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Final Thesis

# **Almost, Both, Neither**

Fragmented Identities in Contemporary Black-to-Jewish Passing Literature

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## ABSTRACT

The United States have long been characterized by a strong racial binarism, that sees white people as superior to non-whites. Slavery, segregation and inequality have led to racial passing, an act that featured light-skinned black individuals passing for white. In some specific cases these individuals passed for Jewish. This is particularly interesting because Jews, although now considered to be part of the mainstream white race, have been seen for a long time as mere 'off-whites', a minority group at best, if not straight-out inferior.

Passing continues to be an interesting topic for fiction writers, even after the decrease of real-life passing. Critics have mostly focused on black-to-white passing, neglecting the different types of white that have existed in the United States before they merged into one main category. These other minority groups, which due to their white skin belonged to the white race but at the same time were seen as inferior, offered a middle ground between the two main races of the binary, opening new possibilities for individuals who had a fragmented identity and who saw passing not only as an opportunity concerning social and economical status and legal benefits, but also as the means through which they could resolve their fragmentation.

This thesis seeks to shed light on the importance of Black and Jewish identities in the contemporary novels *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna and *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's mirror theory and on Daniel Itzkovitz's analysis of Jews as chameleonic beings who, because of their racial fluidity, exist in a liminal place outside the black and white races, I argue that passing for Jewish instead of passing for generically white allows fictional passers to bring together the scattered pieces of their identity, fragmented by the clash between the image of the self they see in the mirror and identify with, and the image the rest of the population has of them. I argue that becoming a Jew connects the two opposed black/white races and finds a middle ground which provides the passer with a complete identity.



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## INTRODUCTION

“The world is a possibility if only you'll discover it”

Ralph Ellison

My first contact with racial passing took place, not surprisingly, through literature. The first two passing novels I read – *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* by Mark Twain and *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth, both analyzed in this thesis – could not be more dissimilar, narrating stories of passing that differed in terms of development and outcome. The passing novels that I subsequently explored were varied as far as their authors, characters, and plots were concerned, but, despite the difference in style and morals, they had common points that made me start asking myself a series of questions.

The first concerned, quite simply, what motive lies behind the act of racial passing. I say ‘quite simply’ because it seems natural to me to question the reasons behind this enormous decision, but of course those reasons are anything but simple. Proceeding to answer this question has meant delving into the world of passing, both in fiction and non-fiction. The premise of racial passing is to be seen in race itself. In thesis I will often refer to race as having some kind of foundation in biology, something that presupposes the existence of innate differences between peoples. Although it has been shown that race is a social construct, it was not always so, and the purpose of this work is to analyze racial passing as one direct consequence of race dynamics as dictated by biological beliefs. The stigmatization of certain races can certainly be identified as one of the main motivations for passing. Defining stigma, Erving Goffman describes it as having many forms – deformations of the body, character traits that are perceived as weak or unnatural, and finally the blemish of belonging to a ‘different’ race, nation or religion (4). What goes together with the stigma, be it a physical stigma or an ideological one, is the rejection of those who bear it on part of those who do not. Goffman mentions cripples, the blind and the deaf, the simple minded – but the racially other are stigmatized and rejected in a much broader way. Black-skinned individuals in particular – but, in a slightly minor manner, immigrants and foreigners as well – were given legal and economical limitations, as well as constant humiliation and scorn. Since the time of slavery and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, blacks became relegated in their own community, because when they left it they were subject to all kinds of brutal and violent belittlements, verbal but also physical.

A natural consequence of these deprecations is the wish to escape this situation, this state of being. Racial passing often derives from a simple wish for something more, for a more peaceful and equal

environment. The huge inferiority and inequality of the minor races, in fact, is paralleled by the equality and fairness experienced by the mainstream race, which in this case is represented by pure and unblemished whiteness – a whiteness that is not only physical but ancestral. Faced with stigmatization, blacks could only look from a distance at the apparent happiness of those who demeaned them, and, despite the resentment and sometimes even hatred, there was certainly a strong envy for the white part of the population.

The problem posed by the opposition of great equality on one side and immense inequality on the other manifests itself in a higher degree in those individuals who *can* pass – light-skinned blacks, white in appearance but labeled black, struggle internally to find the correct identification for themselves, presented with a physical appearance identical to those who hate them and with an imposed categorization that does not fully represent them. The struggle is fueled by the guilt that accompanies the envy for whites and the desire not only to be *like* them, but to *be* them. Passing, and therefore going from being the alienated other to being accepted without qualms, would mean siding with the race that had made this passing necessary in the first place. These considerations about passing have brought me to an attempt of identification with the passers. What most interested me was the psychological effect of being effectively white-skinned but being nonetheless labeled as black, its opposite color. From all the works that I found, literary and non-literary, an anguished inadequacy emerged, a sense of non-belonging, of being in the wrong body or, alternatively, of having the wrong name. This point has later become the main focus of my thesis, as I wondered whether and how this inner struggle could be resolved, and considered the connection between this sense of incompleteness and racial passing.

As my research progressed and I investigated passing literature more deeply, another essential question arose: why are passing narratives still being written? While the great bulk of passing literature has been written at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, which is also the period when passing occurred in real life with more frequency, there have been contemporary authors who have written and published passing novels in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even in the 21<sup>st</sup>. The great passing authors of the past – Nella Larsen, Charles Chesnutt, Fannie Hurst, Jessie Redmon Fauset, James Weldon Johnson, and even Ralph Ellison – had every reason to explore that great topic. It was contemporary to them; it represented their present and, for all they knew, their future. When the mentioned authors wrote their famous passing novels, real-life passing was still very much practiced. As a common practice, it was important that everyone understood its dynamics – how and why it was carried out and by whom, so as to possibly eliminate its need through awareness. Despite it now being the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and despite the great improvements that have taken place in the



United States concerning the treatment of people of color, race divisions are still in place, not legally but certainly by force of habit. As long as the white population is considered to be the mainstream and the other races are seen as different, even if not always inferior anymore, authors will feel the need to still speak about passing, a practice that, while less frequent, is not so distant in time. It might appear redundant and unnecessary to speak about race and about racial passing in the same century that has seen the first African-American President of the United States. It might appear superfluous to think black people might still wish to pass for white, even after the abolition of the legal constrictions imposed on them. Discourses about race, however, will only disappear when differences in culture and ethnicity will stop being underlined at every turn. What this thesis wants to emphasize is that passing narratives are still needed, because they serve as tangible proof that passing still exists as a social practice, which in turn implies the presence of social stigmatization where ‘race’ is concerned. In the current political climate especially, the matters of race and its perception are emerging again, showing that the overcoming of the biological aspect of race has not been successful after all, and it still needs to be discussed.

Of course, the passing literature of the recent years is very different from classic passing literature, covering a different historical and cultural context and presenting different developments and outcomes to the act. One distinctive trait in the contemporary passing novels that I have found is the presence of the Jewish element, namely the fact that some fictional passers opt to pass for Jewish instead of white. Jewishness as an option for identification for light-skinned blacks shed new light on my research, steering its path towards what would become its main concern: an analysis of passing not as abandonment of one’s true self or as performance of a fake identity, but as the realization of the passer’s real identity in its full potential. Jewishness represents the turning point of passing literature because it is the first step towards the denial of race as a whole – in the sense that the passer elects to be part of a ‘raceless’ race – a race that is fluid and that eludes fixed categorizations – instead of simply exchanging one race for another. Passing for Jewish in contemporary literature brings forth a new array of advantages and possibilities; namely the chance of becoming white while at the same time remaining empathic towards a minority, and the possibility of being like whites while retaining some distinguishing characteristics that are not as condemning as skin color.

The objective of this thesis is to demonstrate the importance of Jewishness in the resolution of the inner struggle of light-skinned African-Americans, which presents itself in the form of an internal fragmentation that does not allow them to have a definite and complete identity, but yanks them in opposite identifications that cannot be reconciled. I argue that the function of acquiring a Jewish identity through passing is that of gluing the fragments of identity together, reuniting them in an

identification separate from the other two (black and white) and that comprises them both because of its specific attributes.

Despite the rising presence of Jewishness in contemporary narratives and the great potential it represents, however, it has still been difficult during my research to find works that truly present Jewish identity as the healing factor for the characters' fragmentation. Most of the narratives found in my research dealt with biracial individuals, both fictional and non-fictional, who already were partly Jewish, therefore not fulfilling the requirement of choosing Jewishness as the *new* best-fitting identity. Other works kept Jewishness separate from passing, or ignored it completely. Even among critics, the opinions concerning the function and subsequent importance of Jewishness differed. Some critics have defined black-to-Jewish passing as only an intermediate step before the final return to blackness, or as a state of alienation and invisibility, equating it to black-to-white passing. Others, like Lori Harrison-Kahan for instance, have underlined the importance of Jewishness as an ambivalent identity that brings to exiting the white/black binary; this representation of Jewishness, however, ignores its unifying factor, its ability to create a more solid and unified identity in addition to offering more options in terms of identification. Others still bring the two concepts together, analyzing passing as a performance but stressing the aspect of its multiplicity, of its different manifestations according to the context. The performativity aspect of passing, however, precludes it from being more than a simple fake identity, from being a natural and effortless identification with the new identity. The passers analyzed in this work must of course take precautions in order not to be outed as passers; nonetheless, their Jewish identities represent a role in which they feel at ease and that do not require a continuous pretense to hide their true self – on the contrary, they bring them closer to it.

In order to analyze the importance of Jewishness in literature, however, it is essential to look at the position of Jews in the historical and cultural context from which the literary works arose, and at the relationship that exists between Jews and people of color. Although blacks are almost always visible due to their skin, and Jews can blend in like chameleons, both groups are seen as outsiders, as an 'other' that is different from what is considered normal. This belonging to a minority bonds them, so that it is easy for each group to understand and empathize with the other. The experience of the Shoah for instance, while different in nature, has given Jews the perspective of what the Middle Passage – what is often referred to as the 'African Holocaust' – might have been like for blacks, or at the very least it has given them an understanding of the trauma it has caused. This common ground has prompted Jews to support blacks and their rights, striving for their equality. At the same time, however, there remained reticence on their part, provoked by their wish to climb the social ladder and

to be included in the white half of the population. Being Jew, therefore, was a step forward from being black, though not quite yet the step that crossed the finish line of the race. Scholar Eric J. Sundquist groups blacks and Jews together under the epithet of ‘strangers in the land’, and relays that:

Separated by color and religion, hardly insignificant considerations in a predominantly ‘white’, Protestant nation, Jews and blacks once found that their day-to-day command experiences were as intimately connected as their histories were distinct. Those among them who made common cause in the face of anti-Semitism and racism, as well as many commentators since, have described Jews and blacks as ‘friends’, ‘partners’, and most often as ‘allies’, as in reference to the ‘black-Jewish alliance’. (2)

The common or similar experiences of Jews and blacks – slavery, the Shoah, the sense of always feeling like misplaced and lost foreigners – has caused the two peoples to identify with one another and fight for a common cause: freedom, and the abolition of racism and anti-Semitism. The paths of the two allies later diverged, mostly due to the growing assimilation of Jews into the white race, and to the unwavering pride of blacks for their own race that flourished in the 1960s with the Black Power movement. Still, the underlining connection did not die completely, and light-skinned blacks in particular continued to see Jews as an example, as people to emulate, as those who had proved the possibility to make it in the world.

Bringing these reflections on Jews and blacks in the context of racial passing, my research underlines an aspect of passing that tends to be ignored, or at least put to the side in favor of other interpretations: its role in repairing fractured identities by positioning the passer above any race, so that he can find his pure and untarnished essence. To demonstrate the importance of this aspect of passing both in reality and in literature, I have divided my study in separate topics that illustrate the interconnectedness of passing and identity-making.

Chapter one will be dedicated to defining and contextualizing notions of race and racial passing in the United States, seeing the latter as a reaction to the many historical occurrences of the period going from the beginning of the slave trade until the abolition of the Segregation. It will especially focus on how passing was first born, on why it was necessary, and on its advantages and disadvantages. The chapter will also explore the relationship between blacks and Jews that has been hinted at above, as well as black-to-Jewish passing and the differences it presents from traditional black-to-white passing.

Chapter two will introduce the concept of the ‘fragmented identity’ experienced by light-skinned African-Americans, useful to see why passing as Jewish would bring forth the resolution of one’s complete identity. The chapter will then compare classic literature with contemporary passing literature. Three examples of both will be analyzed in depth, focusing on the psychology of the passer. Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), and Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933) will serve to underline how classic passing narratives present passing as the catalyst for tragedy. As a contrast, Brooke Kroeger’s first report in *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (2003), Rebecca Walker’s autobiography *Black, White & Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001), and the South African Achmat Dangor’s *Kafka’s Curse* (1997) will be used to show the difference made by the presence of Jewishness in contemporary passive narratives as far as the identity-making of the passer is concerned.

Chapter three and four will be dedicated to an in-depth analysis of two novels, Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998) and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000). I have chosen these two novels in particular because in Senna’s and Roth’s works the importance of Jewishness as an identity and of its function in the development of an identity that is true and whole is especially underlined compared to other literary works. Both authors depict their characters as initially incomplete and unsatisfied in their current state, and both protagonists will need to undergo a process of change and growth in which Jewishness is the essential and unwavering key.

CHAPTER ONE  
RACE AND THE VARIETIES OF PASSING IN AMERICA

“There are times when one would like to hang the whole human race, and finish the farce”

Mark Twain

**The Construction of Races**

When one thinks of race, what comes to mind is a concept hard to pin down or define straightforwardly. The reason for the tricky nature of both the term and the concept it represents is that ‘race’ not only includes several different categories which are in turn subject to different interpretations, but these categories have also changed in time, so that the concept of race of the 21<sup>st</sup> century does not coincide with the concept of race of the preceding centuries.

This chapter seeks to contextualize and try to define race, as well as to explain how its interpretation used to affect the North American population at a time when it was much more monolithic than it is now. This chapter will also discuss racial passing as a direct consequence of race division, as well as how race can be interpreted differently according to different racial groups, often bringing to the fragmentation of one’s identity because of the contrasting interpretations and effects of race and its correlation with ethnicity. Race will be used, in this work, with its original meaning, that intends biological differences between groups, visible on a physical level. Ethnicity, on the other hand, refers to cultural and social differences, and includes language, religion, customs, and historical and artistic heritage (Brooker 92, 213-214). Both race and ethnicity are imbued with a sense of togetherness, of belonging to the same group and therefore to a community or to the human race, but they are equally imbued with the dissociation of opposing one race/ethnicity to another which is different and therefore alien (Sollors 288-289). In America there has been a tendency to label ethnicities as races, therefore associating what were mere cultural differences to biological ones. This tendency has recently been subverted, to the point that race is now often used in inverted commas, and the word’s connotation includes now many aspects that once pertained to ethnicity alone. The conception of race has evolved, and is now, for the most part, considered not a biological reality but a social construct, “entirely a product of the ways that people think about human differences” (Andreasen 655).

The starting point of the evolution of race, however, is very much distant from this new open and broad definition. Historically, human beings have been classified as belonging to either superior or inferior races. When European colonizers first arrived in what are now the United States of America at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they were faced with the native inhabitants of the land they were seeking to occupy, whom they then called Indians. The Indians, now called Native Americans, were immediately classified into a binary system, in which they were the inferior – red – race in contrast to the superior white race. This classification of races was based both on pseudo-biological and on cultural assumptions, so that the race that appeared stronger and more knowledgeable was seen as superior, whereas the race that appeared weaker and less advanced was considered inferior. In the case of the Native Americans, they lacked weapons and technological goods in general, and they proved helpless against the diseases brought by the Europeans and against their more structured organization, which saw the Natives defeated in battles and the Europeans consequently feeling at a higher standing. This feeling soon degenerated, so that “[b]y the Jacksonian period, in the 1830s, Native Americans were seen as lazy aliens, savages to be dispossessed or exterminated as obstacles to America’s inevitable westward expansion. They were not citizens, not part of the nation: they would be forever strangers in its midst” (Brodkin 70).

By that time, another important factor was influencing the American view of race: slavery. The first slaves were brought to America from the African continent in 1619 in the colony of Jamestown, Virginia (“Slavery in America”). Different factors contributed to the belief that the African peoples were inferior, such as their different skin color, their inability to speak English, their belonging to a different culture and religion, and often their inability to read and write as well. Even after the Africans started to learn English and to convert to Christianity, however, the stigma of being an inferior race remained, to the extent that they were seen as property, as objects, rather than humans.

Karen Brodtkin identifies slavery as one of the two ideas that stand at the origin of the belief that the white population is better and that they are supposed to stand above any other race. Based on the results of research done, among others, by Eric Williams, the first president of Trinidad and Tobago, Brodtkin reports that slaveholders initiated the process of segregating different racial groups from one another, and later restrained slavery only to Africans because they were easier to contain (68). This concept is found in Ture and Hamilton’s book about Black Power as well, where they report that:

Indians would have been a solution [to cheap work], but they were too susceptible to diseases carried by the Europeans, and they would not conform to the rigid discipline of the plantation

system. Poor whites of Europe were tried but proved unsatisfactory. They were only indentured servants, brought over to serve for a limited time; many refused to complete their contract and ran away. With their white skins, they assimilated easily enough into the society. But black Africans were different. They proved to be the white man's economic salvation. (24)

The second explanation of the belief in white superiority analyzed by Brodtkin is social Darwinism (81-82), that implies that those who are fittest to survive should prevail. When this concept emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed to demonstrate that the numerous conquests in lands and victories in battles obtained by the Europeans both in the past and in the present were not mere skill, but the biological predisposition to mastery that they had been trying to prove for centuries. The white population has often remarked, especially in the period of slavery, that it was by God's will that people of color (or 'Negroes' as they were derogatorily called) were inferior and therefore slaves. The common belief was that because they lacked property, they also lacked virtue; work became then a necessary cure for their idleness (Brodtkin 79), thus justifying what was an inhuman practice of violence and abuse that would take two centuries to be abolished.

The tendency to define race inferiority as biological and slavery as something needed at an innate level is referred to by Louis F. Mirón and Jonathan Xavier Inda as the practice of naturalizing the racialized other (85). This practice is meant to secure the racial relations between two groups, because if their differences were merely cultural they could evolve in time, reduce or even disappear. Being the differences natural, instead, and therefore innate, inherent to each race, they are not subject to changes, and the binary composed of one superior and one inferior race can remain. What is stressed in Mirón and Inda's essay, however, is that race is not natural per se, but *made* natural by those who consider it so. When several people say that others are different from them, inferior to them, on a biological level, and when this concept becomes the status quo, race stops being a matter of culture, language, religion, and becomes a matter of genes, not because it is actually so, but because it is what everyone – sometimes even the 'inferior' race – believes.

If slavery strengthened the belief that the Africans and their American-born descendants were inferior, however, it also introduced a third variant in the black-white binary of that time, complicating the matter of race further. Slaveholders, for no better reason than it confirmed their power and that they could perpetrate such an act, intermingled with female slaves. This act not only increased the number of slaves, as the offspring of slave mothers were inevitably slaves themselves, but also created what would be considered a new racial group: mulattos. Mulattos have been, since

the beginning, an in-between race, standing in the middle between two opposite points. Because of their lighter complexion, many mulattos were visibly more similar to the white population; nonetheless, they have been unequivocally considered black, and denied the privileges granted to the race they partly belonged to, at least biologically. As this kind of forced miscegenation continued and grew, 'mulatto' became a term that did not simply refer to a child of a white parent and a black parent, but to the progeny of mixed-race individuals as well, as any quantity of black blood meant one was part of the black race, no matter one's actual skin-color (Reuter 36). At the same time, as explained by Reuter and Toplin in their respective essays "The American Mulatto" and "Between Black and White: Attitudes Toward Southern Mulattoes, 1830-1861", mulatto slaves were often privileged over Negro slaves, and they were thought more intelligent and able because of their white blood, to the point that they were sometimes freed from slavery and provided education and property by their white ancestors (39-40; 185). This led in turn to mulattos feeling superior to dark-skinned blacks, and to their aspiration to be like whites in all aspects.

As the Civil War approached in the mid-1800s, the proslavery faction became in need of a stronger division between races to prove that anyone with black blood was not worthy of being freed or of being in any way brought closer to white individuals. Mulattos were therefore pushed back towards the black half of their race, and favoritisms towards them greatly diminished. Biological traits became a factor again in defining the mulattos anew, with several studies trying to prove their inferiority, danger, and uselessness. They were, for instance, equated to mongrels and mules as hybrid races – and, obviously, the reference to them being closer to animals than humans cannot be ignored. What the comparison wished to prove was that mulattos, because they are a mixture of two incompatible races which God never intended to mix, become infertile in the matter of a few generations, proving in turn their racial inferiority and deficiency as well as the error that was miscegenation (Toplin 197). Mulattos therefore regressed to being called Negroes, and the black-white binary was restored, on the surface at least, for a time.

What complicated the precarious binarism once again was the immigration wave coming from Europe in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, featuring predominantly southern and eastern European ethnic groups, such as Italians, Poles, and Jews, with the addition of the Irish. Once again, the tendency was that of relegating those ethnic groups to the inferior side of the race binary, as they contrasted, in the white American's eyes, to his superior northern and western Europe ancestry of blue-eyed, blond-haired individuals. What certainly helped this identification of the newcomers was their poverty and their consequent urgency to accept even the most demeaning jobs. The immigrants' poverty similarly associated them with decadence, death and disease so that they were kept at distance



for fear of contamination. Moreover, the immigrant women's need to work to support their families distanced them even further from their white American counterparts who were pure and refined ladies. Immigrant women in contrast were strong and masculine, while immigrant men, unable to support their families by themselves, were in turn effeminate and subjugated to women (Brodkin 86-87).

If these ethnic groups coming from Europe were framed by denigration and by the same stereotypes that accompanied people of color – making them lean towards being separate races themselves – they were, however, not black, but rather belonged to a category of their own which Karen Brodtkin calls 'off-white' (1). The people belonging to this off-white group were considered inferior mainly because of their social and economic standing, and because of cultural differences. Race, in this instance, "is expanded beyond biology to embrace a set of cultural and historical associations normally associated with descriptions of ethnicity" (Brooker 184).

In this contextualization of the races that exist – or have been made to exist – in America (mainly white, red, black, mulatto, and off-white) we can now go back to Inda and Mirón's concept according to which something (in this case, race and racial divisions) is made by the act of being named. In America, the white portion of the population have named and therefore made themselves the white race while also naming and making other races that stand in opposition to theirs. This concept is taken one step further by stating that the process of making-in-naming can only be successful if it is continuously repeated. This repetition makes the subject sedimented and maintains its naturalization. Another consequence is, however, the incomplete state of the subject itself, which needs to remain 'open' to being repeated, and can therefore never fully conclude its creation, leading to the possibility of it being changed and interfered with (92-95).

The truth of the aforementioned prediction can be directly seen in the perception of each different race in America. We have already explained the change of attitude towards mulattos, and certainly the abolition of slavery is a sign of change in how people of color were seen by others. The change in the language used to refer to them is a sign as well, as they went from being 'Negroes' (and even more derogatorily, 'niggers'), to being simply 'blacks', and finally to being 'people of color' in an attempt to soften the perceived difference between an 'us' and a 'them'.

The so-called off-whites have been subject to a great change as well, to the point that they are now fully white, having gone through a process of assimilation to the white culture. While it is true that assimilation began with the off-white groups, who did what they could to be perceived by the fully white as one of them, the procedure could not have been completed if the whites had not *wanted* to

accept those whom they considered ‘other’. Karen Brodtkin, granddaughter of Jewish immigrants and daughter of Jewish parents who experienced the transition from off-white to white first-hand, reports that by the 1940s “Euro-immigrants and their children were more securely white by submersion in an expanded notion of whiteness” (36), confirming that it was the perspective of the race-namers which had changed, not the race-subjects directly.

The main advantage these off-white ethnic groups had was that they soon distanced themselves from the black community, therefore underlining how much closer they were to the white American mainstream than to blacks. That, coupled with their ability to move upwards economically and socially, brought them on the same plane as the whites who had previously excluded them, reverting to being an ethnicity rather than a separate race, as the differences that characterized them were cultural and social rather than physical.

### **Racial Passing**

If the European immigrants in the 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced an improvement in how they were perceived and consequently treated, the black population remained stigmatized by prejudices, racism and restrictions, both social and legal. The social injustice that began with slavery in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and never truly ceased to exist in America pushed many light-skinned colored people to cross the so-called color line imposed by the white elite, and engage in an act called ‘racial passing’.

Passing is a term which can refer to many different practices; in short, people who pass “effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be . . . Passing means that other people actually see or experience the identity that the passer is projecting” (Kroeger 109).

There are several types of passing which can refer to either religion, race, sexual orientation, or economic status, just to name a few. A homosexual person can pass for straight, for instance, or an atheist can pass for a worshipper. Generally, a person who passes does so because she wishes to conform to certain norms imposed, on a cultural level, by society, in order to not feel excluded by those belonging to the mainstream. Other times, passing can be undergone to enjoy privileges one would not otherwise have, such as appreciation from others, or, in the case of racial passing, the lack of racism, racial prejudices and restrictions imposed by racial division. Some individuals pass only occasionally, or for a brief period of time; others do so for the rest of their lives. Equally, the choice of passing can be voluntary or imposed; it can depend on one’s desire to be seen as he truly feels, or it may only be a tool to the aforementioned advantages (Sollors 250-251).

Racial passing in particular sees a person belonging to a discriminated race pretending to be, or passing for, a person of a ‘superior’ racial group. As far as North America is concerned, the passers most likely belonged to the Native or Black communities, but also to the off-white ethnicities before they became assimilated. There have been of course some cases of ‘reverse passing’, which meant that, for instance, a white person passed for Jewish or for black<sup>1</sup>, but that is far less common. Nowadays, ‘racial passing’ – often simply reduced to ‘passing’ – refers to the more prevalent black-to-white passing.

The word, and the action it represents, originated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when slavery was still practiced in America. A ‘pass’, during that time, was a piece of paper written for a slave by the master explaining that the slave had permission to be in the streets unsupervised due to errands he had to complete (Hobbs 33). As time passed, however, the lighter-skinned slaves began to take advantage of these slips of paper, and of their masters’ faithful belief that they wouldn’t try to escape. Many stories of fugitive slaves start with slaves writing themselves passes so they could go freely around and avoid being stopped and brought back to their slaveholders. The pass gave them an advantage so that they could try to reach the northern states, which were moving towards an anti-slavery climate.

Thus, the first example of black-to-white passing goes much deeper than the passer’s skin color, including notions of freedom as well as race. Allyson Hobbs writes: “white skin functioned as a cloak in antebellum America. Accompanied by appropriate dress, measured cadences of speech, and proper comportment, racial ambiguity could mask one’s slave status and provide an effectual strategy for escape” (29). The references to clothing and manners underline how race was very much linked to class at that time, so that one’s superiority of status could be affirmed through display of refined speech and neat garments. By wearing clothes whites would wear, and by imitating their speech and demeanor, slaves could elevate themselves to a state of freedom, and by extension humanity (Hobbs 31). It was not easy, and many fugitive slaves were caught in their act of passing, but many others had the opportunity to access a different life with more possibilities.

