eloise and her family in order to “infiltrate” the exclusive space of the white elite and report back with her findings.

Mona soon thinks she has been accepted as Eloise’s friend and agrees to have dinner with Eloise and her family, but she quickly realizes that Mr. Ingle is a “typical” white member of the country club when he asks Naomi, their waitress for the evening, “So what part of Scotland are you from?” When she is not distracted by the extravagant menu, Mona notices that Naomi is not acting like herself. The narrator notes that, “Naomi will not look at her... Though what did Mona expect? Nobody could invent herself the way Naomi has without also being able to serve a person what she asked for” (179). This is to say that Naomi treats Mona as if she is a rich, white country club member. The Ingles, however, treat Mona as if she is dramatically different from them. Mrs. Ingle asks her where she is from, and one of her stepsons clarifies, “She means where are you from, from” (181). In addition to casting American-born Mona as a foreigner, “they do not talk to Naomi; when she’s serving or clearing, only Mona talks” (181-2). The Ingles allow Mona to sit at their table and to temporarily benefit from the privileges of whiteness, but

they make it clear that she is a guest invited for their amusement and that Naomi will not be afforded even a paternalistic type of acceptance. In doing so, the Ingles cast Mona as a model minority figure and place her in direct contrast with Naomi; because she is black and working-class, Naomi cannot even temporarily share in white privilege. The property of whiteness is available only to model minorities who are willing to compromise themselves and deny their connection to black Americans.

During their dinner, Mr. Ingle steps away to take a phone call from work. Someone working at his company was caught “shorting the stock of bankrupt businesses” for his company’s own profit. The swindled buyers are unable to sue because technically the employee’s actions were legal, but the company believed “that someone should step down, in order to restore the good name of the firm” (230). Mrs. Ingle disagrees with the company’s decision, noting that the “poor man” who is to be fired “has a family too,” but Mr. Ingle claims that “If there were a choice, we would choose.” The narrator notes the “perfectly round black period at the end of the sentence,” indicating that the matter is already settled. When Mona returns home, she learns from Barbara that her father has been fired. Apparently, Mr. Ingle works for the same company, and was either responsible for or complicit in the decision to fire Mr. Gugelstein and make him the scapegoat for the scandal, despite Mr. Gugelstein’s obvious innocence. Mr. Gugelstein’s wrongful termination proves to him “that Gugelstein was never how you spelled popularity to begin with” (230). In other words, it seems clear that he is the one chosen to be fired solely because he is Jewish. Therefore, in the era and context of the novel, Jews have not yet fully attained the property of whiteness. Like Mona’s position at the Ingle’s

dinner table, Jewish Americans position in the white American mainstream is still probationary.

Mr. Gugelstein does not sue his company for wrongful termination because he does not have a strong case. Barbara remarks, “But what could he prove? That no one there turned out to be his friend?” (237). She correctly notes that it is very difficult to prove discrimination in court, especially when it comes to anti-Semitic discrimination. Compared to racial discrimination, anti-Semitic discrimination is less visible and thus easier to deny. This is part of the reason why “Mr. Gugelstein cannot sue, but Alfred can” (238). Alfred is suing the Changs for firing him from their restaurant. He claims that he was fired because he was black—a suspicion substantiated by the fact that Mona once revealed to him that he was not being considered for a promotion because of her parents’ distrust of African Americans. The Changs, however, maintain that he is fired for causing trouble at the Gugelstein’s house, and that they have no choice but to fire him out of respect for their friends. They even claim that they were generous to have hired him in the first place, “despite his having a police record” (243). Mona’s Aunt Theresa admits that “clearly Alfred’s dismissal had something to do with race. But what?” (244). Her poignant question is also the central question of the novel; clearly, the novel has *something* to do with race relations. But what, exactly, does the novel argue about race?

The novel’s central argument is that attaining the property of whiteness is necessary for upward mobility, and that this property is unavailable to black Americans who are unable or unwilling to pass as white. This argument is slightly obscure to the reader and completely mystifying to Mona. While she never seems to discover how exactly race contributed to Alfred’s termination, Mona recognizes that she is at least

partially at fault for the entire debacle. She is complicit in the accusations that disintegrated Camp Gugelstein, she is mostly passive when her parents discriminate against Alfred, and she makes the mistake of telling Alfred that her parents harbor anti-black prejudice. She visits Alfred to apologize and convinces him to drop the lawsuit against her parents. Either by luck or industriousness, Alfred gets a better job in a steakhouse and is thereby willing to let the Changs off the hook for discriminating against him. Alfred is willing to overlook the discrimination he faced once he no longer suffers its direct material consequences.

In the epilogue, after Alfred's redemption and the Changs' absolution, the novel jumps forward ten years or so to Mona and Seth's wedding day. While Jen's narrator explains what has come of each of the novel's main characters, "Jen leaves unresolved the conundrums of identity that she has unearthed" in the earlier chapters (Heung 25). Instead, the narrator paints a rosy picture indicating that things have worked out well for everyone. Barbara has embraced the outward markers of her Jewish identity and now she even "spritizes her hair to frizz it up more" (Jen 296). Similarly, Callie has turned "so Chinese that Ralph and Helen think there is something wrong with her"; she has even begun using a mock-Chinese name, rather than the "nice English name" her parents went to "so much trouble" to find for her (301). Alfred has had continued success and even married Evie; "They've marched, they've cooked, they've given up denying that she married him to assuage her own guilt, or that he's a white-bitch-lover who shouldn't have needed her to get him through college" (297). The narrator neither comments on the troubling idea that Evie once had to argue that she did not marry Alfred because of her white guilt, nor on the more concerning possibility that she has "given up denying" this

because it is an indisputable fact. Perhaps the couple has merely “given up” denying others’ unfounded accusations, but if so this distinction is not made clear in the novel. Even if one assumes the best, the novel’s ending is nonetheless unsatisfying. In the epilogue, the novel’s narrator abandons her strong critical voice in favor of vague optimism.

The conclusion indicates that no one has suffered any long-term material consequences of their ethnic or racial identities. As previously stated, the narrator guides the critical arc of the novel and serves as a mouthpiece for the author, albeit a sometimes sarcastic one. In an interview regarding why she wrote *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen said:

In this time of huge, public embracing of ethnic roots, I wanted to show how our lives are more complex than what we're born with. While our ethnic roots are very important to us, I think that anybody who is interested in their identity would do well to learn about the place they grew up in, and learn about its culture. We make ourselves in this country; even people who are racial and ethnic minorities transform themselves. (Jen Interview)

On one hand, Jen’s concept of ethnicity is successfully multicultural. She embraces, and creates a novel which embraces, cultural cross-dressing for personal and group enrichment without representing such enrichment as malicious appropriation. For Jen and for her novel’s protagonist, culture and ethnicity are to be shared if they are to be understood.

On the other hand, while the novel is largely successful in presenting and troubling issues of race, ethnicity, and identity, the conclusion misses the opportunity to

provide an assertive, complete criticism of racialization and its material consequences. In the epilogue, Alfred has escaped the bulk of the material consequences of his race by finding a new job and marrying a white woman, and everyone has conveniently forgotten the anti-Semitic discrimination the Gugelstein's once faced. Each of the white, white-ish, and white-affiliated characters has settled into the safe, liberal vision of utopia that Seth once thought he was "naïve" to believe in. As Chen points out, "Jen's epilogue does not address everyone." The other black men who participated in the utopian social experiment that was Camp Gugelstein are not mentioned in the epilogue. The reader is left to wonder what came of them or to forget them entirely. Chen argues that "if wondering about them at all, readers are left to assume that their conditions of life—their marks of class status—surely remain unchanged" (25). Although Alfred was able to leverage his relationship with a white woman to escape some of the most oppressing material consequences of his race, the other black characters in the story (save Harvard-educated Naomi) are unable to overcome the lower-class status unjustly afforded to them as a direct result of their race. Only those characters who attain or otherwise benefit from the property of whiteness are able to find success in the end of the novel, and those who do not are left behind.

The epilogue establishes a fictional post-racial America even more naïve than Camp Gugelstein, in which everyone has either avoided ethnic struggle over the last decade, or managed to overcome discrimination through individual effort and a positive attitude. While the text seems to argue in favor of interethnicity, the text's overly sanguine epilogue passively perpetuates the structures of oppression which marginalize people of color by ignoring the material consequences of blackness and creating a vision

of the future which nearly excludes non-white characters. The future presented fails to alter the structures of oppression which privilege whiteness as property in that it merely extends this property and its hegemony to a wider range of non-black ethnic groups, rather than dismantling the system altogether. The conclusion—in contrast with earlier representations of race—seems to say that race, religion, and ethnicity are all surmountable identity performances.

Despite the fact that Jen chooses not to leave open important questions of race and identity in the epilogue, the novel is still generally successful in posing and complicating them through the representations of identity in the preceding chapters. *Mona in the Promised Land* as a whole presents an interesting take on the performance of identity. While the performance of particular kinds of identities can lead individuals or even groups to attain the property of whiteness, ultimately someone is unjustly left behind when the hegemony of white supremacy remains intact. Mona may not personally have a change of heart about racial performance, but the text itself nonetheless demonstrates some of the fundamental issues with whiteness as invaluable cultural capital. Even though Mona effectively gains white privilege by the end of the novel, it is clear that she only does so by imitating the path of the Jews and “becoming” white, not by overcoming the disadvantages of being non-white. Through the black characters in the text, Jen successfully demonstrates and critiques the material consequences of race which have historically oppressed and continue to marginalize people of color who lack the resources to perform or pass as white and assimilate into the white dominant class.

## CHAPTER 2

### BLACK, WHITE, JEWISH: THE MULTIPLICITY AND MATERIALITY OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN *CAUCASIA*

Jewish identity is an apt lens for examining racial and ethnic identity constructions, because the notions of Jewish race and ethnicity have changed over time and have thus troubled the once widely-held concept of racial essentialism. In the early twentieth century, Jews were often stereotyped as “a ‘chameleonic race’” (Itzkovitz 35). According to scholar Daniel Itzkovitz in “Passing Like Me,” the “difficult position of Jewishness” is clear in this characterization; the idea of being essentially chameleonic paradoxically insinuates, “*both* the fluid instability of Jewish identity *and* the embodied stability of Jewish racial distinctiveness” (35). He goes on to explain that yet another paradox of the concept of Jewish chameleonism is, “the idea that Jewish identity could be characterized only in terms of an always unstable shape-shifting. The Jew was most Jewish, that is, when not Jewish at all” (35-6). In other words, it was believed that an essential, defining feature of Jewishness was the ability to alter oneself, paradoxically revising, obscuring, or abandoning other ‘essential’ features of one’s Jewish identity. Notably, “This paradoxical notion of Jewish mimicry as an essential trait highlights the ways that racial identity is constructed” (Harrison-Kahan 26). Considerations of Jewish identity were central to “the early twentieth-century development of an American rhetoric of racial and national identity” (Itzkovitz 34). While contemporary readers are likely to be unfamiliar with the history of Jewish American identity and stereotypes, Jewishness nonetheless troubles the black/white racial binary and—in its contradictory depiction as essentially performative and chameleonic—raises questions about racial authenticity.

