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Victims and Aggressors: Black and Jewish Interethnic Relationships in Contemporary American Literature

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VICTIMS AND AGGRESSORS: BLACK AND JEWISH INTERETHNIC
RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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May 2009

Accepted by:
Dr. Michael LeMahieu, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

Though blacks and Jews are often portrayed together in African-American and Jewish-American writing, the reasons for the juxtapositions are curious. Contemporary authors have created a close relationship between blacks and Jews that, perhaps with the exception of their cooperation during the Civil Rights movement, historically did not exist. But, the relationship between these two groups in literature offers a unique perspective on American racial and ethnic social structures because both blacks and Jews are considered minority groups, yet they also maintain a hierarchical relationship with one another. By employing black and Jewish characters, American writers, especially Jewish-American writers, create a platform from which to speak about racial and ethnic binaries and the construction of interethnic relationships within American culture. I explore these binaries using the themes of guilt, sexuality and Democracy. The novels discussed in this thesis look at the confrontation between the white power structure and ethnic minorities as well as between the minority ethnic groups themselves to explain the difficulties in this articulation because of the deeply entrenched nature of binary ethnic relationships within American culture. This thesis intervenes in the discourse concerning the representations of blacks and Jews in literature and helps to illuminate interethnic relationships within American culture. Authors Saul Bellow, Alice Walker, Lore Segal and Philip Roth employ binary systems in their novels in order to illustrate how Jewish characters operate in an undefined position between blacks and whites and the consequences of their liminality. Though binaries characterize much of the relationship between races and ethnicities, the Jewish characters destabilize these hierarchical social

structures, if only temporarily, opening up the possibility for interethnic relationships to exist outside of a hierarchical system.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Berta Samartino –
a woman who gives new meaning to the word “survivor.”

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The completion of this project would not be possible without the encouragement, support, and patience of a number of important people. My thesis advisor, Dr. Michael LeMahieu, and my thesis readers, Dr. Kimberly Manganelli and Dr. Angela Naimou all offered much-appreciated encouragement and guidance during this process. I am also sincerely grateful for a number of professors from both my undergraduate and graduate programs who checked in with me from time to time and helped to remind me of my love for English literature.

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For my Mom and Dad there are few words to express my gratitude for their unwavering support. They have been and are great teachers, and I will carry their lessons with me always. My sister, as usual, has challenged and encouraged me, and for that I am grateful. My in-laws are always a source of motivation and encouragement, and I feel very fortunate to call them family.

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INTRODUCTION

Though blacks and Jews are often portrayed together in African-American and Jewish-American writing, the reasons for the juxtapositions are curious. As Emily Miller Budick maintains, the two ethnic groups did not have much interaction with one another and “such interaction as did exist occurred only among slender elements of both populations, and, even then, only at very specific moments and under highly particular circumstances” (1). Contemporary authors have created a close relationship between blacks and Jews that, perhaps with the exception of their cooperation during the Civil Rights movement, did not exist. But, the relationship between these two groups in literature offers a unique perspective on American racial and ethnic social structures because both blacks and Jews are considered minority groups, yet they also maintain a hierarchical relationship with one another. By employing black and Jewish characters, American writers, especially Jewish-American writers, create a platform from which to speak about racial and ethnic binaries and the construction of interethnic relationships within American culture.

Gloria Naylor’s novel *Bailey’s Café* is a useful novel with which to begin looking at the complexities involved in representations of African Americans and Jewish Americans in literature. On one hand, the interaction depicted by Naylor between Bailey, an African American, and Gabe, a Jew, supports a hierarchical view of the African-American and Jewish American relationship. For instance, Gabe, a pawnbroker, owns a store that is never open while the café that Bailey owns is never closed. Whenever new faces enter the street at Gabe’s pawnshop they are always directed to Bailey’s café by a

sign on Gabe's door that indicates his store is not open. Gabe's pawnshop is not a destination like Bailey's café; rather, it serves only as a directory. The Jewish character represents only a place through which to pass, not a stopping point, placing the characters and the shops they own on unequal footing.

On the other hand, Naylor depicts the black and Jewish relationship as one that can be mutually illuminating instead of as a relationship that serves only one group. Naylor portrays Bailey and Gabe as far from being friends, but their relationship is still described as fruitful in its ability to produce understanding. Both Bailey and Gabe experience individual traumas and the collective traumas of their ethnic groups. Bailey was drafted into World War II and forced to fight for a country that did not see him as an equal. On top of his own experience as a soldier, he also must deal with the racism present in America as a result of slavery. Gabe experienced personal trauma in the Holocaust, and added to this latest persecution of his people, Gabe also carries with him all the past atrocities committed against Jews. Bailey says of Gabe, "When he refers to his people, he doesn't just mean the refugees fleeing from Europe, he means the whole ball of wax...For him Hitler was only the latest punk on the scene" (Naylor 219). Bailey's statement concerning Gabe is easily applied to his own life circumstances in America; the Jim Crow laws to which Bailey refers later in this passage are just the latest curtailment of blacks' rights in America (Naylor 220). The pain associated with both men's heritages is part of what places them on this street together, showing that though they have experienced different types of prejudice, they ultimately reside in similar positions. The characters are described as facing extreme prejudice, and while their

specific experiences are different, they know what it feels like to be the “other.” Bailey and Gabe not only find themselves on the same street but also own shops there, which Naylor uses to represent their different experiences and shared outcomes. Her juxtaposition of an African American and a Jew illustrates that despite their troubled relationship, these two ethnic groups can share enough to learn about and to understand each other.

Naylor’s novel helps to set the stage for a discussion of binaries that structure interethnic relationships. Bailey and Gabe both experience prejudice from whites, which creates a hierarchy between whites and non-whites, and Naylor’s juxtaposition of a black and a Jew forms another binary between those two specific groups. In this thesis, I explore these binaries and their effects on ethnic relationships in Saul Bellow’s *The Victim* and *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, Lore Segal’s *Her First American* and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*.

In the early part of the twentieth century, being American entailed assimilating as much as possible to the white majority social group within American culture. In Jewish-American author Saul Bellow’s 1947 novel *The Victim*, the Jewish protagonist is well integrated into gentile life. Still, he is often faced with both latent and conspicuous anti-Semitism even though he does not maintain overtly Jewish characteristics. The novel looks at Jews’ victimized position within American society to find out why this position becomes the one in which Jews are placed. *The Victim* offers a rich exploration of the ways American society views ethnic subjects, which helps to lay a groundwork for the other novels investigated in this thesis.