As far as literature is concerned, what comes to mind is Mark Twain’s 1894 novel *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, in which Roxana, a one-sixteenth black slave, switches her one-thirty-second black slave son Chambers with her own master’s son Tom, and no one notices for decades. Roxana’s purpose – that of saving her son from being sold ‘down the river’ – eventually fails, but Twain’s novel certainly does what it was meant to: underlining the absurdity of the color line, and the extreme ambiguity of race. Similarly, in Charles Chesnut’s novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, set in the South

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<sup>1</sup> In 2015, head of the Spokane NAACP Rachel Dolezal was outed by her parents as white, after having self-identified as black for decades (Botelho).

during the Reconstruction, one of the characters is to her dismay often mistaken for her half-sister, who has the same tone of skin she has, but is nonetheless labeled by society as black.

The relative easiness with which some slaves – both real and fictional – were able to pass as not only free (there *were* free blacks) but as white, created great uneasiness in the white population, who felt threatened by how two races so incompatibly different could be taken one for the other. The main problematic of passing in the eyes of the white population consisted in the fact that it reduced the gap between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, bringing who they thought inferior on the same plane as themselves. It therefore upset the fixed dynamics of race that were in place at the time, and it did so secretly, invisibly, as many of the passers were not identified. When passing started to be practiced in North America, it had two effects on society: it reinforced the belief that the black race was inferior, as blacks abandoned their own race to belong to another (Ture and Hamilton 31), and it reduced the meaning of the color line, and of race as a social construct as well: “[p]assing works as a prism: it refracts different aspects of what we commonly think of a racial identity and reveals what is left once the veil of an ascribed status is stripped away. . . . Passing unmask[s] race as conventionally understood, revealing the intimate and personal meanings of putative racial identity” (Hobbs 14). In other words, both race division and the superior/inferior race dynamic risked becoming redundant, and the effect was that the white portion of the American population sought to strengthen that division to prove its validity.

The Civil War, which lasted from 1860 to 1865, culminated with the abolition of slavery in America, and with the bestowing to blacks of the human rights that had been denied them until that moment. The 13<sup>th</sup> amendment of the Constitution abolished slavery in the United States; the 14<sup>th</sup> made citizens out of former slaves; the 15<sup>th</sup> supposedly granted them – the males, at least – the right to vote. ‘Supposedly’ unfortunately becomes the key word of these amendments, because the period that followed the Civil War did nothing but bring a new kind of slavery, a subtler one, a slavery hidden under layers of law. In the wake of the war, the Reconstruction followed. While the northern states kept arguing for real equality for former slaves, the South was in turmoil, trying to resist adaptation. The state of mind of the people of the South was not yet ready for the uplifting of the black race, and the so-called black codes were enacted to “control the labor and behavior of former slaves and other African Americans” (“Reconstruction”). Black codes forced most former slaves in the South to sign contracts for their labor; if they refused they risked being fined or even arrested (“Black Codes”). The black codes ensured a continuity with the past, as they provided cheap if not free labor, and a tight control on the workers on part of the employers. Many African-Americans

found themselves forced to remain on the plantations where they had been slaves, now paid for their hard work but still exploited.

Simultaneously, another obstacle to black integration was born: the Ku Klux Klan. Varying in terms of class and status, the members of the Ku Klux Kan were united by their use of violence against blacks and those who supported them. Their main objective was putting a definitive stop to the Reconstruction and to the promotion of race equality that came with it, so that the superiority of the white race could be reinstated.

It was in this perilous and unstable climate that the Jim Crow laws were promulgated, adding yet another reason to the many which stand behind the choice of racial passing. For close to a century, African-Americans were segregated, not only on an abstract level, but physically. Schools, hospitals, bathrooms, train cars, buses – every place rotated around the banner of ‘separate but equal’, thus splitting everything in unequal halves, one for each race of the binary that could not – or would not – cease to exist. It regrettably goes without saying that the facilities destined to black individuals, labeled with a sad sign reading ‘colored’, were less well-kept than those for whites, reinforcing the feeling not only of separation but of the inequality they pretended not to promote.

In the well-known episode of a 1955 evening, the African-American Rosa Parks refused to give her bus seat to a white man, and was consequently arrested. Such was the extent of the segregation, and in such a climate it is hard to see why a black person would *not* pass for white. Questionnaires sent to both black and white people showed that passing was mainly motivated by love, economic and social ambition, but also lack of race pride and identification, and the simple thrill of deceiving whites (Conyers and Kennedy 217). On the other hand, the same questionnaires also underlined why others did not undergo this process, mainly due to the high risks it entailed and the many repercussion it had on a psychological level.

First and foremost, passing meant abandonment. The passer left behind his past, his family and history, his memories and his name. He became someone else, and in doing so negated his previous self. He was forced to invent a new history and family for himself, and to always remember it in favor of the real one, not to be discovered. Family and friends could be made anew, found among the new race. But any relationship created as a passer was built on lies and deception, and the unspeakable truth always loomed over each new day. Despite their light skin, blacks could have darker-skinned children, for example, who would expose them and who would be then denied the newly acquired privileges of the white race. It is for this reason that Peola, the passer of the 1933 novel *Imitation of Life*, written by Fannie Hurst, makes sure she cannot bear children before she marries a white man,

knowing it could revert her passing. In the same trend, Ernestine, sister to Coleman Silk in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, declares her brother should have had no children as price for his act of passing.

Passing also entailed going from a status of high visibility – in which one's manners, way of speech, and one's family relations were all symbols of his race – to an irreversible invisibility, to becoming a white face in the midst of thousands of others. One of the best-written passing novels, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), opens with this exact concept:

I am an invisible man . . . I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surrounding, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me . . . That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition in the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. (3)

As soon as he passed and became a white man, Ellison's protagonist faded away; he receded into the background because he no longer had attributes that made him visible to whites, who now believed him one of their own. At the same time, the race he became part of openly disregarded his original one, hated it, subjugated it. Therefore, passing weighed on one's conscience, appearing as an act of immorality, as a betrayal, no matter how good the consequences were for a single individual. Anatole Broyard speaks of the inauthentic Negro as the man not true to himself, the man who rejects his own identity, both the racial and the personal one: "since he cannot hide from society, he often hides from himself . . . the inauthentic Negro almost entirely occupies himself with either affirming (ingratiation) or denying by his behavior what the anti-Negro says about him, until his personality is virtually usurped by a series of maneuvers none of which has any necessary relation to his true self" (57). There are, therefore, black men who not only *accept* the view whites have about them, but willingly conform to it and confirm it. There are black men who embrace the prejudices spoken about them, and there are black men who lower themselves to even fulfill them. There are black men who isolate themselves in anger, rejecting not only the white men who denigrate them, but the black community, somehow to blame, in his eyes, for his inferior status.

## **Jews and Blacks**

The act of passing, however, is not always a rejection of one's identity in favor of a mask, of a fake personality. Sometimes, passing can bring an individual closer to his true self, to the characterization in which he recognizes himself the most despite his upbringing, his family history and cultural background. For this reason, it is interesting to investigate why certain figures, both in literature and in real life, opted to pass for Jewish instead of passing for generically white. As has been said earlier, Jews are nowadays considered assimilated to the white culture, but it has not always been so. It is interesting that someone belonging to a minority category would chose, in the attempt to evade from it, to place himself in another minority group, albeit better treated than his.

The next part of this chapter will analyze the relationship between these two groups – blacks and Jews – going through what differentiates them and what connects them, and finally contemplating the reasons behind black-to-Jewish racial passing.

The plainest difference one would think of regarding blacks and Jews, and one that is not truly present in America, is that the former belong to a racial group, while the latter are part of a religion, Judaism. Jews are not a people from a specific country or even continent; anyone can be born a Jew or become one, as it is with any religious affiliation. As any other religion, Judaism comes along with its own culture, and culture is what has always been stressed in America when talking about Jews. One is not Jewish because of his religion, but because of specific traditions linked with it that other communities lack. Traditions and culture are certainly the most fundamental points that define Jewishness, and are passed on from one generation to the next without fail, so that there is always the presence of a common past looming over the present. The common culture, called *Yiddishkeit*, was a link between the Jews of the world, between age, between classes, emphasizing the community as a whole as the cornerstone of moral life, imbued with work and social justice. Although it originated in eastern Europe, Jews brought *Yiddishkeit* with them during the immigration wave to the United States, ensuring it would be passed on despite the changes immigration would entail (Brodkin 106-108).

On the other hand, something to pass on is exactly what blacks lack. Having been eradicated from their country, deprived of their own language – many Jews, on the other hand, still maintain the use of Yiddish and of Hebrew – and religion, blacks have lost any tie to their own past. They have become *African-Americans*, and their history has been made on American soil. Even slavery, a common trauma they share with the Jewish people, has been for them nothing but the breaking of their bond with Africa (Sundquist 155), and being freed did not equal going back home, nor strengthening their sense of tradition.

The other difference, though not always true, is skin color. Being Judaism a religion, it goes without saying that anyone can be Jewish – even people of color. What normally comes to mind when thinking about Jews, though, is an olive hue, perhaps combined with black hair and a hooked nose. In European Jews especially, lighter tones can be found, making them less visible than blacks, whose skin inevitably makes them stand out: “Jews really are white—so long as there is nothing very visibly Jewish in their appearance or behavior . . . Jews, unlike blacks, might throw off the evidence of race in favor of a new American self” (Sundquist 66-67). Still, Jews are not totally white either; they can be said to be raceless, in the sense that their racial identity is fluid, opaque, it can be one or the other or maybe neither.

What accounted for the fluidity and adaptability of Jews was, partly, the Shoah, that forced them to hide from the eyes of those who sought to exterminate them in a way the African slaves had not been able to. It was not a matter of assimilation to a different culture or religion, but of survival, which required them to absorb all the little pieces and undertones of other peoples and make them their own while still remaining separate and different so as not to become like those who condemned them. Their ability to shift between diverse beings originates further in time than the horror of the Shoah, and it stands at the very base of their essence:

The Jewish culture identifies its origin with Abraham, who chooses to be someone else; with Jacob, who passes for someone else; with Moses, who discovers to be someone else; it paves the way for the Messiah with Tamar, who pretends to be someone else; it opens with Ruth, who decides to become someone else, and it is saved with Esther, who reveals to be someone else. It gets to know its ‘heresy’ with Jesus, whom the disciples proclaim to be Other. (Bassi 25, my translation)

The peculiar feature of the Jews’ ability to assimilate was that in doing so they also invariably maintained certain traits – be it in personality, behavior or traditional habits – that identified them as Jews to the rest of the population, and gave them an air of mystery that engulfed them in a paradox: they belonged to the mainstream, but were an Other; they were white, but belonged to another ethnic group; they were Americans, yet strangers, foreigners, to the point that the essence of being Jewish is being able to be non-Jewish (Itzkovitz 42-43). Cheryl Greenberg gives a possible reason for this fluidity of identity, differentiating between race and color and giving the two terms different meanings and perceptions. Jews, Ashkenazi Jews<sup>2</sup> in particular, did not consider themselves to be white on a

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<sup>2</sup> Caucasian Jews; different from Sephardic Jews, coming from Spain, and Mizrahi Jews, from the Orient.



biological level, they did not feel to belong to the white race. They also were not considered white by many American whites, especially the anti-Semites. Therefore, they were not racially white. They were, however, white in color, Caucasian (41). What resulted from this new paradoxical binary was that Jews felt they were a minority, and felt kinship towards other minority groups, while benefiting from all the privileges that came with being white, without identifying as such, and therefore disavowing the traits they did not agree with, racism being on top of the list.

So, Jews were white, but not racially white; they were part of a religious community, but were an ethnic group. They belonged to each of these categories individually, and fit into them all together. They were part of a separate race, one that included them and them only, without being a separate color. They were raceless.

In this scenario, where did the blacks, the most racial and racialized group in America, fit? How did they relate themselves to the non-quite-white yet white chameleons?

Blacks initially felt a deep bond with Jews, and related to them due to their similar experiences. Jews had also been enslaved and freed from slavery, and had found themselves on foreign soil, like Nomads who had no place of their own. Both groups had also somehow made of America their new home, as the majority of neither African-Americans nor Jews returned to Africa and Israel respectively after the possibility presented itself<sup>3</sup>. Rather, blacks found themselves swept over by an inner wave of racial pride, that surged with the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and changed the mindset of blacks from one of submission and inferiority to one of pride and justice. Under the slogan of 'Black is Beautiful', the so-called Black Power isolated blacks from any other racial group, including the Jews who, although sympathetic to the black cause, were ultimately considered white in light of their progressing assimilation. The Black Power advocated the right of the black community to be part of the social and political sphere, and claimed it was not enough to be represented by single individuals of the black elite. What the Black Power demanded was the thriving of the black community, with facilities that could best represent them because completely run by them. The reason for this self-alienation in the wake of the abolition of the Segregation in 1964 stood in the belief that "before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks" (Ture and Hamilton 44), to find strength and build a communal power rooted in their origin. It stood in opposition with integration, which implied acquiring a new identity because their own had no real

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<sup>3</sup> The State of Israel was founded in 1948, and many African colonies obtained independence; despite this, many Jews and many blacks remained in the land they considered foreign, perhaps fearing to disrupt their idyllic dream of their natal place with the images of the present wars and chaos.

value (Ture and Hamilton 55). So stopped the attempts to straighten hair and whiten skin, to speak and behave like whites.

What even Black Power did not stop, though, was racial passing. Passing was the exact opposite of what Black Power stood for – taking pride in being black, establishing bonds within a black community, rising from the bottom not towards or with but *despite* white supremacy. Still, it happened, as many blacks sought more privileges than the ones the Civil Rights movements could give them; privileges that did not need to be fought for but were already available. Specifically, passing for Jewish, and therefore passing for someone who is chameleonic and shifting by nature, could give the passers more advantages even than passing for the more generic white.

The first advantage of passing for Jewish instead of passing for white stands in the fact that, as Jews are a minority group, or in any case a separate group from other whites, blacks do not need to change completely when they pass. Having gone through similar experiences, and sharing a similar fear of subjugation and a similar longing for a lost home, blacks understand what being Jewish means much more than they understand being white. As passing is a form of pretense, an act in which one must behave differently than one is used to, becoming and subsequently acting Jewish allows blacks to keep some of their own characteristics, as they belong to Jews as well. Passing for Jewish, to blacks, is not a complete passing, but rather it is an integration of their being with those characteristics that Jews and whites have and they do not. This integration, unlike in cases of black-to-white passing, is not accompanied by the necessity to shed other characteristics that whites do not have, as Jews were allowed to have them, to be something, as we have seen, in-between. It was, for this reason, easier to become Jewish than white, as it provided less chances of being discovered.

Another benefit of passing for Jewish is that the reaction on part of other blacks is not as hateful as when one passes for white. As has been explained, blacks and Jews have had a good, if not always perfect, relationship; they have supported each other and empathized with one another through the Segregation and the Shoah. For this reason, passing for Jewish would be, if only slightly, more accepted by other blacks, it would be seen less than a betrayal and it would then temper the sense of guilt and regret felt by the passer.

Passing means abandonment – of family, friends, of an entire community. In the study conducted by James E. Conyers and T. H. Kennedy concerning the reason why a black individual might or might not pass, one of the reasons against passing is the sense of loneliness that follows in the white community, so wide and void of a common spirit similar to the black one (220). Jews, unlike whites and similarly to blacks, have always had a sense of community, have built the deepest essence of their

Jewishness on being part of a community on sharing values. Becoming Jews meant that blacks could still be part of a strong community, albeit not their own – a community different in name but similar in spirit, that welcomed the passer with familiarity.

Jews and blacks did not share affinity only in being a minority group, having a similar past, and being a community. Many Jews and blacks had similar physical traits, such as dark hair and eyes, a prominent nose, an olive skin which is not totally and purely white, and which perfectly suited light-skinned blacks who wanted to pass. Similarity in physical characteristics decreased the risk of being unmasked as non-belonging; it also lessened the danger of having to explain more prominent African features in future children, as they could be attributed to Jewish ancestry.

The last advantage about passing as Jewish as a black individual is that it provided a way out of the black/white binary in which all blacks were trapped. We have established the fluid and chameleonic nature of Jews, saying they are neither totally white neither totally non-white; they are an Other that essentially stands on its own but has roots in both the main groups of the binary. Therefore, becoming Jewish means becoming that type of Other, that Other that is not linked to a certain standard but can move more freely and adjust the pieces of his own identity as *he* likes, not in the way imposed by another.

CHAPTER TWO  
FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES  
IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK-TO-JEWISH PASSING LITERATURE

“Aspects of one’s identity can be dormant, intuitively felt, explicitly articulated, or translated into action”

Katya Gibel Azoulay

**Fragmented Identities**

Essentially, it is important to remember that the identity of the person who passes for someone else is not whole, but fragmented, with the pieces pulled in opposing directions. The passer’s wish and purpose in making a Jew out of himself is not only to acquire advantages reserved for those considered white, or almost-white; it is not only to have more and be more, but his objective is that of collecting the pieces of his scattered identity and bringing them together, as the Jew is the persona who best represents the entirety of his being.

The main cause of the mentioned fragmentation of identity in black people was the color of their skin. Light-skinned blacks were, essentially, white in color. Their white ancestors were much greater in numbers than their black ancestors, leading to milky complexion, and sometimes even blond hair and blue eyes, so that the only thing differentiating them from actual white people was the invisible yet indelible drop of black blood that designated them as black by law. Light-skinned black individuals were effectively told they were black – both by whites, who excluded them, and by the black community, who was trying to build a common foundation of shared values and traditions. What they saw when looking in the mirror, however, was something different: they saw their white skin, their Caucasian features, and could not completely recognize themselves as black, because the image they saw did not correspond to the image they were told about. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his article “Strivings of the Negro People”, called this pulling of the identity in two opposite directions ‘double consciousness’, explaining the condition of blacks in the American world:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of

a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.

The fragmentation of identity is found in Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* as well. In the chapter "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", Lacan calls the mirror stage the moment in a child's life when he first recognizes himself in the mirror, understanding himself as a complete individual, seeing himself entirely instead of glancing down at his feet, legs, or hands.

Lacan distinguishes between the real *I*, composed by the physical body, and the *I* seen in the mirror, which is the insubstantial reflection of the *I* but nonetheless the *I* which is always beheld with one's eyes. Applying Lacan's theory to racial identity rather than to identity in general, we can say that the real *I* is constituted by the light-skinned black individual, who is labeled black by society – he *is* black on a racial and social level. The reflected *I* is the person he sees in the mirror, and the reflection is white; the reflected *I* is, therefore, white in color and in essence. Because the mirror *I* is the only one the subject actively sees every day, he is prompted to identify more with the mirror *I* than with the real *I*. The mirror *I*, however, in addition to only being a reflection, is also inaccurate: the reflection is reversed horizontally so that, for instance, if a person raises his right hand the mirror reflection is seen raising the left hand. The mirror *I*, because it is not a completely accurate representation of reality and because it is only a reflection, is an alien, an entity separated and different from the real *I*. The real *I*, on the other hand, can never be completely seen nor accurately represented in its entirety, and is therefore incomplete. For a light-skinned black person, the mirror *I* is the one to imitate, to strive for. Becoming the mirror *I*, for them, would equal on the practical level passing for white, becoming white in the eyes of both society and themselves, in an attempt to unite the real *I* and its reflection. Because the reflection is an alien identity, however, in passing for white the real self would become alienated as well. Passing for white is therefore not the best way to solve the fragmentation of identity.

Other factors affect this fragmentation. The real self is enveloped in a sense of pride of being who he is, of belonging to the black race. The mirror *I* contrasts his pride, yearning for a higher status and recognition, wanting to be something – *someone* – more. The fragmented light-skinned individual is also caught between the remembrance of his past as a slave, and his desire to ensure he will be

perpetually free. Moreover, he wishes to remove the trauma from his mind, and to build a new life for himself in which he will not be solely a former slave.

The only resolution to this dilemma would be for the two ‘unreconciled strivings’, as Du Bois called them, to be united, to become one and the same, instead of being two separate identities. One needs to find and then maintain a balance of the two poles, and only then can one become whole. Passing for white would not be enough, as it would mean denying certain fragments of the identity, favoring predominantly only a part of oneself.

On the other hand – and this is the main point this work seeks to demonstrate – passing for Jewish allows the fragmented identity of the light-skinned black to come together, completing the identity process without leaving anything behind. Although the identity of the Jew might seem itself fragmented, it is a different kind of fragmentation. It is a propensity to assimilate, yes, to imitate the white mirror *I* like blacks. But it is also a rootedness in their cultural and ethnic values, accompanied by a rootlessness in place and in conventions that gives them freedom and authenticity (Charmé 47), setting them loose from all the strict codes dictated by belonging to a mainstream race, a race restricted by being in a binary system. Passing for Jewish, *becoming* a Jew, is a freeing act, an act that liberates a light-skinned black person from the restricting binary of race, from being an inferior subject in society, from being stuck in a position that does not fit. It also precludes the individual from being caught in yet another immobile situation (i.e. the white race, still part of the binary). Rather, it unblocks all the possibilities that come with being part of a chameleonic, fluid, Other-yet-assimilated racial group. By being Jewish instead of simply white, the black man can remain in a minority group which has suffered and then has thrived, so that he can maintain the pain and remembrance of the past while simultaneously having the advantage of being the ‘lesser minority’, a minority which has been accepted, which has even been *saved*, by America, from the destruction of the Shoah. By being Jewish instead of white, the black man can become the real self-made man, he can make himself into a new person, a person not different and other from himself, but a new person which is the result of joining the fragments of his identity, that were previously scattered and mismatched. He can embrace an ambiguous identity that best reflects and corresponds to the actual indefiniteness of the real world, in truth much less set by boundaries and binaries than we would be led to believe.

We have so far spoken of racial identity and racial passing in the context of real lives and real individuals. These topics, however, are much represented in the literary world as well, and have even created a genre of its own, so that novels dealing with racial passing are classified as ‘passing novels’. The reason why passing is present in literature, starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and going well into the

21<sup>st</sup>, is because literature is representative of real life, serving as a means to explain, interpret and understand what happens around us and to us. This dissertation will now delve into the realm of literature, analyzing works that address the issues of the fragmentation of identity, race, and racial passing, and it will aim to demonstrate how black-to-Jewish passing in contemporary passing novels is used by their authors to bring the scattered pieces of their characters' identity into one complete being.

### **Passing in Literature**

The period most saturated with the writing and publishing of passing novels has been the interval between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Many among the most renowned authors of those decades have become famous, or are most remembered, because of their passing novels – among others, Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson, and Fannie Hurst, to name but a few. Passing novels inevitably flourished at a time when real-life passing was also flourishing, transporting it into a fictional world and therefore making it more accessible even to those who had not experienced it or to those who refused to think about it as something that truly happened. The popularity of passing novels was not due only to their engaging style and enthralling plots, but to their intrinsic necessity, to the purpose they fulfilled.

Firstly, passing novels were needed to create awareness regarding the actual issue of passing and the reasons that stood behind it. They acknowledged passing as something that realistically happened and explored its motivations and its consequences in a way that left little room for disputation. The first passing novels were written during the literary movement of realism, which sought to depict real life without embellishments, so as to underline the issues of the time and criticize their cause, and to “assume a transparent relation of likeness, resemblance or analogy between reality and its representation” (Brooker 218). They also tried to arouse sympathy in the white readership through their characters and their stories of real hardship, real pain and concrete loss.

Secondly, passing novels gave their passer readers, and all readers who experienced some degree of fragmented identity, a piece of literature in which they could identify themselves. If passing meant abandoning everything and everyone previously known, if it led to loss and loneliness alongside freedom, passing novels brought back a sense of recognition and belonging in the passers, who read their own experiences on paper and could approach their own memories of the past with a lighter heart, with a filter that made them feel more accepted precisely because they became the representatives of communal experiences, now available for anyone.

Lastly, passing novels served to underline the extensive obsolescence of the color line and all that came with it. They presented white readers with facts, with tales, unveiling a hidden world that existed not separate from but *within* theirs. They drew attention to the fact that black people could indeed look white, act white, be seen by everyone as white. They showed that black people could indeed be accepted, that they could be smart and successful, that they could be ordinary humans, not so different from white people at all. The abundance of passing novels meant that real-life passing could not be ignored.

Generally, the passing novels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century all presented similarities in themes and storylines. They usually dealt with the psychological struggles of the passers, their guilt and their inability to fully fit in both before and after the act of passing. Says Yulia Kozyrakis, in her dissertation “Post-Racial Realities: Passing Narratives in Contemporary U.S. Fiction”:

Since the underlying motivation for passing was usually located in economic gain and an improved social position, for a long time passing was viewed as treason to race. Protagonists, who were condemned for “selling their birthright for a mess of pottage” (to say with the concluding words of James Weldon Johnson’s “Ex-Colored Man”), appeared to be tragic figures, confused and unable to embrace their ‘true’ race”. (27)

The mentioned unnamed narrator of *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is unable to find peace even after he has escaped the black world of racism and hardship. He remains torn, divided between past and present, lost possibilities and nostalgic memories, and the guilt which emerges from his words is so engulfing and overwhelming that it would seem an abundant punishment for crossing the color line.

Authors of passing novels were, of course, both female and male, both white and black. The majority were African-Americans, perhaps because the topic hit close to home, perhaps simply because they understood passing and its implications more thoroughly. Writes Kerstin Edler:

White authors use the theme of ‘passing’ differently from black authors. In white narratives of ‘passing’, plots are “typically predetermined [...] presuppos[ing] that characters who ‘pass for white’ are betrayers of the black race” (Smith 1994 quoted in Gosselin 1998: 48). They depend



almost inevitably upon the association of 'blackness' with self-denial and suffering. White writers use the 'passing' narrative to exploit the threat of 'invisible blackness'. (19)

The theme of invisible blackness and its absurdity was explored by one great white male author who is certainly worth mentioning when speaking about passing literature. Mark Twain, pseudonym for Samuel Langhorne Clemens, is known for his subtle but effective critique of American society and its issues. If his best works are considered to be *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1875) and its sequel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), his 1894 novel *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, already mentioned in the first chapter of this work, is equally astounding and striking with its portrayal of the unfairness of slavery, the frivolousness of the color line, and the breaking down of one of the biggest stereotypes concerning people of color: that they were inherently bad because of their blood, as opposed to displaying a bad behavior because they were raised incorrectly.

As far as the theme of fragmented identity is concerned, the novel presents many instances of dualism, of forces having the same origin and then being pulled in opposite directions, getting separated and then intertwining again, trying to make sense of themselves and of what surrounds them. The image of dualism is both physical and abstract. The characters Luigi and Angelo are twins, and the characters Tom and Chambers are switched when they are only five months old. The switching leads to the two grown men having a dual identity – the original one they had at birth, and the one they acquired after the switch. These two identities are both separate and merged at the same time, as the two individuals are first masked as the other, then told about their true identity, and finally switched back to the original identity which they are no longer able to identify with. David Wilson as well, the 'Pudd'nhead' of the novel's title, is, according to Derek Parker Royal, the embodiment of two impulses, alternatively enslaving and liberating, emancipating and manipulating ("The Clinician as Enslaver" 414, 416). The very first chapter presents an image of duality and halving, opening the way for the continuous theme. As David Wilson is introduced, both to the readers and to his fellow citizens, he comments that he wished he owned half of the dog who was barking so that he could kill his half. The inhabitants of Dawson's Landing immediately – and understandably – label him as stupid, but there is a deeper meaning to David's words. If he killed his half of the dog, the other half would perish too, and the entire dog would be dead. It is a metaphor, signifying that the two halves are connected, they cannot stand alone nor by themselves. Equally, separating one half of the population – namely, the black race – from the other half – the white race – would not bode well for either, as both would be negatively affected. In fact, the rest of the novel is set to demonstrate how the white and black races are not definitively separate, but stand together in the world.