In early twentieth century literature of passing in particular, “The construction of Jewish identity as performative and inauthentic” stood “in contrast to popular conceptions of blackness,” which depicted light-skinned black people who passed as inauthentic and destined for tragedy (Itzkovitz 34). Early-twentieth-century passing novels, like James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, often featured mixed-race, “tragic mulatto” figures who passed as white to their ultimate detriment. These characters and countless others like them were doomed from the start because passing was supposedly the denial of their authentic black identity. By and large, these novels failed to challenge racial essentialism, because the idea of the “tragic mulatto” whose demise arises as a result of abandoning her authentic race reinforces the concept of race and an essential trait, rather than a social construction. This conception of racial essentialism is challenged as Jews—neither black nor white, and allegedly capable of changing shape and shade—become a fixture in American society and culture. The successful passing of Jewish Americans and the possibility of an essentially performative identity brings into question the notion of racial authenticity. Jewish identity thus demonstrates that racial authenticity is nonexistent and impossible, because race is not an essential feature of identity.

In literature of the late twentieth century, the trope of passing is revived and revised. Danzy Senna’s 1998 novel *Caucasia* features a protagonist, Birdie Lee, who has a black father and a white mother. When Birdie’s parents divorce and her mother commits an unspecified crime in the name of civil rights, Birdie and her mother, Sandy, begin a new life on the lam. Meanwhile, Birdie’s father, Deck, and her older sister, Cole, move to Brazil in the hopes of finding a more racially tolerant community. The girls are

divided based on the parent they resemble most; Birdie goes with their mother because she looks white, and Cole goes with their father because she looks black. Ostensibly in order to evade the police, Sandy creates new identities for herself and for Birdie. Birdie becomes Jesse, the daughter of an imaginary, deceased, Jewish professor named David Goldman. Although Birdie must hide her blackness, Sandy argues that her daughter is not really passing because “Jews weren’t really white” (140). Senna’s novel therefore differs from early-twentieth-century passing novels both in that Birdie is coerced into passing, rather than independently choosing to pass for social privilege, and in that she passes as Jewish, rather than as simply white.

The novel, like *Mona in the Promised Land*, is a bildungsroman. *Caucasia* differs from *Mona in the Promised Land* in that it features a biracial character who unwillingly begins passing as white, rather than a character who intentionally adopts a new cultural, religious, and ethnic identity in order to experiment with her sense of self. The main project of *Caucasia* is the exploration of race, racial essentialism, and authenticity. Throughout *Caucasia*, Jewish identity plays a subtle but crucial role in defining authentic identity. First, the novel establishes a shadow of Jewishness both in the cityscape and in Birdie and Cole’s secret language and games of make-believe. Jewishness is alluded to and mentioned casually throughout the first section of the novel. During the novel’s second section, Jewish identity is used as a way for Birdie to pass without completely abandoning her Otherness. When she experiences anti-Semitism, however, Birdie abandons her Jewish identity for general whiteness. In this way, Birdie unknowingly becomes more stereotypically Jewish because of the way Jews have been regarded as chameleonic and able to assimilate into whiteness. Birdie’s experience of anti-Semitism

and her frequent observation of anti-black racism both lead her to recognize the material consequences of racialization and the personal consequences of abandoning her true identity. Birdie begins to understand race more completely when she reunites with her father, who believes that race is merely performance. In large part because of her experience of passing as Jewish, Birdie recognizes that her father is choosing to ignore the inevitable consequences of race. In the novel's conclusion, Birdie realizes that there can be interethnic coexistence without ignoring the real consequences of race in the past and present. Birdie's personal coming-of-age is thus shaped by the historical presence of Jews, her identification with Jewishness, and her understanding of race's material consequences following her personal experiences with anti-Semitism. While critic Habiba Ibrahim contends that, "the project of the novel is to design a narrative that underscores the trajectory of the multiracial movement in the twentieth century" (156), I argue more specifically that the novel shows the development of American multiracialism and interethnicity as it relates to Jewish identity. The novel demonstrates a complex, overlapping, simultaneous set of experiences with identity through Birdie, who represents herself as and is believed to be black, then white, then Jewish, and, finally, mixed. Through Birdie's retrospective account of her journey to racial consciousness, maturity, and self-acceptance, *Caucasia* demonstrates the role of Jewish identity in both the initial formation and contemporary understanding of race, ethnicity, and identity in American literature and culture. Jewish identity is a useful lens for examining racial identity because Jewishness represents an Othered identity while simultaneously challenging racial authenticity and even race itself. Historically speaking, Jewishness was subsumed into whiteness and thus did not challenge the notion of racial essentialism;

Jews became white and their disbanding as a racial category meant only that there were fewer racial categories. By reappropriating Jewishness as a lens for understanding racial identity in general, however, Senna challenges the notion of racial authenticity as a whole, ultimately demonstrating that race is non-essential and socially constructed, yet very real to those who suffer racial discrimination.

Before Birdie is compelled to pass as white and Jewish, Senna shows the development of Birdie's identification with blackness. She initially identifies herself as black because she thinks of herself as a reflection of her older sister, Cole. The novel's opening lines, "Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence," indicate that Birdie's sense of self develops in conjunction with her perception of her phenotypically black older sister. (5). As she gets older, however, Birdie begins to realize that other people see a significant difference between her and "cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired" Cole (5). For instance, when Sandy objects to Birdie attending a Black Power school because, "She looks like a little Sicilian," her father retorts, "In a country as racist as this, you're either black or you're white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass" (27). While Sandy fears that Birdie will suffer social ostracization in a majority black environment because she appears to be white, Deck resists the erasure of what he believes to be his daughter's authentic black identity. Then-eight-year-old Birdie does not yet fully understand what either of her parents say about race and color, but she begins to wonder why people look at her and her sister differently and what her physical appearance might say about her identity.

More important to Birdie than her and her sister's physical differences are their similarities; both girls enjoy "playing make-believe" and communicating in a made-up language they call "Elemeno," named for their "favorite letters in the alphabet" (6). Cole tells Birdie that Elemeno isn't "just a language, but a place and a people as well" (7).

Cole claims that the Elemenos:

...could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and back again. She said they were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility ... The Elemenos could turn deep green in the bushes, beige in the sand, or blank white in the snow, and their power lay precisely in their ability to disappear into any surrounding. (7)

In addition to the literal similarities between Cole's description of the Elemenos and actual chameleons—who can indeed "turn deep green in the bushes, beige in the sand"—the passage establishes the shadow of Jewishness that will color the novel. The fictional Elemeno people are described in terms consistent with common stereotypes about Jewish chameleonism. In the public perception, "Jews were both white and racially other" (Itzkovitz 35); their identity was not easily contained within the black/white binary. Jews, too, were stereotyped as "a shifting" people, and their adaptability was often regarded as part of their "quest for invisibility" within the white world. Just as the Elemeno's "power lay precisely in their ability to disappear into any surrounding" (Senna 7), chameleonism was regarded as an essential and defining feature of Jewish identity. This reference to the stereotype of Jewish chameleonism may be lost on the average reader, given that Jews are not often stereotyped in this way in contemporary American society. Senna presumes this opacity and uses it to her advantage by merely alluding to Jewishness in the first

book of the novel in order to build suspense and avoid overtly playing into negative ethnic stereotypes.

The shadow of Jewishness is also present in the novel's setting. Birdie and her family live in Boston, where a notable "period of racial change that extended from the late 1940s through the 1970s" changed the local ethnoracial landscape (Gamm). During this period, as Jews' upward mobility allowed them to transcend the working class, "middle-class Jews" moved to suburban communities. Many people contend that the urban exodus of the Jews was an effort to distance themselves from neighboring black communities (Gamm). The aftermath of this exodus is exemplified in *Caucasia* when Birdie, Cole, and Deck go to visit Deck's sister, Dot. Birdie notes that Dot's "house had once belonged to a family of Hasidic Jews." She then explains that the Jews "had fled Roxbury when it began to change colors" (Senna 12). Similarly, Birdie notes that there, "sat an abandoned Jewish synagogue with weeds growing out of the cracks in the stone" next door to Nkrumah, the Black Power school she and Cole briefly attend (42). These subtle references to the Jewish flight from Boston neighborhoods hint at the way that Jews have been able to escape some marginalization and oppression by distancing themselves from black communities.

Both in the use of an original language and in setting, the novel establishes the relationship between African American or biracial characters and Jewish Americans. Although there are no significant Jewish characters in the novel, *Caucasia* represents Jewishness as both a cultural legacy in the United States and as a point of comparison for other ethnic groups. The beginning of the novel alludes to Jewish identity and to the Jews who once inhabited the Boston neighborhoods where the main characters live and

socialize. These allusions establish the histories of anti-Semitism and of Jewish assimilation after World War II, which shape the urban environment and the social environment of African Americans in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. By including a shadow of Jewishness in the first book of the novel, Senna foreshadows the role Jewish identity will play later on in the text and replicates the real-life impact Jewish identity formation and assimilation had on black communities.

In the beginning of *Caucasia*, Birdie is marginalized within black communities because she appears to be white. At Dot's house, Deck clashes with a light-skinned black man called Redbone, who tells Deck, "Don't get black and proud on me. You're the one with the white daughter" (16). Despite the fact that Redbone himself has been marginalized and criticized within the black community for his pale skin and red hair, he implies that Deck is inauthentic in his blackness because he married a white woman and has a daughter who appears to be white. Birdie is similarly marginalized by her father when she realizes his preference for Cole. She notes that her father, "never seemed to see me at all. Cole was my father's special one. I understood that even then. She was his prodigy—his young, gifted, and black" (55). Cole served for their father as "proof that he had indeed survived the integrationist shuffle...Her existence told him that he hadn't wandered quite so far and that his body still had the power to leave its mark" (56). Birdie's body thus betrays not only her own sense of black identity, but also brings into question her father's authenticity. Notably, questions of racial authenticity in these black and biracial bodies disrupt the notion of racial essentialism itself; if Deck, who is ostensibly genetically black, can be inauthentic in his blackness, then perhaps blackness is not an essential feature of identity. When Deck's peers accuse him of failing to perform

blackness correctly, they imply that their own black identity is a mere social performance.

In addition to challenges to his authenticity as a black man, Deck faces challenges to his legitimacy because of his blackness. According to critic Daniel Grassian, “Deck's contrasting attitudes toward his daughters on the basis of their skin color is a response to others who have trouble accepting Deck's kinship to Birdie” (326). This becomes apparent when Deck and Birdie take a trip alone to the park, and Birdie notices an older couple watching her. She tries to “put them out of [her] mind,” but then the couple starts “talking to two men in uniform, the police on their beat, and then the four of them were trudging across the grass in our direction” (59). Almost immediately, one of the policemen condescends Deck by calling him “brotherman” and asks him, “Who’s the little girl?” Despite his calm demeanor, his insistence that Birdie is his daughter, his photographic evidence that she is his daughter, and his documents proving he is a professor at Boston University, the police still do not believe him. Eventually, the officers either decide to take Birdie’s word that she is his daughter, or they simply give up. Either way, the incident compels Deck to tell his daughter, “Study them, Birdie. And take notes. Always take notes” (61). Even though the entire incident was caused by Birdie’s white appearance, in telling her to study “them,” Deck momentarily accepts her as essentially, authentically black.