The Victim anticipates a change that occurred in the Jewish community between the years immediately following World War II and the beginning of the Civil Rights movement in which Jews switched from assimilation with white culture to maintaining their differences from it. By the 1950s, American Jews began claiming the Holocaust as part of their ethnic group's history and wanted their community to make this tragedy an important part of their group identification. Therefore, the community made it a cultural theme in the Jewish schools' curricula. Interestingly, in most pieces of literature included in the curriculum of Jewish American schools the Holocaust actually "represented Jewry's strength, victory, and courage more than its victimization, vulnerability, and suffering" (Sheramy 287). Moreover, the school lessons stressed that the Jews did not allow themselves to be simply overrun by the Nazis, but rather they taught that the European Jews seized power over their situation and helped bring down the Nazis (Sheramy 288). Consequently, the Jewish victimization present in Bellow's novel was swept aside as the community tried to emphasize its bravery and strength. It follows then that the struggle for Jewish identity between being labeled as victims and aggressors becomes a prominent theme in Jewish-American literature.

Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) explores the Jew's precarious situation in America through the lens of a victim/aggressor binary, represented in the novel by an African-American, an Israeli Jew, and an American Jew. Bellow's novel becomes a product of its times – the 1960s – in which victims and aggressors abound in an effort to create and occupy a space in an exploding and mutating society. Couched in the new militancy of the Civil Rights movement with the rise of Black Power, the Israeli Six Day

War, and the remnants of the Holocaust, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* asks the question “what is required now?” after the 1960s have ended. But the characterizations of both the victims and the aggressors, sometimes one person in the same, still exist. Through his portrayal of the American Holocaust survivor Artur Sammler, the Israeli Holocaust survivor Eisen, and the African-American pickpocket, Bellow explores the roles of both victims and aggressors and the human degradation that results from participation in this binary.

The victim/aggressor binary put forth by Bellow's *The Victim* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* creates the initial space in which the subjects of my chapters are grounded. Because a victim/aggressor binary requires a two-place relationship in which its participants are locked in a hierarchical struggle, the binary creates themes through which this struggle is lived. The first theme explored is guilt, in which both blacks and Jews are assigned and assign guilt by other ethnic groups. The guilt in these novels, though, is not attached to a specific action for which the characters can atone. Rather, the guilt is attached to the characters' ethnic identifications, creating a situation in which guilt can never be erased. Consequently, guilt, because it is always present in interethnic interactions, plays an immense role in shaping the ways in which ethnic groups identify themselves as well as each other. Ralph Ellison writes about Jewish guilt as it relates to the white power structure that places both blacks and Jews in an inferior position: “I feel uncomfortable whenever I discover Jewish intellectuals writing as though *they* were guilty of enslaving my grandparents, or as though the *Jews* were responsible for the system of segregation. Not only do they have enough troubles of their own, as the saying goes, but Negroes know this only too well” (qtd. in Budick 22). Ellison's statement not

only places blacks, Jews, and whites in a conversation concerning guilt but he also places blacks and Jews in a similar situation in which they share the “troubles” of prejudice aimed against their respective groups. Consequently, guilt is used as a way to talk about the construction American culture through the intersection of white, black, and Jewish ethnicities’ reactions to guilt.

In chapter two, a victim/aggressor binary manifests itself as a hierarchical struggle in which ethnicities vie for power. The time period in which the novels are set, the second half of the twentieth century, represents an America in flux. The Civil Rights movement changed the face of the proposed homogenous America, forcing a recognition of the racial inequality that structured American society. A victim/aggressor binary provides a useful lens through which to explore sexuality. Conquering the victims through sexual mastery helps the aggressors stabilize their power structure; however the novelists complicate the causal relationship between sexual mastery and victimization by allowing the victims a certain amount of power over their own conquering. Therefore, power becomes a relative term in these novels, allowing for the free play of power between ethnic groups. With power no longer tied to a binary system, members of different ethnic groups are allowed to share power, engendering new possibilities for relationships between ethnic groups rather than ones defined by a hierarchical system.

Chapter three discusses democracy’s relationship to a binary structure. The novels reveal a democratic paradox in which a promise of equality is contradicted by individual sovereignty. Democracy, which plays a role in how ethnicities interact with one another politically, implodes when it is viewed from a minority standpoint – a

standpoint that is often unheard when it comes to an American governmental system that serves the majority instead of the minority. Equality and individual sovereignty collide in the novels, but without the recognition of this collision, the democracy not only falters but collapses altogether. With democracy no longer politically structuring interethnic relationships, alternate ways of structuring society, such as othering, are revealed. The othering portrayed depicts similitude rather than alterity as the novels explore shared constructions of black and Jewish identity. The friction displayed between blacks and Jews in the novels explored in this thesis is the result of an effort to maintain distinction from each other in a society that attempts to force homogeneity.

The literature on which I am focusing covers several decades and is written from various points-of-view, which will give a broad scope to the topic and, at the same time, allow for close readings of common themes and differentiating reactions to those themes. Along with Bellow's *The Victim* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, this thesis discusses Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Lore Segal's *Her First American* (1985), and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2001). Each of these pieces of literature, except for *The Victim*, juxtaposes blacks and Jews. While it is true that African Americans and Jewish Americans share some commonalities in their respective groups' histories, such as being a part of a diaspora and being persecuted for their racial/ethnic heritages, it is also true that once in the United States, blacks and Jews faced very different circumstances. The novels discussed in this thesis were written after a major shift in the perceived racial makeup of the United States. Representations of groups, including Irish, Italian, and Jewish-Americans, were transformed from racially different to racially similar to Anglo-

Saxon whites. According to Matthew Frye Jacobson, between the 1920s and 1960s, “concerns of ‘the major divisions’ would so overwhelm the national consciousness that the ‘minor divisions,’ which had so preoccupied Americans during the period of massive European immigration, would lose their salience in American culture and disappear altogether as racially based differences” (92). Consequently, Jews, who were considered part of the “minor divisions” and seen as being racially different from whites, were suddenly considered white, making Jewish identity no longer a racial category but instead an ethnic one. Therefore, as Jacobson argues, with other white “race-types” subsumed into the white category, the “binary racial arrangement” became the dominant view in American political culture, polarizing even further American blacks and Jews (98).