Roxana, one of the protagonists and the initiator of the two children's fragmentation of identity, is a slave girl. Her status is imprinted in her speech and in her manners, and the readers inevitably picture her with dark skin – but she is white. In this, she perfectly embodies the duality represented by Lacan's mirror theory, explained in the previous chapter. She is black inside, because she has been raised as such and was taught to behave in ways that represent her blackness. Outside, she is white, and is proud of her white blood:

From Roxy's manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not. Only one sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show . . . To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a Negro. She was a slave, and salable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom a Negro. (14)

The physical appearance of Roxy's child – “blue eyes and flaxen curls” (14) – becomes pivotal in the novel, as she uses it to their advantage to spare him a life of slavery. The only thing that distinguishes Roxana's son and her master's son – in the man's eyes at least – is their attire, which is easily changed as Roxy undresses the two children and switches their clothes – and their lives. Here, the act of passing occurs when the child is an infant, and it is not a conscious choice; it is imposed by the mother, who rejects her son and positions him in the white race. When Chambers, grown up as Tom, is an adult, Roxy tells him the truth and therefore reverts him to his state of slave, at least internally. It is at this point in the novel – chapter nine – that Tom's identity consciously fragments as he is forced to think about who he is and who he should have been:

For days he wandered in lonely places, thinking, thinking, thinking—trying to get his bearings. It was new work. If he met a friend, he found that the habit of a lifetime had in some mysterious way vanished – his arm hung limp, instead of involuntarily extending the hand for a shake. It was the ‘nigger’ in him asserting its humility, and he blushed and was abashed. And the ‘nigger’ in him was surprised when the white friend put out his hand for a shake with him. He found the ‘nigger’ in him involuntarily giving the road, on the sidewalk, to a white rowdy and loafer. When Rowena, the dearest thing his heart knew, the idol of his secret worship, invited him in, the ‘nigger’ in him made an embarrassed excuse and was afraid to enter and sit with the dread white folks on equal terms. The ‘nigger’ in him went shrinking and skulking here and there and yonder, and fancying

it saw suspicion and maybe detection in all faces, tones, and gestures . . . For as much as a week after this, Tom imagined that his character had undergone a pretty radical change. But that was because he did not know himself. In several ways his opinions were totally changed, and would never go back to what they were before, but the main structure of his character was not changed, and could not be changed. (66-67)

The way in which Roxana addresses Tom changes as well after the revelation. Once submissive and humble, Roxana adopts the role of mother she had previously rejected, and berates Tom, threatens him, curses his black blood as the cause of his bad behavior and vices. Tom partly accepts that he is black – he believes Roxy, and as the passage quoted above shows he feels different now from those he used to consider his equals. At the same time, he is unable to completely shed the identity he was raised with. When Roxana expresses her maternal love for Tom, “[i]t made him wince, secretly – for she was a ‘nigger’. That he was one himself was far from reconciling him to that despised race” (119). Tom’s upbringing and consequent identity as a white slave master is ingrained in him to the point that he not only sells Roxy, now free, but sells her down the river, to the plantations of the southern states, where life was much worse than in the North. Ironically, it is the same fate that Roxy had spared Tom, and that he will have to face when his real identity is discovered. At the end of the novel, in fact, the same David Wilson who is considered a fool by the community of Dawson’s Landing realizes through the fingerprints of Tom and Chambers, taken both before and after the switch, that their identities have been inverted. Tom, albeit accused of murder, reverts to being a mere object and is sold; Chambers is freed and is made master once again, but is completely out of his depth:

The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the Negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh – all were vulgar and uncouth; his manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up; they only made them more glaring and the more pathetic. The poor fellow could not endure the terrors of the white man's parlor, and felt at home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen. The family pew was a misery to him, yet he could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge of the ‘nigger gallery’ – that was closed to him for good and all. (170)

In Tom and Chamber's case, it was Roxana who initially caused them to have a fragmented identity. Her switch was possible because the two children, despite the different races they were labeled with, outwardly looked the same. By switching them, she bestowed upon them two identities, opposite but parallel. When she exposed them – Tom initially by telling him and Chambers later as an indirect consequence of Tom's following actions – she made the fragments, previously dormant, known, and caused both men to question who they were.

Here in Twain's passing novel, the fragmentation of identity is not yet resolved. There is no moment in which the different identities are brought together and merged; passing here serves as the beginning of the fragmentation. At the same time, Twain was able to demonstrate how the cause of this fragmentation lies not merely in a slave's desire to be a master or in a mother's attempt to free her son, but that it derives from the plain fact of being a white-skinned person of color. It is, in this sense, not emotional or abstract, but physical, visible by anyone.

A couple of decades after Twain's novel, which pertained to the literary genre of realism, another movement rose: the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was "the first major movement of African American literature", and it focused on the pride and self-respect of black people, creating a form of high art as opposed to the previous popular comic writing (Matterson 96).

A common storyline, that continued to be present in the 1920s passing novels after their first appearance decades earlier, was that of the 'tragic mulatto', most often a woman, whose passing was eventually discovered and whose real identity was exposed, leading to a tragic ending, sometimes even death. Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry, one of the protagonists of her 1929 novel *Passing*, is a young tragic mulatta, whose story has become one of the most iconic in the realm of passing literature. Her experience is filtered through the eyes of her childhood friend Irene Redfield, who, meeting Clare again after twelve years, realizes she is passing as a white woman. Clare's story can be described as an arch, starting from a tragic childhood, peaking in a successful marriage to a white man, and finally crashing in an even more tragic segment – her death. Clare grew up with a drunken father who died in a saloon fight; her mother, it was rumored, "would have run away if she hadn't died" (11). When Irene first describes Clare, a dual personality is immediately evoked with her words. Irene says: "[s]ometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive" (3). These two traits that characterize Clare transfer in her adult life to her belonging or wanting to belong to two different races. At eighteen, Clare runs away from her two white great-aunts' house and marries John Bellew, has a daughter with him and settles in the white world, never looking back. After meeting Irene by chance, Clare seizes the opportunity to re-enter the black community. Unbeknownst to her husband, who often travels for work, Clare begins to attend tea-

parties and other social events in the Harlem black community; she reconnects with old acquaintances and cultivates new ones, spending time, for instance, with Irene's dark-skinned maid Zulena. She even admits that if it were not for her ten-year-old daughter she would leave her husband, saying that if he found out about her real origins she would "do what I want to do more than anything else right now. I'd come up here to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I'd be able to do as I please, when I please" (85). Clare literally has a foot in both worlds. She's an upper-class white woman, even nicknamed 'Nig' by her husband, who explains that "she was as white as . . . a lily. But I declare she's getting' darker and darker . . . You can get as dark as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger" (29). While John Bellew jokes around about his wife's appearance, however, he ignores that she really is a Negro, and that she is regaining her long-lost role in the black community he believes she despises. Josh Toth's definition of the word 'passing' perfectly explains Clare's fragmented state of being, her being pulled in both directions and her inhabiting two separate worlds at the same time:

Derived from the Latin *passus* ('to step or pace'), 'passing' connotes transience, the sense of being between places, of being neither inside nor outside (yet both inside and outside) a particular space or grouping. Passing is not to have been already let 'passed'; it is not to be before the pass, nor is it to be safely on the other side of the pass. Simply, passing suggests a mode of becoming rather than a mode of being. As regards a text that is significantly titled *Passing*, this is an important distinction. Although it is obviously interested in the issue of race, and racial ambiguity, Larsen's text – like the concept of passing itself – evokes a more general ontological threat of transience and instability. (57)

Like her dual and fragmented identity, Clare's passing has neither beginning nor ending; it is simply an action that represents her and accompanies her through her life. Much like Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in *Passing* the fragmentation is not resolved. Clare does not feel truly at home in either world, nor can she completely abandon either of them. She is condemned to remain suspended between them, belonging to both and to neither. Even her tragic death in the final lines of the novel lacks the definiteness that normally comes with dying. Clare is at a party in Harlem, among her old and new black friends. Her husband, having at last discovered her secret, bursts through the door, calling for her, both furious and desperate, and suddenly she is gone, out of the open 6<sup>th</sup> floor window. It remains unclear whether Clare has accidentally fallen or has thrown herself down, or even whether it was

Irene, convinced of her own husband's infatuation with Clare, who has pushed her. Her tragic ending is simply labeled "[d]eath by misadventure" (94).

Less tragic is the story of Peola, the passer of Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel *Imitation of Life*. Peola, the 'white nigger baby' of the dark-skinned maid Delilah, grows up from the age of three months in an environment that inevitably leads to a conflict in her identity. Her mother works for Bea Pullman, a widowed white woman who sells maple syrup door-to-door to support herself, her invalid father and her infant daughter Jessie. The epitome of the mammy figure<sup>4</sup>, Delilah takes care of Bea after a day of hard work, cooks and cleans for her, and puts the interests of Bea's daughter before those of her own. Delilah's deference is such that even when the two children misbehave Peola cannot be punished before Jessie has been punished, cannot apologize before Jessie has apologized. When Jessie, albeit not truly knowing the meaning of the word she is using, calls Peola a 'nigger', Delilah comforts her daughter, but nonetheless instructs her to get used to it, to accept it as something that is natural, as a glory bestowed upon her by God himself. On the other hand, Bea urges her own daughter to apologize to Peola, sending to both girls a conflicting message. Peola is in fact black, and is not equal to Jessie. But she and Jessie grow up side by side, playing together as friends, and both have Bea, a white and successful woman, as a role model figure. Even at a young age, Peola was able to recognize that Bea had more advantages than her own mother, and that their difference stood in their skin color and in their speech. Consequently, Peola imitates Bea's white manner of speaking rather than Delilah's evident black one – "[f]rom her very infancy, Peola, as quick as any child to ape, was nevertheless careful to avoid replica of her parent's one" (99). Similarly, she is strong in her assertion that she "won't be a nigger" (152-153). At eight years of age, Peola enacts her first passing, which lasts for two years and only stops when she is accidentally discovered by Delilah: "in a public-school system where the northern practice of non-segregation was common, it must have been a simple, if coolly calculated, little procedure, for the eight-year-old Peola to take her place without question among the children, never by word or deed associating herself with the handful of negro pupils in the class" (190).

Years after her first attempt at passing has been thwarted, sixteen-year-old Peola, refusing to attend the black university she has been accepted into, establishes herself in Seattle as a white librarian, and ceases to visit her mother's home.

These two episodes build up to the climax of the story, a few years later. Peola goes back home one last time, with a heartbreaking request for Delilah, Bea, and, though she is not present, for Jessie:

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<sup>4</sup> The stereotype of the mammy depicts a dark-skinned woman who takes care of the white children and women of the family she serves. She is portrayed as devoted, maternal, and obedient.

to pretend they do not know her if they happen to meet her in the future, as she is about to marry a white man. Peola's begging to her mother to be let go, her imploring cries as she essentially asks permission to pass, demonstrate that she is unable to let go on her own, to terminate contact with her mother without her blessing to do so. A part of Peola remains rooted in Delilah's hugs and loving words, while the other strives to become as much independent and free as Bea has become. Her language is hybrid as well, as she goes from calling Bea 'Mrs Pullman' to reverting to the childish 'Missy Bea', to then settle for the compromise of 'Miss Bea'. Despite her insecurities, however, it is clear from Peola's words that she knows what her path is, and is set on it:

I've prayed same as you, for the strength to be proud of being black under my white. I've tried to glory in my people. I've drenched myself in the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Booker Washington, and Frederick Douglass. I've tried to catch some of their spark. But I'm not that stuff. I haven't pride of race, or love of race . . . I can't learn to endure being black in a white world. It might be easier if I was out-and-out black like you. Then there wouldn't be any question. But I'm not. I'm light . . . I'm as white under my skin as I am on top . . . If your skin is white like mine and your soul is white – like mine, there is no point to the needless suffering . . . It is that [passing] for me, or nothing. It is life for me, or death . . . It's all or nothing for me . . . It's life, I tell you. Me clutching at life! (258-265)

Eventually, Delilah accepts to let go of Peola forever, and grants her her wish, dying of heartbreak soon after. Peola's passing, however, is as much inconclusive as it is permanent. Peola may pass for white, as she has wished to do for her entire life, but she does not resolve the dilemma of her fragmented identity. That is, she does not bring together the different and separate pieces that constitute her, but merely chooses one of the pieces and builds a new identity for herself based only on that piece of her previous identity, forgetting the other pieces.

The three examples of classic passing literature analyzed above are very different. In the first one, passing is steered by someone else; in the second it is conscious, but leads to the passer's death; the third is once again conscious and much less tragic, but nonetheless cannot grant the passer's complete integrity or happiness. Other classic passing literature are equally unresolved. Its characters choose to pass for white, and in doing so they forgo an essential part of who they are. Even when they go back to the black community, they abandon the white fragments of their identity to do so. The

unresolved binary will only find an attempted solution in later passing novels, and especially when the Jewish factor enters the race binary.

### **Contemporary Black-to-Jewish Passing Narratives**

Today, the main factors that made passing attractive, and even necessary, for black people, no longer have the same weight. The one-drop rule is no longer valid, all segregation practices have been abolished, and, on the surface, blacks have ceased to be considered inferior. After Barack Obama's election as President in 2008, America has even been referred to as being post-racial, in the sense that race and racial divisions no longer matter – America has become a place of true equality and freedom for all. Unfortunately, it is not exactly so. A certain degree of racism still exists; there exists a black community, not totally integrated with the white one; mixed marriage and interracial adoption are still somewhat frowned upon, and racial labels remain in use, branding individuals as 'white', 'black', 'other', or even 'multi-racial', term which confirms America's ongoing obsession with labeling race, albeit in broader and more inclusive terms. America's new status as post-racial is given by the shift of the focus from race to two other factors: class and colorism. The matter of class is quite self-explanatory – socioeconomic class has replaced one's race in determining an individual's chances in life (Lovell Banks 100). As for colorism, it is "the tendency to perceive or behave towards members of a racial category based on the lightness or darkness of their skin" (Sanders Thompson 141). What differentiates colorism from racism is that the latter operates in different races, while the former functions within a single race. According to racism, for instance, white people are better than black people; according to colorism, light-skinned blacks, while black themselves, are on a higher level than dark-skinned blacks.

Ultimately, although in a different way than before, the color line still exists. And, as stated by Donovan Ramon, "as long as the color line remains in any form, efforts to jump the color line will also persist . . . Racial passing narratives are not fixed in the past because race remains unfixed" (2-3, 11). He reports Nathan Huggins's belief that "the love that black people have of their race means that disavowing blackness to live as white is no longer necessary" (4). It is undoubtedly true that after the 1960s wave of Civil Rights movements, the surge of the Black Power, and the official abolition of Segregation in 1964, passing has become less practiced. It is also true, however, that the white race has remained the mainstream race, governing the binary despite its expansion that now includes 'multi-raciality'. Passing has not, after all, passed. It is less frequent, especially because many individuals who used to be considered black due to the one-drop rule are now considered white, but it is present, both in real life and in literature. As for the presence of Jewishness as a third alternative



in contemporary passing narratives that has been mentioned above, it has been slowly growing, although it is being presented very differently by the various authors.

One of the most renowned contemporary passing narratives is a biography – Bliss Broyard’s *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life: A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (2007). Broyard reconstructed her father’s story and his passing experience, which he had kept secret from everyone save his wife until his death. Another important biography is that of Anita Reynolds, published posthumously in 2014 under the title of *American Cocktail: A “Colored Girl” in the World*. Neither memoir, however, directly deals with black-to-Jewish passing, as Broyard passed for simply white and Reynolds, because of her skin color, preferred to pass for Indian, Mexican, or Creole, playing with the exoticism that her skin-color evoked (Williams 7).

Some contemporary narratives ignore the Jewish component altogether, such as Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Intuitionist* (1999), where one of the characters is discovered to be passing for white; moreover, in the novel passing is presented not as something that unifies either the character or the plot, but rather as an element that fragments the unity further (Elam 763). Eric Jerome Dickey’s *Milk in My Coffee* (1998), too, presents black-to-white passing, ignoring Jewishness as a possible identity and focusing on other themes. In other works – such as Fran Ross’s *Oreo* (1974) and Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) the longing for a Jewish identity, or more generally for an identity that is not strictly rigid, is the key, but it is also countered by the impossibility to pass due to physical aspect, so that the characters need to find another way to fulfill their still incomplete identities.

While chapters three and four of this thesis will deal with the analysis of two novels, written in 1998 and 2000 respectively, which tackle black-to-Jewish passing in depth, the remainder of this chapter wishes to demonstrate that the fragmentation of identity and the issue of its resolution have never ceased to be portrayed despite the difference in means and representations. In the three works that will be analyzed below, Jewishness plays a defining role in the way in which the authors or characters understand themselves and present themselves to others. The presence of Jewishness as a variant that is reachable and that is helpful differentiates these works from the others mentioned above, which either portray the more common black-to-white passing or offer Jewishness as an unreachable aspiration. The three works are very different from one another – the first is the short report of a real-life experience, the second is an autobiography, and the third is a South African novel. The chosen works serve as proof that the fragmentation of identity is not only present in North-American literature or real-life testimonies, but encompasses other countries as well, being, in fact, a constant in both time and space.

### **Brooke Kroeger's *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are***

Kroeger's collection of real-life passing experiences is "about people who pass to be more truly themselves" (Kroeger "Introduction"). She reports stories about the most diverse people, including different kinds of passing. While the first chapter reports the most common type of passing, black-to-white – which in this case becomes passing for Jewish – other chapters deal with white-to-black passing, Christian-to-Jewish passing, homosexual-to-heterosexual passing, and so on.

The first story, titled "Not Some Social Agenda Struggle", opens with a quote from James Weldon Johnson's *Along This Way*, in which he wishes, if given the chance to change his race, to be made a Jew. The report tells the story of David Matthews, who was born to a black father and a Jewish mother. David has, however, never met his mother, and therefore he does not feel that Jewishness is truly a part of his identity. Having been raised by a black community leader, it is his blackness that initially and majorly defines him. Almost immediately, we are told that:

From late elementary school until well into his twenties, David Matthews got into the habit of presenting himself to the world as white. Not all of the time, but whenever the need arose. Usually, in these instances, he presented himself as Jewish. Was it passing for this half-Jewish person to present himself as white or Jewish? The short answer is yes, first and foremost, because he perceived the act as passing while he was doing it. Black is how he was brought up to know himself; black is how he understood himself to be. ("Chapter One")

David's fragmentation of identity is undeniable; he is and feels black, but in the same instance feels compelled to be something else, in this case Jewish. He also learns from a young age to distinguish between light-skinned blacks ('us') and dark-skinned blacks ('them'), who, according to his grandmother, shame light-skinned African-Americans with their delinquency. While living on Madison Street, "synonymous with what it meant to be black" ("Chapter One"), David is constantly afraid to be mugged, and strongly feels like he does not belong. He does not try to fit in, but merely positions himself with another 'them', the white community. If David is brought up as black, Kroeger also underlines that, according to Judaism, having a Jewish mother makes him a Jew intrinsically ("Chapter One").

Matthews grew up after the segregation ended, in the heart of Black Power. According to many, he would have been expected to embrace his black identity; instead, he often ignored it. David's passing, however, is atypical in many ways. Firstly, his passing is occasional and temporary. The years in which David passed for Jewish are the years that correspond to his development; a period in which many struggle to discover who they are. Rather than a disavowal of race and background, his passing is an attempt at self-discovery, which ends in his adult years once he has had his answer.

Secondly, because David is actually half-Jewish, and because Judaism is matriarchally transmitted – actually making him a full Jew – David's passing is a preference for one aspect of his identity rather than a rejection of his identity. It is, for him, a propensity for one side of his identity that already exists, and that he wishes to explore because, contrary to his black identity, he has not been encouraged to accept it.

Thirdly, David never takes the step that is normally implicit with passing. He never abandons his family, never leaves his home. His passing is much simpler, and much less sorrowful. David limits to never bringing his friends home, so that they do not meet his darker-complexioned father. His father, going along with his son's decision, is amused by his actions rather than angry or anguished; he lovingly laughs at David and imagines what he might tell other people about him, and awaits patiently the moment in which David will accept his black identity as well. For David's 'passing' is not a passing in the way in which it was for Clare Kendry or for Peola, or even for Twain's Tom and Chambers. Taking on a Jewish identity is for David an acceptance of himself, of a part of himself that cannot be denied. When looking in the mirror, David Matthews sees his own Jewish features, and is brought to orbit towards others who have the same traits. "It was more like I look like you and you look like me so we'll be friends" ("Chapter One"), he says. He strives to be like the person he sees in the mirror, like many other light-skinned blacks before and after him, but his striving need not to be divided or unreconciled, like Du Bois's was.

Vetta Sanders Thompson suggests that "individuals with limited experience of racial discrimination will experience greater fragmentation of identification and may be more willing to participate in a system that apportions privileges based on color due to the increased access to economic, social, and political opportunities it affords" (149). This is the case of David Matthews – because of his class status, because of his light skin color, and because of the time he was born in, David was not discriminated against as much as he would have been in the past, or in a different environment. For him, passing for white, for Jewish, was not betraying race, but accepting race, tightening one piece of his identity to the others. Even after he stopped passing, he never let go of his

Jewish identity, of the part of him that feels and is white. He equally never let go of his self-identification as black:

“Fight the Power” and all that it represented offered the first popular discourse that Matthews felt he could get behind . . . He was drawn to its forcefulness, its oppositional stance, its arguments – even when he found the arguments wrongheaded. Until that point, winning his father’s approval had been his only real point of connection of anything ‘black’. For the first time, his grandmother’s old them started to feel a lot more like us.

Still, Matthews kept his own counsel. His past experiences allowed him to straddle all the worlds he inhabited with an independent spirit. (“Chapter One”)

In David Matthews’s case, passing for Jewish allowed him to maintain a bridge between his black identity and his white identity – between who he was told he was and who he felt he was. Passing for Jewish also allowed him to be both, instead of choosing one. As years passed, he succeeded in reuniting all the different parts that constituted him, making himself a more complete human being.

### ***Rebecca Walker’s Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self***

Rebecca Walker is half black and half Jewish as well. According to Danzy Senna’s classification of mulattos, proposed in her 1998 article “The Mulatto Millennium”, Walker is a ‘Jewlatto’: “The second most prevalent form, this breed is made in the commingling of Jews and blacks who met when they were registering voters down South during Freedom Summer or at a CORE meeting. Jewlattos often, though not necessarily, have a white father and black mother (as opposed to the more common black father and white mother)”.

Walker’s autobiography, published at the age of thirty-two, explores her childhood and her adolescence, narrating her growth in the liminal and precarious place that is her interraciality. Walker does not pass, save for a few sporadic episodes, but her identity is certainly fragmented, and the way to mend it is long and strenuous. The book opens with an image of forgetfulness and deep uncertainty. “Who am I and why am I here?”, wonders Walker, claiming to feel off balance, “amorphous, missing the unbroken black outline around my body that everyone seems to have” (1-2). She continues:

I am more comfortable in airports than I am in either of the houses that I call, with undeserved nostalgia, Home. I am more comfortable than I was in any of the eight different schools where I learned all the things I now cannot remember. Airports are limbo spaces – blank, undemanding, neutral. Expectations are clear . . . I remember coming and going, going and coming. That, for me, was home. (3)

Born in 1969, Rebecca Walker is a Movement Child, product of the overcoming of slavery and Segregation. Suddenly, her existence as mixed-race child became possible, legal, accepted<sup>5</sup>. Her infinite possibilities, however, her being encouraged to be anything she wants (24), end when she is only eight years old, with her parents' sudden divorce, which she calls the time when she stops making sense.

With the rise of Black Power, my parents' interracial defiance, so in tune with the radicalism of Dr. King and civil rights, is suddenly suspect. Black-on-black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor . . . And then Feminism . . . This historical moment is about options, about formulating a life defined not by male desire but by female courage. Which is exactly what it takes to leave my father.

The only problem, of course, is me. My little copper-colored body that held so much promise and broke so many rules. I no longer make sense. I am a remnant, a throwaway, a painful reminder of a happier and more optimistic but ultimately unsustainable time.

Who am I if I am not a Movement Child? (60)

Walker's parents decide each of them will have her full-time for two years at a time, and for Rebecca the answer to who she is becomes even harder to find, as she is forced to move "from Jewish to black, from D.C. to San Francisco, from status quo middle class to radical artist bohemia" (117).

Walker spends the first two years after the divorce with her father, lawyer Mel Leventhal, and his new white Jewish wife, the wife that had always been meant for him and who can finally give him

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<sup>5</sup> In 1967, the same year in which Walker's parents married, the U.S. Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* led to interracial marriage being made legal.

Jewish – and white – children. Walker’s first real race-related experience occurs when a white boy at her school is told Walker likes him – immediately, he tells her he does not like black girls (69). The episode instills in her the desire, or rather the need, to look non-white. After school, she awaits her white stepmother and her white grandmother to pick her up, so her schoolmate can see she has white relatives. For her, life is a “negation of my own mind, my own heart, my own story” (74), she is defined by others to the point that she struggles to remember herself and her life clearly. Katya Gibel Azoulay, in her book about the experience of interracial individuals, calls attention to the fact that “[m]embership in their groups is not merely the result of a voluntary decision; it is thrust upon them by the prejudice of the whole society” (“Chapter Two”). Rebecca Walker, as a ‘copper-colored’ interracial child, is seen as too black by white people, and too white by black people. To her mother’s family, Walker reminds of pain; she is a *cracker* “doing things they think are strange or weird, things they think are not black . . . a part of me feels pushed away when they say this, like I have something inside of me I know they hate. And so even as we stand here together I am struggling to find my ground, to know where I really belong” (85). Yet, Walker recognizes her relatives do not push her away entirely, but rather only a *part* of her. They accept unconditionally the features that mark as her black, as her mother’s daughter, and look queerly at what brands her as white. Walker’s need from a young age is not that of renouncing one of these two parts, but of reconciling them, of bringing them together, of feeling at ease in both worlds. Her duplicity, her ability to go from one world to another on short notice – as she will do for her entire adolescence – can be seen in an episode in which she spends a weekend with her mother. Everyone she sees acknowledges how she resembles her mother, asks her whether she, too, wants to be a writer. Walker claims that “it is easy to be my mama’s daughter” (102), but as soon as she returns to her father’s home, “life snaps back to the way it was before she came” (103), and she adapts to the other half of her family.

After two years, Walker moves to San Francisco, where her mother has relocated. There, too, the issue of her not being black enough resurfaces, and she is demeaned, told she cannot stick up for herself. She constantly compares herself to her friends, both black and white, hanging with different groups, never at the same time, always separately. Her friendships include Black-Jewish twins whom she babysits, and with whom she never talks about race; Michael, to whom she lies about her age; Lena, daughter of a German Jewish woman and an American man who fought in World War II, and whom Walker calls Papa; and Lisa, a Hispanic girl. These relationships are all ephemeral, destined to end. Walker feels an intrinsic necessity to become amnesic, to forget each part of her life:

I'm only in the present, driving up to the airport, waiting still on the escalator as it carries me closer to the gate. I'm an amnesiac because if I weren't I'd be feeling all that loss, all that tearing away, and who wants to feel that? . . . I don't trust the everyday; it is a mask, a sham. It gives the illusion of permanence, of an unshatterable calm, a placid surface; and yet underneath the pot is slowly coming to a boil. Each configuration is already breeding its own dialectical response, its own disintegration. (164, 168)

Walker's world, already unstable because of her double identification with two races, is further complicated by her parents' divorce, by their living in two different states, and by their forcing her to spend two years at a time with only one of them. For two years, she only has access to one parent, and therefore is led to identify with only one of her races. Her attempt is, however, thwarted by her peers, who see her for what she is: interracial, in-between races, neither black nor white but both.