The sense of authentic blackness instilled by her father is of no help when Birdie struggles to fit in at the all-black Nkrumah School. On her first day, another student asks her, “What you doin’ in this school? You white?” (43). Because she appears white, “Birdie's body, the combination of her features and color, acts as an enemy informant,

announcing to the world an identity that she resists” (Dagbovie 101). Birdie is continuously ostracized and ridiculed at the school until Cole stands up for her, claiming that “Birdie isn’t white. She’s black. Just like me” (48). While Cole “Ironically... must also ‘learn’ to be black to fit in at the school” (Boudreau 63), she is merely made fun of for not meeting the standards of blackness, not accused of being inauthentic. Cole’s black identity goes largely unquestioned because of the visible blackness of her body, and she is thus able to provide necessary credence to her light-skinned sister, despite her own notable differences in identity performance from the other black students. In contrast to mainstream American society, both the girls’ father and their classmates cast “blackness as the ideal, desired identity,” to which they must conform (Harrison-Kahan 20).

Over time, Birdie and Cole perform the version of blackness they see among their schoolmates in order to fit in. The social environment at Nkrumah thereby, “forces them to reconsider their identities and becomes their first real attempt to pass,” or perform, as black. Unlike passing in the traditional sense, “Birdie and Cole try to pass as African American and have a difficult time doing so. Birdie quickly learns how her lighter skin separates her from Cole, who has a much easier time being accepted” (Grassian 324). Nonetheless, Birdie attempts to fit in. She recounts, “I started wearing my hair in a tight braid to mask its texture. I had my ears pierced and convinced my mother to buy me a pair of gold hoops like the other girls at school wore” (Senna 62-3). Although Cole similarly eschews her individual identity to perform this particular version of blackness, Birdie—unlike Cole—is considered inauthentic because, “Cole’s darker body identifies her as black in a way that Birdie’s doesn’t. Cole is not *passing* for black; Instead, she is in a sense *enhancing* her blackness” (Rummell 4). She is seen as authentic by those who

believe in racial essentialism because her “black body legitimizes her attempts to learn blackness and renders her ‘performance’ of blackness somehow more authentic, at least in the minds of her family and schoolmates” (4). Despite the fact that Birdie does manage to find some level of acceptance at the Nkrumah School, society at large is unwilling to accept her performance of blackness as authentic because of her skin tone. Once again, black individuals unsettle the notion of racial essentialism by claiming that other black or half-black characters are inauthentic in their racial performance.

Birdie’s performance of blackness is comparable to passing. Birdie unintentionally and unknowingly passes in the traditional sense in her early life, when people presume she is white, and later she must try to pass for black. Birdie does not exude blackness in her appearance, so she performs the type of black identity she witnesses at school and reads about in magazines. Like in traditional passing, Birdie’s goal is to effectively become a part of the racial group she imitates. Birdie, however, inhabits the same role as an African American who is unable to pass successfully—her body betrays her identity, and she is perceived as white regardless of her performance. Much like a biracial individual whose skin is too deeply pigmented to convincingly pass as white, Birdie is too light-skinned to persuade others that her performance of blackness is authentic.

Birdie’s skin tone becomes an even more prominent issue when her father begins dating Carmen, a black woman. Birdie recognizes that when Carmen speaks to Cole, “I saw the new life in my sister’s face, as if she had found some reflection of herself in this tall, cool woman” (Senna 91). Carmen does not have the same effect on Birdie, who feels ignored and slighted by Carmen. Birdie reflects:

Others before had made me see the differences between my sister and myself—the textures of our hair, the tints of our skin, the shapes of our features. But Carmen was the one to make me feel that those things somehow mattered. To make me feel that the differences were deeper than skin. (91)

Both to the reader, and to Cole, Carmen’s coolness toward Birdie is palpable. Deck, on the other hand, completely disregards “how Carmen demeans and ignores Birdie in favor of Cole on the basis of skin color” (Grassian 326). In contrast, when Birdie tells her mother that Carmen is rude to her, Sandy remarks, “So, Miss Black and Beautiful doesn’t think you’re good enough, huh? You probably remind her of me, and that’s what they’re all trying to forget these days, you know—that they ever dabbled in the nitty-gritty land of miscegenation” (114). This remark unintentionally conveys to Birdie that her body and her very existence are regarded as shameful to some people, perhaps including her father; Carmen, for one, seems to regard Deck’s interracial procreation and his light-skinned progeny as a disgrace.

When Sandy commits an unspecified crime in the name of black activism and fears that she will be arrested, she decides to leave Boston and assume a new identity. In turn, Deck decides to take Carmen and Cole and leave the country. Another reason he decides to leave is because he thinks, “Boston, America, is a fucking mess and it’s only going to get uglier. Real ugly. Black people need to start thinking internationally” (121). It is unclear if specific events—the incident with the police in the park, widespread resistance to bussing within the white parts of the city, or perhaps unmentioned racism he faces on a daily basis—trigger Deck’s desire to escape, or if his black-centric intellectualism has made him feel hopeless about the future of black America.

Regardless, Deck feels compelled to take his girlfriend and his daughter to Brazil in order to escape American racism.

When they leave, Deck and Cole give Birdie a box of so-called “Negrobilia,” which is “filled with a collection of strange objects” intended to help her remember her black culture and past (127). Though the box seems to have been thrown together haphazardly—in a shoebox with the word ‘Negrobilia’ “scrawled in magic marker on the side”—Birdie cherishes the box as one of her only remaining pieces of her father and sister. In addition to the box, Cole gives Birdie her Golliwog doll. The doll had been a gift to Cole from their (racist) grandmother, and:

Its body was made of cloth and hung limply, like a long-legged puppet. Its face was a perfect black circle, its hair a crescent of steel wool. Its eyes were huge white plastic circles with tiny black pupils, and its mouth a half-moon strip of red felt that sat in a perpetually mocking smile. (98)

Birdie recalls that the girls had loved the doll when they were young, before they “had any idea what was wrong with dolls like Golli.” Though Birdie and Cole now know, as their mother told them from the start, that the doll is “a racist tool, a parody, a white-supremacist depiction of African people,” the gift symbolizes for Birdie her childhood and the naïve, secure sense of self she had before she became aware of the physical differences between herself and Cole. Later, when Birdie is left alone with her mother, Birdie often looks at the doll and the box of negrobilia, “to maintain a connection to African American culture” (Grassian 329). When Birdie is not with her father and sister, who inform the black half of her identity, she loses her explicit connection to blackness.

Through the objects they give her, Birdie is able to replicate their black bodies and reinforce her connection to black identity.

When Birdie is in the car with her mother on the way out of Boston, Birdie remarks that, “Beyond my window, the city appeared colorless and hushed, like footage from a black and white movie” (Senna 125). The city seems “colorless” because her father and sister have left, taking with them Birdie’s link to blackness. Birdie’s whitewashing is made complete when Sandy imposes upon her a new identity. While Sandy first tells Birdie that she has “a lot of choices” and that she, “can be anything,” she nonetheless ignores Birdie’s ideas and instead announces that her new name will be Jesse and she is to present herself as a white Jewish girl, “the daughter of an esteemed classics professor and so-called genius named David Goldman” (130). Sandy chooses a Jewish identity for her daughter perhaps in part because one of her interests in her youth was the Holocaust and she was “obsessed with the footage she had seen of the Jews being liberated from Treblinka” (34), but predominately because of the racial ambiguity she recognizes within Jewish identity. Sandy appropriates secular Judaism in order to justify coercing her biracial daughter to pass because of the privileged but not-quite-white status Jews held in American society in the late 1970s. Significantly, “the story of Jewish assimilation in America can be read as a narrative of successful passing for white.” Thus, “In passing for Jewish, Birdie passes as the consummate passer,” (Harrison-Kahan 26). Sandy, however, tells Birdie that Jews are not white, “more like an off-white. She said they were the closest thing I was going to get to black and still stay white” (140). Sandy also explains that Birdie does not have to actually practice Judaism because her fake father, “was pretty much an atheist even though he wanted you to know your history,

your heritage. For him, Judaism was more like a cultural thing” (131). Sandy exploits the ambiguous racial position of Jewish Americans and the group’s contentious history of passing and assimilation in an attempt to preemptively avoid any questions about Birdie’s skin tone.

Though Birdie is technically passing when she and her mother are on the road, she does not yet take her false identity seriously or think of it as a part of her true self.

Birdie recalls the years before she and her mother find a place to settle:

On the road and in the women’s commune, the lie of our false identities seemed irrelevant because there was no world to witness them. The people we encountered seemed—like us—to be in a perpetual state of reinvention. We were all fictive images of our former selves, a fact that somehow neutralized the lies, made it all a game of make-believe. In those years, I felt myself to be incomplete—a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping toward completion—half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked, not quite ready for consumption. And for me, there was comfort in that state of incompleteness, a sense that as long as we kept moving, we could go back to what we had left behind.

(136-7)

By mentioning that her passing was irrelevant without a “witness,” Birdie acknowledges that passing is an act of performance; without anyone to perform for, her passing is hardly different than when she played “make-believe” with Cole. It is necessary for others to observe racial performance because racial identity is a social relation. Race, as a social construction, only exists if others bear witness and recognize its performance. In this moment, Birdie begins to recognize that racial identity is not essential. In addition,

Birdie's sense of being "incomplete" is the result of her unstable identity. In other words, as long as Birdie is in-between her former self and the realization of her newly-formed identity, she will continue to feel like, "half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked." Birdie feels halved because, at Nkrumah, she came to see herself as black. Now, she has been forced to abandon the black half of herself and has not found a way to reconcile a complete identity without her blackness. Critic Brenda Boudreau argues that in doing so, "it is clear that letting her body speak for her," and "by 'becoming' white, Birdie is stripped of the agency to define herself. Forced to negate her 'invisible' blackness, Birdie literally begins to disappear behind a white identity she doesn't understand or want" (60). In an attempt to rediscover the lost half of her identity, Birdie "would sit, fingering the objects in my box of negrobilia, usually humming a little tune (some old, long-gone soul song), while I tried to imagine what Cole was doing at that very moment" (Senna 139-140). The sense of loss Birdie feels clearly not just the result of losing her father and sister. Instead, Birdie seeks out the black culture and identity she has lost. Her newly-constructed Jewish self is not, as her mother claims, close enough to the black identity she has unwittingly abandoned.

Birdie's false Jewish identity is dependent on her mother's whims and fears. Birdie states that they "played up" her Jewish identity "only some of the time." Sandy buys Birdie, "a Star of David somewhere along the way, a cheap one from a pawn shop. It hung from a thick gold rope that left a vaguely greenish tint on the skin below my collarbone" (140). Sandy insists on giving Birdie a physical marker of Jewish identity in order to make her performance more believable, but the falseness of the performance is still indicated on Birdie's skin. Birdie begins to recognize disingenuousness in objects

because of the falseness she recognizes in her own performance of identity. She notes that their van's shoddy radio plays music that is, "washed out, like an echo of music, not quite the real thing" (142). Birdie subconsciously feels that she, too, is like a "washed out," "echo" of her former self. Similarly, she describes the van itself that "had once been yellow," as now having, "no color at all; the color of something stripped clean for the sake of starting over" (142-3). Birdie does not feel that her white, Jewish identity is a part of her true self. Instead, Birdie thinks of herself as fake and washed out, as having lost her color and having thereby lost what she believes to be her authentic self.