Ethnicity and race are slippery terms in all of the novels explored in this thesis, especially when it comes to a discussion of the Jewish characters. Ethnicity is often considered as a racial marker and becomes associated with cultural themes. At times the authors portray their Jewish characters as belonging to the white racial group, while at other times the Jewish characters are more closely aligned with blacks. The Jewish characters’ movements between the black and white terms of the racial binary is in part historical, but the authors do more than just repeat a shift in the way Jews are categorized within American society. By allowing their Jewish characters to move between binary terms, the authors detach not only Jewish ethnicity but ethnicity in general from assumed cultural markers. By calling into question the production of Jewishness, the authors also call into question the production of whiteness and blackness, which destabilizes the American racial hierarchy. In her essay “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of

Particularity,” Robyn Wiegman states that abolishing white supremacy “involves making whiteness visible as a racial category by interrupting the ‘natural’ assumption that people who look white are invested in being white” (143). The novelists, by aligning their Jewish characters with black characters, enact Wiegman’s interruption, breaking Jews away from their prescribed assimilation with whites and blacks away from their binary relationship with whites. Of course, this interruption of a socially structuring hierarchical system causes a number of questions to be raised: In the absence of a dominant ruling class, who makes the rules concerning interethnic interaction? The suspension of the social hierarchy causes such anxiety that, as Dean Franco puts it, the “moment of identification” between the ethnic subject and dominant white power structure “is freighted with the overthrow of an entire linguistic and symbolic order. To articulate a theory of the subject which neither relies upon the dominant other’s perspective nor partakes of the other’s metaphysics involves an entire questioning of the frame of questioning” (Franco 156). The novels I explore in this thesis look at the confrontation between the white power structure and ethnic minorities as well as between the minority ethnic groups themselves to explain the difficulties in this articulation because of the deeply entrenched nature of binary ethnic relationships within American culture.

This thesis intervenes in the discourse concerning the representations of blacks and Jews in literature and helps to illuminate interethnic relationships within American culture. Bellow, Walker, Segal and Roth employ binary systems in their novels in order to illustrate how Jewish characters operate liminally within them and the consequences of their liminality. Though binaries characterize much of the relationship between races and

ethnicities, the Jewish characters destabilize these hierarchical social structures, if only temporarily, opening up the possibility for interethnic relationships to exist outside of a hierarchical system.

CHAPTER ONE
RECYCLED GUILT: THE MATTER OF ETHNIC AMERICAN
INTERACTION

In Saul Bellow's *The Victim*, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, and Lore Segal's *Her First American*, guilt serves as a trope of ethnicity. To be named as an ethnic subject is to be always already guilty. The novels trade on a language of owing and obligation in which the ethnic subjects either exact or struggle to pay off a debt. Consequently, the novels produce hierarchies based on ethnic group identification in which one ethnic group maintains power over another. The basis for group identification is elusive because the individuals who agree to become part of the group do not stay individuals. The individuals form a group based around the debt from which the group members derive their identity. Identity and debt become inextricably intertwined, creating a situation in which debt can never be fully expunged because it is based on identity rather than a discrete action. Guilt, then, becomes a pre-existent term in the construction of interaction between ethnicities within American culture because group identification leads to a production of language that serves to perpetuate the link between guilt and ethnicity and to uphold the segregated social structure.

Ethnic subjects as already guilty and always owing

Bellow's *The Victim*, written in 1947, explores the language of debt and obligation and its relationship to ethnicity. *The Victim*'s two main characters, Leventhal and Allbee, argue over who needs to atone for creating friction in their relationship.

According to Leventhal, Allbee used an ethnic slur when referring to Leventhal's Jewish heritage; however, according to Allbee, Leventhal caused him to be fired in order to exact revenge for the ethnic slur. Consequently, the two characters are locked in a standstill because they cannot decide on who deserves original blame. Though it could be argued that both characters are to blame for an action, it is Allbee, the white character, who Bellow portrays as first placing blame on Leventhal, the Jewish character. Therefore, the novel begins with the ethnic character, Leventhal, as already guilty. Beginning the novel with guilt previously assigned allows Bellow to explore the roots of ethnic guilt within American culture. By setting the novel's source of conflict in finding blame, Bellow sets the stage for a novel based on a hierarchical power struggle in which one entity attempts to exact atonement from another.

Bellow portrays ethnicity and ethnic subjects as obligated to a power system that places them in a debtor situation. For example, once Leventhal expresses sorrow at the news of Allbee's wife's death, Allbee tells Leventhal that he "should be" sorry to which Leventhal responds "'Of course I should be' not quite aware that he was acknowledging a charge" (64). The "should be" employed in this passage refers to an original set of terms that defines the two men's interactions with one another. It is fitting that Allbee is the one to enact the set of terms because Allbee's name represents the dominant white culture's view of what all "should" be. Allbee's name is a constant reminder to Leventhal and the audience that Leventhal does not belong to the "Allbee" category because of his Jewishness, furthering Bellow's point that ethnic subjects are viewed as debtors to a white-dominant power structure. In Ashley Montagu's 1946 article titled

“What Every Child and Adult Should Know about ‘Race,’” he argued that racial definitions had become so loaded with assumptions connecting race to “all of the important traits of body, and soul, of character and personality” that the term “race” needed to be eradicated from the vocabulary (Jacobson 101). Leventhal, because he is part of the Jewish “race” has a personality and/or character flaw that makes him guilty. According to the terms of racial interaction then, Leventhal transgressed, and therefore, he is the one who should atone. However, the transgression is not tied into an action; rather, it is tied into what Leventhal is – Jewish. Consequently, Bellow implicitly connects Allbee’s misfortune with Leventhal’s ethnicity, making ethnicity, not the human being, the culprit. Bellow interestingly uses the word “charge” here to illustrate a connection between Leventhal’s ethnicity and his responsibility in causing Allbee to lose his wife. By not only answering the charge but answering it affirmatively, Bellow gives the impression that Leventhal is on trial – that he is being held accountable for and admits to a wrongdoing. Thus, the ethnic subject, in this case Leventhal, is considered already guilty by others and himself because by being ethnic, he fails to comply with an original set of terms used to define the society in which he lives.