Her fragmentation of identity continues at the Jewish summer camp her father sends her to. There, she is forced to perform, shift, and contort, to "assume the appropriate air of petulant entitlement. And yet . . . [I] never can completely shake free of my blackness: my respect for elders, my impatience with white-girl snottiness, the no-shit tough attitude I couldn't quite perfect back with Lisa in San Francisco, but which comes to me natural as rain [here]" (178-180). If previously she has been labeled as not white enough and not black enough, at the camp she learns she is not Jewish enough, as a string of new characteristics she lacks – pretty, rich – is presented to her.

Back at her father's house – a new one, in the Bronx – Walker surrounds herself once again with diverse friends – "a Puertorriqueña, a mulatta, breathed out with all that Spanish flavor. A girl of color with attitude" (200). She tends to befriend liminal people who, like her, stand between two worlds – between acceptance and rejection, between belonging and alienation. It is in the Bronx that Walker feels a sense of belonging in her own body for what is perhaps the first time. It is in the Bronx that her father is as uncomfortable in his daughter's new world as she is comfortable in it. It is a specific place in the Bronx – the house of her Hispanic friend Theresa – that provides Walker with a sense of real home: "I am more comfortable at Theresa's house than I am at my own . . . Her house . . . reflects how I feel inside . . . I am at home among the mess, the drama, the darkness of Theresa's house, there I find a corner to fit into, walls that contain me" (205).

When Walker is forced to move to Larchmont, where her father and stepmother wish to live the 'Jewish dream', and where everyone is white, except a few black kids so different from her, Walker

cannot let go of yet another piece of identity, and lies to her new friends, assuming a Spanish identity instead, and even feeling a stronger kinship with her friend's Hispanic maid than with her peers. Walker's lie is a form of passing, although not intended to be so, and not successful. It is an attempt on her part to understand once again who she is, what the big category that is 'multiracial' means to her as a single individual. Gibel Azoulay described biracial children as having an inescapable duality embedded into them, that "seems to determine the alternative ways of thinking about positioning oneself" ("Chapter Three"). Walker certainly presents this duality, and sets herself forth as a link between the two parts. When she imagines her two latest groups of friends – the multicultural one in the Bronx and the intrinsically white one in Larchmont – she feels "as if we speak two different languages and I am the only one who can speak both, who even knows that there is more than one to be learned" (211). In this instance, however, her duality and fragmentation slowly start to become her strength. If compared to her friends, and even to her parents, Rebecca Walker, in her own individuality, comprises a greater quantity of knowledge than they ever could. It is the chameleonic essence she has, given to her by her being Jewish and by her being black. She must be both together, and she must be each of the two singularly, so that what makes her different from others is what constitutes her, what becomes her identity. The issue is that she does not know how to express it.

Back in San Francisco, Walker is older, angrier, and still fragmented. She reconnects with old friends, and makes new ones – among them is Jesse, "the first person I know well who is like me: a border crosser, a human bridge" (244). She sees her own struggles in this white boy who speaks and acts as if he were black, and envies his being accepted by his rich white parents no matter what, and his being able to express himself freely. She compares his self-confidence and ease to her own sense of inadequacy. When she looks at herself in the mirror, Walker sees an image she does not like, an image that does not correspond to her identity. Like for other biracial individuals, and for light-skinned blacks, Walker's body image sends back opposing messages – she is too pale and yet too dark, and different groups cannot agree on what her color represents. It is only at her new school Urban that Walker feels accepted, feels that "the emphasis here is on what you say, not what you wear" (261) – and on what color you are.

From her experience at Urban, Walker is able to accept both her body and her dual cultures. For the first time, she allows herself to "become the woman he sees" (281). 'He' is Andrew, her new boyfriend, but it refers to others as well. Now out of high school, Walker can abandon herself to her



instincts, and make a new definition of herself based not on her skin color, but on her interaction with people (304). At seventeen, she changes her name from Rebecca Grant Leventhal to Rebecca Leventhal Walker. Her father perceives her gesture as a betrayal, as anti-Semitism even, but Walker's decision was an assertion, a choice that she got to make for the first time, a conscious affirmation of identity. She did not remove 'Leventhal' from her name, nor did she repudiate her father. She added her mother's last name to her own to confirm the fact that she was not only white or Jewish, but black as well, not only in the color of her skin but in her heart. She concludes her autobiography by saying: "I exist somewhere between black and white, family and friend. I am flesh and blood, yes, but I am also ether. This, too, is how memory works" (322). Ether, the highest, purest, and lightest part of the sky, exists beyond all limits. It is ungraspable and yet gives a sense of wholeness. This is how Rebecca Walker resolves her fragmentation – by reaching little by little inside herself and turning her fragments to the outer world so they can reflect all of her.

### **Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse***

Published in 1998, *Kafka's Curse*, written by South African author Achmat Dangor, narrates the story of yet another case of black-to-Jewish passing, this time set in South Africa. The history of South Africa presents many similarities with the events which occurred in America from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Slavery was practiced in South Africa as well. It was abolished in 1833, and initially converted into indented labor before its final abolition in 1840. Like in North America, South Africa subsequently developed a system of segregation, called *apartheid*, an Afrikaans word which means 'separateness'. *Apartheid* was legally practiced from 1948 until 1991, but, like American segregation, originated during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, being implemented long before it became law. During *apartheid*, the South African population was divided into four main categories – white, African, colored, Indian. Whites were the Boer descendants of the first Dutch colonizers; Africans were natives; Indians were those of Asian descent; and finally 'colored' were all those who were mixed, and therefore lacked a fixed classification (Posel 51-57; "apartheid").

Omar Khan, the passer of *Kafka's Curse*, is said to be a mixture, "Javanese and Dutch and Indian and God knows what else" (14). When his wife Anna first meets him, she asks whether he is Indian. Omar, who had by then already changed his name to Oscar Kahn, denies Anna's assertion and states he is Jewish. Being Jewish moves Omar/Oscar to the 'white' category, despite Jews being inferior to mainstream whites in South Africa as well. Anna's father, Patrick Wallace, claims that it is alright to be Jewish, because not only does his family have Jewish blood as well, but the entire white population probably does, too.

The novel begins with Anna moving out of the house she shares with Oscar, due to a sickness he has that has made his company unbearable. She moves in with her brother Martin, and Oscar dies soon after. His story is recounted in pieces; by Anna and by Oscar's brother Malik, and by Oscar himself, whose voice we hear in the entire second chapter of the novel, and who explains who he is and where he comes from. He is Muslim, of mixed descent. His paternal grandmother Ouma Kulsum was Dutch, and her real name was Katryn. Barely fourteen, Katryn married Oscar's grandfather Shaik, was repudiated by her family, and changed her name to the Muslim Kulsum, 'daughter of faith' (96). Hers was not exactly passing, because she could not have looked black, but it certainly was a form of metamorphosis, a theme which will recur throughout the entire novel, as almost every character, and even some objects, transform and change into something else. Oscar, like his grandmother, is fair-skinned and curly-haired; he has a hooked nose that allows him to become Jewish and a profound need to escape what he considers death in favor of life:

Yes, I took advantage of my fair skin. Like those Jews with blond hair and straight noses who discarded their Jewishness because it was wartime and they were being persecuted. It was a matter of life or death. Of course there are comparisons to be made. Not being able to study, to go to university, become an architect, being forced to remain Omar Khan, the son of a newly impoverished entrepreneur, was a form of death! (33)

For Omar, being Oscar is a way to succeed in life, to study and have a better job, and to exit the demeaning world of his ancestors, always seen as inferior. Even after experiencing the end of *apartheid* – the novel is set in 1996 – Oscar remains in the white world with Anna. He is only exposed when his brother Malik, visibly belonging to a different racial category, visits him to tell him their mother has died. Upon seeing Malik, Anna and her brother's family, who are also present, realize Oscar must not be white, nor Jewish. He is an undefined hybrid, not one of them but Other. Anna remains at Oscar's side despite the revelation, but that night triggers something in Oscar that will change the course of his and Anna's life.

The next day, as recalled through flashbacks, Oscar has trouble breathing. Doctors have trouble defining his condition, but it becomes clear he is breathing in carbon dioxide and breathing out oxygen. Without a clear diagnosis and treatment, abandoned by Anna and left by his therapist, Oscar dies. When Anna returns to their house months later, all she finds in their bedroom is a tree. The image of the tree is certainly the most metamorphic image of the book. Anna recalls a legend Oscar

has told her, about the gardener Majnoen and the princess Leila. Forbidden to marry each other, they resolve to run away together. Leila, however, is imprisoned by her father, and Majnoen remains awaiting in the forest, where he eventually transforms into a tree and becomes part of nature instead of dying. It is suggested that Oscar, too, has turned into a tree, like he had turned from Omar to Oscar years before. His physical metamorphosis is a process which begins with his passing, continues with his inverted breathing, and finds accomplishment in his becoming a tree. Anna's brother Martin calls his disease and subsequent death 'Kafka's curse', and indeed it recalls Frank Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), where the protagonist wakes one morning and finds he has turned into a human-sized insect. Dangor therefore gives two possible interpretations for Oscar's death. The first is deeply linked with Leila and Majnoen's legend and with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, leaving the impression that Oscar has slowly turned into a tree – his new breathing system, in fact, is that of plants. The second operates on a psychological and physical level – Oscar, distraught by his mother's death and by being outed as a colored man, becomes depressed, sickens, and dies. The tree, then, would merely be a sign of the house being abandoned, with no deeper significance.

Oscar's disease, too, can be interpreted in two different ways. It can be seen as a mere illness, as an undiagnosed and untreated disorder which caused him to die. In this case, it would be completely coincidental that Oscar became ill after seeing his brother. Alternatively, Oscar's sickness, his abandonment on part of Anna, and his later death would all be a punishment he receives for having passed for Jewish, for having crossed the categories of race – therefore recalling the story of the American 'tragic mulatto'. After all, Majnoen means 'madness' (29).

In her analysis of *Kafka's Curse*, Elaine Young says:

Dangor focuses the productive as much as the (self-)destructive ends of transgression. If the desire to transcend social categories and traditional ways of seeing may be taken as a positive recommendation in the still segmented society of present-day South Africa, what is rather problematic is the *type* of transcendence longed for in the novella and the way in which it is achieved. In many cases the outcome of such transcendence in *Kafka's Curse* is death itself: a rather morbid and pessimistic scenario for a society seeking to reinvent itself. On the other hand, given that most of the deaths that occur in the novella are in fact cast as transformations of different sorts, Dangor may be appealing to the reader to imagine a radically new society in which previously sacrosanct identities themselves metamorphose in response to changed national circumstances. (20-21)

Transformation in *Kafka's Curse* are indeed numerous. Majnoen becomes a tree, Oscar's Boer grandmother Katryn becomes the Muslim Kulsum and he himself becomes someone new. Oscar's therapist Amina, who later has an affair with Malik and his son after him, is a Muslim woman who marries a Jew, so that her name becomes a hybrid, and her identity as well. Malik, towards the end of the novel, dies in an attempted transformation as well, as he tries to fly as a hawk and tragically fails in absolute darkness. Houses change as well in the novel, and Oscar himself, ever the architect, compares their being expanded to one's straying for his own path in life, to leaving "that little room which you are told at birth is yours. You may expand it a bit, add a loft or a garden, build a bigger fence than the one you inherited. But you leave at your peril" (31). When Oscar visits Malik's house, that used to belong to their parents, he notices it has been renovated, "expanded to the very edge of the property" (52); yet, all the changes have been made to the outside of the house, and the inside remains untouched. "We are shaped by the ability of these simple structures to resist being defiled" (52), Oscar says. When he buys the house he shares with Anna, in fact, Oscar refuses to destroy the fountain in the garden. It represents a David whose penis had been chopped off by the previous owner, so that it appears mutilated. The pump has rusted, and the mutilated David pees bloodied water, but Oscar, though embarrassed, refuses to remove it. In a way, it represents him, recalling Jewish circumcision, and therefore confirming his identity as a Jewish man.

After all, "Oscar has no need to create a new category to describe himself. He merely chooses from the available classifications" (Sastry 277). His act, as a colored man in South Africa, of passing for Jewish, is not an exchanging of one identity for another. It is, rather, a metamorphosis, a process through which Oscar makes himself not into something Other, but into something new. His passing for Jewish is a trajectory, from an initial transgression that frees him from the initial situation, through a metamorphosis that changes him into a new being which reconciles his old life with his new one (Young 21). Oscar becomes a hybrid, but, as stated by Sastry, "the hybrid is not a static form, but one created through the constant interplay of its composite elements" (276). It is not a fragmentation, but a resolution of his being. Passing for Jewish allows Oscar to be free of all race categories. It allows him to reproduce his inner self to the outer world without restriction, bringing together his past upbringing and his desired future self, his traditions and his strivings. It allows him to refrain from choosing between good and evil, black and white. Oscar's triumph, his resolution to the fragmented identity he had, was to make himself a morphing chameleon who could be anyone and everyone.

The three examples of contemporary passing literature that have been explored present passing, its motives, and its consequences in a different light when compared to classic passing literature. While during slavery and the Segregation passing was a necessity intended to improve one's life, and was often accompanied by loss, loneliness and sometimes death, from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century new circumstances developed. Contemporary passing is no longer a wish to escape from a race and find refuge in a different one, but it is an attempt to find unity, a completeness in a self which is fragmented and still undergoing growth. The evolution of passing, both in fiction and non-fiction, has meant that it no longer represents the movement from one point to another, but the binding of the two points in a broader one.

CHAPTER THREE  
DANZY SENNA'S *CAUCASIA*  
AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE MIXED-RACE GIRL

"Everything is a construct that we believe in"

Danzy Senna

Born in 1970, Danzy Senna is a Movement Child just as much as Rebecca Walker. Compared to Walker, however, Senna's identity is even more ambiguous – she is not 'copper-colored' like Walker, nor is she plainly black like her brother or a combination of her two parents like her sister. Senna says of herself that she resembles her white mother much more than her black father, and explains that she is often confused for Italian, Greek or Jewish, ethnic groups associated with dark hair and eyes, but also with whiteness. The ambiguous racial categorization of Senna, or, rather, the *lack* of a certain and definite categorization, is of great importance for the theme of racial passing and for the issue of fragmented identity. When describing herself, Senna must first describe others – her parents, her siblings – and then herself, because she alone does not have a fixed identity. She says: "I have never had the comfort zone of a given racial identity. My mother is a Bostonian white woman of WASP heritage. My father is a Louisiana black man of mixed African and Mexican heritage. Unlike people who are automatically classified as black or white, I have always been up for debate" (Senna 83). Senna speaks about herself in uncertain terms, because her skin pushes her towards one identification, while her *self*-identification differs. When Senna speaks about blackness, she defines it as something to be proud of, something beautiful that to her is a given, as she was born in a time when it was okay to be black. Being accepted as a black person, she explains, allowed her to inspect certain aspects of blackness and race in a critical light, as they wouldn't crumble under her (Ashe and Senna 126). She regarded it, simply, as a fixed and defined aspect of her identity, as stable as the side of her that is not black. Therefore, although her skin does not demarcate her as black, Senna has been able to make blackness a part of her being, intermingled with the aspects of her that are categorized as white, or mixed-race. Senna's ability to critique certain aspects of blackness, and of race on a more general level, have brought her to the point of distinguishing between black people as symbols of the black community, and black people as individuals with separate experiences, points of view, and feelings. This distinction will become fundamental for understanding her novel *Caucasia* (1998). Its protagonist, Birdie, is a mixed-race girl, but, as Senna herself painstakingly stresses, she is not

representative of all mixed-race individuals, and neither are the protagonists of her later novels (Ashe and Senna 130). Birdie is a person shaped by her personal story, by her environment and experiences, by those who surround her and those who have left her. Nonetheless, her story is her own, and can be no one else's.

Danzy Senna has so far written three novels, an autobiography which focuses on her parents' marriage, and a collection of short stories, as well as several essays. *Caucasia*, her first work, published in 1998, has won her several awards and a great recognition, partly because of its important themes – race, identity, personal growth – and partly because of its narrator's way of involving the readers in her story, complicated and in some ways unique but at the same time universal.

“The larger function of the narrative is to recover and remap America as racially mixed, where multiple memories, or an inventory of memories, are used to identify, catalogue, access, and interrelate thematic histories of displacement”, writes Claudia M. Milian Arias in her introduction to her interview to Senna (447). *Caucasia* explores Birdie's feeling of displacement, her sense of disruption and uncertainty through her childhood and early adolescence. Although published in 1998, *Caucasia* is set in the years between 1975 and 1982. The first section of the novel in particular, “Negritude for Beginners”, in which eight-year-old Birdie narrates her childhood with her parents and sister, depicts the turmoil of the period, albeit filtered through a child's eyes. Those years were the years that followed the Civil Rights Movements and that were thick with Black Power sentiments. In Boston, where Birdie initially lives, she experiences first-hand desegregation and the taking down of the anti-miscegenation laws previously in power. In this changing world, Birdie's parents, who had met in 1963 before their union was legally possible, are both described as activists who fight for racial equality to give their mixed-race daughters a better environment. The second section, “From *Caucasia*, With Love”, is set in prevalently-white New Hampshire, and recounts Birdie's adolescence when she passes for Jewish with her mother. The third, “Compared to What”, follows Birdie as she tries to come to terms with who she truly is, returning to Boston after six years spent elsewhere to then fly to California, finally reconnecting with her long-lost sister.

### **Birdie's Black Childhood**

The novel opens with a prolog of sorts, untitled, which only fills half of a page and gives an anticipation of Birdie's story and of her feelings of loss in the wide and rigid world that is race.

“A long time ago I disappeared”, says Birdie, clearly older than in the following pages and no longer lost. “I disappeared into America, the easiest place to get lost. Dropped off, without a name,

without a record. With only the body I traveled in. And a memory of something lost. This is what I remember” (1). Her words are a recalling of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), as both books open with a suggestion that passing in the white world means not only ‘disappearing’ from the black race and community, but losing one’s identity and sense of self, which are linked to a body that is rejected and replaced with a new one. Birdie’s proclamation that she will recount what she remembers about her past suggests that she has been able to recover her body and forge a strong identity, reacquiring the name and record she had had to let go. And in fact the following page, opening the first section of the novel, is titled after what is perhaps the most important part of one’s body, the face. The face is what we generally observe in others when we see them, it is the body part that is watched when speaking to another individual. Birdie’s first experience with her own face is artificial, as it actually concerns her sister’s face:

Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence. Back then, I was content to see only Cole, three years older than me, and imagine that her face – cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired, serious – was my own. It was her face above me always, waving toys at me, cooing at me, whispering to me, pinching me when she was angry and I was the easiest target. That face was me and I was that face and that was how the story went. (5)

Jacques Lacan argues that, from the age of 6 months, children, while unable to speak and walk, can nevertheless recognize themselves in the mirror and identify themselves in the image they see in front of them, understanding it as an *I* which is differentiated from other people. “[T]his form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality”, explains Lacan (2). Birdie has no recollection of gazing at her own image in mirrors as a young child, but she nonetheless anticipates their function as well as that of external society – Cole, her sister, becomes her mirror in the flesh. Birdie sees herself in Cole, so that the image that is reflected back to her is another’s, and therefore wrong, non-correspondent to her real self. In Birdie’s particular case, the image becomes even more deceptive because race and color have a strong influence on the way both girls look. Birdie and Cole belong to the same racial category – they are mixed, having a white mother and black father; they are mulattos



in the original connotation of the word. They have, however, different skin colors and hair textures. Cole is, as described above, ‘cinnamon-skinned and curly-haired’, while Birdie has straight hair and an olive complexion that easily positions her in the Caucasian world.

Birdie’s self-identification with her sister is not the only element of her childhood that is imbued with illusion. Birdie and Cole have a secret language that Cole allegedly invented before Birdie was born, and which they use to communicate. It is called Elemen<sup>6</sup>, and it is not only invented and secluded to the two children, but it also lacks all the elements that would give it the status of a real language: “no verb tenses, no pronouns, just words floating outside time and space without owner or direction” (6). Yet, the sisters understand each other, and create a whole world around Elemen, complete with cities and inhabitants who, like Birdie will do later, disappear at will and camouflage with their surroundings: “[t]he Elemenos, [Cole] said, could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and black again. She said they were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility. According to her, their changing routine was a serious matter – less a game of make-believe than a fight for the survival of their species” (7).

Cole’s description of Elemenos can be seen almost as a preannouncement of her sister’s later fate – forced to pass for Jewish – to blend in the mass, to change color in order to survive. Shape- and color-shifting is also a characteristic attributed to Jews, whose long process of assimilation has brought them to evolve from their former selves: “the most common ‘fixation’ of Jewishness was accomplished, paradoxically, through the notion of chameleonism – the idea that Jewish identity could be characterized only in terms of an always unstable shape-shifting” (Iztkovitz 42-43). Another element of Birdie’s unfixed identity, or rather of her being fixed in a changing identity, is linked with her name:

When I was born, my father wanted to call me Patrice, as in Lumumba, the Congolese liberator; my mother wanted to name me Jesse, after her great-grandmother, a white suffragette. Cole just called me Birdie – she had wanted a parakeet for her birthday and instead got me. For a while, I answered to all three names with a schizophrenic zeal. But in the end, even my parents grew tired of the confusion and called me Birdie, though my birth certificate still reads, ‘Baby Lee’, like a gravestone of some stillborn child”. (19)

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<sup>6</sup> Birdie explains it is called after their favorite letters of the alphabet (6); but, as pointed out by Sika Alaine Dagbovie, the word also has an assonance with ‘eliminate’, in reference to the elimination of race (102).

Birdie is effectively nameless, and, as long as she understands herself by looking at her sister, she is faceless as well, because she does not recognize herself as a separate identity, as a self-standing individual. Her sister has dark skin, she is black on the outside and on the inside. She is not only considered black by others, but sees herself as black because it is how her parents have raised her. Birdie's identity, because of her lighter skin color, is more complicated, but initially she, too, identifies as black, and that is all she is until other possible races begin to infiltrate her secluded world, coupled with a growing awareness of the self.

When Birdie is eight years old, she and her sister, previously home-schooled by their mother, are sent to the Black Power school Nkrumah. The decision to send the two children to the school had been a source of argument between their parents – their mother Sandy, a WASP who had rejected her origins to marry Birdie and Cole's father Deck in 1963, underlines how the school might be a good choice for darker-skinned Cole, but would be a nonsensical environment for Birdie, whom she describes as a 'little Sicilian'. "Sicilian", recalls Birdie. "I didn't know what it meant. Only that it sounded dirty off my mother's tongue. I could feel Cole beside me, studying me, struggling to see something on my face, something she had never seen before" (27). When Deck answers his wife, he says something that will greatly impact his youngest daughter. He tells Sandy: "I know what my daughter looks like, thank you. Maybe you need to cut this naïve, color-blind posturing. 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). Throughout the rest of the novel, Birdie expresses an inner struggle concerning her passing – on some deeper level, she does identify with her new white and Jewish identity, but mostly she keeps worrying about what her father might think if he knew she was passing. What she – or her father, for that matter – does not realize, is that Birdie had been passing already, throughout her childhood, for black. When she starts to attend Nkrumah, she finds herself in a limbo in which the other children cannot understand who – or rather, what – she is. They wonder whether she is white, and question her presence in the black school. It is only when Cole publicly proclaims her as her sister, reveals her as black, that Birdie is accepted. Being black, however, does not come naturally to Birdie, and both she and Cole, raised in a half-white world, need to adjust their bodies to the new fully black environment they find themselves in. Cole is mocked, for instance, for her dry knees and elbows, which look white. Cole starts using lotion to hydrate them, and so does Birdie, although she does not truly need to. Both girls also start adapting their speech, just like their father does, depending on the people who surround them:

Learning to perform different racial identities through language is how passing becomes plausible for Birdie, who grows adept at listening to how others speak and, in turn, using different accents, dialects, and discourses to pass for different selves. Birdie learns how to talk the talk of various racial communities and what to say and not to say when performing different racial identities . . . She learns quickly that others' perceptions of who one appears to be constantly inform what one can do and how one is expected to act. (Dennihy 158)

Birdie must pass for black because she is expected by others to be black, and as such to behave and speak in a specific way, despite the fact that she hasn't been taught how. For her, speech and behavior become much more important than for Cole, whose skin is proof of blackness. Birdie must perform as black because her body alone is not enough, so she needs to supplement it and support it with other elements. Her strategy works, because her schoolmates begin to include her, and her father, who generally preferred to spend time with Cole, is pleasantly surprised when Birdie repeats his Black Power lectures to him, demonstrating not only that she has been listening to him, but that she is as much black as Cole is. Ultimately, race is in the eye of the beholder (Harrison-Kahan 35), and Birdie, by feeding her beholders symbols of blackness, becomes black.

Cole, too, feels the need to strengthen her blackness. Her white mother has no clue about how to take care of Cole's African hair, and when she tries to style it the way Cole wants it, she inevitably fails, causing Cole to smash the mirror she's holding to the ground. The scene is highly significant as far as both girls are concerned. It signifies Cole's identity is as fragmented as that of her lighter-skinned sister. Cole is uncomfortable with her mirror image, because it does not represent who she feels she should be. Others have certain expectations regarding how Cole appears, and when she looks into the mirror she feels the weight of her failure to fulfill those expectations. When she throws the mirror – which, ironically, was already cracked – and it breaks, so does Cole's self-esteem, and her perception of herself. Who she wants to be, who she is told to be, and who she truly is are in that moment three separate figures that she cannot yet reconcile. As for Birdie, she is left with broken fragments of her sister's image, the imagine in which she used to recognize herself. If Cole feels lost and displaced in her own body, then so does Birdie, now that her fixed point of reference is loose.

Cole's and Birdie's fragmentation derives from their different body images; from the two different ways in which others see them and urge them to see themselves. It is also influenced by their own family's view of them. Despite belonging to the same racial category – they are mixed, mulattos – Birdie and Cole are treated differently by their relatives. Their black father favors dark-skinned Cole,

reserving only 'cheerful disinterest' and 'impatient amusement for Birdie, "as if he were perpetually tapping his foot, waiting for me to finish my sentence so he could get back to more important subjects" (56). As for Cole, Deck makes her the sole recipient of his theories on race, and "[he] didn't seem to care that she often looked away with an expression of deep ennui when he spoke. He spoke through her, above her, around her, but still to her, as she continued to be the exclusive object of his lessons, leaving me to absorb his platitudes only through osmosis" (72).