Birdie continues to recognize falseness around her when she and her mother settle in rural New Hampshire. Birdie states that New Hampshire, "looked strange to me, like some imitation of life I had witnessed before only in movies" (143). In this new life, Birdie notices that her mother begins to perform her identity differently. For instance, Birdie is struck by her mother flirting with white men. To Birdie, this "seemed to be taking our game one step too far, becoming the other woman rather than just playing her" (144). The potential permanence of Sandy's transformation is highlighted by the fact that she has lost seventy pounds since they left Boston. With her new body, Sandy is able to more confidently assimilate into the New Hampshire community. When Sandy meets the Marsh family, from whom she would like to rent a small house, Birdie notices that the well-to-do family, "heard her accent, so like their own, and knew she would do just fine. Never mind the thin, glowering, dark adolescent by her side, they thought. They saw a woman and a child. No man? No problem. They knew she was one of them" (150). By returning to her upper-class, 'Wasp' identity, Sandy begins revealing that her new identity performance is more than just an act.

As time passes and Sandy and Birdie become more accustomed to their new identities, Birdie begins to forget once vital aspects of her former self and to feel disassociated from her own body. She remarks that, “My father was fading on me. Not the Jewish father. I could see David Goldman clear as day, in a rumpled tweed jacket, a yarmulke bobby-pinned precariously to his loose afro, as he bent over some ancient text. It was my real father, Deck Lee, whom I was having trouble seeing” (188). Forgetting her real father is a natural, predictable result of their separation and her inability to freely talk about him. The fact that she has a clear, false memory of her imaginary Jewish father, however, shows that her memories are being rewritten by the lies she is forced to live. The performance that was once a game of make believe has taken over Birdie’s core identity, and the objects that once reminded her of her true self now, “seemed like remnants from the life of some other girl whom I barely knew anymore, anthropological artifacts of some ancient, extinct people, rather than pieces of my past. And the name Jesse Goldman no longer felt so funny, so thick on my tongue, so make-believe” (190). Because she now has witnesses to her identity performance, Birdie starts to actually become Jesse. As the persona becomes more familiar to Birdie, her body becomes less so. She feels a profound sense of disembodiment. She states, “I would look at my own body the way I looked at another’s. I would think ‘You,’ not ‘I,’ in those moments, and as long as the girl was ‘you,’ I didn’t feel that I lived those scenes, only that I witnessed them” (190). Birdie struggles to cope with the process of actually becoming who she has pretended to be, and her performance shifts from fraudulence to unintentional authenticity.

Birdie is inhibited from growing comfortable in her new identity because of the anti-black racism she often hears and the anti-Semitic racism she experiences. When she experiments sexually and smokes marijuana with her neighbor and crush, Nick Marsh, he recounts how he and his friends purchased a prostitute in Amsterdam. He explains that, “She was this fat black chick from Africa or something. They have white girls, too, and some Chinese girls, but they cost more than we had. I heard that black girls were supposed to be good, anyway, so we bought this one. It was all right. We took turns with her” (199). His racist remarks remind her of when Carmen told Cole that “white boys were trouble. She said they might seem nice at first, but they can never forget your color. It’ll come up sooner or later, and then you’ll see that they always saw you as a black chick—a curiosity, a dabble in difference—nothing more” (200). Clearly, Birdie remembers Carmen’s warning at this moment because of her fear that Nick would not want her if he knew that her real father is black. This fear and her general discomfort with his racist attitudes prevent her from having sex with Nick. She thinks that any sexual act beyond kissing would be, “proof that the game had gone too far,” because, “It wasn’t Birdie, but Jesse, who lay beneath him, who held him in her hand, who made his eyes turn all glassy and his breath come out uneven” (203). Birdie realizes that Nick does not know her true self and that, because of his bigotry, he would not accept her if he did. In a desperate attempt at true acceptance, Birdie tries to tell Nick about her past, but he has fallen asleep and doesn’t hear her.

When Birdie begins attending school as Jesse, she encounters more overt anti-black racism. Birdie must either tolerate the racist remarks of her acquaintances and so-called friends, or run the risk of social ostracization and, perhaps, of others finding out

her true identity. In regards to the racist language and ideas she often hears, Birdie states, “And when I heard those inevitable words come out of Mona’s mouth, Mona’s mother’s mouth, Dennis’s mouth—nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie—I only looked away into the distance, my features tensing slightly, sometimes a little laugh escaping” (233). Birdie is able to overlook anti-black racism because she continues to tell herself, “what I had maintained from the start: I was a spy in enemy territory. This was all a game of make-believe” (269). By refusing to admit that she has actually become Jesse, a white-passing girl who does not stand up against racism, she is able to continue the charade and keep her secret.

Birdie finds it much more difficult to deal with ethnic discrimination when she is its target. While walking with her popular white friends, a group of boys approach in a car and some of them begin throwing pennies at her. After one boy calls her a “Fuckin’ kike,” Birdie, “looked down again, this time noticing my Star of David, thick and gleaming in the sunlight.” Only then does she realize, “that they were throwing pennies at me because I was Jesse Goldman, daughter of David Goldman” (246). This incident is the first instance of overt discrimination Birdie has faced since she began passing, and she is taken aback. Her friends then ask her if she is Jewish, and she replies, “Well, not really Jewish. I mean, only my dad was, and he’s dead. And to be really a Jew, you have to have a mother who is Jewish. It’s like the religious law or something” (247). By disowning her false Jewish identity, Birdie takes a significant step in her transformation from performing to actually becoming a different person; she is now complicit in the perpetuation of racism, and she chooses on her own to abandon an identity which might ostracize her. Shortly after the incident, Birdie takes off her Star of David and hides it in

the bottom of her underwear drawer. Significantly, she does not put the necklace in her box of negrobilia because she does not consider the symbol of her false Jewishness a valuable marker of past identity in the same way that she considers the objects in the box valuable markers of her lost black identity.

As Birdie becomes even closer friends with a group of popular white girls, she hears racist remarks increasingly often. Her friends' remarks remind her of how, "My grandmother in Boston used to say that 'the Negroes should stop obsessing about race. Then maybe everybody else would.'" In contrast, Birdie "was finding that in New Hampshire, the white folks needed no prompting. It came up all the time, like a fixation, and there was nothing I could do to avoid it" (248). Birdie suffers from having to hear what the white people she knows have to say about people of color when they think they are not around, and she realizes that her grandmother had been wrong about why racism is perpetuated. Shortly thereafter, Birdie recalls a 'game' her family played when they drove through Irish or Italian neighborhoods in Boston. She remembers how her parents "called the game 'Now You See Him...' My father would pull out the raggedy plaid blanket we had in the backseat and hunch down real low in the passenger seat, making a tent out of the cloth. ...They wouldn't stop the game until we were out of the neighborhood, on safer ground" (249). She recalls this memory because her friends' racist remarks alert her to the fact that—regardless of what her grandmother once said—there are material consequences to race. Sometimes these consequences are the discomfort people of color feel at overhearing racism or the isolation and insult they experience when they are discriminated against; the memory of Deck, however, reminds both Birdie and the reader that sometimes the material consequence of race is fear for

one's own safety. Birdie thus feels a sense of guilt because by passing, she is spared of the most severe material consequences of her race. Even though she faces some consequences of her false Jewish identity, she is able to simply take off the physical marker of Jewishness and thereby easily find acceptance in the white world.

Birdie is able to take off her Jewish identity, just as she removed the markers of black identity left over from her performance at Nkrumah. By removing her Othered identities, Birdie preserves the privileges of whiteness. Birdie does not choose for herself to begin passing as white or performing as Jewish. However, when she chooses to abandon her performance of Jewishness, Birdie becomes a consenting agent in her own passing. No longer is she compelled solely by her mother's paranoia—Birdie abandons the part of herself that makes her vulnerable to the material consequences of Jewish identity. In doing so, Birdie becomes more aware of the racism she hears and observes from her peers on a regular basis, and she begins feeling guilty for abandoning her black identity and thereby escaping the material consequences of the racialization of African Americans.

Birdie eventually feels overwhelmed with the guilt of passing and the pain of abandoning her past. Birdie struggles to understand her own identity, and seeks to discover it through Samantha, her biracial classmate, who “appeared as someone else, someone melancholy and sullen and fluent in Elemenno. She appeared as my sister under the broken swatches of sky” (283). Because Samantha resembles Cole, Birdie now sees her as the reflection that proves her existence—she sees herself in Samantha, thus proving her disguised black identity lives on. When Birdie drunkenly decides to ask Samantha what color she is, “There was a prolonged silence, then she smiled sideways...

She said so softly that she wasn't sure I'd heard her right: 'I'm black. Like you'" (286). Though it is unclear both to Birdie and to the reader whether or not Samantha actually recognizes Birdie's blackness, Birdie nonetheless resolves to return to Boston in search of her family and her long-missing black identity.

Birdie's arrival in Boston symbolizes both the return to her past and her emerging understanding of racial issues. When Birdie arrives, she comes across a map of the subway system. Birdie stares:

...at the lines of red and green and purple and blue and orange, a bright webbing of artificial colors, thick and primary. My father had told me once that those lines were racial codes. He said green led to Jews in Brookline and Newton. Red to Cambridge Wasps. The blue and the purple to the suburbs, where the Irish and Italian townies lived. And the orange line, he had told me, led to Chocolate City.

To Dorchester and 'the Berry.' Roxbury. To your people, he had said. (296)

Much like when she recalled her grandmother's assessment of race relations and when she remembered the 'game' her parents had to 'play' to keep her father safe in white neighborhoods, Birdie remembers her father's lessons about race. Birdie's apt recollection indicates that she has come to Boston to take the orange line to her people, and subsequently to the memories she has lost and the identity she was forced to uproot. When she catches a glance at her reflection, she sees that her "makeup was smeared by rain and maybe tears, I couldn't remember—making my face appear blurred, like a photograph of someone caught in motion" (297). Birdie is still "blurred" and "in motion" because she has not completed her journey or found her authentic identity.

When Birdie finally finds her aunt Dot's house, she feels a sense of shame while recounting her life on the road, at aurora, and in New Hampshire as Jesse Goldman. She waits, "until the end," of her story, "to tell her that I'd been living as a white girl. Jesse. A white girl who wasn't even Jewish at the end of the day" (311). Birdie expects Dot to be disappointed in her. Instead, Dot tells her about how she has come to feel after spending a number of years living in India:

It's funny. When you leave your home and wander really far, you always think, 'I want to go home.' But then you come home, and of course it's not the same. You can't live with it, you can't live away from it. And it seems like from then on there's always this yearning for some place that doesn't exist. I felt that. Still do. I'm never completely at home anywhere. But it's a good place to be, I think. It's like floating. From up above, you can see everything at once. (315)

While Dot went somewhere that is geographically "really far" from home, her experience resonates with Birdie who left behind the identity she once called "home." Like Birdie, Dot sometimes experiences her own life "From up above"—in contrast to Birdie's overwhelming disembodiment, however, Dot sees her transcendence in a positive light. Dot gains a new perspective when she is able to look past her own corporeality and rise above racial categorization and skin color, and she thus serves as a role model for Birdie. Birdie thinks that she doesn't, "want to be black like Samantha," her socially ostracized, biracial, former classmate, whom she regards as, "A doomed, tragic shade of black." Instead, Birdie wants "to be black like somebody else" (321). Birdie continues to look for her true identity in other people when she comes across a recent picture of her sister. She says, "I scrutinized my sister's face for signs of my own. The resemblance was there, but

it wasn't easy to explain. It was something in the expression. Or maybe I was just imagining it" (330). Birdie's connection to her sister's black body, like her connection to blackness itself, has faded. She used to take it for granted, but now it lies either in something beyond the body that isn't "easy to explain" or she is "just imagining it." Regardless, Birdie lacks a physical connection to blackness and thus must look to others to define herself.