In establishing a conversation about guilt, Bellow also establishes a conversation concerning atonement for the guilt that is assigned. Bellow introduces the language of debt in the novel when Leventhal says to Allbee, “I’m letting you sleep here tonight to return a favor, and that’s all” (148). To return a favor implies that someone did something for Leventhal; however, the favor is never explicitly connected to a particular debt, pointing back to an originating feature of American society that causes ethnic

subjects to feel as if they owe something for committing a wrongful action. Without an explicit debt to repay, no amount of “favor returning” can balance the metaphorical ledger sheet to which Leventhal refers. Subsequently, Bellow reveals a never-ending attempt at repayment for an imagined debt, making Leventhal guilty not just for his ethnicity but for his inability to repay the debt he owes. It is important that Bellow ends his novel with a chance meeting between Leventhal and Allbee several years after their major encounter in which Allbee tells Leventhal “I know I owe you something” (264). Thus, a debt is still owed but this time it is Allbee who owes it. This ending could be read as a possible cessation of the link between ethnicity and guilt because the representative of the white power structure, Allbee, takes on a part of the debt; however, the fact that a debt still exists and is still related to an ethnicity, illustrates only a flip of the white/non-white binary, not an erasure of it.

Walker’s novel *Meridian* makes explicit the connection between guilt and ethnicity as well as puts forth a language of obligation in order to atone for the guilt. The novel, which focuses on the intersection between blacks and Jews during the Civil Rights movement, places the discussion of guilt as it relates to race in an almost courtroom-like setting, underscoring the causal relationship between ethnicity and guilt within the society of the novel. Tommy Odds, a black civil rights activist, is shot when he is seen walking with Lynne, a Jewish woman also involved in the Civil Rights movement and married to Tommy’s friend Truman. As a result of the shooting, Tommy loses his arm, causing him to seek out blame. Like Allbee, Tommy and Truman seek atonement from

an ethnic subject, Lynne, even though she is only indirectly involved in the shooting.

Walker writes:

By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness. [Truman] could not reduce the logic any further, in that direction. Then the question was, is it possible to be guilty of a color? Of course black people for years were “guilty” of being black. Slavery was punishment for their “crime.” But even if he abandoned this search for Lynne’s guilt, because it ended, logically enough, in racism, he was forced to search through other levels for it. (140)

In this passage Walker exemplifies the debtor identity ethnic subjects occupy in American society by employing a slavery metaphor. Enslaved blacks are portrayed as the debtors and are forced to “pay” off their debt through forced labor. Walker’s discussion here illuminates the always owing and always guilty nature of ethnic subjects because slaves, though they worked to pay for their “crime,” rarely reached the point at which they could call themselves free. Over one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Walker’s novel uses the slavery metaphor to explain how ethnic subjects, in this case a Jewish woman, are still being found guilty and punished for a crime they cannot help but commit. Lynne cannot help but be white when viewed through the black perspectives of Tommy and Truman, illustrating the black/white binary. But Lynne’s Jewishness complicates the binary because her ethnicity and her association with blacks keep her from being completely absorbed into the white power structure. Because Lynne is considered an ethnic subject she automatically receives a guilty verdict and now owes reparations for her crime. Lynne’s character here marks an interesting shift in the way

Jewishness is viewed in *Meridian* and *The Victim*. Viewed from a black perspective, Lynne is categorized as white; however, viewed from Allbee's white perspective, Leventhal is categorized as an other, associating Leventhal's Jewishness with blackness. Jewishness is caught in the middle between black and white, showing Bellow and Walker's attempts at shaking up the assumptions associated with ethnicity by making Jewish ethnicity a fluid term.

Truman admits that Lynne's guilt is rooted in racism, but instead of allowing the admission to drop the charges against her, he continues searching for other reasons to blame Lynne. Walker points out this search in order to highlight the entrenched nature of ethnic guilt. In this passage, prejudice becomes a type of logic that allows these characters to think through their group's place versus another group's place in society in order to ensure group survival. Lynne must be guilty, showing how deeply and easily guilt becomes pulled into ethnic interactions. In this scene, logic is borne out of a need to construct a worldview that places one group, blacks, in a secure position from another group, whites. Assigning guilt serves as a buffer between the two groups that not only protects one group from the other but that also supports segregation.

Hierarchies based on ethnic group identifications

Guilt is assigned by outside forces as well as internal forces, affecting the way the characters identify themselves and identify others. Bellow underscores the connection between Leventhal's ethnicity and his feelings of guilt during a conversation Leventhal

has with his close friend, Williston, about his involvement in Allbee's job loss.

Leventhal thinks that:

[he] had used the word "evil" a while ago, and what had given rise to it was a feeling that Williston had made the accusation under an influence against which he could not help himself. If he was ready to believe that he was such and such a person – why avoid saying it? – that he would carry out a scheme like that because he was a Jew, then the turn he always feared had come and all good luck was canceled and all favors melted away. (81)

Bellow writes this passage from Leventhal's point of view, showing Leventhal's own connection between his ethnicity and his responsibility for causing Allbee's downward spiral. According to Bellow, the catalyst for the feelings of guilt comes from an outside source -Williston in this instance - who is, in turn, influenced by an outside source "against which he could not help himself." Consequently, Leventhal's guilt is not originally self-imposed, but is imposed by a force twice removed. Though guilt originates outside of Leventhal's character, Bellow demonstrates how the guilt becomes internalized and perpetuated once it is associated with one's ethnicity, one's very identity. "The turn" to which Bellow refers in the passage represents this internalization, and Leventhal comes to represent not just a guilty man but a guilty Jew, which separates him from all of mankind and identifies him only with other Jews. Leventhal's own perception of himself changes here because the passage illustrates Leventhal cutting himself off from any type of redemption. He is no longer allowed good luck or favors because his guilt is now completely subsumed in his ethnicity instead of an action for which he can

atone. Therefore this passage illustrates the creation of a hierarchy in which Leventhal places himself in the lower category of a binary because of his inability to be redeemed due to his ethnicity.