After their parents' divorce, the girls live with their mother and occasionally spend weekends with their father Deck. One day, Cole is sick and Birdie spends the day alone with her father, taking note of his disappointment about Cole's absence and above all of his awkwardness around her. At the park, some passers-by call police officers over, thinking Deck has kidnapped Birdie and is hurting her, not realizing they are father and daughter. When Deck brings Birdie home that night, she notes he does not kiss her on the forehead like he normally does. Instead, "he just touched my forehead with the back of his hand, as if he were checking for a fever. His own hand was cold, and he pulled it away quickly, as if the touch had burned him" (61). Later on, when Deck starts dating a black woman named Carmen, she only has eyes for Cole, treating her like her own daughter, and barely glancing in Birdie's direction. Because Cole herself feels more understood by Carmen than by Sandy, Birdie becomes a human bridge between her mother and sister, mediating and negotiating as they grow further apart, "a translator of foreign tongues" (84). Cole, on the other hand, attempts to be the mediator between Birdie and Carmen, trying to connect them and failing miserably. The image of the mirror returns, this time involving Cole and Carmen and leaving Birdie on her own, excluded: "As she [Cole] spoke, I saw the new life in my sister's face, as if she had found some reflection of herself in this tall, cool woman" (91). Cole, unable to find a resembling image in her own mother, shifts her attention to Carmen, more similar to her. In Carmen, Cole tries to see and understand herself, catching glimpses of who she could be when she grows up.

Much like Deck seems to bond with Cole more easily, Sandy's white mother visibly prefers Birdie, focusing her attention on her with hugs, questions about her life, and grandmotherly concerns, while effectively ignoring Cole altogether. All she gives to Cole is a doll that the children love, but clearly – for the adults at least – only serves to underline Cole's difference from her grandmother, mother, and sister. The doll, called Golliwog, is a mocking parody of African-Americans: "[i]ts 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).

Their mother shows a behavior similar to her husband's and mother's, although in a different way. When a young girl is kidnapped and then found dead, Sandy warns Birdie not to go in that part of town by herself, but she does not warn Cole. She says: "There are perverts, crazies, dirty old men, and they want little girls *like you*" (67, my italics). In this passage, Sandy underlines the difference in their bodies, and suggests Birdie and Cole will be treated differently because of their skin color, although in reality they share the same quantity of black and white blood. It is not the first time Sandy has pointed out that her daughters do not look like one another, and, while she does not do it in a mean or demeaning way, it certainly contributes to their feeling fragmented, divided, as if in certain instances they were both black and in others they did not correspond. When Sandy and her mother are arguing about Birdie going to the black school, Birdie's grandmother points out that Birdie looks Italian or French. "I expected my mother to bark something back like 'Well, she's not, crackerjack. She's black!'", explains Birdie. "But instead she just smiled kind of sadly and said, 'Yes, mother, she could be'" (107). What results from this is that Birdie cannot form a clear conception of who she is. She is told she is black, and is sent to an Afro-centric school. Once there, she is seen as white, and must adjust her everyday behavior to appear blacker. Still, she is constantly referred to as something other than black, which is reinforced when she takes in herself in the mirror and compares herself to Cole or to Carmen, or even to her friends from school.

One of these friends, Maria, is a Cape Verdean girl Birdie starts identifying with in hopes of finding more definite terms for herself. When spending the night at Maria's house, Birdie recounts her ability to yet again become someone else, to make herself anew so that her inner self can match her reflected image.

I felt I was being let into a secret world I had been denied for so long, and I tried to hide the giddy feeling bubbling away in my stomach as Maria revealed one small luxury after another . . . I stared at myself in the fogged mirror, amid the rows of beauty potions, and breathed in the sweet-and-sour spare-rib air of the apartment. The curls Maria had given me softened out my pointed features. As I admired my new look, I imagined myself to be just a girl who lived and had always lived in this splendid pink-and-purple palace where all the furniture matched, a girl whose mother worked late nights as a nurse and whose big brother was in the Army. I imagined my name was not Birdie or Jesse or even Patrice, but Yolanda, and that Maria was one of my many cousins. I imagined myself Cape Verdean. (69)

In this scene, Birdie looks at herself in the mirror after Maria has curled her hair. The reflection Birdie sees is different from the usual one. Normally, Birdie sees a white girl with pale skin and straight thick hair. While her skin color remains unchanged, Birdie has transformed – she has curly hair that match Maria’s and even Cole’s. As Birdie underlines, however, the new Birdie in the mirror is not Birdie, cannot be Birdie. She needs a new name to exist, a name that fits her new image. Yolanda is a perfect solution – it reflects the miscegenation present in Cape Verde, first inhabited by the Portuguese settlers and only later by African natives. Because of Cape Verde’s geographical location, moreover, it positions Birdie in the African continent, and therefore in the very place where her black ancestors came from. In Maria’s mirror, Birdie’s whiteness becomes much more intermingled with her blackness, becoming racially resolved, as many other light-skinned literary figures before her, into a “single human being” (Sheehy 402).

The problem with Birdie’s short-lived resolution, however, is that she is not Cape Verdean Yolanda, but nameless Baby Lee. Yolanda is not enough to bring the pieces of Birdie’s identity together; a more efficient stratagem is needed. Birdie soon finds it, although she will remain unable to truly take advantage of it until the very end of the novel. As the end of the first section of *Caucasia* approaches, little changes continue to amass in Birdie’s life. Her father slowly withdraws from her, refusing to enter the house he used to share with his wife and daughters. Cole, on the verge of adolescence, is caught up in her own world, from which Birdie is gradually left out. Sandy, who throughout the previous pages is depicted as an activist conducting secret operations in the basement, becomes more and more paranoid of being discovered and arrested by the FBI, losing friends and alienating others<sup>7</sup>.

On a Tuesday afternoon, Deck and Sandy pick up their daughters from school and bring them to a Polynesian restaurant on the pretext of catching up. Birdie reflects on the strangeness of that statement, as her parents “hadn’t had a civil conversation in as long as I could remember” (116). The outing is filled with a general sense of perturbation. When Birdie accidentally spills her drink, the family freezes in a gelid silence, to the point that she feels like crying. Later, Cole stands alone in the bathroom stall as Birdie looks at herself in the mirror and speaks Elemeno to herself, clinging to one last piece of the childhood that she feels has ended. In the car, she attempts to speak Elemeno to Cole, who remains in silence and merely clenches her fists. Once at home, Birdie is finally told what the rest of the family already knows: Deck and Cole are leaving for Brazil with Carmen. Deck’s only

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<sup>7</sup> It remains unclear whether Sandy is truly pursued by the FBI, as Birdie never discovers what Sandy was actually doing in the basement. Other characters have diverging opinions on the matter – Birdie’s aunt Dot believes Sandy is not really in danger; Deck’s friend Ronnie thinks she is still being chased, while Deck himself thinks she was once in trouble but is not anymore.

explanation, short and rushed, is that “Boston, America, is a fucking mess and it’s only going to get uglier”, and that “Black people need to start thinking internationally” (121).

After having more or less involuntarily separated their daughters through speech and behavior, Deck and Sandy initiate a differentiation between Birdie and Cole that becomes physical, with black strictly on one side and white rigidly on the other.

Later in the night, Birdie wakes up to see her mother with freshly dyed hair giving her the impatient instruction to pack – they, too, are leaving. If Cole is allowed a clear and definite destination point for her trip, Birdie is left with as little information as possible, only knowing she and her mother must hide from the FBI for some undisclosed reason. Birdie’s destination is unknown, yet at the same time evident: she is going to ‘Caucasia’, leaving everything behind save a box her father brought in the middle of the night while she was sleeping. The box, labeled ‘Negrobilia’<sup>8</sup>, contains:

A Black Nativity program from the Nkrumah school, a fistful of pick (the smell of someone’s scalp oil still lingering in between the sharp black teeth), a black Barbie doll head, an informational tourist pamphlet of Brazil, the silver Egyptian necklace inscribed with hieroglyphs that my father had bought me at a museum so many years before, and a James Brown eight-track cassette with a faded sticker in the corner that said ‘Nubian Notion’, the name of the record shop on Washington Street”. (127)

To these few tangible memories of her past, Birdie adds Golliwog, left to her by Cole. Shut in the box is Birdie’s childhood as a black girl. Now, on the run with her mother, she must become “the key to our going incognito” (128). Sandy renames herself Sheila, the epitome of the suburban mom and wife. As for Birdie, Sandy initially tells her she can choose her own new identity: “You can be anything. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek. I mean anything, really . . . And, of course, you could always be Jewish” (130). As Birdie hesitantly starts to express her preference (Italian), Sandy decides for her – she will be Jesse, and she will be Jewish: “[s]o that morning at the Wellington Diner in Maine, surrounded by the thick smoky scent of pine trees and the broad flesh of country women, I was knighted a half-Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman, with a white mama named Sheila – and the world was our pearl” (131).

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Negrobilia’ refers to objects which represent black existence (Ramon 112).

## Jesse's Jewish Adolescence

The second section of the book, "From Caucasia, With Love", opens four years after the end of the first. Birdie quickly explains that those four years have been spent on the run, moving from one place to another, never really having a destination or purpose. To Birdie, that time feels surreal, like a dream almost, empty of people, of judgement, of substance:

There's something unreal about the time we spent on the run. Soft. Unfulfilled. Dreamlike. Something about the unseen, the undocumented, the off-the-record that still feels unmentionable. But I'll mention those years enough to say this: On the road and in the women's commune<sup>9</sup>, the lie of our false identities seemed irrelevant, because there was no one in the world to witness them . . . We all were fictive imaginings 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 towards 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 left behind. (136-137)

For Birdie, the act of passing is forced. She is bestowed a new Jewish identity by her mother, and she is forced to leave behind not only her former name and home, but also half of her family, the half that was outwardly more different from her, but also the half she had always identified with in spite of all the differences. The first four years spent as Jesse have no real density to Birdie, because, despite having changed her name, she is not effectively living life as Jesse. At the end of those four years, Sandy – now Sheila – decides she is tired of running, and resolves she and Jesse will settle down in New Hampshire to have a 'normal' life. It is at that point that Jesse's Jewishness, until that point "played up only some of the time" (140), becomes concrete. Although previously Birdie had had to make herself blacker at Nkrumah, now her passing is no longer a matter of adapting her behavior and speech. In New Hampshire, Birdie takes on a completely new identity, with new parents and a new background story, a new name, a new race. At Nkrumah, Birdie had to make more prominent the part

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<sup>9</sup> Birdie and Sandy stayed there for close to a year. In the women's commune, Sandy pursued a homosexual relationship with a woman called Bernadette. Birdie compares Sandy's relationship with her own father, a black man, and with Bernadette, a woman, to Sandy's later relationship to white Jim, saying she perceives the latter as much more disgusting and unnatural.



of her that was *already* black; in New Hampshire as Jesse she must delete that black part of herself and learn to live as only white. Jewishness is in her case a mask that allows her to retain some of her blackness, but paints it as white. Jesse is still an outsider, she is still looked down on as a Jewish girl. But, because she is only *half*-Jewish and because she does her best to adapt, she is accepted into whiteness.

Birdie's Jewishness is something that grows on her, in the sense that her perception of it changes in the course of the novel. At first, while on the run, she did not feel Jewish; she still clung to her past and dutifully waited for Deck and Cole to come back from Brazil so that her family would be as it used to. In the occasions in which she and Sandy needed to underline Birdie's Jewish identity, Sandy always reassured her daughter that she "wasn't really passing because Jews weren't really white, more like an off-white. She would say they were the closest I was going to get to be black and still stay white" (140). Sandy's choice of words is curious, as Birdie would have probably been more comforted by the opposite concept – that by being Jewish she would be the closest to being white while staying black. Because of the Jews' ability to be placed in either racial category, both statements would be truthful. Sandy's words underline that Birdie's black identity has been erased, forgotten, covered by her new Jewishness. While she still is close to being black, she is not. Birdie's is a kind of double passing – she is passing for a Jew, a Jew who has had, previously, to assimilate and become white (Harrison-Kahan 26). Birdie's whiteness is a layer that is standing over the black layer of her identity, hiding it from view but not burying it irreversibly.

Daniel Izkovitz's description of Jews as chameleons is particularly fitting to Birdie as Jesse. In the four years spent on the run, Sandy has taught Birdie to blend in, to not be noticeable, to always remain in the background:

*Be a presence no one quite remembers, the one who blends into the woodworks, so when the Feds come asking questions later on, people will say they only vaguely remember a woman and a child. Was the child a boy or a girl? They can't quite remember. Were they tall, fat, thin, blond, red-haired, white, black, poor, rich, serious, or laughing? Did they look anything like the two in this picture? If the neighbors can't recall, you've done your job".* (177, italics in the original)

Izkovitz stresses how, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, America has shifted its focus on performativity based on imitation rather than on actual identity. The emerging consumer culture, which put forward new possibilities in one's self-making and self-promoting, caused the deviation

from deep and essential values to a superficiality of sorts, according to which individuals preferred to present themselves as imitations and re-creations of others (50). Performativity is innate in Birdie from her childhood spent among black folks trying to be like them. As she becomes adolescent, her performativity does not stop or diminish, but becomes even more deeply rooted into what and who she is, so that her *real* identity is, at that point in her life, the identity she performs, because she has not acquired another. We have previously mentioned how, according to Jacques Lacan, the self seen in the mirror is only a reflection of the real self, but because it is the one most seen, it is the self the person identifies with. It is also, however, unreal, and consequently alienating, bringing the subject further away from his real self. In Birdie's case, no longer able to identify with her sister Cole, she can only rely on her own mirror image. Her mirror image is white, and, because she is posing as a Jewish girl, her mirror self sends back to Birdie the image of Jewish Jesse Goldman. Without Cole to link her to blackness, and with the addition of the Star of David necklace she now always wears, Birdie begins to connect more and more with her new mirror image, that of Jesse:

Before bed that night, I stared at the bathroom mirror and saw a twelve-year-old girl who might be a boy if it weren't for the ponytail falling down her back . . . There were no curls, no full lips, still no signs of my sister's face in my own. There had been a time when I thought I was just going through a phase. That if I was patient and good enough, I would transform into a black swan. I mouthed the word *shimbala* at myself in the mirror. It was somewhere between a noun and a command in Elemeno, but I couldn't remember what it meant. (180)

Birdie's identity, already fragmented because of the divergence of her skin color from the social categorization bestowed on her, is now taking the form of forgetfulness – instead of trying to bring the pieces together, Birdie unwittingly focuses on her white identity. She forgets Elemeno, she stops seeing Cole in the mirror when she watches herself, and she is unable to remember her father clearly. She says:

My father was fading to me. Not the Jewish father . . . It was my real father, Deck Lee, whom I was having trouble seeing . . . I wasn't really sure why it hadn't happened to me before, this fogging in my memory of him. Maybe the perpetual motion had kept my vision clear. It was as if the blankness of our identities before had left enough room for the old to survive. Now that we had stopped moving allowing our new selves to bloom, it seemed the old had to disintegrate . . . When

we had first chosen Jesse Goldman that day in the Maine diner, I had thought of it as a kind of game . . . But something was changing here. Something slow and sneaky. At night I stared into my box of negrobilia, fingering the objects . . . and tried to tell myself, ‘I haven’t forgotten’. But the objects in the box looked to me just like that – objects. They 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. (188-190)

About thirty pages later, when Birdie starts attending school for the first time since Nkrumah, she initially feels the same sense of uncertainty she experienced at eight years old. This time, however, she is accepted more quickly by the white students than she had been by her black schoolmates. While Cole is not present as a mediating figure as she had been in the past, Birdie’s appearance – and her performed identity – as white mark her with the other children as one of them. Moreover, Birdie herself feels closer to them than she had felt to the children at Nkrumah, signaling that her new identity is not as much a performance as she thinks. As Birdie introduces herself to her future best friend, she notices that introducing herself as Jesse suddenly feels more significant than before (221). Confronted with the fading of her past and her growing identification with her Jewish identity, Birdie “continually oscillates not only between black and white racial poles, but also between two distinct ways of reading: The passing figure must always be read simultaneously on the ‘x axis of white signification’ and on the ‘y axis of blackness.’ . . . To use Lacan’s terms, in ‘passing’ he [the passing figure] becomes no more and no less than the face of the mirror – nameless, colorless, and invisible” (Sheehy 405-406).

Birdie is no longer nameless, and no longer invisible, but she has become colorless. Despite being mocked by her friend Nick, who tells her she “could be colored in the right light” (104), and by her friends, jealous that she never burns herself under the sun, Birdie is no longer black: she has defined herself as white, as Jewish. By losing the ‘wrong’ color, she has acquired the ‘right’ one, the one which allows her to fit in, to have the normalcy she longs for. Birdie says that “with [Alexis], at Aurora, it had been okay to be nobody, to be nameless, just a blur girl . . . Here . . . everything seemed suddenly real to me, utterly public, and I yearned to be a part of it. The visible world” (220). Birdie has brought out of the mirror her reflected self, and made it real.

It is at this point in her life, four years after she has become Jewish Jesse, that passing first helps Birdie to collect the pieces of her identity. It is by no means her arrival point, and the road is still

laborious, but for Birdie it signifies the beginning of the discovery of her real identity. Passing for Jewish, as opposed to passing for generically white, has allowed Birdie to retain some part of her past – hence the oscillation between black and white that Sheehy speaks of. While her memory of Deck is fading, and Cole is not present to answer her in Elemenno, Birdie has kept her Negrobilia box. Birdie cannot let go completely of her past – she keeps, albeit faintly – waiting for Deck and Cole to come back, and she is unable to accept her mother’s new boyfriend Jim as a father figure, even after he is told the truth about Sandy and Birdie’s real identities. Similarly, while she finds herself remaining in silence when others around her insult people of color, and she herself half-heartedly mocks Samantha, a mixed girl at school, she also inevitably identifies herself with Samantha, who reminds her of Cole and of her past. Birdie sometimes pretends that she is not really passing, but merely conducting research for her father’s book, spying on white people while pretending to be one of them. What essentially happens to Birdie when she establishes herself in New Hampshire and becomes once more part of the ‘visible world’, is that she finds herself stuck between past and present, between blackness and whiteness. Because she still has fragments of her past, she is not completely white. Because she starts to identify herself as actually Jewish, she is not completely black, either. Jewishness allows her to keep some elements of dissonance with the white world, some little quirky habits that are accepted because of Birdie’s fluid racial identity.

Birdie’s Negrobilia box represents her inner mixture of past and present, blackness and whiteness. Birdie says she “had begun to steal things lately, adding them to the box like offerings to some greedy god” (241). The objects all have some sort of significance to Birdie, although she does not always know what exactly they represent.

The first object Birdie adds to her box actually comes from her mother’s own box of memories. One day, when looking for the nonexistent proof that Jim might not be who he says he is, Birdie goes through his things, and, finding nothing, opens her mother’s duffel bag instead, which she had never been allowed to see.

Inside, it was mostly what I’d expected – a diaphragm, a photo of her and Bernadette nude, *The Joy of Sex*, and *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. But there was something underneath all of that . . . It was a first edition of Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. I remembered my father giving it to her so many Christmases ago . . . There was something stuck in the middle of the book, like a bookmark, but bigger. I opened it. A postcard. Of somewhere familiar. (229-231)

The postcard was written by Deck's sister Dot, who had left for India before the family disintegrated, and arrived back in Boston to find it empty of the people she loved. Birdie takes the postcard, and tries to contact Dot, but does not find her. The postcard represents Birdie's tangible link with her past – it reminds her that it existed and that it is within reach. It also leads to Birdie feeling more distant from her mother, unable to trust her as she used to. It is the first step to Birdie becoming her own person instead of being the person her mother had made her into.

The second object is a photograph of Jim from his time in Jamaica. It represents his truthfulness, as Birdie had not believed he had truly been there until she saw the photo. By putting it in her Negrobilia box, Birdie essentially accepts Jim in her life, makes him a part of who she is.

The next item is a Jim Rice baseball card. Birdie cannot explain why she picked it up, especially because it is dirty and ruined. But, perhaps *because* it is dirty and ruined, the card represents the tattered state of Birdie's memories of the past, which she always keeps with her despite their shabbiness.

The fourth object belongs to Jim as well – a red, gold and green friendship bracelet. Again, it is a sign that a part of Birdie has accepted his presence as non-threatening to her and her mother.

Next is a hair that Birdie took from Samantha's sweater one day in class. Samantha holds a great significance to Birdie, as she reminds her of her sister and of her past. Moreover, she underlines just how much Birdie has been accepted into the New Hampshire life, while Samantha is mocked and excluded. Samantha also continuously triggers questions in Birdie about who she really is.

Another important item is a page Birdie ripped from a library book. It talks about a Brazilian religion called Candomblé. Birdie becomes fascinated by the god Exu-Elegba, who represents potentiality and change. The book "said that although many people thought Exu was the devil, he was really just a trickster, always shifting his form, always at the crossroads" (242). Candomblé is a religion that actually originated in the territory now correspondent to Nigeria, so that Exu's origins are as much African as Birdie's are. Exu's trickster nature is often found in reference to passing novels – John Sheehy finds it in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in the narrator himself, who, according to Sheehy:

Is a liminal figure who can speak from within a melodramatic structure without, ultimately, falling victim to that structure's moralistic constraints . . . The passing figure as Signifyin(g) trickster breaks the bounds of the text, Signifies upon and subverts it. As Tejumola Olaniyan has said in a

different context, ‘Whenever there is any attempt to congeal [racial] identities ... Esu unfailingly lies in ambush, sharpening h(is)er deconstructive arrows’. (408)

Exu, like Birdie, changes and transforms, and inflicts changes and transformation upon others. It is, somewhat, a different version of Birdie and Cole’s Elemenos, who changed colors and form. Exu makes itself known to Birdie in a time of change, in which her game of make-believe feels less like a game and more like truth. It also presents itself to her at a time when she is revisiting her past and bringing it together with her present, because ultimately she decides she wants to choose both. The connection, the union, is striking: Birdie prays to Exu, “the God of Change, the God of Potential, to bring some kind of change” (244). And she prays in her childhood’s language, Elemenos.

The last object that Birdie adds to her Negrobilia box, although she will add it a bit later in the story, after having kept it hidden in a drawer, is her Star of David necklace. The necklace is the only tangible object of her Jewishness. Although Birdie has some Jewish features, like her hair and skin tone, she could easily be something else, as she was often reminded as a child. Her necklace however marks her as Jewish, and precludes her from assuming another identity, such as Italian or Pakistani. Lori Harrison-Kahan, when analyzing the significance of the necklace, writes that “the Star of David also represents Birdie’s ambivalence about the identity she has taken on. In contrast to a legitimate Jewish girl at school whose Star of David ‘looked like real quality gold and had a diamond on it’ (247), Birdie’s necklace is not real, but a piece of costume jewelry, even if it does leave an indelible mark on her skin” (27). The mark on her skin is given by the low quality of the necklace, which leaves a ‘greenish tint’ on her collarbone. Birdie takes it off after some boys taunt her because of it, but the gesture is by no means a rejection of her Jewishness. In fact, Birdie feels more Jewish in that moment than in many others before. The insults provoke in her a deep sense of loyalty for her fake Jewish father and their origins. Right after that, her friends ask whether she is *really* Jewish, and Birdie, after some hesitation, responds that she is not *fully* Jewish, because her mother is not, only her father. Birdie claims “it’s like the religious law or something” (247) – which is indeed the truth. When Birdie takes off the necklace she does so because she is assimilating, she is doing what it takes to fully integrate in her new community. By taking off the necklace that symbolizes her Jewishness, Birdie does what is most Jewish – she changes, she transforms, she becomes someone else. She assimilates by imitating those around her, because “the Jew was most Jewish, that is, when not Jewish at all . . . ‘Jewish difference’ is caught in the double bind of the ‘chameleonic race’ – an ‘identity’ marked at once by indistinguishable sameness and irreducible difference” (Iztkovitz 43). When, later in the story, Birdie places the necklace in her Negrobilia box and runs away from New Hampshire, she

muses that if she was found dead the Star of David would be the only object that would make sense (381). “For Birdie, Jewishness makes more ‘sense’ than blackness alone because of the contradictions it represents. The ambivalence of Jewish identity, as both marked and unmarked, explains Birdie's loyalty to her pretend Jewish self, which she thus feels the need to preserve, even if it is relegated to the recesses of her belongings” (Harrison-Kahan 31).

Two episodes cause Birdie to fully distance herself from her mother, and to confront her past, to bring it back from where it had been half-forgotten. The first episode occurs when Sandy tells Jim who she and Birdie really are. In Birdie's eyes, it is the ultimate betrayal. Sandy had always told her not to trust anyone, to keep silent about who she was, to really be Jesse and not Birdie. She, however, entrusted Jim with their secret, and, despite his unconditional acceptance of both mother and daughter, Birdie cannot help but wonder if he will sell them to the FBI. Moreover, Jim's knowing means Sandy truly loves him, and means to share her life with him. Gone is the hope that Deck and Cole might come back, and shattered is Birdie's dream of her old family reuniting. Birdie realizes it even more when, trying to make her understand why they had to run away and why she chose to tell Jim, Sandy speaks as if Cole were her only black child. “It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse” (275), says Birdie, and, though further thoughts remain unspoken, it is clear that she herself thinks she *is* Jesse, but remains Birdie as well, as her mother has called her a few lines above for the first time in a long period.

The second episode occurs at a party. Birdie meets Samantha in the woods, and, slightly drunk, asks her: “‘What color do you think I am?’ . . . I tried to look different, more serious, and thought the word ‘black’ to myself, hoping through telepathy to transmit the correct answer to her” (285). When Samantha wonders why she's asking, Birdie starts to say that she's not really Jewish, but, Sandy's cautiousness still ingrained in her, she falls back on the usual story, that she's not Jewish because her mother is not. Still, eager for an answer to her doubts, Birdie asks what color *Samantha* is, to which the girl answers: “I'm black. Like you” (286).

While Birdie is not totally convinced by that answer, either – she vaguely wonders whether not having a black mother makes her blackness a fraud, as it does her Jewishness – she finally decides to go back to Boston to find her aunt Dot, and possibly her father and sister – and with them, herself.

I wondered, as I passed the clear abandoned lake – silver, still, silent – if I too would forever be fleeing in the dark, abandoning parts of myself that I no longer wanted, in search of some part that

had escaped me. Killing one girl in order to let the other one free. It hurt, this killing, more than I thought it would, but I kept walking, repeating a pattern of words under my breath, words that I no longer understood but whispered just the same. *kublica marentha doba. lasa mel kin.* (289)

Birdie feels like she's deleting Jesse Goldman, interrupting her existence. She feels Birdie Lee again, but not quite. Birdie struggles to make sense of what is happening in her life and in her mind. After having consolidated both her black and her Jewish identities, it is time for her to realize she is neither, but both – she is black *and* white, she is mixed. Understanding herself as Jewish has allowed Birdie to accept a side of herself she had previously set aside – now she can put the two parts of herself together: the mirror *I* she sees, which is white, and her real self, which is black. In her Jewish existence they can finally co-exist, so that what was initially an alienating factor – the lie of being someone she is not – becomes a factor of growth and self-acceptance.

### **Being Mixed**

As Brenda Boudreau underlines, “[a]s the novel will make clear, Birdie’s sense of self-identity is threatened throughout the novel because she is stripped of the agency to define herself” (64). In the third part of the novel, titled “Compared to What”, Birdie will re-acquire the agency she had lost. The first step in Birdie’s rediscovery of her real self is leaving New Hampshire for Boston. Seeing the city that was once so familiar to her, a place where she used to be happy and where she had her complete family, brings her back to the feelings of her past, so she can face them and understand them once more.