Later on, Birdie stands up for herself against her grandmother's assault on her identity. She recalls that her grandmother has always said things that make her "feel as if there were something pitiful about [her] existence." Unlike the shame she felt when she was a child, Birdie becomes angry when her grandmother says Birdie's parents' marriage "was doomed from the start. Tragedy in the making" because Sandy "should have stuck to her world" (365). She indignantly tells her grandmother that she and those like her are the real "tragedies" because their whole world "is based on lies." The lie, of course, is the fiction of white supremacy. In her dejection, Birdie looks outside to see that, "The world outside the window was as white as it had ever been... The snow looked tinted with blue, the way totally white things sometimes do. It's the same with things that are deeply black—an Asian girl's hair, a drop of ink, a stallion's coat. They turn blue" (368). Despite that the world is "as white as it had ever been," Birdie recognizes that even the purest shade of white and the deepest black is really blue, the color of the blood in all people's veins before it is exposed to oxygen. Whether consciously or not, Birdie begins to understand that race itself is a construct based on lies.

When she finally reunites with her father, however, Birdie begins to understand that race is both a social construct and a reality with material consequences. Deck seems

uninterested in what her life has been like over the last six years, and she angrily tells him about how she “passed as white.” Deck condescendingly responds, “But baby, there’s no such thing as passing. We’re all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It’s a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point, That’s the absurdity of the whole race game” (391). Deck then goes on to explain his most recent theories of race. Birdie counters his theory by asking, “If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum ‘cause I looked white. You don’t think that’s real? Those are the facts” (393). She is angry with her father because, according to Michelle Elam, “Part of the political and personal failure of making believe that race is make believe emerges from Deck's simplistic equation of performance with "costume" (391) and theatrical pretend, with his suggestion that there exists some stripped un-reality beyond racial parochialism” (754). By contrast, Birdie contends that there must be some reality to race based on her own experiences of racialization, which are “as real as anything else” (Senna 396). She knows that her false racial and ethnic identity felt like a game of make-believe when performed alone with no one but her mother to witness it, but it became more than a costume when she passed as Jewish in society. The novel also, “implies that part of the reason Birdie is able to survive is that she passes as Jewish instead of as white; that is, she does not completely renounce her identity as other” (Harrison-Kahan, 26). The history of Jewish racialization is relevant to Birdie’s passing and thereby shows that social perceptions of race and ethnicity have long held material consequences.

Upon their reunion, Birdie and her sister, Cole, agree that their father does not understand the intricacies of race. After Birdie mentions their father’s ideas, Cole replies,

“He’s right, you know, about it all being constructed. But... that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist” (408). The girls agree that there are material social consequences—such as discrimination, ostracization, and isolation—regardless of how an individual chooses to perform. As Birdie and Cole show, however, individuals are limited by their appearance in how they may perform.

At the novel’s conclusion, Birdie sees a school bus. The children on the bus are “black and Mexican and Asian and white”; a heterogeneous group of children in peaceful coexistence. Birdie is taken aback when she sees, “a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl” (413). For the first time, Birdie identifies herself as mixed, thus indicating that she has moved on from both her father’s archaic ideas about “mulattoes” and from the belief that one must be either black or white. Before Birdie can get a closer look at the girl, “the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion” (413). The image of “a blur” that is “in motion” harkens back to when Birdie was on the road and felt she was incomplete, but placed that the end of the novel the image illustrates the ongoing process of building identity and the necessity of motion for progress. Birdie now regards instability and change not as a deficiency, but as the best way to find herself. Her identity is neither dictated by the white/black binary, nor by notions of racial essentialism. Instead, her sense of self is the product of her ancestry, her culture, her experience, and her character.

The novel’s conclusion shows that Birdie has found both self-acceptance and a better understanding of race and identity. By spending her formative years passing as Jewish, Birdie is able to organically come to her own understanding about the material consequences of racialization. The conclusion rests in stark contrast to Birdie’s early life,

when her “chameleon-like abilities to change color depending on where she is and who she is with allow her to move between a black and a white world, but her racialized subjectivity gets caught somewhere in the middle, without a secure place to stand” (Boudreau 62). Eventually, it is the anti-Semitism she experiences—not the anti-black racism she overhears and witnesses—that spurs her understanding of how racialization carries material consequences. Birdie finds peace when she accepts that she is neither only black nor only white; she exists in the liminal space of “mixed” identity. She finds “a secure place to stand” when she discovers that she can stand in-between the two dominant poles. Birdie is only able to complete her coming-of-age when she develops and understands her sense of self, as it relates to racial and ethnic identity construction and performance. The crucial role Jewishness plays in Birdie’s racial awakening pays homage to the role of Jewish Americans in the broader cultural formation of ethnic and racial identity, and the inclusion of anti-Semitic discrimination respects the discrimination that Jews continue to face when they are visible to others. Senna ultimately shows that race is non-essential and socially constructed, yet nonetheless real to those who have suffered and continue to suffer its material consequences. By revisiting the passing narrative in the late twentieth century and by acknowledging Jewishness as an integral force for understanding constructions of race and identity, Senna demonstrates how the ambiguity and flexibility of Jewish identity derails claims of racial essentialism and of race as mere performance. By extension, Senna uses the novel’s conclusion to advance an interethnic vision of the future, no longer governed by the white/black binary.

## CHAPTER 3

### CROSSING THE COLOR LINE: PASSING AS JEWISH AND PASSING AWAY IN

#### *THE HUMAN STAIN*

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many African Americans have made the difficult decision to pass for white in order to gain the privileges of whiteness and escape the material consequences of their race. Like Jewish American identity once was, the identity of an African American who passes for white is probationary and liminal. The black subject who passes for white is afforded “a whole set of public and private privileges... Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one’s life rather than being the object of others’ domination” (Harris 1713). While both whiteness and Jewishness had to change in order to become one in the same, the concept of blackness was static. The model of Jewish whitening, however, established a specific type of passing as individual identity construction that could be appropriated by African Americans who passed. Like Jews who assimilated into mainstream American society, African Americans who passed had to distinguish themselves from the physical, cultural, and social markers of blackness in order to fit into the white paradigm. In these ways, Jewish American identity is proximate to the constructed identity of an African American who passes as white.

Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* highlights and extends the proximity between African Americans who pass and Jewish Americans. The novel tells the story of Coleman Silk through the voice and perspective of Nathan Zuckerman, who serves as a mouthpiece for Roth. The novel is about passing; Coleman spends the majority of his adult life living a lie, denying his black parentage and upbringing. After Coleman quits

his job as a professor when his colleagues accuse him of racism, he approaches Nathan to heavily edit and revise his autobiography, since Nathan is a writer and Coleman feels ill-equipped to write a book. When Coleman and his lover, Faunia, are killed in a car accident, Nathan discovers the secrets that make up Coleman's life and identity. Through the voice of Nathan, Roth shows that society is "the human stain."

In the novel, protagonist Coleman Silk passes not just as white, but specifically as Jewish. "By making Coleman alternately black and Jewish," critic Jennifer Glaser contends, "Roth taps into this liminal Jewish racial history in America" (1470-1). The discourse of passing surrounding *The Human Stain*, "emphasizes that race, like gender, as Judith Butler formulates it in her notion of 'performativity,' only comes into existence in the ways in which we perform it and through the discourses that constitute it" (Glaser 1469). On the one hand, society imposes racial identity on Coleman by perceiving and policing identity based on his physical appearance. On the other hand, Coleman is able to construct his own identity because of his ambiguous physical characteristics and his decision to reject his past, his family, and his socially-imposed racial identity.

The historical Jewish movement across what Du Bois calls 'the color line'—the process of Jewish whitening that occurred after World War II— is an analog for Coleman's own personal movement across the color line within the novel (Du Bois 9). Though, as Glaser claims, "Roth uses the ambiguous whiteness of Jews in America as a site from which to critique race and ethnicity in the United States" (1468), the novel itself contains, but does not intentionally advance, the argument that Coleman's identity transformation and his ultimate tragedy parallel the path of the American Jew. I will discuss how Coleman's trajectory in *The Human Stain* mirrors the path of the American

Jew by discussing his life before, during, and after he decides to pass as Jewish, why his passing as Jewish rather than as white is significant, and how this chosen social identity impacts his life as America begins to perceive Jews as white. In addition, I will show that the narrator's biography of Coleman's life fails to give him a truly individual, singular, and de-racialized identity. Finally, I will conclude with an overview of how *The Human Stain* uses Coleman's struggle with individual identity to show that despite the socially constructed nature of race, it is impossible even in narrative to divorce identity from its social perception. Roth thus demonstrates that there is no escape from social categorization.

In his early life, Coleman does not recognize his proximity to Jewish Americans. When Coleman is seventeen, his sister, Ernestine, tells him that a Jewish surgeon from the hospital where their mother is a nurse, Dr. Fensterman, came to the house to speak with their parents. Dr. Fensterman explains to the Silks, "It was of the utmost importance to him and Mrs. Fensterman that their son, Bertram, graduate as class Valedictorian" (Roth 85). He reminds the Silks that Coleman is first in the class, ahead of Bertram by only one grade. Dr. Fensterman goes on to condescendingly suggest, "Perhaps the Silks were not aware of the discriminatory quotas that were designed to keep Jews out of medical school" (86). He wants Coleman to earn intentionally mediocre grades in two of his classes so that Bertram can be the valedictorian. He explains:

As salutatorian, Coleman would still be the highest-ranking colored student ever to graduate E.O. With his grade average, Coleman would more than likely be the highest-ranking colored student in the county, even in the state, and his having

finished high school as salutatorian rather than as valedictorian would make no difference whatsoever when he enrolled at Howard University. (87)

Upon hearing this, “Dr. Fensterman’s proposal meant no more to [Coleman] than that he was of the greatest importance to just about everyone. The larger picture he didn’t get yet” (88). The “larger picture” Coleman fails to see was that Dr. Fensterman presumes Coleman will not and cannot do the things his own son is capable of. He thinks that since Coleman is going to Howard, a historically black university, it does not matter whether he is first or second in his class. Dr. Fensterman argues that by being salutatorian and going to Howard, Coleman is already at the highest level of achievement a “colored student” can ever reach. Essentially, Dr. Fensterman argues that a person of color has no reason to aspire to do what he expects of his own, Jewish son. This interaction helps Coleman to begin recognizing the proximity between himself and his Jewish classmates, as well as the relationship between African Americans and Jewish Americans in general.