Bellow pays close attention to hierarchies based on ethnic group identifications in *The Victim* from the very beginning of the novel. In his first chapter, he uses the word “brethren” twice to refer to Jews. The first time the word is used by a gentile, and the second time it is used by Leventhal. In both instances, though, the term has a negative connotation, illustrating the hierarchical nature of ethnicities in American culture. In the first instance, Leventhal’s boss Mr. Beard says, “Takes unfair advantage...Like the rest of his brethren. I’ve never known one who wouldn’t. Always please themselves first” (3). By referring to Jews as “them” and “brethren” Bellow lumps all Jews into a category that is completely opposite and separate from the category that Beard sees himself as occupying. By placing Beard as Leventhal’s boss, Bellow sets the stage for a power hierarchy, which he further underscores by making Beard sound as though he is morally superior to the “them” to which Leventhal belongs. Brethren is used the second time when Leventhal decides not to return to work after a family emergency. He thinks, “Beard would interpret his coming in now as an admission that he was in the wrong. Moreover it might seem that he was trying to establish himself as one of the ‘brethren’ who was different. No, not even a hint of that...” (9). In this passage, Bellow depicts the power hierarchy to which ethnic subjects are subjected. Leventhal recognizes that, according to his society, he belongs to a specific group – the “brethren.” Furthermore, this group is separated from the group that maintains the power, and in order to receive

acceptance and/or positive recognition, the “brethren” group members have to do something, in this case return to work, to prove that they are different from their negatively viewed counterparts. Here, Bellow shows that Leventhal not only recognizes himself as part of a different group from his boss, but also that he sees no reason not to identify himself with his “brethren.” By refusing to return to work, Leventhal both refuses the power hierarchy set up by Beard while at the same time plays into the hierarchy by occupying a role defined for him by Beard. Bellow’s novel depicts hierarchies in which those named and who view themselves as ethnic subjects are forced into group categories.

Walker’s novel looks at the shifting nature of group identification based on hierarchies. *Meridian*’s courtroom-like scene in Tommy’s hospital room helps to lay out an “us” versus “them” mindset in which those who consider themselves part of the majority set themselves apart from the minority instead of allowing for a pluralistic society. While Tommy and Truman try Lynne for her guilt in Tommy’s shooting, Truman decides that “Lynne was guilty on at least two counts; of being with them, and of being, period” (142). The antecedent to “them” is unclear in Walker’s text; it could mean whites or it could mean the blacks with whom Lynne was walking on the night of the shooting. Either way, the “them” to whom Lynne belongs is decided for her by another person, and the “them” to which she is placed determines her identity. If she is placed with whites, then she is a traitor to and determined guilty by her black friends; however, if she is placed with blacks, then she is a traitor to and determined guilty by her perceived biological race. The ambiguity of the term “them” shows how easily group identification

can shift depending upon who is doing the identifying and thus setting up the hierarchies. The ambiguity of group identification is further played out in Lynne's character that embodies several identifications: female, white, and Jewish. When describing what Lynne felt like when seen with a group of blacks by whites Walker said, "They made her conscious, heavily, of her Jewishness, when in fact, they wanted to make her feel her whiteness" (196). Thus, Walker shows that the attempt to externally categorize ethnic groups can have unintended internal consequences, illustrating the slippery nature of ethnic identification. Consequently, the hierarchies that are created in *Meridian* such as the ones between blacks and whites and whites and Jews root themselves in group categories; however, as Walker depicts, these categories are incredibly unstable whether they are assigned internally or externally.

The center cannot hold

Walker and Roth both write about enacting the personal "I" and refusing group identity in order to rid their characters of this never-ending cycle of guilt. However, both novelists complicate this enactment by making it nearly impossible in order to illustrate the constant pull of groups on personal identity and consequently the embedded nature of guilt in American culture. In Walker's novel, one of *Meridian*'s poems begins with "i want to put an end to guilt" and the other ends with "...and we, cast out alone/ to heal/ and re-create/ ourselves (235; 236). Even though the "i" in the first poem seeks out individual responsibility for ending the cycle of guilt, the "we" in the second poem still places a claim on the individual, canceling out individual responsibility and thus the

possibility of the ending of guilt. Moreover, Walker ends her novel with Meridian saying, “Besides, all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth” (242). Meridian’s poems illustrate that though individuality may be possible for a discrete length of time, but Walker, by the end of the novel, shows that it is not possible indefinitely because even those who are truly alone will find their way back to a “we” that shares something in common with one another, including race and/or ethnicity.

Walker titles her last chapter “Release,” but what the release is from remains ambiguous, which runs parallel with Walker’s attention to the ambiguous nature of group identification. In an optimistic view, the release means Meridian’s successful break from the “us” versus “them” scenario, freeing herself from guilt; however, Walker does not end her novel with Meridian walking off into the sunset – she ends it with Truman clutching Meridian’s sleeping bag wondering “if Meridian knew the sentence of bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed on herself – and lived through – must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them” (242). By concluding her novel with this scene, Walker illustrates that the release was in fact just a passing on of guilt. Meridian might have released herself from it, but she leaves it for everyone else to suffer through. Walker chooses the words “bearing” and “borne” in this passage to connote reproduction in order to underscore the cyclical nature of guilt. According to this passage Meridian released herself from guilt by bearing guilt and that guilt that she gave birth to now rests on everyone else’s shoulders giving rise to another “them” or group identification. Thus Walker’s novel ends in *medias res* in which another group based on guilt is born.

Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* reveals the unstructured center of group identification that causes the racial hierarchies to be unstable. The novel chronicles the life of Coleman Silk, a black university professor who spends the majority of his life passing as a Jew. Roth's novel concerns itself not just with ethnic group labels but with the instability of these labels when the very essence of a group identity becomes disrupted with an enactment of the personal "I." Walker and Bellow's texts mostly concern themselves with external manifestations of ethnic identification and internal reactions to those manifestations. The "I" in those novels is not the "raw I" enacted by Coleman. The "raw I" discussed by Roth is an enactment of complete individuality without any identification to a group. This is in direct contrast to Meridian's "I" that eventually finds its way back to a group and Leventhal's "I" that is greatly influenced by non-Jewish perceptions. Roth's novel looks at the formation of group identification on the level of the individual to illustrate that the individual no longer exists as an individual once he or she agrees to subsume his or personal identity to that of the group's. The individual, as proposed by Roth, can be likened to Jacques Derrida's center that "is not the center" (196). In his essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play" Derrida writes, "The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality..., the totality *has its center elsewhere*" (196). Consequently, the group, or "totality" that centers itself on the individual's decision to become part of the group no longer has a center because the individual is no longer an individual. Therefore, the group has no center and becomes unstable.