The second step is reverting to being Birdie – albeit the Birdie she is now is not the Birdie she used to be, but rather a mixture of old-Birdie and of Jesse. When Birdie reaches Dot’s house, Dot’s three-year-old daughter opens the door, and asks who Birdie is. Birdie says: “I’m Jesse – I mean, Birdie. Birdie Lee” (301). Being Birdie does not come naturally to her anymore – she needs to repeat it twice for it to sound true. A few days later, when Birdie contacts an old friend from Nkrumah, she once again introduces herself as Birdie, but remarks how strange it feels to say that name, “forbidden for so long that I almost expected a bolt of lightning to crash through the living room” (324).

In Dot’s bathroom, Birdie once again stares at herself in the mirror: “I looked tired and thin and rough. My denim jacket stank, and my jeans had dirt stains on the knees. My shoes had little splotches of Mona’s vomit on them. I tried to run my fingers through my hair, but it was matted with tangles. There wasn’t much I could do, so I just splashed my face” (303). As compared to the previous scenes



which feature Birdie in front of a mirror, this one is quite different. In the previous scenes, Birdie looked at herself and tried to find on her own face features of her sister's – something that would make her look blacker, more like Cole. Those scenes always entailed some kind of comparison, of hope of change and transformation. Here, for what is perhaps the first time, Birdie truly and only sees herself. She does not try to see Cole, or Samantha perhaps, or Dot – all characters who have darker skin, and are undeniably black. She looks at herself and sees what she is, no more and no less. A few pages later, when imagining her mother looking into her bedroom and realizing she is gone, she wonders:

Or maybe she would find me there, in that bed – the other me, Jesse Goldman. Hung-over, giddy from the kiss last night, thinking only of how she wanted to call Mona and turn the party over and over in giggling whispers. Or perhaps Jesse was planning to run across the woods to the Marshes', where she would fall into Nicholas's arms and smother him in real-girl kisses. She would be as golden and casual and free as a prep-school girl. Maybe I was still there. It was too strange to think that Jesse Goldman was really gone, that I erased her in just one night. (306)

Birdie feels that choosing to be Birdie Lee again means she will stop being Jesse Goldman. Jesse, however, is the person she has been for six years, and will always be a part of her. As Birdie attempts to separate the two girls, she keeps realizing she cannot, as her memory goes back to Jesse time and time again, and as she accepts that life as Birdie now is not the life of the old Birdie.

In another scene a few pages later, which features Birdie in front of the mirror once again, Birdie looks at herself and thinks: "I looked country. A girl Nicholas might like, but not Ali . . . I brushed my hair and pulled it into a tight ponytail so that it masked the New Hampshire feathers. I changed into some of Dot's jeans and a long blue cardigan. I didn't want to put on my denim jacket and sneakers, but they were all I had" (325). Here, too, Birdie looks and sees herself, her real self. Having been Jesse has given her a different perspective of the world and of who she is. The face she sees in the mirror is no longer alienating, because Birdie is slowly bringing herself to coincide with that face. What results is a merging of child-Birdie and adolescent-Jesse, a more complete version of both united in the same figure.

Birdie admits that Dot is a familiar presence in her life, and thinks the same of her old childhood friend Ali. But many people from her past are missing from Boston, or have changed like she has. Upon realizing that Deck and Cole have not contacted Dot, nor have they sent her letters to hold until

Birdie's return like she expected, she inevitably thinks about her life as Jesse, a life of lies that was, despite everything, a comfort to her. Dot has the perfect explanation for Birdie's feelings: "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 . . . And it seems like from then on there's always this yearning for some place that doesn't exist" (315).

Dot also has another explanation for Birdie – one that involves color. According to Dot, "There's skin color, eye color, hair color, and then there's invisible color – that color rising above you. It's the color of your soul, and it rests just beyond the skin" (321). To this, Birdie asks, again, "'What color am I?' The last time I'd asked that question, I'd been in the woods of New Hampshire. Samantha had told me what color I was. She had said I was Jewish, but she had been joking, just playing along with what she knew to be a gag. Later she had told me I was black like her. At least that's what I had heard. Those words had made something clearer. Made it clear that I didn't want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else" (321). Birdie clearly refers to wanting to be black like her sister, but Dot's answer changes her perspective again: she is a deep dark red. One of the connotations of the color red, and of dark red in particular, is that of longing ("Red Color Meaning"), which certainly fits with Birdie's strong desire to find her sister and to find a place to truly call home. In Jewish symbolism, scarlet and crimson also symbolize life, and all that it entails – sin, but also redemption, happiness and joy (Gordon-Bennett).

Birdie's longing had been directed, throughout the novel, to her sister and her father. Now, back in Boston and not yet closer to finding them, her longing includes her life in New Hampshire, the life Jesse had:

The name Jesse had been a lie, but as I walked home that day, I wasn't quite sure the girl Jesse had been such a lie. I had felt out of place with Ali – less at home with him than I did in New Hampshire. Maybe I had actually become Jesse, and it was this girl, this Birdie Lee who haunted these streets, searching for ghosts, who was the lie. I missed Mona and Nicholas and my mother and Mr. Pleasure. I missed the soft country earth and the dingy little town I had come to think of as my own. The missing scared me. It made me feel a little contaminated. I wondered if whiteness were contagious. If it were, then surely I had caught it. I imagined this 'condition' affected the way I walked, talked, dressed, danced, and at its most advanced stage, the way I looked at the world and at other people. (328-329)

The reason why Birdie feels ‘contaminated’ is because for her entire life she has been led to believe that she can be either black *or* white, but not both simultaneously. The truth of the matter is, however, that she is both, because she is mixed. Her blood is black and it is white, in equal measure. Hence, her passing, her identifying with Jesse, is not a disease – it is part of her, of who she is. Whiteness – or rather, passing for white, being Jesse – does affect her behavior and her way of looking at things and people, but only because she is at last understanding who she is, and accepting that part of her that *is* white, that *is* Jesse. “Birdie realizes that only by asserting agency over what this color will be will she ever be able to become the woman she wants to be, and her identity will never be complete until she owns both her blackness and whiteness and claims her bi-racial body” (Boudreau 68).

In a scene reminiscent of the beginning of the novel, where she sees herself in her sister’s face, Birdie examines a photograph of Cole from Brazil that Dot gives her. “I scrutinized my sister’s face for signs of my own,” says Birdie, “The resemblance was there, but it wasn’t easy to explain. It was something in the expression” (330). Differently from her previous inspections of Cole’s face, during which Birdie had tried to find herself in someone else and therefore to prove her own existence, here she is trying to prove the fact that *Cole* has existed. She is trying to project her face in Cole’s not to be like Cole but to make Cole alive, to make her tangible as an individual separate from her but at the same time connected, not because they look alike but because they are sisters.

Equally, when Sandy goes to Boston to bring Birdie back to New Hampshire, she keeps calling her Jesse, to which Birdie finally answers: “My name’s not Jesse. It’s Birdie Lee” (332). It is the final assertion of her name, an assertion that separates her from Jesse not because she does not identify with Jesse but because she is reclaiming agency over her body and her identity. Birdie is by no means her real name – her birth certificate reads ‘Baby Lee’ – but it is the name that most fits her, because it is the name she chooses to answer to. In this instance, Birdie finally chooses who she is, and frees herself from being categorized by others; “[h]er statement reveals not only her budding independence from her mother but also her desire to assert her self-identity” (Dagbovie 104). After her mother leaves and Birdie stays, she reflects on their relationship, realizing that Sandy “was the person in the world who was closest to me, the person who had been my other half all these years. But it hit me now how little I knew about her. In some deep way, she had remained a mystery even to me” (337).

If her mother is an unsolved mystery to Birdie, she is determined to unravel the one surrounding Cole and Deck. Resolute to find them, she visits her father’s old friend Ronnie. Ronnie tells Birdie that Cole and Deck have come back from Brazil years before and have established themselves in California. He even gives her a phone number – Birdie calls, and finds no answer. Despite this, she goes to see her grandmother to ask for money so she can fly to California. Interestingly, the first thing

her grandmother tells her is: “You look awful – like Anne Frank” (364), almost fomenting her Jewish identity, underlining the fact that it has not been erased completely, but it stands side by side with Birdie’s other identities, uniting them as if it were glue.

When her grandmother refers to Sandy’s marriage to Deck and to Cole and Birdie’s existence as ‘tragedy in the making’, Birdie’s real thoughts and real personality break through the already thinned-out walls of her make-believe life, and she says: “this whole world – it’s based on lies” (365). She acknowledges to herself that:

They were the truest words I had spoken in a long time, and having said them I felt a little lighter. I had meant every word of it. My grandmother had always loved me more than my sister. Or maybe it wasn’t me she loved, but rather my face, my skin, my hair, and my bones, because they resembled her own. It wasn’t a pure love, if such a thing existed . . . She believed that the face was a mirror of the soul, that the race my face reflected made me superior. (365-366)

Until this moment, Birdie had been comforted by lies. At Dot’s house, when they are talking about Cole and Deck, Birdie says that she “wanted Dot to tell me it was going to be okay, that Cole and Papa were on their way back. I wanted lies, sweet lies. Good lies. Lies made the world go around, my mother had taught me that” (310). Later, when she is telling her adventures to Ali, she thinks that it feels unnatural to tell the truth (343), so unnatural that she feels in a trance as she speaks. Now, so close to finding Cole and Deck again, and finally having brought the pieces of her identity together, forming a more complete self, she can handle to speak the truth and to hear it, she is ready to live in a world without lies and games and masks. She only tells one final lie – she gives her grandmother a fake address and phone number so she can contact Sandy. The deception makes her feel guilty, and she only does it because she sees it as her only way to reach Deck and Cole, to obtain the money that will bring her to them.

Her aunt Dot believes Birdie is ‘chasing ghosts’, but something in her body tells her she must proceed, must find them and the answers they can give her. On the plane to California Birdie imagines Cole. Her image is of course fiction, but it is perhaps more truthful than any other projection of Cole Birdie has had before. She pictures her sister in Brazil, speaking Portuguese rather than their childhood language Elemenó. In doing so, she separates the Cole of the present from the Cole of her past, and she separates herself from Cole, both geographically and emotionally. She had always focused on how she felt about the split, but now a different version of Cole enters her mind, a Cole

that has suffered as much as she has, a Cole who is yearning for home – wherever that may be – as much as she is.

Now that Birdie has stopped seeing herself in the faces of others, it is someone else, a Pakistani man on the plane, who sees himself in her:

He was staring at my face, hard, as if he knew me . . . he began to chatter to me in what sounded like Elemenó. It took a second for me to realize it was his own language. And he was fully convinced I would understand. He was asking me the same question, repeating it, with an expectant, friendly smile . . . His expression changed slightly. I had disappointed him, deeply. He had been homesick and had seen his home in my face. (378-379)

Thinking about being homesick makes Birdie think about how she and her mother have always remained in proximity to their starting point: “Mostly, we had kept to the eastern seaboard. We had never been to California . . . She said the West was where people went to make themselves over, to transform . . . I wondered if my father had come to the West to transform himself. Or simply to avoid me and my mother” (379).

Once in California, Birdie will discover that Deck has in fact changed. As for herself, she has no longer the need of transforming, having reclaimed the pieces of her identity when she accepted that she was both Birdie *and* Jesse.

According to Ralina L. Joseph:

Senna presents Birdie’s physical body as the vehicle for what Patricia Hill Collins dubs the inclusive ‘both/and’, which Collins characterizes as a core aspect of black feminism, as opposed to an exclusive ‘either/or’ . . . Marjorie Garber gives another name to Collins’s both/and: ‘the third’. This model provides white-appearing subjects who identify as African American with greater flexibility in moving between many categories . . . The third is not an embodied identity or a new category; instead it is a ‘mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility’.

(68)

In Birdie's specific case, the 'space of possibility' is given by her identification as Jewish in addition to her identification as black like Cole, Dot, and Deck, and white like Sandy and her grandmother. Having built an exclusively Jewish identity, complete with a Jewish father and a Jewish culture, has forever marked Birdie as Jewish, identification in which she can include both other identities. She is both black and white, because she is Jewish, which by definition means she is fluid, she can cross the boundaries of the separate categories because her fluidity erases boundaries, it nullifies them, rendering race a real social construct, at least on a theoretical level.

To her surprise, Deck himself, previously a strong supporter of race and its pride, negates the very existence of race. Deck has spent the past few years after his return from Brazil writing a book titled *The Petrified Monkey: Race, Blood, and the Origins of Hypocrisy*<sup>10</sup>. Upon Birdie's confession that she has passed for Jewish, Deck tells her the opposite of what she expected: "There's no such thing as passing. We're all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe.<sup>11</sup> It's a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That's just the absurdity of the whole race game" (391). Deck's new theory on race is based on the concept of the 'Canaries in the Coal Mine'<sup>12</sup>, whose function is that of warning others of a coming danger. As he explains to Birdie:

The mulatto in America functions as a canary in the coal mine. The canaries, he said, were used by coal miners to gauge how poisonous the air underground was. They would bring a canary in with them, and if it grew sick and died, they knew the air was bad and eventually everyone else would be poisoned by the fumes . . . Likewise, mulattos had historically been the gauge of how poisonous American race relations were . . . 'My guess is that you [Cole and Birdie] are the first generation of canaries to survive, a little injured perhaps, but alive'. (393)

To this theory, Birdie responds with the undeniable truth: "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). Leaving out Deck's theories, this is the first time in the novel in which Birdie is truly

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<sup>10</sup> The title of Deck's book recalls Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). The book had clearly already been published when Danzy Senna wrote *Cacausia* but did not exist in Birdie's world. Gates's work illustrates the 'signifying' theory, according to which "to 'Signify' . . . is to engage in a manipulation of signs, armed with an awareness that these signs are always already embedded within a social power structure" (Sheehy 402).

<sup>11</sup> As has been mentioned above, when Birdie was a child Deck had told Sandy one day that "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).

<sup>12</sup> Curious is the choice of the name in the context of the novels, as it recalls the names of both Deck's daughters: 'coal' has the same pronunciation of Cole, and the canary is obviously a bird, recalling Birdie.

defined as a mulatta. Although it is known from the beginning that she has a white mother and a black father, she is initially seen as black, a real product of Black Power. She is then seen purely as white when she is on the run with Sandy, but is seldom referred to as mixed-race or mulatta – until now. In addition, she is given indication for the first time that she possesses some features that she inherited from the African-American ancestors: “You look a little like my mother,” Deck tells her, “I never noticed that before. Same skinny body, broad shoulders. Same eyes” (395). Deck is seeing Birdie in her entirety for the first time, just like she is understanding herself as complete. Birdie has inherited those features from her paternal grandmother because she is related to her. Her body, which had always marked her as only white, can now put forward the truth – that she is mixed. Whether race is a social construct or not, Birdie *is* a mulatta, and she finally sees herself as one.

Deck drives Birdie to where Cole lives, and Birdie finds her in a café nearby. Their re-encounter is reminiscent of Birdie’s interpretation of Cole as her mirror, as the two girls stare at each other and find themselves.

She looked up then, abruptly, searching into the faces of the strangers who surrounded her, as if she had heard someone call her name. As her eyes moved over my face, I felt a slight heat, like a match held close to the flesh, but not touching. Her eyes kept moving, past my face, not recognizing me . . . But then she glanced back up from her table again, almost shyly. She glanced toward the girl at the door, the thin pale girl in the big man’s coat, at me, where I stood shaking and dripping and holding my breath. Her smile faded as she watched me, squinting, her eyes scrutinizing my features, searching them for something. Then seeing it . . . And we just watched each other then, watched for that minute when the whole restaurant seemed to grow quiet, grow still, the bodies around us melting into one another, into a blanket that surrounded us, and then I began to float towards the back of the café, like an apparition, a memory of myself, towards my sister, who rose to meet me. (401-402)

When Cole looks into Birdie’s face, she seeks signs of her long-lost sister. When Birdie looks into Cole’s, she finally finds herself, that part of her that had been missing, that had been suppressed. Later, as the two sisters discuss race, Cole admits that Deck is right, that it is a social construct – but that it exists nonetheless. Birdie agrees, and thinks about how “they say you don’t have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t” (408). Birdie’s journey is complete – she has chosen. And she has chosen neither black Birdie nor Jewish Jesse, but both of

them. In the last scene of the novel, Birdie sees a girl on the bus. “She was black like me, a mixed girl . . . Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion” (413).

With her final words, Birdie establishes herself. She defines herself as mixed, choosing her own identity instead of letting others define her. The final blur she sees is the most significant image of the entire book – Birdie sees black, because black is part of who she is, but she also sees yellow, a color that has become associated with Judaism, present in the Star of David that Jesse has worn for years, initially forced (as it was forced on Jews during the period of the Second World War) but later accepted. She sees the two colors in a blur, because they are together, merged but equally visible – two separate entities contained into one single human being.



CHAPTER FOUR  
PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*  
AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE LIGHT-SKINNED BOY

“Jews are like everyone else, only more so”

Chaim Weizmann

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) is another novel that puts forward the fragmentation of identity felt by black individuals who have light skin. Albeit in a different way than Senna did in *Caucasia*, Roth as well uses Jewishness and Jewish identity as the resolution of this fragmentation. *The Human Stain* narrates the story of Jewish Coleman Silk and his fall from success following an episode of apparent racism. Silk, the epitome of the Jew – independent, intelligent, intellectual, successful, revolutionary, just – is in truth no Jew at all, but a light-skinned black man who has been passing for white since his college years. Far from the classic passing novel, Roth's *The Human Stain* shows Coleman Silk in snippets, through his youth and adulthood, through his indignation at being called a 'nigger' and his amazement at having produced four perfectly white children, to his sorrowful downfall and death. What is spectacular about the novel is that Coleman's story is told by another, and is therefore not only filtered and distorted, but often straight-out invented, as blanks are filled and connections are created in order to form a coherent story that because of its apparent coherence and completeness loses veracity. Coleman Silk's story is not linear, but is offered through flashbacks and reconstructions, as the narrator Nathan Zuckerman is told some events by Coleman, others by his sister, and fabricates all the rest while simultaneously narrating what is going on in his and Coleman's present life.

The novel is divided into five chapters, that move back and forth between Coleman's present and past, exploring the thoughts and feelings of various characters and unearthing events and trains of thought that are connected only because their narrator makes them so. The present chapter of this work will attempt to reconstruct Coleman Silk's passing story linearly from its beginning to its end, exploring the fragmentation of his identity during his youth, the peak of the resolution of that fragmentation during the central part of his life, and reaching the destabilization of his complete identity in his last years, where once again his Jewishness will eventually prevail.

To understand Coleman and his story, however, it is essential to know how his inventor thought and how he envisioned the writing process as well as its connection to real life. Philip Roth (1933-2018) has been one of the greatest North-American authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Roth published his first work *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959, and kept writing for the following fifty years. Roth had Jewish descent – his four grandparents were all from Eastern Europe – and Jewishness is indeed a theme that always emerges from Roth’s works. Roth’s characters are normally male, Jewish, and from New Jersey, therefore mirroring their author in their upbringing and life experiences. Despite having created a long series of Jewish characters, however, and despite having always attributed to those characters traits and mindsets that are undeniably Jewish, Roth has vehemently refused to be labeled as a Jewish American author, preferring to see himself as “an American writer who happens to write about Jews” (Parrish 127). Roth’s Jews are imbued with Americanness, with assimilation, with an identity that is neither purely Jewish nor purely American but that contains both, simply because one is the continuation of the other. Parrish argues that:

If Roth’s Jews are ‘American’ in the way that they conceive the fluidity of their cultural identity, they are also ‘American’ in their insistence that without a prior ethnic cultural identity with which to invent themselves they would have no identity at all. Roth’s novels can be read as a search to locate some essential or authentic Jewish self and as an attempt to discover, or create, a self that need not be bound by any social or cultural constraints. (130)

The absence of boundaries, and therefore absolute freedom, is exactly what fiction meant to Roth – fiction to him was the means to go beyond reality and expand one’s horizon, reaching truths that, even if invented, are also much fuller than those found in the real world:

Fiction is not written to affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold, nor does it seek to guarantee us of the appropriateness of our feelings. The world of fiction, in fact, frees us from the circumscriptions that the society places upon feeling; one of the greatneses of the art is that it allows both the writer and the reader to respond to experience in ways not always available in day-to-day conduct . . . Ceasing for a while to be upright citizens, we drop into another layer of consciousness. (“Writing About Jews”)

In his article “Writing About Jews”, written in 1963 following bad criticism on his recently published works, Roth analyzes his own characters and stories, shedding light on his writing process and on what writing means to him. The criticism Roth answered to in the article mainly concerns his highly stereotypical characterization of Jews, that had caused him to be labeled an anti-Semite and dangerous to fellow Jews. Critics claimed that it was detrimental to the Jewish community to be represented in such a stereotypical way. Roth countered that he was by no means trying to put forward any representatives of the Jewish community, but that his characters were representatives only of themselves, and no one else: “The story of Lou Epstein stands or falls not on how much I ‘know’ about [Jewish] tradition, but on how much I know and understand about Lou Epstein . . . The story is called ‘Epstein’ because Epstein, not the Jews, is the subject” (“Writing About Jews”). This affirmation can be reconnected to Parrish’s statement that Roth’s novels involve a creation and invention of the self, instead of taking an already established identity that requires no work. The selves that Roth presents his readers in the figures of his characters are all fictional – they are invented by themselves, and invented again by the other characters, and invented again through the act of narration by Roth himself.

The creation as invention of the self stands at the roots of *The Human Stain*, whose protagonist spends his entire life trying to acquire and then maintain the power and control over who he is and who he is perceived to be. *The Human Stain* is the third novel in what Roth has labeled ‘the American Trilogy’ (preceded by *American Pastoral* (1997) and *I Married a Communist* (1998)). The novels do not contain the same characters – although they do have the same narrator, the already known Nathan Zuckerman<sup>13</sup> – nor do they have a continuous plot; rather, they are a “thematic trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation”, as Roth himself has said (Royal, “Plotting the Frames” 114). *The Human Stain*’s Coleman Silk is represented in his youth as trapped between opposites – between pride of race and stigma of race, between ambition and the barriers that slow it down, between the communal ‘we’ and the singular ‘I’. The singularity that for Coleman is intrinsic in becoming a Jew is what prompts him, at eighteen years old, to pass not for white, but for Jewish. Gradually, Coleman will have to build and invent for himself a Jewish identity that slowly resolves his fragmentation and therefore his being, bringing forward the importance of Jewishness as a third possible identification and as the possibility to escape racial categorization to be seen as a raceless ‘Other’, not contained nor definite but malleable and iridescent.

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<sup>13</sup> Zuckerman had already been the narrator of the four *Zuckerman Bound* novels (1979-1985), as well as of *The Counterlife* (1986). After the American Trilogy, Zuckerman will return in *Exit Ghost* (2007).

## Silky Silk

*The Human Stain* opens in 1998, as the narrator Nathan Zuckerman introduces his friend Coleman Silk and explains that he's having an affair with a younger woman – comparing their affair and the scandal that will ensue to that of President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky – and that he has retired from teaching at Athena College two years before, following an accusation of racism. Zuckerman introduces Coleman as a Jew, and goes on to describe him as such, attributing to him many traits that are typically Jewish. It is only in the second chapter of the novel that the readers discover that Coleman is actually black, and, as opposed to his strong and clear initial characterization as a Jew, Coleman's blackness is inserted in the text very subtly and silently, without too much of an explanation. The first indication that Coleman is not Jewish is in fact indirect – Coleman thinks back to one day during his teenage years when Dr. Fensterman visits his parents. Fensterman is labeled 'the Jewish doctor', and Coleman certainly would not have identified him as such if he himself had been Jewish. The actual revelation of Coleman's racial identification comes from Fensterman himself, who compares the struggles of anti-Semitism to those of racism, saying that he "knew that prejudice in academic institutions against colored students was far worse than it was against Jews. He knew the kind of obstacles that the Silks themselves had had to overcome to achieve all that distinguished them as a model Negro family" (86). Although Fensterman clearly states that the Silks are black, his statement is not followed by an in-depth description of the Silks as the epitome of black individuals in the way in which Coleman was put forward as the typical Jew. Their status as black is only presented in contrast and comparison with Fensterman's Jewishness, and later with Coleman's abandonment of blackness in favor of Jewishness. In fact, as claimed by James D. Franco, blackness in *The Human Stain* is depicted as something that has been repressed and is therefore absent, as a secret that has sunk almost below the point of remembrance (90).

The passage goes on to explain the differences and similarities between Jews and blacks in the New Jersey of Coleman Silk's adolescence. Coleman's father sees Jews as "Indian scouts, shrewd people showing the outsider his way in, showing the social possibility, showing an intelligent colored family how it might be done" (97). Jews are presented as a ladder of sorts, as those who have been successful in entering the white race and the middle class, and who are therefore an example for who has yet to take that step. The two Jewish men that Coleman knows in his youth – Dr. Fensterman and Doc Chizner – are both doctors, and, contrary to Coleman's own father and mother, have succeeded in their profession. Coleman's mother Gladys is a nurse, but, despite her aptitude and competence, she is passed over in the appointing of the head-nurse position. Equally, Coleman's father has studied

optics at college and later opened a store, but was forced to work as a waiter in a train after his business failed. Jews are presented as successful and well-established, while blacks, albeit honorable and respected, are still one step behind. When Fensterman visits the Silks, he does so to ask a favor: he wishes Coleman to take a B in one of his subjects at school, so that his own son Bert will be elected valedictorian. In return, Fensterman offers the Silks three thousand dollars – “more than Dad makes in a whole year” (88), says Coleman – and the position of head nurse for Mrs. Silk. While the world of Jews is strictly centered around work and business – Bert’s future as a doctor, Gladys Silk’s future work position as head nurse, Coleman’s future success in college, and the necessity of making the deal in the first place – the Silks are more concerned about Coleman’s feelings concerning the request, and about their own pride, their wish to succeed on their own without external help, without buying their way into success.

Pride is a strong characteristic of the Silk family, and of Mr. Silk’s in particular. First of all, Mr. Silk prides himself in his knowledge of the English language, which he has taught his three children since they were born, teaching them the proper word for each object, and the correct grammar for every sentence. His children’s middle names – Anthony, Brutus, Calpurnia – are a reflection of Mr. Silk’s esteem for language and literature, as are their future professions: as Coleman’s sister Ernestine will point out to Zuckerman at the end of the novel, the three Silk children all became teachers. Mr. Silk’s pride is shown in the life he has planned for his children, and for Coleman specifically:

For as long as Coleman could remember, his father had been determined to send him, the brightest of the three kids, to a historically black college along with the privileged children of the black professional elite . . . Mr. Silk had it all figured out: Coleman was going to Howard to become a doctor, to meet a light-skinned girl from a good Negro family, to marry and settle down and have children who would in turn go to Howard. At all-Negro Howard, Coleman’s tremendous advantages of intellect and of appearance would launch him into the topmost ranks of Negro society, make of him someone people would forever look up to. (99-102)

The ‘tremendous advantage of appearance’ Mr. Silk refers to is Coleman’s skin color, light enough to look white. It is not the first time that Coleman’s skin is described – at the beginning of the novel, when Zuckerman first describes his friend as a Jew, he points out that Coleman is “one of those crimped-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white” (15-16). The advantage obviously stands

in the fact that Coleman, although not expected to pass for white, looks white, and can therefore be more readily accepted both by whites and by darker-skinned blacks, who see him as superior to themselves. As reported by Kimberly Jade Norwood:

By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was clear in black America that the lighter one's skin, the greater the societal and communal bestowed/received/obtained benefits. The elevation of success and status based on white blood was so clear and unequivocal that the mulatto group almost always socialized and married people whose skin color matched their own or was lighter . . . mulattoes . . . often created their own communities, segregated from their darker-skinned brethren. (160)

Although no component of Coleman's family is mulatto in the original connotation of the word – they think of themselves as purely black – it is clear that their behavior is that described by Norwood. Coleman – and most probably his siblings as well – is expected to marry a light-skinned woman, in order to have light-skinned children and maintain the status of his family as not only respectable but also as close to white. If the readers have previously known that Coleman's skin was light-colored, in the passage quoted above the fact truly acquires its real importance. Coleman's skin color symbolizes the wider range of possibilities he has in life, which he will later explore through passing, and it indicates his fragmentation, his being taught to take pride in being black, but also that he should strive to make himself and his future family as white as possible.