The relationship between African Americans and Jewish Americans is one of conflict for many, but for Coleman it becomes one of modeling and emulating. As a promising young boxer, Coleman finds that he has more freedom when coaches and opponents assume he is Jewish. People assume that he is Jewish because of his light complexion and because his boxing instructor, Doc Chizner, is Jewish. Doc Chizner does not tell Coleman explicitly that he should pass, “He just told Coleman not to mention that he was colored” (98). Coleman goes along with this plan because Doc Chizner tells him, “You’re neither one thing or the other” (98). The liminality of Jewishness—its status as somewhere between black and white—appeals to Coleman because he wants only to be singularly himself, not part of a racial group. Even though Coleman is offered a boxing

scholarship to Pitt University when he is believed to be Jewish, he nonetheless decides to follow his father's plan for him and attend Howard University as a black man. Even as Coleman lives in a fixed position on one side of the racial binary, he becomes aware of the possibility of liminality.

Coleman becomes more conscious of the fact that his socially constructed identity as an African American limits his individuality when he goes to Howard. One day when he is in downtown Washington, D.C. with his roommate, "he was called a nigger. His first time" (Roth 102). In this moment and in his subsequent reflections, Coleman is shocked to realize "how protective his life had been" in his hometown and how much his racial identity mattered elsewhere (105). Coleman begins to realize that the way others perceive him is shaped by his apparent racial identity. In addition to being blindsided by how the segregated South sees him:

At Howard he'd discovered that he wasn't just a nigger to Washington, D.C. ... he discovered at Howard that he was a Negro as well. ... Overnight the raw I was part of a we with all of the we's overbearing solidity, and he didn't want anything to do with it or with the next oppressive we that came along either. (108).

Coleman's experiences during his brief tenure at Howard influence his decision to enlist in the military as a white man. He realizes that without his strict father and moralizing older brother watching him, he is "free to be whatever he wants, free to pursue the highest aim, the confidence right in his bones to be his particular I" (109). He sees his best alternative to the restrictive environment of Howard is to join the military, where he can reinvent himself. He plans to lie about his age, and when he arrives at the federal building to enlist, it occurs to Coleman that, "He could play his skin however he wanted,

color himself just as he chose” (109). Coleman enlists in the navy as a white man, and he feels his heart, “banging away like the heart of someone on the brink of committing his first great crime” (109). Though Coleman feels liberated by his decision to ‘color himself,’ he recognizes that, in the eyes of his family and of society, passing is considered a ‘great crime.’ For Coleman, transgressing societal expectations and boundaries is part of the appeal of passing as Jewish.

The issue of passing in the novel “invites us to reflect on identity constructions, on the difficult negotiations between the “given” and the “chosen,” and between group identity and the freedom of individuals to define their own identity at the crossroads between fixed patterns and personal choices” (Kral 47). Coleman is able to effectively choose his identity and pass as a Jew because of his light skin and his willingness to deny both his inherited identity and his personal history. The issue of passing in *The Human Stain*, “also invites us to reflect on the tension between individual identity and group identity, and to a certain extent, the plot hinges on the plight of an individual who not only shapes and fakes his identity but also literally constructs it, independent of society (Kral 53). Coleman “literally constructs” his identity in that he falsifies a past, creates a family who knows him only to be a Jewish academic, escapes most of the material consequences of blackness, and publicly maintains his self-engendered identity until his death. For Coleman, even seemingly positive group identities and affiliations—such as acceptance from the other black men and women he met at Howard—are constraints on his self-determined identity. Coleman does not want to be a part of any “we,” racial or otherwise.

While serving in the navy, Coleman experiences “the worst night of his life” (180). He goes to a famous, white-only brothel in Norfolk, where the bouncers suspect that he is black and, “hurled him from the open front door, over the stairs from the sidewalk and into the street” (181). Perhaps because of his head injury or because of his excessive consumption of alcohol, Coleman does not recall what takes place that night. In the morning, the Shore Patrol finds him abandoned in a lot and they “attributed the bloody wounds and the broken wrist and the befouled, disheveled uniform to his having spent a night” in the black part of town, presumably in a perverse pursuit of black women (183). Though he escapes a dishonorable discharge, Coleman is left with an unexplained tattoo, “a mark evocative not only of the turbulence of the worst night of his life but of all that underlay the turbulence—it was the sign of his whole history, of the indivisibility of the heroism and the disgrace” (184). Even if passing is a noble act of radical individualism, as Coleman intends, it is nonetheless considered a disgrace within the social realm. His skin is now marked in a way that he can see, and this mark illuminates the fact that he is always already marked by those who recognize his race.

After serving in the navy, Coleman moves to New York City, studies classics at NYU, and passes as a Jewish man. In New York, he falls in love with a white woman named Steena, who has no idea that he is passing. He does not want to be held back by his black identity because, “All he’d ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free” (120). Race is not important to Coleman, and he does not want something he considers trivial to impact his relationship. Coleman eventually takes Steena to his mother’s house, and although the dinner seems to go fairly well, on the train ride home Steena cries out that she “can’t do it” and, “without

another word of explanation, gasping, violently weeping, clutching her bag to her chest...she raced alone from the train as though from an attacker and did not phone him or try ever to see him again” (125). Steena’s reaction stems either from internalized racism or her fear of social ostracization. Either way, Coleman loses the woman he loves because he introduces her to his family, to his past, and to his socially-determined racial identity. This moment in the novel emphasizes the material consequences of blackness.

Despite the disaster with Steena, Coleman continues passing, and he soon meets a Jewish woman named Iris Gittelman. Much like Coleman himself, Iris reveals to him that she “had grown up willful, clever, furtively rebellious—secretly plotting, from the second grade on, how to escape her oppressive surroundings” (127). Perhaps because of what happened with Steena, Coleman is afraid to reveal his true self even to someone whose personal version of open-mindedness is “on the order of mania, the cracked antithesis of bigotry” (130). Despite the fact that Iris would almost certainly accept him as a black man, Coleman will never tell her his secret or introduce her to his family. He keeps his secret as a committed act of radical individualism, in which he cannot risk even the slightest possibility of being judged or limited by his race. Coleman wants to escape the stain of his racial identity by effectively becoming the identity he performs; if Coleman marries Jewish woman, he will have solidified his identity as a Jewish man.

Coleman feels so constrained by the identity he inherits that he decides he must cut all ties with his family. When he decides to marry Iris, Coleman goes to see his mother for the last time. Coleman thinks he must disown his family in order to find happiness with a white woman. Coleman himself recognizes that “There was no explanation that could begin to address the outrage of what he was doing” to his mother.

It is as if, “He was murdering her ... Murdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom” (138). Despite recognizing the “brutality” of his action, Coleman feels that the only way he can be a singular individual is to detach himself entirely from his race and his familial ties to blackness. He thinks that, “Once you’ve done a thing like this, you have done so much violence it can *never* be undone—which is what Coleman wants” (139). Coleman does not want the opportunity to go back to his former identity and he does not want to risk being discovered. His choice to pass as a Jew is clearly intentional; he feels a moment of guilt, a fear of being disingenuous, when he realizes that he does not love Iris for herself, the way he loved Steena. When he confronts his mother, “there floated through Coleman the eerie, crazy fear that all he had ever wanted from Iris Gittelman was the explanation her appearance could provide for the texture of their children’s hair” (136). By emancipating himself from his family, Coleman becomes Jewish in a manner comparable to one of the ways that Jews historically became white in America (Brodkin); Coleman becomes Jewish by positioning himself in direct opposition to blackness.

Coleman’s decision to pass as a Jew, rather than simply as white, serves both the functional purpose of being more believable and the ideological purpose of freeing him from group identification. Coleman recognizes that Jewish Americans are perceived as, “an intermediary race, a way station of sorts on the road from black to white” (Glaser 1470). Additionally, although he identifies himself as a Jew—ostensibly a member of a group—Coleman is free from group identity as an American Jew because Judaism is not a singular, unified culture within the United States. For Coleman and other Jews, being

Jewish “is to be constructed simultaneously in racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious terms” (Freedman 194). Laura Levitt elaborates on this idea, stating:

Jewishness is cultural and ethnic and religious in many but not all instances. Jewishness exceeds notions of ethnicity because there are multiple Jewish ethnicities and because it can include forms of religious expression beyond privatized faith. Thus, in order to appreciate what it means to claim a Jewish position, a Jewish identity, the common rubrics of liberal pluralist difference—race, class, and gender and/or sexuality—just do not fit... (810)

Being Jewish does necessitate being part of a group, but because it is heterogeneous, there is often significant flexibility within the group. Coleman discovers the opportunity of Jewish identity to “exceed” ethnicity when he meets Iris. He quickly sees through “non-Jewish, Jewish Iris” that Jewish identity is “a medium through which to make himself anew... the solution, the secret to his secret” (Roth 132). Since Jewish identity is not grounded in a single set of expectations, Coleman’s subsequent identity performance is an attempt at a radical individualism that is almost entirely detached from socially imposed expectations of identity.

As Coleman ages, societal perceptions of American Jewish identity alter his once unshackled identity. At first, Coleman “is able to gain prestige and prosperity through his passing and by denying his true self” (Kirby 155). However, when he is accused of uttering a racial epithet—“spooks”—in reference to a pair of absent students, Coleman is effectively “thrown out of Athena College for being white” (Roth 16). His colleagues all know he merely meant “ghosts,” the primary definition of the term, but he is persecuted anyway. In an attempt to overcome his anger and ameliorate his reputation, Coleman

writes his account of the incident, aptly entitled *Spooks*. He presents the first draft to his newfound friend, writer Nathan Zuckerman. Nathan is both the novel's narrator and "Roth's well-known alter ego or alter brain—as the writer prefers to call him" (Frieburg 175). Coleman tells Nathan, "I hardly believe it myself any longer. To turn this screed into a book, to bleach out the raging misery and turn it into something by a sane human being, would take two years more at least" (19). Like the spooks incident itself, Coleman's word choice here is revealing. His desire "to bleach out" sizable segments of the book reflects his own metaphorical bleaching out of his black identity. The unintended and unexpected side effect of Coleman's 'bleaching' is that he is no longer simply "not black," but rather he has become white, as American culture at large has ceased to perceive "Jewish" as a distinct racial or ethnic category.

Coleman fails to accept responsibility for the privileges associated with his successful passing. As an ostensibly white man, Coleman escapes the material consequences of blackness and assumes the benefits of whiteness. Coleman's fate as a "tragic mulatto" character is unlike that of the tragic mulatto figure in typical passing narratives, because his defamation and eventual demise are the result not of his failure to pass successfully, but instead arise because he does not accept the responsibilities that come with white male privilege in a multiethnic society. If Coleman had acknowledged his white privilege and apologized for his politically incorrect speech, regardless of his innocent intentions, he would probably have been able to continue benefitting from the privileges of whiteness. Because Coleman wants a singular identity, free from any group affiliation, he cannot acknowledge the ways he benefits from his apparent whiteness.

Coleman's defamation is spearheaded by his colleague, Delphine Roux.

According to a study of names in *Le Journal Des Femmes*, the name Delphine indicates a woman, "Féministe, elle cherche à lutter contre les injustices et à sortir de l'ombre des hommes pour s'épanouir."<sup>1</sup> Delphine's name is fitting, given that she is an accomplished French feminist who often overcompensates for perceived instances of misogyny. Like Coleman, Delphine resolves "to be the author of [her] own life" (Roth 273). In this way, she is also engaging in a type of passing. She moves to the United States from France to "fight *against* the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individualism at its best," but ultimately finds herself misunderstood and unfairly labeled by her colleagues (273). Delphine, too, misjudges others, assuming that Coleman hired her for her beauty instead of for her accomplishments. Her own insecurities spur her resentment, and her unfounded suspicion that Coleman is sexist influences her belief that he is guilty of racism in the 'spooks' incident. Delphine adds to the irony of Coleman's tragic fate because she—a woman who wants to remake herself as an individual, free of her origins—persecutes a man who is doing the same.