The Human Stain concerns itself with the irrecoverable nature of guilt when it is tied together with ethnic group identifications. Because of the constant implosion of the group, the feelings of debt and obligation that originally give rise to the group identifications can never be expunged and feelings of guilt arise due to the inability to “repay” the debt. Coleman leaves his job as a university professor because he is convicted of using the racial slur “spooks” when referring to two black students who were absent from his class. Coleman looks for support from his colleagues, especially from Herb Keble, who Coleman brought in as the first black professor at the college, but Coleman is disappointed by his friends. Coleman says, “But Herb too has been radicalized by the racism of Jews like me. ‘I can’t be with you on this, Coleman. I’m going to have to be with them...To my face. *I’m going to have to be with them.* Them!’” (16). The “them” here, like in Walker’s novel, is ambiguous and important in its repetition. It could refer to the “them” that Coleman had to overcome in order to bring a black professor to Athena College, or it could be the “them” that are trying to accuse Coleman of racism. Roth is not ambiguous, however, on the fact that despite the group to which “them” refers, Coleman is unable to find any support from any group to help him prove his innocence, making Coleman an “I,” at least for a short period of time, instead of part of a group. Unlike Walker’s optimistic *Meridian*, Coleman cannot put an end to guilt. The “I” is impotent in its ability to erase guilt because the “I” is always eventually subsumed by group identification. While Roth’s novel at times attempts to make space for the “raw I”, unattached to any group, the “I” eventually falls victim to a group tying the individual in with the guilt assigned by or to the group:

You can't let the big they impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you. Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. 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*. (108)

According to the beginning of this passage, the "raw I" keeps the individual away from the always collapsing black hole of a "we," or group, that is "dying to suck you in," but the ending of the passage leans towards a more pessimistic view of one's ability to actually end any kind of group identification. *E Pluribus unum* refers to the ideal of people from different nations coming together to form the United States, but Roth's novel plays with this meaning to show the inescapability of any one from the larger group. Therefore the "I" is stopped before it is ever allowed to fully envision itself because it is claimed by many others.

As can be seen by Roth's novel, the issue of ownership, especially of oneself, is still as relevant in a post-Civil Rights movement society as it was in a post-Civil War society. In his discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Dean Franco explores Morrison's use of the word "claim" as a way to show the "slippery nature of ownership in the nineteenth century" (83). Part of what makes ownership so slippery is the language used to represent claim. In Roth's passage, pronouns abound in an effort to exemplify the number of different groups seeking to place claim upon the individual. According to Franco, "Claiming rests on the veracity and verifiability of the 'I,' and to acknowledge the kinds of claims described so far means recognizing the life and work of the one who

makes the claim” (86). In a final effort to claim himself Coleman asks the novel’s narrator to write a book telling his story, which would stand testament to the life and work of Coleman and would establish him forever as an “I.” Roth, however, complicates this final enactment of the “I” by telling the audience that Coleman attempted to write his own autobiography and failed. Consequently, the book that Zuckerman writes is really a step removed from Coleman’s “I,” making Coleman’s attempt at reaching a point in which he has no group identification a failure because his “I” is reconstructed through Zuckerman’s impression of him. Thus Roth makes the verifiability of the “raw I” impossible, showing that group identification trumps individuality. Without the opportunity for true individual action, group identification rules social interaction. Consequently, the basis for group identification, such as ethnicity and the guilt tied to ethnic subjects, plays a fundamental role in the development of interethnic interaction.

Language’s role in perpetuating ethnic guilt

Lore Segal’s *Her First American*, like Roth’s *The Human Stain*, explores group identification’s role in the linguistic production of a social order that perpetuates the link between guilt and ethnicity. In his book *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Matthew Jacobson speaks to the effects of group identification, or race consciousness, on social relations, which are explored in Segal’s novel through the naming of groups based on racial and/or ethnic categories. In his analysis of a passage on race relations written in 1939 by Robert Ezra Park, Jacobson notes:

[p]hysical markers generate race consciousness, and race consciousness in its turn influences social relations. The content of race, then – the specific set of traits that constitutes ‘blackness,’ for instance – is secondary to the social relations created and maintained by the consciousness that such traits stir within both those who possess them and those who do not. (105)

Race consciousness, the act of identifying oneself or another based on racial categories, produces a language that is not only self-conscious of its racial consciousness but also helps to carry on the social implications of belonging to a particular race or ethnic group. Thus, race consciousness becomes “racialized” by consciousness as people begin to recognize and articulate racial distinctions (Jacobson 105).

Her First American highlights the turning point to which Jacobson refers in which race consciousness evolves into a consciousness that is racialized. The novel, a bildungsroman of Ilka Weissnix, a young Jewish refugee from Hitler’s Europe, chronicles Ilka’s indoctrination into American society by Carter, an African American, instead of by her Jewish cousin Fishgoppel. Consequently, Ilka does not assimilate into white society; rather, she negotiates a space between her white skin and her perception of America, which is greatly determined by her relationship with African Americans. Segal uses Ilka and Carter’s relationship to explore American race relations in the 1950s. Through a conversation between Carter and Ilka concerning physical appearance and its effect on how one is described, Segal depicts how language assumes a connection between physical markings, such as race, and abstract notions of behavior. Carter says to Ilka:

“...Give you a test. You’re at the wedding and the skinny fellow with the nose asks you, ‘Who’s that out in the kitchen?’ Are you going to tell him, ‘It’s the Negro guzzling Chivas Regal?’”

“‘No! Of course not!’ said Ilka...”

“‘Or would you say, ‘It’s the Jew in the kitchen?’”

“No, I don’t say that!” She said.

“No,” Carter said, “you don’t say that. You say, ‘it’s that guy in the tweed jacket drinking himself into a coma.’ But, say, I’m an Englishman drinking myself into a coma – you’d say, ‘It’s that English chap in the kitchen,’ wouldn’t you?”