Sanders Thompson differentiates between racial identification and racial identity; the first being the racial group one is categorized into, and the latter being a self-designation (145). In Coleman's case, he is identified as black by his community, his family, and society as a whole, but his self-designation is not so clear. Partly, this ambiguity derives, like for many other light-skinned blacks, from his mirror image, which sends back a reflection different from the one he expects: he is defined as black and called Negro, but his skin is white. Another element is the stigma that comes with being identified as black: it leads to a self-consciousness of being different, 'other' from the mainstream, which in turn leads to an internal struggle in the matter of how the self is understood and accepted, so that "a 'fragmented' sense of racial identity militates against a strong sense of peoplehood" (Sanders Thompson 145-146). The black population in America has long tried to compensate its stigmatization with the creation of a strong community, characterized by communal ideals and values, principles and hopes. The sense of belonging that originated is strong in its components, but, *because*

of the stigma of the very act of belonging to that community, the same components that feel pride in their race also experience shame and inadequacy.

In Coleman, the fragmentation is heightened because of his own ambitions, as well as those his father has for him. Coleman is pushed to be the best he can be, but not only that – he is pushed to become a doctor, which incidentally is the same profession of the two Jewish men he knows, and he is pushed to intermingle with blacks whose skin color tends to white. These two facts lead Coleman to start identifying with Jews, and to feel akin to them.

Although the real and permanent act of passing will only be carried out years later, there is an episode during Coleman's adolescence in which he refrains from specifying his race, and is therefore taken for Jewish, preannouncing his later fate. At that point, Coleman had been secretly training at boxing for years. When his father discovers his secret, he sends Coleman to Doc Chizner, a dentist whose hobby happens to be boxing, and who trains kids in the sport. At a match, despite knowing Coleman is expected to go to Howard, Chizner encourages him to fight at his best, so as to possibly win a scholarship at Pittsburgh University, whose coach has come to observe him. For this reason, Chizner urges Coleman not to bring up his race, saying: “‘You’re neither one thing or the other. You’re Silky Silk. That’s enough’ . . . ‘You look like you look, you’re with me, and so he’s going to think that you’re one of Doc’s boys. He’s going to think that you’re Jewish’” (98-99). The omission is successful, and the knowledge of knowing something all others ignore gives strength to Coleman, both physical and emotional:

It was that something he could not even name made him want to be more damaging than he'd ever dared before, to do something more that day than merely win . . . He did love secrets. The secret of nobody's knowing was going on in your head, thinking whatever you wanted to think with no way of anybody's knowing. All the other kids were always babbling about themselves. But that wasn't where the power was or the pleasure either. The power and pleasure were to be found in the opposite, in being counterconfessional in the same way you were counterpuncher . . . immerse yourself in the thing . . . whatever's to be mastered, become that thing . . . just Coleman Brutus 'Silky' Silk carried to the millionth degree. (99-101)

In the boxing ring, Coleman momentarily disavows race, not by rejecting it completely but by temporarily relegating it so deep inside himself that it becomes secret, closeted, the absence and ghostly presence of Franco's analysis, who goes on in his study to say that identity – in this case of a

racial nature – is private, not public, as it is not exposed, but held by its subject in such a way that only he can reveal it (96). It remains private, of course, only so far as it is kept silent, which is certainly Coleman’s case in this first experience of the withholding of his identity. The strength and sense of immense power that Coleman experiences while passing for Jewish in that instance is given by his momentary self-identification with a racial group that already has what Coleman has been fighting for: a higher standing in society, recognition, and a success that is not diminished by setbacks. His tendency to identify with something that is not only different, but directly opposite to himself, also recalls Lacan’s mirror theory, as the subject identifies with his reflection instead of identifying with his actual self. This identification with the ‘other’ starts already in infancy, when the child, at a few months of age, begins to recognize himself, or rather the specular reflection of himself, in the mirror. There occurs a transformation during that stage, in which the subject “assumes an image” (Lacan 1-2). The transformation Lacan speaks of is twofold. There is an initial transformation when the young child shifts from seeing his body as physically fragmented – so that his body parts are disconnected and unrelated limbs – to seeing and recognizing himself as a unity. There is then a second transformation when the subject, as opposed to merely recognizing himself in the mirror, directly identifies with his own reflection (Lacan 1-5).

For Coleman, this process has an even greater psychological meaning because race – and an ambiguity of race at that – plays a part in the development and completion of the process. After the initial part – the recognition as a union of all his body parts – has been completed, Coleman must now understand himself on a deeper level. There are no scenes in the novel that involve Coleman looking at himself in the mirror, but it is not hard to image how his self-analysis might have gone. Much like the protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Coleman must have initially looked at himself and not realized he was black, simply seeing a white man looking back – in Sheehy’s apt words, “[d]oes a black man gaze into the looking-glass to find a white man looking back? Or is it the other way around?” (401). Because society has unequivocally labeled him as black, however, Coleman’s identification in his mirror image is stunted, incomplete – he cannot completely reconcile what he sees and what he is told to see. In the boxing ring, Coleman is finally given a way to resolve, at least temporarily, the conflict of his identification. By bestowing upon him a Jewish identity, even a fake one, Doc Chizner has given Coleman the opportunity to understand himself as something that is neither black nor white, and that therefore does not impose upon him the choice of only one pole of the binary. By being a Jew, Coleman does not have to reject his mirror image, nor does he have to distort it and make it as black as society wants it to be. Moreover, Jews are for Coleman the representatives of self-invention, of American independence and self-determining (Elam 160).



The invention of the self is exactly what young Coleman is most interested in, prompted by the feeling that he was living the life designated by his father, a life that left no real space for individuality. The episode that will lead Coleman to start the process of a more permanent passing for Jewish occurs during his first week at Howard University, where he went despite his own wishes because otherwise “his father would – with words alone, with just the English language – have killed him” (102). In that first week, Coleman is called ‘nigger’ for the first time in his life, which makes him feel not only ashamed and inferior, but also as if he had no identity of his own, but were simply part of an indistinct community with “no separate identities” (103). Thinking back to other episodes of racism he has experienced in the past, Coleman muses over his ability to forget them and dismiss them, contrary to his brother Walt. Partly, this could happen because Coleman does not totally identify as black, and therefore he does not feel the slight on part of whites as much as he would if he considered himself to be colored with no space for further examination. Coleman also realizes he had previously been shielded from the worst of racism: “The protection of his parents, the protection provided by Walt as his older, six-foot-two-and-a-half-inch brother, his own innate confidence, his bright charm . . . even his color, which made of him someone that people sometimes couldn’t quite figure out . . . he finally recognized the enormous barrier against the great American menace that his father had been for him” (105-106).

‘Barrier’ is meant by Coleman both positively and negatively. Positively because he recognizes he has been protected and has had the advantage of not knowing the pain of serious racism; negatively because this protection has not adequately prepared him for Howard, and because he once again acknowledges the degree to which his father influences his life, which Coleman would like to control by himself. The barrier to the possibility of being self-controlled disappears soon after Coleman has started attending Howard – his father suddenly dies, and, with his brother in the army and therefore physically unable to persuade him otherwise, he leaves Howard. What derives from Coleman’s choice is a heightened singularity that lifts him above the sense of community and universality that had previously accompanied his life:

Now he would make [his story] up himself, and the prospect was terrifying. And then it wasn’t . . . it was exhilarating . . . *This* had been purposed by the mighty gods! Silky’s freedom. The raw I. All the subtlety of being Silky Silk . . . 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 . . . He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I . . . Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with

its insidious *E pluribus unum* . . . Instead the raw I with all its agility. *Self*-discovery – that was the punch to the labonz. Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. The singular animal. The sliding relationship with everything. Not static but sliding. Self-knowledge but *concealed*. What is as powerful as that? . . . he is repowered and free to be whatever he wants, free to pursue the hugest aim, the confidence right in his bones to be his particular I . . . Free to go ahead and be stupendous. Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I. (107-109)

Not so much of a struggle, and not at all inescapable, after all, that *E pluribus unum* that is the American motto and that Coleman disregards to change it into *ex uno plura*, making himself not the product of a plurality but its generator. Coleman’s disavowal of plurality is a call for authenticity, that authenticity that Sartre attributed to Jews as the “renunciation of social conventions and the prefabricated ideas, values, and identities that they support as the source of who one is. It requires resistance to any claims about one’s essential or true nature or self, and an honesty and acceptance of the tentative, constructed nature of the self” (Charmé 44). It is a disavowal not only of plurality but of categorization – not of race per se, but of its rigidity and immobility, as “being Jewish for Coleman is finally a way of trading in one set of assumptions, rigid and dichotomous, for another, fluid and malleable” (Franco 94).

In October 1944, Coleman commits what he thinks of as “his first great crime”: he “play[s] his skin however he want[s], color[s] himself just as he [chooses]” (109): while filling out the forms to enlist in the army, he lies not only about his age – he has not yet reached his eighteenth birthday – but about his race as well. It is a consequence of his dream, of his aspiration to be free, to be “not black, not even white – just on his own and free” (120). While he never specifically states to be Jewish, Coleman realizes all those he meets assume that he is. His choice is initially not conscious, but rather directed by those around him, who make a Jew out of him by seeing him as such. However, if the Jewish race is not an identification Coleman chose directly, it proves to be the racial identification that best suits him and his needs and desires. Coleman says that “his high school years assisting Doc Chizner as a boxing instructor of Essex County Jewish kids made claiming a New Jersey Jewish boyhood not so laden with pitfalls as pretending to being a U.S. sailor with Syrian or Lebanese roots” (131). Assuming a Jewish identity is something that Coleman does because it is convenient to him – it is a characterization he knows well, and he does not have to invent a new identity, being able to bring forth what he experienced during his childhood. As pointed out by Glaser, Coleman feels at ease in his role as a Jew (1471). He does not need to actively perform, because it is

something that comes natural to him. As time progresses, a Jewish identity will reveal itself to be the solution to Coleman's problems, the very thing that completes him and makes him have sense as a person: "as a heretofore unknown amalgam of the most unlike of America's historic undesirables, he now made sense" (132).

### **Ex Uno Plura**

Jews may have once truly been the 'undesirables' of America, but at the time of Coleman's passing they were already starting to be accepted, even revered. During the 1940s and 1950s, following the Second World War, there developed in the United States a 'white' sort of Jewishness, which saw Jews as wary and hesitant about being embraced with the mainstream, but at the same time worried about being seen as too Jewish (Brodkin 139). Brodkin reports that in those decades, "white America embraced Jews and even Jewishness as part of itself – you didn't have to be Jewish to love Levy's rye bread or to tell Jewish jokes. Jews could become Americans and Americans could be like Jews, but Israel and the Holocaust set limits to assimilation" (140). What resulted was that Jews were finally welcomed by the white society, and they accepted their welcoming – but still held back, keeping one foot outside of the circle, remaining after all partly non-white, maintaining a "sense of otherness" (Brodkin 141). One way in which Jewishness was made whiter was by contrasting it with blackness, so that Jews became those to be imitated and African-Americans became those to be kept at a distance. It is no wonder, then, that Coleman Silk, at eighteen years old, chose to be openly welcomed as a Jew over being continuously pushed back as a Negro. As a Jew, Coleman experienced not only the feeling of being seen as intelligent, successful and self-made, but he also experienced what being accepted into the white mainstream felt like – something he would not have known as a black man.

Still, Coleman's passage into Jewishness is gradual, it does not happen in a sudden and irrevocable moment. Coleman initially preserves his links with his past and therefore with his blackness, by maintaining a relationship with his family and by occasionally going back home to visit. It is on such a visit that Coleman attempts to disregard race and its divisions altogether, by bringing a white girl, Steena – who believes him to be Jewish – home to his visibly black family. Coleman attempts to connect the two worlds, not because he believes they are mixable but because he wishes them to not be separate. Coleman explains that in the two years he's been with Steena he has never lied to her about himself – he has simply neglected to inform her he is black:

She knew that he had a mother in East Orange who was a registered nurse and a regular churchgoer, that he had an older brother who'd begun teaching seventh and eighth grades in Asbury Park and a sister finishing up for her teaching certificate from Montclair State, and that once each month the Sunday in his Sullivan Street bed had to be cut short because Coleman was expected in East Orange for dinner. She knew that his father had been an optician – just that, an optician – and even that he'd come originally from Georgia. Coleman was scrupulous in seeing that she had no reason to doubt the truth of whatever she was told by him, and once he'd given up the boxing for good, he didn't even have to lie about that. He didn't lie to Steena about anything. All he did was to follow the instructions that Doc Chizner had given him the day they were driving up to West Point (and that already had gotten him through the navy): if nothing comes up, you don't bring it up<sup>14</sup>. (117-118)

As years pass and Coleman becomes more attached to Steena, however, he starts feeling the need to unveil his real self, but cannot bring himself to say the words. He resolves to let Steena figure it out by herself, bringing her, clueless as she is, to his family. The scene that follows appears to be the realization of Coleman's dreams – the overcoming of race and of prejudice, the confirmation that the human species has, after all “the ability . . . to adapt” (123). Coleman muses that that Sunday appears to be “like every nice family's dream of total Sunday happiness” (124), and he is sure that not only have his mother and sister accepted Steena, but that Steena has been equally impressed by his family. Instead, on the ride back to New York, Steena breaks down, claims she ‘can't do it’, and flees.

Despite Coleman's initial heartbreak at having lost Steena, it is clear from subsequent passages in the novel that, even if she had stayed, Steena would have eventually lost appeal to Coleman, for one simple reason: by knowing the truth about his origins and his race, she had deprived Coleman of the power of secrecy, the power of being the sole expert of himself. Instead, by leaving when she did, Steena was able to leave Coleman one great gift: the power of whiteness, as he describes it one night as she dances for him. Dancing occurs three times in the novel – twice Coleman witnesses women dance for him, and a third he himself dances with Zuckerman. All three episodes are significant, as they bring forward Coleman's perception of himself and others, and the perception others have of

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<sup>14</sup> Coleman's ‘don't ask don't tell’ approach to his race forges another link between him and Bill Clinton, just like his later affair with 34-year-old Faunia when he is in his seventies will. In the early 1990s – so, well after the time of Coleman's initial passing – President Clinton will support a ‘don't ask don't tell’ policy in the military concerning homosexuals, whose sexual orientation was allowed to remain private – and as such secret, hidden – as long as no one brought it up (Franco 96).

him. The first dance – in Coleman’s life, not in the novel’s chronological order – is indeed with Steena. As Coleman watches her, he finds himself astonished:

[S]he began what Coleman liked to describe as the single most slithery dance ever performed by a Fergus Falls girl after little more than a year in New York City. She could have raised Gershwin himself from the grave with that dance, and with the way she sang the song. Prompted by a colored trumpet player playing it like a black torch song, there to see, plain as day, was all the power of her whiteness. That big white thing. (115)

Because Coleman has chosen to disregard racial categorization made by others about himself, he also has the power to choose what elements of other people he can make his, therefore creating a being that is not racially categorized, simply because he is completely unique. In this scene, Steena becomes Coleman’s mirror, as he watches all the elements that make her inherently white and reflects them on himself through the act of watching her dance. By dancing for Coleman, Steena unwittingly transfers her white traits on Coleman, because he chooses to identify with those traits. She is in a way the alienating self that Coleman sees in his own mirror; he identifies with her whiteness and behaves similarly to her. It is around the time of the dance that Coleman had also abandoned boxing. He told himself he did so to prevent her from finding out about his being black, but in truth it was because of Steena’s gift of whiteness, Coleman severed one link with his past in East Orange.

Months after Steena leaves, Coleman starts dating a colored girl, Ellie, who immediately realizes he is not white. After she asks what he is, Coleman tells her that she can “play it any way you like” (133). Coleman encourages Ellie to think of him whatever she wants, implying he does not want to define himself – “that’s the little game they play, and that becomes the excitement for them, playing the ambiguity of it” (133). After a while, however, Coleman tells everything to Ellie, erasing what ambiguity was left, and “losing the secret, he felt like a boy again. The boy he’d been before he had the secret. A kind of imp again. He gets from all her naturalness the pleasure and ease of being natural himself . . . but some dimension is missing. The whole thing lacks the ambition – it fails to feed that conception of himself that’s been driving him all his life” (134). The problem with Ellie knowing – or anyone else, for that matter – is that it brings Coleman back to being racially categorized and identified. Instead, by letting others understand him as they wish, or alternatively by identifying as a fluid chameleonic Jew, Coleman can remain hovering over race, feeling the singularity of his status as passer, albeit he knows he is not the only black man passing for white. Coleman differentiates

between himself and the potential other passers of New York: “maybe there *are* a dozen more guys like him hanging around in the Village. But not just everybody has that gift. That is, they have it, but in petty ways: they simply lie all the time. They’re not secretive in the grand and elaborate way that Coleman is” (134). Coleman allows himself to be a Jew indirectly, and that is his power – his transformation is not a real transformation but an evolution, a *sliding* into something else that is there waiting for him and that suits him and his ambition loosely, so that it leaves space for further growth and expansion. He is a chameleon, but not only in the sense Iztkovitz intended. He is, yes, a chameleon in the sense that he can make himself appear like something he is not, but, even more, he is a chameleon in the *way* he changes: by reflecting someone else on himself.

A third woman in Coleman’s life serves as enhancer of his secrecy, stoking in him the fire that was already burning, but that had almost died down with Steena and Ellie, as with the two of them Coleman went back to being known as black. “As she first portrayed herself and her origins to Coleman, Iris Gittleman had grown up willful, clever, furtively rebellious – secretly plotting, from the second grade on, how to escape her oppressive surroundings – in a Passaic household rumbling with hatred for every form of social oppression, particularly the authority of the rabbis and their impinging lies” (127). Iris’s family is depicted as Jewish but anarchic – her brothers, contrary to non-Jewish Coleman, are not even circumcised<sup>15</sup>. They are said to be “two uneducated immigrant atheists who spat on the ground when a rabbi walked by” – yet, “they called themselves what they called themselves freely, without asking permission or seeking approval” (127). That trait is certainly one that calls to Coleman, whose own wish for freedom and self-approval, as has been seen, has driven him to distance himself from his community, and from the pre-imposed category society had given him. If Iris’s father can label himself both American and Jewish, can speak Yiddish and at the same time be as unconventional as can be, then certainly Coleman can call himself a Jew as well.

It has been pointed out how Coleman had mainly let others name him a Jew – he had, until meeting Iris, preferred the power of ambiguity and of secrecy over that of self-naming. Now, after his experiences with Steena and Ellie, and faced with “non-Jewish Jewish Iris” (132), Coleman changes his strategy of self-naming and -making and actively calls himself a Jew: “what he told Iris was that he was Jewish, Silk being an Ellis Island attenuation of Silberzweig, imposed on his father by a charitable customs official” (130). Coleman explains that:

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<sup>15</sup> Coleman’s mother made the choice of circumcising her sons for hygienic reasons (130). Circumcision being a typical Jewish trait, Coleman is even more physically advantaged to pass for Jewish as he would be in passing for generically white.

It wouldn't have fazed [Iris] for five minutes to learn that he had been born and raised in a colored family and identified himself as a Negro nearly all his life, nor would she have been burdened in the slightest by keeping that secret for him if it was what he'd asked her to do . . . To be two men instead of one? To be two colors instead of one? To walk the streets incognito or in disguise, to be neither this nor that but something in between? To be possessed of a double or a triple or a quadruple personality? (130).

Mirón and Inda, reporting Foucault's theories on discourse and subjectivity, describe the subject – i.e. the individual – as “constituted within discourse . . . discourse itself produces subjects . . . [the subject] is not the author of meaning but its effect . . . always an effect of power” (93). According to Foucault, it is the act of speech, and therefore of being spoken of, that produces a subject. The production of the subject is passive, and it is also imbued with unequal power, because it presupposes that someone who is not the subject names him and creates him. Applied to race, this would mean that one race is named ‘other’ and ‘inferior’ by another, who must then continuously reiterate the naming to keep it active (Inda and Mirón 93). Coleman's case, however, quite differs from this. It is he himself who perpetrates the act of naming, and therefore he is the one who holds the power over himself. He, essentially, as was his wish, creates himself:

No longer was he playing at something. With Iris – the churned-up, untamed, wholly un-Steena like, non-Jewish Jewish Iris – as the medium through which to make himself anew, he'd finally got it right. He was no longer trying and casting off, endlessly practicing and preparing to be. This was it, the solution, the secret to his secret, flavored with just a drop of the ridiculous – the redeeming, reassuring ridiculous, life's little contribution to every human decision . . . he now made sense. (131-132)

Making sense for Coleman means becoming Jewish and naming himself as such. Having witnessed the life of Jews during his childhood, and having realized that being a Jew equals being above race rather than trapped into it, Coleman has now taken an actual step towards the resolution of his fragmentation. Coleman's passing has now evolved from being only temporary and in the hands of others to being a real, permanent way of living. It should not, however, be mistaken for the kind of passing in which the passer forgoes his race to belong to another, following which decision he experiences guilt and nostalgia. For Coleman, passing does not mean abandoning his real self for a

mask or personification, but rather it means *finding* his real self. Said self derives not from the choice of a race different than his original one, but from the union of his original race and his new race. This merging is embodied in Coleman's case by his Jewishness, which holds elements of both the white and black races. Despite the advance of Jews in the eyes of the Americans, they were still a minority, and as such they were subject to prejudices and restrictions – of course much scarcer and lighter than those Coleman faced as an African-American, especially considering that racial Segregation was still in place.

Despite the unequalled benefit of finding himself, passing for Jewish – and deciding to marry a Jewish woman – does have a price for Coleman. He has to 'murder' his mother – by disowning her as his mother:

He was murdering her. You don't have to murder your father. The world will do that for you . . . Who there is to murder is the mother, and that's what he saw he was doing to her, the boy who'd been loved as he'd been loved by this woman. Murdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom! It would have been much easier without her. But only through this test can he be the man he has chosen to be, unalterably separated from what he was handed at birth, free to struggle at being free like any human being would wish to be free. To get that from life, the alternate destiny, on one's own terms, he must do what must be done . . . Once you've done a thing like this, you have done so much violence that it can *never* be undone – which is what Coleman wants . . . If, in the service of honing himself, he is out to do the hardest thing imaginable, this is it . . . This is the major act of his life, and vividly, consciously, he feels it immensely. (138-139)

As his mother goes on about what she believes to be Coleman's reasoning and motivations, he imagines her as already being in the process of wasting away and dying, but he also imagines his connection with her becoming stronger in the future, "because of its denial" (141). Coleman also admits to himself that "neither his mother's longevity nor her mortality could be allowed to have any bearing on what he was doing" (141). Jennifer Glaser claims that Athena College – the college where Coleman will teach later in his life – is ideal for Coleman because "its patron goddess is the product of a motherless birth, having sprung fully formed from the skull of her father Zeus as if she were an idea of perfect male generativity rather than a person. Athena's birth represents for Silk the freedom from his own mother (and her race) that he seeks throughout *The Human Stain*" (1472). By repudiating his mother, Coleman becomes motherless – he has no Jewish mother who has molded



him as a Jewish man, but he has shaped himself as he so wished. What remains of his mother is a ghost, a memory, that Coleman relegates in the back of his mind just like his blackness.

Later that night, Coleman is called by his brother, who orders him never to approach their mother again. Coleman thinks of that moment as the precise moment that made his passing final: “The act was committed in 1953 by an audacious young man in Greenwich Village, by a specific person in a specific place at a specific time, but now he will be over on the other side forever” (145). The ‘act’ Coleman mentions refers both to his passing and to his metaphorical murder of his mother. He is now a white man for good, which can also be seen in the very significant words his brother speaks to him: “‘Don’t you dare ever show your lily-white face around that house again!’” (145).

‘Lily-white’ is an expression that returns in another point of the novel, used once again to symbolize pure whiteness. In the passage quoted above, ‘lily-white’ is used by Walt to distance himself from Coleman, to underline how different they are now: he is still black, and will remain so, while Coleman is white, and can never revert to his previous state.

Many years later, it will be Coleman himself who uses those words to underline his own difference from a white man. He is talking with his lawyer, Nelson Primus, about his own affair with Faunia Farley, a woman in her thirties – he is at this point seventy-one years old. Following a disagreement, Coleman bursts out to Primus that “‘I never again want to hear that self-admiring voice of yours or see your smug fucking lily-white face’” (81). After having said those words to Primus, Coleman worries about having revealed himself as non-white, or rather, as black. Primus never understands the meaning of Coleman’s words; nonetheless, they do not unmask him as black, but rather they underline his Jewishness. As has been stressed throughout this work, the main characteristic of Jewishness is that it is not relegated into one race or the other; it is fluid and malleable and for this reason it can be stretched according to one’s wishes and needs. Charmé explains that “the core of Jewishness is the sense . . . of being outsiders, the Other” (49). Being an outsider in Coleman’s case does of course not refer to his social status, but to his being an outsider of race, to having no fixed racial categorization. Labeling Primus ‘lily-white’ did not mean calling him white and himself black, but strengthening his position as ‘Other’, as non-white, by being a Jew. After all, if Coleman were not ‘other’, he would be forced to choose between the more definite terms of blackness or whiteness – whiteness, while more advantageous than blackness in that time and place, was still limited by certain beliefs and expectations that would make Coleman feel as constrained as he had felt as a black man. The ‘otherness’ of Jewishness provides him with a link between his present and his past. It allows him to remember, while remaining fixed in his current state. It is indeed this second episode featuring the ‘lily-white’ epithet that prompts Coleman to think back on his life as a black adolescent

and on his early years as a Jew, finally remembering Walt's last words to him. The two episodes place Coleman in the middle – with Walt representing blackness on one side, and Primus representing whiteness on the other. Coleman can touch both worlds, he can understand both points of view, he can be alternately on one side and the other, and even on both at the same time.