Through the tragic irony of Coleman's fate, Roth shows "the repercussions of a too-successful passing into whiteness" (Glaser 1471). When he was first hired, Coleman had been "one of a handful of Jews on the Athena faculty...and perhaps among the first of the Jews permitted to teach in a classics department anywhere in America" (Roth 5). Later, in his position as Dean of Faculty, Coleman "put an end to the place as a gentleman's farm by aggressively encouraging the deadwood among the faculty's old

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: "Feminist, she seeks to fight against injustice and to get out from behind the shadow of men to thrive."

guard to seek early retirement, recruiting ambitious young assistant professors, and revolutionizing the curriculum” (5). Though his work as Dean was to the benefit of the university as a whole, it earned him more than a few enemies among the older faculty members at Athena who did not appreciate his disruption of the status quo. Thus, when Coleman is wrongly accused of racism, the faculty does not defend him because, “In short, he brought in competition, he made the place competitive, which, as an early enemy noted, “is what Jews do” (9). The underlying implication of this accusation, besides the accuser’s anti-Semitic attitudes, is that Jews as part of the white mainstream are still complicit in an egalitarian society which itself reinforces an environment of competition. Coleman suspects that perhaps the students who accused him of racism think he is, “a white Jew of the sort those ignorant bastards call the enemy. That’s who’s made their American misery” (16). These moments of verifiable and suspected anti-Semitism highlight the erroneous nature of racism. Because Coleman is not Jewish, he therefore obviously does not change Athena College or refer to absent students as “spooks” *because* he is Jewish. In other words, he could not have done something because of an ‘essential’ Jewish identity if he does not possess, or even believe he possesses, an essential Jewishness. Though he is initially under scrutiny for being white, Coleman is accused of anti-black racism and ultimately becomes a scapegoat for the university because others believe he is Jewish.

The great irony of *The Human Stain*, according to Glaser, is that “a black man performing Jewishness is accused of racism and becomes a spokesperson for the vexed position of the Jewish intellectual and author in the multicultural age” (1476). Roth himself specifies, however, that his texts are to be read as representative of Jews or

Jewish Americans as a whole. Coleman's life does, however, represent the trajectory of the social perception of American Jews. Like Jewish Americans themselves, Coleman's Jewish identity becomes a white identity. He adopts a classic version of upper-class, academic whiteness that eventually falls out of fashion. The fact that a black man passing as white is fired for alleged anti-black racism is only part of the novel's irony; in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, multicultural moment, Coleman "is unable to miss the shifts in the discursive realm that would now reward him for the racial difference he once perceived as a hindrance" (Glaser 1473). The rise of multiculturalism and the socially-perceived whitening of Jews means that Coleman cannot benefit from the identity politics which could have saved his job. Instead, he is lambasted in the name of political correctness. The Jewish identity Coleman adopts in an effort to eschew racial categorization is eventually subsumed by white identity, and Coleman consequently finds himself to be part of a new, restrictive social category. In the late 1990s, " smack in the middle of an era when ethnic is in" (1473), Coleman's white identity has made him a bland relic of the past, while his Jewish identity prevents his colleagues from standing up for him against the outlandish charges he faces. Coleman is caught in the same liminal position of Jewish American identity as a whole; Coleman, who was once indisputably non-white, is now both white *and* Other. The central characteristic of this otherness is its proximity to whiteness, so Coleman suffers the material consequences of a white man who fails to acknowledge and respect contemporary, multicultural society. Nevertheless, he only faces these specific consequences because of the distrust and disdain he accrued as a Jewish man.

Despite being fired as a white man, Coleman is killed because he is believed to be Jewish. Coleman's young, ostensibly illiterate lover, Faunia, has a psychologically unstable ex-husband, Les. Les is a Vietnam veteran who suffers from PTSD, and he blames Faunia for the tragic death of their two young children in a house fire. When Coleman first begins having an affair with Faunia, Nathan imagines that Les becomes angry that his ex-wife is with a "Jew bastard," because he thinks, "There's something wrong with those Jew bastards. They didn't look right" (70). Nathan believes that Les is both angry that his ex-wife is with someone else, and personally insulted that she is with a Jewish man in particular. Les resolves to have his revenge against Faunia. Les' anger and instability ostensibly come to a head when he comes to believe that he is already "dead." Les thinks he is dead because he is unable to feel sadness when he encounters his friend's name on a wall commemorating those who died in Vietnam. Nathan imagines that when Les believes he is dead, "He looked serene, but that was a fakeout. He'd made up his mind. Use his vehicle. Take them all out, including himself. Along the river, come right at them..." (256). Shortly after, Coleman and Faunia die in a mysterious car accident, and it seems to Nathan that Les forced their car off the road. Nathan thus believes that Coleman is killed for being Jewish, adding further irony to his story and complicating his passing narrative. Notably, Roth imagines a narrator, Nathan, who himself imagines the interior life of a racist. While it is possible that Les is, in fact, an anti-Semite, the reader cannot be sure that his hatred of Jews and hatred of Coleman as a Jewish man are not entirely fabricated by Nathan in an attempt to make sense of Coleman's life story and tragic death.

Nathan thinks his suspicions of Les are justified by their lengthy conversation at the end of the novel. Nathan finds Les fishing on a frozen pond, and approaches him. Les reveals that while he was fishing alone, he was thinking about then-President Bill Clinton who “gets off everything” and, “about the guys who didn’t get off nothin’. Who didn’t dodge the draft and who didn’t get off. It doesn’t seem right” (351). Clearly, Les considers himself a part of the latter group, a man who was not given any shortcuts in life. Les also tells Nathan about how he, “Came back from Vietnam with too much anger and resentment. Had PTSD” (353). Les reveals that mental illness and his resentment lead him to frequently drink and drive, worrying his friends. Nathan asks if Les ever got in a car accident when he was drinking and driving, and “In a deliberately light-hearted way, [Les] shrugged and said, ‘Got *me*. I didn’t know what I was going through, you *know*? Accident? In an accident? I wouldn’t know if I did. I suppose I didn’t” (354). Nathan perceives Les’ tone as one of guilt, and he continues to believe that Les is responsible for Coleman’s and Faunia’s deaths. Nathan assumes that Les’ “anger and resentment” manifest themselves as anti-Asian and anti-Semitic prejudice, and that the latter serves as part of his motive for murdering Coleman. While the structure of the novel—both its organization and its point of view—make it seem that Nathan is correct in his suspicions of Les, Nathan actually experiences confirmation bias. Because he already believes Faunia’s ex-husband to be an anti-Semite, he assumes that their conversation at the end of the novel supports his suspicions. As a result, the novel is written from the perspective of someone who already believes Les is guilty.

Nathan’s labeling of Les furthers Roth’s central claim that individuals are always susceptible to socially-imposed categorization. In addition, the inclusion of a supposedly

anti-Semitic subplot demonstrates Roth's assertion that to be Jewish in America is not entirely equal to being white, because Jewish Americans are still sometimes susceptible to the material consequences of race. Even if Les is not guilty of killing Coleman in an anti-Semitic rage, Jews are nonetheless predisposed to fear possible material consequences of their race because of the history of Jewish ostracization and genocide. Much of the novel shows that there is a difference between the racism Coleman experiences as a black man and the anti-Semitism he faces as a Jewish man, but clearly there is still a resemblance between African American and Jewish American racialization; When Coleman is allegedly killed for being Jewish, he suffers a material consequence of race that parallels the consequences of blackness. Since Coleman's personal story mirrors the historical trajectory of the American Jew, his alleged murder by an anti-Semite indicates that Jewish Americans still hold a precarious ethnic status in which they are both white and other, both granted the privileges of whiteness and susceptible to racially-motivated discrimination and hate crimes.

At Coleman's funeral, his youngest son chants the Kaddish, a traditional Jewish prayer for the dead. Nathan reflects that, "Most people in America...don't know what these words mean, but nearly everyone recognizes the sobering message they bring: a Jew is dead. Another Jew is dead. As though death were not a consequence of life but a consequence of having been a Jew" (314). Nathan's poignant remark alludes to the tragic history of Jewish people collectively, as well as to his belief that Coleman's tragic fate was the consequence of his supposedly Jewish identity. He did not die of natural causes, "as a consequence of life"; Nathan believes that Coleman died as "a consequence of

having been a Jew,” because he allegedly provoked the hatred of a psychologically unstable anti-Semite.

Through Coleman’s son, Roth shows that Coleman has left behind an unalterable legacy. Coleman does not instill devout religious faith or practice in his children, but by adopting the social label of a Jew and by marrying a Jewish woman, he lays the foundation for being remembered as a Jew. In death, Coleman lacks the ability to control others’ perceptions of his life and identity. While Coleman may have been a Jew only in social performance, his son’s decision to chant the Kaddish solidifies his membership in a collective identity. Regardless of how he is ultimately remembered by society, Coleman’s death marks the end of his radical individualism. While in his life he may have been able to adopt and abandon group identities in order to construct himself, in death Coleman can no longer alter his identity or control how others label him.

After the funeral, Nathan first sees Coleman’s sister, Ernestine, and learns that Coleman spent the majority of his life passing. After listening to Ernestine, Nathan feels that, “there’s nothing about Coleman I don’t have to rethink” (326). Nathan’s confusion leads him to wonder, “How did a man such as Coleman come to exist? What is it that he was?” (333). Ernestine does not have an answer for Nathan, since she has spent most of her life similarly confounded by Coleman. Near the end of their conversation, Nathan reflects:

Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing, and instead of what I’d learned from Ernestine unifying my idea of him, he became not just an unknown but an uncohesive person. In what proportion, to what degree, has his secret determined his daily life and permeated his everyday thinking? (333)

Nathan begins to recognize for himself one of the great ironies of Coleman's existence; Coleman changed his identity to escape the identity which history and society had created for him, but was ultimately undone, "by the history he hadn't quite counted on: the history that isn't yet history, the history that the clock is now ticking off" (335). The irony of Coleman's tragic fate "illustrates that identity is not only a product, but also at the mercy of the many social, political, and cultural forces that surround it" (Frieburg 185). Coleman is unable to find a truly singular, self-fashioned identity because he is always inextricably a part of the present cultural, historical, and social moment. Like the tattoo which marks his skin, Coleman cannot erase the African American or Jewish histories that continue to color the present.