“But that’s different,” said Ilka. (39-40)

This exchange between Ilka and Carter brings up several points about Segal’s novel. One is that she, like the other novelists discussed in this chapter, pays close attention to group identification. Negroes, Jews, and Englishmen comprise the different groups of which the hypothetical figure is said to be a part. Segal’s point in this passage, though, is to show that not all group identifications carry with them the same weight. The racial and ethnic identifications are not acceptable whereas the identification based on nationality is. The way someone is identified then leads to conclusions about his or her acceptability in a larger culture. Thus, ethnic group identification, or the lack of it in descriptive language, leads to a repression of ethnic groups because their descriptions are not allowed, as shown by Ilka’s self-censoring. The repression of one group in favor of another is termed “protocol” in Segal’s novel. In a letter to Ilka, Carter defines protocol as the “art of not repeat not living by natural human feeling” (41). Thus protocol not only

supports the repression of certain ethnic identifications but it also reflects the conflation of those ethnic identifications with personality traits. Ilka does not just deny calling the hypothetical man “Negro” or “Jewish”; she denies it emphatically as denoted by the exclamation points after her dialogue. Segal’s emphasis in Ilka’s denial implies that something negative lurks behind identifying someone as black or Jewish. The implicit negativity ushers in a discourse concerning guilt because the ethnicities to which the ethnic identifications are applied must have done something wrong in order to be so unfavorable to society that their descriptions cannot even be uttered. Segal shows in this passage that an ethnic description carries with it not only just a concrete image of particular physical features but also cultural assumptions of negative qualifications that perpetuates guilt. Therefore, guilt becomes associated with ethnic identification, illustrating language’s ability to perpetuate the link. Moreover, Ilka’s self-censoring reveals an unwillingness to confront the relationship between guilt and ethnicity, making it easier for the relationship to continue unquestioned. By not describing someone using ethnic and/or racial terms, Ilka becomes complicit in allowing the perpetuation to proceed. Consequently, language helps to seal the relationship between being identified as an ethnic subject and also being named guilty.

Roth looks at protocol, which is called propriety in his novel, as a structuring force for group identification that is tyrannical in its ambiguity as well as its awesome power. Roth writes, “As a force, propriety is protean, a dominatrix in a thousand disguises, infiltrating, if need be, as civil responsibility, WASP dignity, women’s rights, black pride, ethnic allegiance, or emotion-laden Jewish ethical sensitivity” (153). Here,

Roth points out that depending on the group who enacts it, propriety can take on many forms, showing the changing meaning behind the word and, consequently, an unstable social structure. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Roth does not just link propriety with primarily ethnic group identifications; he claims that propriety takes on the form of those identifications. In Roth's novel, propriety does not just exist as a force that shapes language as it does in *Her First American*; instead, propriety becomes the language utilized by primarily ethnic groups in order to reverse the seeds of guilt from their groups and replant them on an oppressor group in order to make room for their ethnic group in mainstream society. Thus, propriety perpetuates the link between guilt and ethnicity by becoming the language through which ethnic groups communicate with the larger society.

Guilt as a pre-existing condition

In the novels of Bellow, Walker, Roth and Segal, guilt helps to define interactions between characters of different ethnicities, making guilt a pre-existing condition of the American societies portrayed within the books. By issuing guilty verdicts for ethnic slurs uttered before the actual beginning of their novels, Bellow and Roth both point to guilt as not only a starting point for but also a continued presence in ethnic groups' interactions, illustrating guilt's recycled quality when forming and re-forming relationships between ethnic groups. Emily Miller Budick argues that "In assuming positions of guilt within American society, Jews were assuming as well positions of power. They were identifying with the power structure, passing for white..." (23). Consequently, by

aligning themselves with whites through the use of guilt, Jews helped to create a power structure that, while perhaps unintentionally, placed themselves in a position of power over blacks. Therefore, when Truman confronts Tommy about Lynne's rape, Tommy says, "Black men get preferential treatment, man, to make up for all we been denied. She ain't been fucking you, she's been atoning for her sins" (179). Here, Walker traces interethnic interaction back to a central theme – atonement and guilt, in which Lynne, the white/Jewish character, maintains the power in a black/Jewish relationship because she uses Truman for her own purposes. Walker's passage shows that all other emotions and relationships cannot exist in and of themselves; rather, they are manifestations of an original guilt, an offense committed by existing as something different.

CHAPTER TWO
UNSTABLE CONQUERING: MAKING SPACE FOR THE FREE PLAY OF
KNOWLEDGE

As chapter one begins to explore, interethnic interaction is mediated, at least in part, by guilt; it is also mediated by sexuality, which is the focus of chapter two. In *Her First American*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and *The Human Stain* sexuality operates as a mechanism through which power and ethnicity intersect. The intersection of ethnicity and power creates a struggle in which the participants vie for dominance over one another. The novels employ voyeurism to illustrate a forced transference of power that helps to underscore racial and ethnic hierarchies. However, they also employ the trope of interethnic conquering to illustrate how sexuality subverts the structured interaction between different ethnic groups. The instability caused by the sexual relationships in which the conqueror does not maintain complete control creates a new stage upon which interethnic relations are allowed to act. Thus, sexuality becomes a space in which power and knowledge are transferred between ethnicities, allowing for equilibrium to supplant binaries within interethnic relationships.

Intersection of power and ethnicity through sexuality

A rather peculiar but almost identical scene occurs in both *Her First American* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*; a black man exposes himself to a Jewish protagonist. However, the characters that are flashed react to the scene in two completely different

ways. A comparison of these two scenes provides a useful point from which to start to examine sexuality's role in interethnic interaction.

In *Her First American*, the flasher scene takes up less than half of a page and is never referred to again. The minimalist nature of Segal's description only tells the audience that the flasher is black. Segal writes that Ilka saw "the New York subway penis, erect and deeply purple" (111). This scene is described as an almost normal occurrence in which the penis is like a generic character that would of course show up on someone's commute. Segal writes the scene as if the penis is disembodied from its owner. She says, "it touched itself lightly, rapidly to the back of Ilka's hand and disappeared...", making it sound as if the penis is acting of its own accord. Furthermore, the action is described as light and rapid, which contrasts greatly with the force behind the flasher in Bellow's novel. Segal even puts a comic spin on the scene, writing that after Ilka returns home and washes her hand where the penis touched her, she simply "wished it well" (111).