There is a moment in Coleman's life where he wishes to make known the connection between the two worlds he simultaneously inhabits. He has by now had two children with Iris, and she has just had two other, twins. Upon seeing them, Coleman is amazed by the lack of blackness in their features, and he is seized by the desire to tell Iris the truth. After an episode involving Iris's friend<sup>16</sup>, Coleman changes his mind, deeming himself 'saved' from a foolish act, and realizing that revealing his secret would mean ceasing to be himself. As he has become Jewish, he *is* Jewish, and naming himself black once again would undo the progress he has made in understanding and making himself as a Jewish man. If being Jewish has made him complete, that is, unmasking himself would cut off a part of him that is necessary, and that can exist only if he calls himself a Jew. For this same reason, Coleman resisted visiting his mother after the birth of his first son, and for this reason – maintaining his Jewishness alive – he married Iris in the first place. There is something about Iris that immediately caught Coleman's eyes, something that he keeps thinking about and deems worth of 'murdering' his mother – Iris's hair:

Her head of hair was something, a labyrinthine, billowing wreath of spirals and ringlets, fuzzy as twine and large enough for use as Christmas ornamentation. All the disquiet of her childhood seemed to have passed into the convolutions of her sinuous thicket of hair. Her irreversible hair. You could polish pots with it and no more alter its construction than if it were harvested from the inky depths of the sea, some kind of wiry reef-building organism, a dense living onyx hybrid of coral and shrub, perhaps possessing medical properties . . . that sinuous thicket of hair that was far more Negroid than Coleman's – more like Ernestine's hair than his . . . the explanation her appearance could provide for the texture of their children's hair. (129, 136)

Coleman knew his children might have physical traits that were typically black. Given Iris's hair texture, however, he was able to at least attribute the potential manifestation of African hair to Iris's

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<sup>16</sup> Iris's friend Claudia discovers her husband has a secret family with another woman. Iris stresses to Coleman how the worst part of the situation is not the physical betrayal, but the secret that has always loomed between husband and wife, tarnishing the intimacy they were supposed to have shared (178-179).

own defining trait. Iris essentially provided Coleman with those Jewish traits he himself lacks, offering a further union between the white and black worlds. By marrying Iris, by actively naming himself a Jew to her, and by never unveiling his secret, Coleman has definitively made himself Jewish, and can live the rest of his life as a complete, self-made individual, heading for the utmost success, or, as he dubs it, ‘the hugest aim’.

### **The Hugest Aim**

So, with Iris starts Coleman’s actual life as a Jew. Coleman’s first physical description appears on page fifteen, where he is described by Nathan Zuckerman as ambiguous, as a man who has both Jewish and black traits: Nathan says he could have been mistaken for a light-skinned black passing for white, but he is a Jew – Zuckerman and the readers have yet to discover that it is the other way around. If Coleman’s physical appearance is somewhat ambivalent, his actions certainly depict him as a Jew. We’re told that Coleman has been teaching Greek and Latin at Athena college for most of his academic career – he was, in fact:

One of a handful of Jews on the Athena faculty when he was hired and perhaps among the first Jews permitted to teach in a classics department anywhere in America . . . Through the eighties and into the nineties, Coleman was also the first and only Jew ever to serve at Athena as dean of faculty . . . As dean, and with the full support of an ambitious new president, Coleman had taken an antiquated, backwater, Sleepy Hollowish college, and, not without steamrolling, put an end to the place as a gentleman’s farm by aggressively encouraging the deadwood among the faculty’s old guard to seek early retirement, recruiting ambitious young assistant professors; and revolutionizing the curriculum. (5)

The passage underlines Coleman’s skill and success, and is followed by equally positive portrayals: “Coleman had been no ordinary dean, and who he got rid of and how he got rid of them, what he abolished and what he established, and how audaciously he performed his job into the teeth of tremendous resistance . . . Coleman had overturned everything . . . In short, he brought in competition, he made the place competitive, which, as an early enemy noted, ‘is what Jews do’” (7, 9). Brodtkin, too, corroborates that “Jews were smart and our success was due to our own efforts and abilities, reinforced by a culture that valued sticking together, hard work, education, and deferred gratification. However, she claims, “Jewish success is a product not only of ability but also of the removal of

powerful social barriers to its realization” (26). As Jews were now being accepted as a ‘model minority’, and the stigma of being a Jew was no longer standing, Coleman, having also removed the barrier of his original racial identification, is free to use his ability in the best way, and to strive for the best he can achieve. It is implied by Zuckerman that Coleman was successful not because of his personality or mentality, but because of his Jewishness, which provided him with a different mindset, a different way not only of thinking but of *doing*.

In this instance being Jewish has meant that Coleman could elude the barriers given him by his racial categorization as ‘inferior’, but he could also refrain from doing things in the same way as the mainstream – he is, therefore, saved from disappearing into a mass, becoming as ‘invisible’ as Ralph Ellison’s renowned protagonist.

Coleman’s time as an academic professor is the period of his life during which he is most complete. He is not lost in either the communital ‘we’ of the black race, which attempts to strengthen itself by standing together, nor in the engulfing anonymity of whiteness, the race that par excellence dominates over the others because of its lack of distinguishing marks. There comes a time, however, when Coleman makes an involuntary mistake which will be the starting point of his downfall, and which takes place two years before the beginning of the novel as Zuckerman is narrating it. Coleman’s mistake is first addressed in the very first pages of the novel, and it will serve as background to Coleman’s entire lifestory as it is reconstructed and invented. Zuckerman recounts:

It was about midway into his second semester back as a full-time professor that Coleman spoke the self-incriminating word that would cause him voluntarily to sever all ties to the college – the single self-incriminating word of the many millions spoken aloud in his years of teaching and administrating at Athena, and the word that, as Coleman understood things, directly led to his wife’s death. (6)

The word in question is ‘spooks’. ‘Spook’ is a dated word that has progressively lost use; its first meaning, and the one that Coleman intended, is that of ‘ghost’. It can also refer to a spy, or, as a verb, it can be used with the same meaning of ‘to frighten’ (“Cambridge Dictionary”). There is, however,

a further meaning to the word ‘spook’, which was used in the past to offensively refer to people of color<sup>17</sup>.

When Coleman used it, he was referring to two students of his who had never once come to class; questioning their absence, he wondered to the class whether they existed or if they were spooks. The two students turn out to be black, and they report Coleman’s allegedly racist remark. The unfortunate episode brings to:

The punishing immersion in meetings, hearings, and interviews, the documents and letters submitted to college officials, to faculty committees, to a pro bono black lawyer representing the two students... the charges, denials, and countercharges, the obtuseness, ignorance, and cynicism, the gross and deliberate misinterpretations, the laborious, repetitious explanations, the prosecutorial questions – and always, perpetually, the pervasive sense of unreality. (12)

Coleman is undoubtedly enraged because of the misinterpretation of his words – especially, he muses, because his father had always taught him the precision of speech. He is just as inflamed by being labeled as a racist, he who is a black man. After Iris suffers a stroke and dies, Coleman becomes even more incensed, and his invectives are aimed at creating a distance and differentiation between himself and ‘them’: “I hate the bastards. I hate the fucking bastards the way Gulliver hates the whole human race after he goes and lives with those horses. I hate them with a real biological aversion” (19). Gulliver, from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), spends some time in the Land of the Houyhnhnms, a race of talking horses who rule over the humanoid Yahoos. Gulliver is amazed by the enormous intelligence of the horses, even more so in the instances in which he compares it to the absolute decadence and barbarity of his fellow humans. Gulliver eventually rejects those who are physically more similar to him, and positions himself with those who are racially other, even feeling outright disgusted by the Yahoos, despite being like them in several ways. Coleman’s trajectory could be seen as similar to Gulliver’s. He left his own race, and moved closer to a different one. Still, Coleman’s course also contrasts deeply with that of Swift’s hero. Coleman is able to see himself as distinct from each group, and does not fully identify with either. For this reason, he can still retain the ability to see the flaws, as well as the advantages, that each racial category presents. He also puts

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Sundquist reports that ‘spooks’ was initially used by people of color to allude to the ghostlike attribute of whites, their invisibility. It has only later been turned around based on what Sundquist calls a “psychological inversion” (513).

them on the same level, in the sense that neither group appears as superior or inferior to the other. If Gulliver's mindset were to be transposed and applied to the human races, whites would be the intelligent horses and blacks would be the violent humanoids. And if Coleman purely saw race in the same way as it is – or was at that time – normally perceived, then he would consider whites as superiors to blacks. Instead, while he does say that he has a biological aversion to whites – implying he does so because he is black – he also claims to hate whites in the way Gulliver hated humans, therefore positioning whites with the inferior minorities.

Coleman feels trapped by this new identification his colleagues at Athena are creating about him, saying that they are “creating their false image of him, calling him everything that he wasn't and could never be, they had . . . misrepresented a professional career conducted with the utmost seriousness and dedication” (11). Two things are noteworthy in Coleman's reaction at being called a racist. The first is that Coleman is not incensed as a black man, but as a Jewish man. The false image that is being created at Athena, in fact – and this is the second thing – is not based on Coleman's identity as black, but as Jewish. Jews may be closer to whites in many aspects – color and acceptance the main ones – but they certainly stand on the side of blacks in every instance of social injustice, in the same in which blacks stand with the Jews. Historical facts attest to this:

Jews accounted for almost two-thirds of the White volunteers who went to the South for Freedom Summer in 1964 and . . . three-quarters of the money raised by the civil rights organizations at the height of the movement came from Jewish contributors. Behind this solidarity . . . a politics of recognition able to associate slavery and Nazism, lynchings and pogroms, Jim Crow and tsarist anti-Semitism, bigotry and bigotry. (Cousin and Fine 312)

Scholars, too, have stressed the deep connection between the black and Jewish worlds. Du Bois for one “welcomed the active support of Jews for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which he cofounded, and he acknowledged both the contribution of Jews to the civil rights movement and their continued vulnerability to racism”. Another example is Frantz Fanon, who stresses how “[I]f he [the black man] does not stand with his Jewish brother, he stands against him by default” (Cousin and Fine 209).

Consequently, Coleman does not feel empathy for blacks only because he was born black, but also because he is now Jewish, and as a Jew, despite assimilation, he still knows the same rejection and pain that African-Americans have felt at the hands of whites.

Following this episode in which Coleman, the great designator of the self, is labeled something that he is not, something that he intrinsically cannot be, he momentarily loses himself, struggling to know who he is after all. He retires from Athena, and, after Iris's death, he contacts Zuckerman, the local writer, and asks him to write a book about the whole affair. Upon Zuckerman's refusal, Coleman starts writing *Spooks* himself, an autobiographical work that narrates the event that initiated his downfall. Roth himself has put forward the idea that "a self is invented through narrative form" (Parrish 133); in *The Human Stain* there are multiple levels of narration and self-invention. There is the already mentioned *Spooks*, started by Coleman and then abandoned<sup>18</sup>. There is the fictional *The Human Stain*, the book that the readers are supposedly reading, written by Zuckerman after Coleman's death. And finally, there is *The Human Stain* written by Philip Roth as an author, as an inventor of its characters and of their stories. Coleman has invented a specific identity for himself, the one that best suits him – Coleman the Jew, the emerging middle ground between being black and white. Although others try to deform the image he self-created, Coleman cannot defend himself in written form, as it would shake the basis of his Jewish identity. It is instead Nathan Zuckerman, after discovering the truth about Coleman's origins, who attempts to reinvent Coleman and understand him posthumously. The period in which Coleman attempts to write about himself, therefore, is characterized by a deep crisis. If Coleman has spent the previous fifty years or so of his life to establish his identity as he wanted it, he is now thrown into the position of being labeled not by himself but by others.

It is only after meeting Faunia Farley that Coleman experiences a sense of rebirth to contrast the feeling of falling deeper into the trap of being categorized. Coleman's state of being is narrated by Zuckerman, who witnesses Coleman's new happiness and peace of mind after the 'spooks' ordeal:

This was a new Coleman. Or perhaps an old Coleman, the oldest adult Coleman there was, the most satisfied Coleman there had ever been. Not Coleman pre-spooks and unmaligned as a racist, but the Coleman contaminated by desire alone . . . this was not the savage, embittered, embattled avenger of *Spooks*, estranged from life and maddened by it – this was not even another man. This was another *soul*". (20-25)

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<sup>18</sup> Coleman cannot write the real story of himself. A real explanation of why he cannot be racist would entail an unmasking of his original racial designation and of his passing for Jewish. The act of unmasking, however, although in this case initiated by the self and not by an external person, would strip Coleman of the power he has worked so hard to establish. It would have the same effect he experienced after telling Steena and then Ellie of his identity, and on an even larger scale, as the book would be read by a greater number of people.

The new rinvigorated Coleman drags Zuckerman into a dance – the second of the three dance scenes previously mentioned.

There was nothing overtly carnal in it, but because Coleman was wearing only his denim shorts and my hand rested on his warm back as if it were the back of a dog or a horse, it wasn't entirely a mocking act. There was a semi-serious sincerity in his guiding me about the stone floor, not to mention a thoughtless delight in just being alive, accidentally and clownishly and for no reason alive – the kind of delight you take as a child when you first learn to play a tune with a comb and toilet paper . . . He feels not so much the urge to brag as the enormous relief of not having to keep something so bewilderingly new as his own rebirth totally to himself. (26-27)

The dance is followed by Coleman's revelation of his affair with Faunia, a thirty-four-year-old seemingly illiterate woman who works as a janitor and lives in a farm, scarred by a turbulent adolescence, by the death of her two children, and by the divorce from her violent husband Les, a Vietnam veteran who suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder. Zuckerman pinpoints Faunia as the cause of Coleman's rebirth – rather, although Zuckerman cannot yet know, it is what Faunia means that has revived him. Like the three women before her, Faunia presents Coleman with the possibility of secrecy, and therefore its power. With the 'spooks' ordeal especially, depicting him as a white racist man no different than most, Coleman has the need to feel in power, to take the reins over who he is again. The new secrecy surrounding both his identity and, on a larger scale, the affair itself, give him the strength to reestablish the image he had created many decades earlier in New York with Steena. The dancing scene with Zuckerman is fundamental to Coleman not because he sees himself in his friend, but because it is an expression of power and control. Coleman guides Zuckerman in the dance, performing the role of the man. He also stands out over Zuckerman as physically fitter and more able – Zuckerman had undergone a prostate surgery that left him impotent, while Coleman, albeit with the help of Viagra, is still capable of having sex, with a woman young enough to be his daughter moreover. Coleman's power gives him a sense of life, which is in turn expressed through the dance – and once again this expression of life gives him a further power over Zuckerman, who had been living almost as a reclusive, Coleman being his major contact with other people. If the first dance scene established Coleman in his self-identification with the other, the second affirmed the power that he has derived from it, and from the control he holds over his own self-identification.



Zuckerman certainly feels the power that Coleman emanates, and he later claims that Coleman “danced me right back into life . . . Here was a man who made things happen. Indeed, the dance that sealed out friendship was also what made his disaster my subject. And made his disguise my subject. And made the proper presentation of his secret my problem to solve” (45). Zuckerman is speaking here of Coleman’s continuing downfall, that will culminate in his and Faunia’s death. The final downfall, however, is delayed by Faunia’s presence in Coleman’s life.

Faunia is in fact the protagonist of the third dancing scene. Six months after the beginning of their affair, Coleman himself asks her to dance for him:

[S]o she does it, not conquittishly, not like Steena did in 1948 . . . If this is what he wants, abduct the man, enslave him. Wouldn’t be the first one. She’s aware when it starts happening: that thing, that connection . . . She moves, and now he’s seeing her . . . They’re connected. She knows he wants her to claim something . . . He’s offering me him . . . she moves, she moves, and the formal transfer of power begins . . . moving like this to that music and the power passing over, knowing that at her slightest command, with the flick of the finger that summons a waiter, he would crawl out of that bed to lick her feet . . . He’s lost his wife, he’s lost his job, publicly humiliated as a racist professor, and what’s a racist professor? It’s not that you’ve just become one. The story is you’ve been discovered, so it’s been your whole life . . . That’s the stigma and it’s not even true . . . Then she says it aloud. ‘You know what? I see you’ . . . ‘I see a kid’ . . . ‘You’ve lost everything’ . . . ‘You can’t be twenty again. It’s not going to come back. And this is how it ended’. (225-233)

This scene, too, involves power, only this time it is in Faunia’s hands. By letting himself be scrutinized by Faunia, Coleman gives her the power to see him, and consequently to understand him according to her own inclinations and wishes, as he had done in his youth with Ellie. Faunia has given Coleman the power to be young again, and the power to free himself – at least in his own mind – from the racist accusations made against him, but she has also unwittingly brought him to his death. In the passage quoted above, Faunia compares Coleman to a child in the way he lives and loves, in his excitement and liveliness, in his desire to be young again. She also predicts his death, in a way, giving finality to his surge of power, bringing him back to her own level instead of allowing him to float above in his sense of vigor. She does not, exactly, see him as a black man, although Zuckerman imagines that Coleman himself might have told her. Of course, if he had told her, she would present the same problem that Steena and Ellie had – she would strip him of his self-making. Undoubtedly, however,

Faunia has a disconcerting ability to see things in Coleman that he does not intend others to see, and that ability would strip him of his power even more than his hypothetical decision of telling her his secret, which at least would be his own choice.

The reader has known for a while that Coleman would die – Zuckerman has continuously stressed that he is narrating the story after Coleman has already died – and indeed, he and Faunia are involved in a car accident. Coleman’s death is imbued with ambiguity in the same way his life had been. As Zuckerman tells it, the accident was caused by Faunia’s ex-husband Les, who in the previous months had become obsessed with her affair with Coleman, and at the same time wanted revenge – he blamed her for their children’s death<sup>19</sup>. As the affair is discovered, however, rumors spread about Coleman and Faunia, and their fellow citizens become convinced that Coleman lost control of the car because Faunia was “satisfying him while he drove” (283). Another theory is that Coleman purposefully killed himself and Faunia to hide the affair and other supposedly heinous crimes (293). Moreover, professor Delphine Roux, a nemesis of Coleman’s, who had already anonymously threatened to uncover his scandalous affair, decides to cover her own mistake by accusing Coleman. After having written a personal ad meant to find a romantic partner, she accidentally sends it as an email to the entire department, and, panicking, she accuses Coleman, dead and unable to defend himself, of having hacked into her computer. Delphine knows it is unbelievable, as Coleman would have to be crazy to do such a thing. Yet, as was the case with the ‘spooks’ episode two years before, people do believe Delphine: “[s]imply to make the accusation is to prove it. To hear the allegation is to believe it. No motive for the perpetrator is necessary, no logic or rationale is required. Only a label is required. The label is the motive. The label is the evidence. The label is the logic. Why did Coleman Silk do this? Because he is an *x*, because he is a *y*, because he is both” (290).

Once again, Coleman is labeled as something he is not, but, as Zuckerman says, “there is truth and then again there is truth” (315). After all, Coleman had been the first to label himself as something he was not. Coleman was not born a Jew, but he labeled himself as such and became a Jew, because it was the identity that suited him the most, that made him acquire sense, made him complete.

Zuckerman discovers Coleman’s origins at the funeral, by realizing that the black woman present at the service is Coleman’s sister. In that moment, he feels ‘seized’ by Coleman’s story and by who he really was. What Zuckerman cannot understand, however, is that the Coleman he knew, the Jewish Coleman, was in truth the real Coleman, because he could not be anyone else. If Coleman were only considered in his black identity, he would not be complete, there would be fragments of him still to

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<sup>19</sup> They died in an accidental fire in the bungalow where they lived; at the time of their death, Faunia was outside the building, in the car with a man, and therefore unable to save them.

reign in. In fact, Zuckerman muses that discovering Coleman's secret has made Coleman unchoesive to him, a greater mystery than he was before. The reason for this is that the discovery makes Zuckerman attempt to understand Coleman as a black man passing for Jewish, but he does not consider that Coleman needs to be understood simply as a Jew.

Being Jewish means to Coleman singularity, fullness, and self-making. It's not so much an act of invention, but an act of integrity, of thoroughness of being. Being black would mean renouncing his dreams and aims; being white would mean renouncing his otherness, which is what makes him feel distinguished from the mass. According to Sunquist, "Coleman Silk contains the whole history of the twentieth-century black-Jewish question – its paradoxical intimacies, as well as its ever-accumulating differences and animosities . . . In the mirror of history, each people saw both themselves and their exact opposites" (522-525). Coleman's Jewishness has made him both the real person and its mirror reflection – by being both, he made sure to be truer to himself than most people could.

Coleman's tragic death has made critics see him as a new version of the classic tragic mulatto, but he is far from being so. Although he is dead, he remains unmasked. He may not have been born a Jew, but he unquestionably dies as such, and no one save Zuckerman discovers his secret. Although Zuckerman is writing the novel the external readers are reading, what he is writing is a fictional book, a book that has not been published yet, and that is really Philip Roth's, not Nathan Zuckerman's. Coleman's tragedy stands in him being labeled a racist and later a misogynist, but he is never revealed as a black man passing for Jewish. Such is the strength of his Jewish identity – unbowed even in death, the real self-made man.

## CONCLUSION

“We are our choices”

Jean-Paul Sartre

I have started my research with a contextualization of the concept of race in the United States, moving then to the main theme of the thesis – racial passing – and analyzing its causes and its consequences, delving into the reasons why blacks might wish to abandon their race and pass as an individual of another. These considerations have brought up the question of why some of those blacks might choose to pass for Jewish, remaining therefore in a minority.

I then moved the discussion to literature, comparing classic and contemporary passing literature. What emerged from the comparison was that classic passing literature focuses on black-to-white passing, as the Jewish component will only emerge in later years. Classic passing literature generally explores the passer’s life, focusing on the consequences of passing in his life and in the life of who surrounds him. It also, however, often ends in tragedy – death, unmasking of the race – and is imbued with feelings of guilt and regret. The happiness of the passer is, in fact, almost never present in classic passing literature. On the contrary, contemporary passing literature puts forward passers who decide to pass not only out of necessity, to escape the ever-present racism, but also out of hope – hope to find a state of being where no fragment of one’s identity is left out or repudiated. Realizing that passing for white would be exactly that – an abandonment of some fragments of identity – contemporary passers elect to pass for Jewish, finding a third racial identification that is more comprehensive.

In my thesis I have showed that the novels *Caucasia* and *The Human Stain* offered the best representation not only of the fragmentation of identity in light-skinned blacks, but also of its resolution through black-to-Jewish passing. The fragmentation is due to many factors – one’s physical appearance, one’s cultural context, one’s ideas of what it means to be black or white. It can be described as a force that pulls the future passer in two opposite directions that cannot initially be reconciled. This pulling, and the contrasting striving to reunite the two opposite poles, causes one’s identity to break and scatter, as the pieces are made to separate. The other contemporary books that have been analyzed – the works of Brooke Kroeger, Rebecca Walker and Achmat Dangor – while all dealing with the fragmentation of identity and with the importance of Jewishness, all present some

details that slightly diverge from the main argument of this thesis. Both Kroeger's and Walker's pieces deal with real-life narratives, and are therefore not purely literary. In both cases, moreover, the protagonists are biologically half Jewish, and, while their Jewishness does bring them to a more full and complete identity, they are not exactly passing, but rather choosing to identify with one of their given identities. Dangor's work is fictional, but its protagonist is dead for the entirety of the novel, and for that reason the motives and consequences of his passing, although they certainly lead to a resolved being, are less explored and less clear, and they also appear to lead to his death.

On the other hand, the fragmentation of identity and its resolution through passing is incredibly powerful in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. What I sought to demonstrate is that the cause of the racial passing in the two novels was the fragmentation of identity detected in the characters. I also sought to demonstrate that the fragmented characters presented in the novels needed more than only one possible identification – black or white – if they sought to truly resolve their fragmentation, as the binary system is the *cause* of their inner fracture. I then expanded this statement, and argued that Jewish identity is of great importance for light-skinned black characters whose authors present as suffering from the fragmentation of identity.

To demonstrate the first part of my argument – that light-skinned blacks have a fragmented identity – I took into consideration Jacques Lacan's mirror theory, and applied it to race, drawing in part from John Sheehy's considerations on Lacan's theory in analyzing classic passing figures and moving the discussion to the contemporary conception and perception of race. Race here is meant both as the racial identity that a person has of himself, and as the racial categorization that is imposed on the individual by society. Lacan differentiates between one's actual physical self and one's reflection in the mirror, which is not only unreal and incorporeal, but also inverted compared to the real body. I applied this concept to race by analyzing the contrast in the individual between the race bestowed on him and the race he feels closer to when he looks into the mirror.

For Birdie in *Caucasia*, the fragmentation is especially evident when she looks at her darker-skinned sister and attempts to understand herself as a reflection of her, which she cannot be. Birdie is also caught between the diverging opinions of her family members and peers – her father insists she is black and only black, while her classmates and her maternal grandmother insist that she looks European, and therefore white. Birdie's fragmentation is then deepened by the evident favoritism her father has for her sister, and by the equal favoritism her grandmother has for her.

As for Coleman in *The Human Stain*, he stands between two extremes as well. He is taught to take pride in being black, but he is also taught that he should attempt to remain as close to whiteness as

possible. Coleman, like Birdie, finds someone else that he tries to identify with, actually accelerating the resolution of his fragmentation: Jews.

In order to demonstrate how Birdie and Coleman's fragmentation is resolved through their passing for Jewish, I had to examine the circumstances in which they passed, and the way in which Jewishness is presented by the authors of the novels. One key concept that has allowed me to understand the importance of Jewishness, and that has helped me analyze the representation of Jewishness in the two novels, is Daniel Itzkovitz's characterization of Jews as fluid and chameleonic beings who live outside of a definite race and who can, at the same time, identify with different races because of their ability in assimilation. The fluidity and malleability of Jews strongly contrasts with the rigidity of the black and white races. What Itzkovitz's theory has helped me demonstrate is that, in *Caucasia* and in *The Human Stain*, passing for Jewish has brought the protagonists to understand themselves more fully, allowing them to accept those fragments of their identities that were precluded by either the black or white race.

What was pivotal for Birdie in resolving her fragmentation was understanding and accepting herself not as only black as her father saw her, and not as only white as her grandmother pretended she was. *Caucasia* is Birdie's journey to accepting herself as mixed, as both black and white. The Jewish identity becomes for her the identity that represents her as whole, as it allows her to embrace the parts of her that are white – and, as white, allow her to be accepted and not stigmatized – and at the same time maintain the parts of her that are black, such as the entirety of her memories of the past, and the connection with the black members of her family. Birdie's identification as a Jew is possible because it is an attribute of Jews to remain liminal, and therefore in-between. As a Jew, Birdie can elude a direct and definite categorization. Instead, she has the option of 'having the best of both worlds', quite literally. As a mixed girl passing for Jewish, Birdie has the advantages of whiteness and the advantages of blackness, and she no longer feels incomplete in the constraint of only one race.

The same is true for Coleman, whose progressive identification as a Jew is also a process to become self-made. If for Birdie being Jewish meant keeping the aspect of the community that is often found in minority groups, for Coleman it is a search for the singular, for a being that is outside not only of race but of the plurality, while at the same time remaining detached from the mainstream and its ideals of discrimination and racial superiority.

What has ultimately emerged at the end of this work is that passing for Jewish in contemporary literature, and above all in the two analyzed examples, is not the complete abandonment of the black

race, nor the absolute acceptance of the white race. The importance of Jewishness in the act of passing stands in the fact that it is a middle ground with blurred edges, that forms a bridge between the two poles of the race binary and that also extends to comprise it all, reuniting all the pieces of one's identity that had been distanced and separated by the division. The analyzed characters are almost black, and almost white, because they are neither, stuck in a racist world in which they falter to express themselves as they wish. Through Jewishness, they acquire the status of being both, united and resolved in one racial identification that can comprise all.

It remains to be seen whether more passing literary works will be written and published in the next years. Certainly, race and the problematics that surround it have not been completely resolved, and they are still present in today's society. What is certain is that these contemporary passing novels have offered a possible means of reparation and healing in the wait for an actual solution. The message that stands behind these narratives, after all, is that completeness does not derive from one single race, but by the union of several different races, suggesting that the human race might perhaps one day prevail as the only recognized categorization.

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