Coleman also ultimately fails to transcend socially-imposed identity in that Nathan writes Coleman's story and creates for him the legacy of a black man who passed as Jewish. Nathan feels that Coleman could not have written his own story, because "Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time, but with [Coleman] it could only be concealment and so it would never work" (Roth 45). His biography is the novel itself, introducing a meta-narrative to the novel and complicating the reader's understanding of Coleman's story. Nathan thus "converts Coleman from writer to character" (Glaser 1475). Dean Franco notes one challenge for Nathan:

Part of the difficulty in telling one's story is that the elements of storytelling, including the narrative arc of a life, the terms of identity, the very terms of recognizability, precede us all; they are generic, yet they are all we have to tell our story. (67)

While Franco maintains that Coleman never truly escapes racial categorization in his lifetime, he argues that Nathan imagines and constructs a version of Coleman's life in which he can be recognized outside of racial terms. Although the reader may presume that Nathan got much of his information from Coleman's manuscript and from Coleman's sister, however, Nathan certainly recounts stories and details he could not possibly know to be factual. Nathan himself remarks, "What we know is that, in an unclichééd way, nobody knows anything. You *can't* know anything" (Roth 209). When he reflects on Coleman's death, he says "I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It's now all I do" (213). Both of Nathan's admissions show that he is constructing Coleman's identity—not unlike the way Coleman constructs his own identity—and he therefore authors an identity that is intertwined with group identity, because Nathan must categorize Coleman not as Jewish nor as black, but specifically as someone who passes. Similarly, the reader is also free to interpret the inherently biased, imagined biography in ways that conform to societal constructions of identity. By constructing and circulating his purview of Coleman's identity, Nathan ensures that Coleman's identity will always be inextricably linked to group identities. The narrativization of Coleman's life does not grant him freedom from socially constructed identification, and his perceived whiteness lands him in yet another racial category. Therefore, Coleman's former freedom to define his own identity is contingent upon the once unclear, fragmented, and liminal designation "Jew." In a broader sense, Coleman, "contains the whole history of the twentieth-century black-Jewish question—its paradoxical intimacies, as well as its ever-accumulating differences and animosities—in one liberatingly invented but ultimately tragic life" (Sundquist 522-523). His ultimate tragedy is not only the fact of his death, but the reality

that his attempt to self-fashion identity fails to give him the freedom he anticipates and desires.

Ultimately, *The Human Stain* shows that race is a socially constructed and non-essential feature of the self, but that it is nonetheless inextricable from public identity even in a carefully constructed life or narrative. After Coleman's tragic death, Nathan reflects that Coleman's goal was, "To become a new being. To bifurcate," and that in this way, he participated in "The drama that underlines America's story, the high drama that is upping and leaving" (Roth 342). "America's story" began with the colonists who created their own nation—and their own national identity—in the new world. Waves of immigrants, some Jewish, eventually came to the United States in pursuit of a better life. Many Jewish Americans have achieved the so-called American dream by immigrating, becoming middle class, assimilating, and effectively becoming white. By contrast, taken from a homeland and from diverse national identities against their will, African Americans had less freedom to determine their own identities in the United States. In *The Human Stain*, Coleman adopts Jewish identity in an attempt to define himself independent of racial classifications and societal expectations based on race, but he cannot extract himself from, "The we that is inescapable: the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mind of one's country, the stranglehold of history that it one's own time" (335-336). The novel thus posits that 'the human stain' is not race, but socially constructed, public identity itself, because it will always color how individuals perceive one another.

## CONCLUSION

*Mona in the Promised Land*, *Caucasia*, and *The Human Stain* use Jewish identity and the trope of passing and performance to juxtapose anti-Semitism with anti-black racism, to explore the structure and fallacy of racial categorization, and to critique the ongoing and reemerging discourses of intolerance in contemporary American society. The return to the trope of passing in twentieth century American literature is significant because it demonstrates a renewed interest in the formation and substance of racial identity. This renewed interest in the limits and possibilities of race at the end of the twentieth century was the result of the rise of multiculturalism and identity politics. The flexible and ambiguous nature of Jewish identity once served merely to narrow the categories of racialization—the whitening of Jews altered but did not dismantle the racial category of whiteness. When explored in conjunction with other racial and ethnic designations, however, Jewish identity raises questions about racial essentialism, identity performance, and authenticity. In comparing the novels, it becomes clear that Jewishness is an effective lens for understanding the formation, transformation, and perpetuation of racial and ethnic identity categorization in the United States. In each of the novels discussed, Jewish identity serves as an intermediary or liminal identity designation between Othered, non-white identities and privileged, white identities. Each instance of Jewish performance is juxtaposed with the identities and social experiences of African American subjects. Although all of these novels use Jewish identity as a lens for discussing American identity, each novel uses and represents Jewishness differently.

The early portions of each text establish the proximity between Jewish Americans and African Americans, and *Mona in the Promised Land* shows how Jews are proximate to

other minority communities. By establishing this proximity from the beginning, each novel indicates the important role of Jewish identity both within the novel and in the real-life development of other American ethnic identities, namely Asian American identity. Through their proximity to Jews, each protagonist eventually gains the property of whiteness. Mona gains the property of whiteness because of her privileged status as model minority and her willingness to perform an identity consistent with the social expectations of a white, Jewish identity. Similarly, Birdie and Coleman gain the property of whiteness by passing for white. They are only able to pass because of the privilege of being naturally light-skinned. Both protagonists use their fabricated Jewish identities to establish a false sense of authenticity; if anyone questions their complexions or other physical features, Jewish heritage is a convincing explanation. Despite their unique methods and motivations, all three protagonists gain the property of whiteness by distancing themselves from blackness, and they are only able to do so because of their unique social and physical privileges.

Like Jewishness itself, those who perform Jewish identity may or may not practice religious Judaism. In the beginning of *Mona in the Promised Land*, Mona engages in a religious performance of Judaism. An overt desire for cultural fulfilment and social belonging motivates Mona, along with her subconscious desire to gain the privileges of whiteness. Conversely, Birdie uses symbols (including a cheap Star of David necklace) and fictional stories about her parentage to perform Jewishness during the second book of *Caucasia*, but she does not actually learn about Jewish religion or culture. Both Mona and Birdie have the ability to abandon their Jewish identities at any time. Mona maintains her commitment to Jewishness throughout her life, though over time she becomes less

openly devout. Birdie, on the other hand, readily abandons her performance of Jewishness when she faces anti-Semitic bullying and the subsequent threat of social ostracization. She is able to remove her necklace—the only physical marker of her Jewish identity—and with it remove her Jewish difference and escape the material consequences of Jewish racialization.

Like Birdie, Coleman does not practice a religious form of Judaism in *The Human Stain*. Coleman views Jewishness as a liberating space, where minor instances of anti-Semitic prejudice are tolerable in exchange for the privileges of whiteness and the freedom from being ascribed a black identity. Coleman and Birdie lack a religious connection to the Jewish identities they perform, while Mona performs Jewish identity in part because of her desire to join a religious community. Interestingly, both Coleman and Mona marry Jews. While Mona ostensibly marries her Jewish husband for love, not because of his religious or ethnic identity, Coleman wonders if his marriage is entirely based on his wife's Jewish identity. Coleman hopes that his wife's characteristically Jewish physical features will help him to continue passing successfully, even if his children are born with dark complexions and curly hair. By contrast, Birdie's only encounter with a Jewish person is a classmate, whom she does not know well. Each protagonist encounters individual Jewish people to different degrees and with distinctive results, but all three exist in similar proximity to Jewish communities and legacies.

In all three of the novels discussed, the protagonists' observations or experiences of anti-Semitism demonstrate the differences between anti-Semitism and anti-black racism. Anti-black racism in the United States has historically been and continues to be largely material. In *Mona in the Promised Land*, Mona witnesses subtle discrimination

and prejudice against Naomi, and more overt instances of anti-black racism against Albert. While Albert and Mr. Gugelstein both lose their jobs because of their race or ethnicity, the Changs' discrimination against Albert is somewhat more striking, because they admit that he never had a chance to be promoted because of his race. Mona comes to realize that the material consequences of Albert's race include barriers that inhibit his upward mobility. The structural inequalities preventing African American prosperity stand in stark contrast to Mona's belief that Jewish Americans became a model minority solely because of hard work and determination. By highlighting the material consequences of blackness, Jen shows that there is a difference between anti-Semitic and anti-black discrimination. Similarly, in *Caucasia*, Senna shows that the consequences of blackness are exacerbated by black visibility. Birdie escapes many of the material consequences of her race because she is not often recognized as black. Even when she interacts with her own grandmother, she is privileged as white, compared to her sister who is ignored because of her blackness. By contrast, anti-Semitic discrimination is only an issue when Jewishness is performed in the public sphere and made visible to others. Anti-Semitism no longer plagues Birdie once she chooses to abandon her artificial Jewish identity. Birdie's experience contrasts with Coleman's experience in *The Human Stain*, because Coleman never abandons his Jewish identity. When Coleman is a young man, he suffers the material consequences of blackness. His decision to pass as Jewish in order to escape these consequences and his relative success in doing so demonstrate that the consequences of Jewishness in America are less severe than the consequences of blackness throughout his life. Although Coleman is scapegoated as a Jew, and Nathan believes that Coleman is killed by an anti-Semite, Coleman's prosperous life as an

effectively white academic demonstrates that he generally performed Jewishness without facing negative material consequences. Much like the lot of Mr. Gugelstein in *Mona in the Promised Land*, in *The Human Stain*, Coleman lives a fairly comfortable life prior to becoming a scapegoat in an isolated incident of anti-Semitism. The minor instances of anti-Semitism Coleman faces juxtapose the more severe, explicit instances of anti-black racism in the novel, such as his father's inability to get a good, dignified job despite his intelligence and skills, and Coleman's maltreatment when he is recognized as black in a brothel. Each novel uses instances of anti-Semitism to acknowledge the discrimination Jewish people sometimes face, while simultaneously arguing that the consequences of blackness in the United States are often more material and more difficult to escape.

As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, anti-Semitism is an organizing ideology for a broad ideology of nationalism, xenophobia, and prejudice, which may or may not directly target Jews. In *Caucasia*, for example, residents of Birdie's small New Hampshire town espouse anti-Semitic sentiments and epithets, even when they are not interacting with or speaking about Jewish people. Just as anti-Semitism organizes prejudiced ideologies, Birdie's experience of anti-Semitism informs her understanding of other kinds of racial and ethnic discrimination. Anti-Semitism is, in part, a way for anti-Semites to interpret and convey their fear and hatred of difference; It is not always materially connected to Jewish people. Anti-Semitism sometimes has material consequences—both in the obvious histories of Jewish discrimination, oppression, and genocide, and in the more ambiguous instances of anti-Semitism, such as Mr. Gugelstein's termination in *Mona in the Promised Land*—but often times anti-Semitism is more ideological than material.

Recent examinations of Jewishness in literature reclaim the power of Jewish identity to disrupt and dismantle the ideology of racial essentialism. Reclaiming the potential of Jewish identity directly opposes anti-Semitism's attempts to codify and organize racial and ethnic discrimination. As anti-Semites use the figure of the Jew to espouse a general intolerance for the Other, contemporary authors who examine performing and passing as Jewish in the context of multiple racial designations use Jewish identity as a marker for Othered identities. In a time of interethnic turmoil and backlash against identity politics, the reversal of anti-Semitic ideology uses Jewishness to unpack the tightly-sealed discourse of racial and ethnic identity constructions. In their novels, Jen, Senna, and Roth acknowledge the material realities of racialization and anti-blackness in the United States and pay respect to the violent histories of Jewishness, yet show that Jewish identity and its history in America offer a framework for reconsidering popular ideas about race, ethnicity, and identity. Since Jewishness can be performed and the racial designation of Jews has changed over time and in different contexts, then race is clearly socially constructed and performed, despite its material consequences and social reality. Through an understanding of how Jewish Americans have gained widespread acceptance in the United States, we can reinterpret and redefine other ethnic or racial designations.

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