In contrast, the flasher scene in Bellow's novel is not only more violent but it also is described in great detail and serves as a catalyst for future action in the novel. Bellow describes the scene using rape imagery as Sammler is pinned against a wall and forced to look at the man's penis. Bellow writes that the pickpocket "came up behind [Sammler] quickly, and not simply behind but pressing him bodily, belly to back" (39). Bellow illustrates the scene as one resembling the animal kingdom in which a predator finally catches up to his prey. The pickpocket never talks, taking language and thus a representation of civilized society out of the picture. Furthermore, Bellow compares the

pickpocket to an animal, analogizing the pickpocket to a puma and his penis to a snake and an elephant's trunk (39). In contrast to Ilka, who is portrayed as a victim of a random encounter, Sammler is hunted and forced to submit to the pickpocket's strength – "...Sammler was required to gaze at this organ" that is displayed with "mystifying certitude" and "lordliness" (40).

The two flasher scenes' similarities are so striking that it leads one to speculate about Segal's attempt at rewriting Bellow's infamous scene. In place of Sammler, an older Jewish male, Segal places a young Jewish female. The novels' historical positions offer a possible explanation for this change; *Mr. Sammler's Planet* was written before the height of the feminist movement, while *Her First American* was written after it. The effect of the flasher scene in Bellow's novel is to mainly underscore a binary relationship between blacks and Jews in which blacks are seen in a dominating position, which is portrayed by their sexuality while Jews are viewed as weak and impotent. However, the effect of the flasher scene in Segal's novel does just the opposite. Segal writes Ilka's character as a far cry from the traditional effeminate male Jewish character, and instead portrays her as a strong and sexually potent character. The result is that Ilka's character carries with it a much stronger sense of open possibilities and of action rather than of the passiveness that Bellow's Sammler portrays. Rather than function in binary relationships, Ilka, through her activeness, can resist them, allowing her to maintain control over how she enters into relationships. Segal, in rewriting Bellow's flasher scene, gives the Jewish character more agency in determining how she decides to fit into interethnic relationships rather than having her place decided for her by someone else.

The flasher scenes, while different in their descriptions, introduce a conversation concerning the close relationship between power and ethnicity in which the relationship is determined by and manifested in sexual encounters. Before each flashing another scene occurs also involving sexuality, and these scenes help to put into clearer focus the reactions of the characters to their experience. In Segal's novel, the flashing follows a positive sexual experience Ilka just had with her African-American lover, Carter. In fact, the flasher jolts Ilka out of reminiscing about her and Carter's sexual encounter. Segal illustrates sexuality as an experience that belongs to the individual, giving the individual the power to decide how to view a sexual encounter. For example, when Ilka returns home after the flasher incident she "retained the feel of the exact temperature and extraordinarily fine gauge of the skin on the alien phallus" (111). Segal uses the word "retain" here to further underscore Ilka's possession of her sexual experience. The temperature and the feel of the flasher's penis are seen as objective facts that are completely devoid of any association with the flasher's ethnicity or character. Thus, sexuality, and in this case, interethnic sexuality, is an addition to experience that for Ilka, a novice on many levels, proves to be empowering.

In contrast, the flashing in Bellow's novel follows a negative encounter involving sexuality in which a student proclaims Sammler impotent. Sammler, a writer, gives a lecture at Columbia in which a student listening to his talk yells to the crowd, "Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He's dead. He can't come" (34). In this instance, reference to sexuality takes away the power of the character. Sammler, a writer, finds his power in his words, but the student's

remarks render his source of power and his body impotent. Consequently, the opposition of Segal and Bellow's novels resides in the power of the individual. For Segal, the individual decides how to view the intersection of sex and power whereas for Bellow, the individual is at the mercy of a greater society that attempts to take away his or her power through forced sexuality.

Sexuality and ethnic hierarchies

Mr. Sammler's Planet and *Her First American* share elements of voyeurism in which power, represented by knowledge, is not given freely; rather, it is assumed by the voyeur. The taking of power through voyeurism, as opposed to the giving of it, is connected in the novels with a negative sexual experience. Before the flasher scene occurs, Sammler watches the pickpocket at work for an extended period of time in which he notes when the pickpocket boards the bus and when he completes his robbery. Even though Sammler attempts to turn the pickpocket into the police, "once he had seen the pickpocket at work he wanted very much to see the thing again. He didn't know why. It was a powerful event, and illicitly...he craved a repetition" (7). The pleasure gained by Sammler when he watches the pickpocket work is a deviant pleasure and is followed by a deviant sexual encounter – the flashing. The power that Sammler takes from the pickpocket by "seeing" him leaves Sammler in a vulnerable position because the pickpocket must take action to regain his power, which he does through sexual mastery. Sammler's voyeurism and the pickpocket's response to it are manifestations of the binary terms that their ethnicities represent. Bellow portrays voyeurism and sexuality in these

instances as forms of a power structure that allows for hierarchies instead of equilibrium to dictate the relationship between the black and Jewish characters. These power systems depict an ethnic binary, in this case one between blacks and Jews, that serves as a reminder of the separation between these ethnicities.

The voyeurism expressed in *Her First American* does not have the same dangerous implications as the voyeurism in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Interestingly, the voyeurism in Segal's novel is expressed by Carter, the same man who is involved in an interethnic sexual relationship. It would seem as though because of his involvement with Ilka he no longer needs to be voyeuristic; however, as he admits, he still looks. For example, Carter and Ilka notice people watching them as they walk to the subway together. Though this bothers Ilka, Carter says, "When I see white and colored walking, I always look, don't you? Always wonder if they make love. Don't you?" (108). Here, Carter not only admits his voyeuristic tendencies, but he attempts to include Ilka in them as shown by his repetition of "don't you?". Carter, though he subverts the racial hierarchy by dating Ilka, reinforces the hierarchy by "looking" at interracial couples. The looking underscores that the couple is doing something out of the ordinary or out of the realm of comfort of mainstream society, and therefore, it helps to establish a social order in which interethnic relationships are deemed at the least curious and at the most completely inappropriate. Voyeurism, as shown through the characters of Sammler and Carter, represents an extension of ethnic binaries, helping the novelists to establish the binaries they later subvert.

Segal and Bellow's novels provide a foundation for discussing a power dynamic between different ethnicities that *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Meridian* and *The Human Stain* explore through the trope of sexual conquering. A helpful way of couching the discussion of black and Jewish interethnic relations, especially as it relates to sexuality, is to look at these novels in light of nineteenth century minstrelsy. Michael Rogin says that most early minstrels were Irish, though as the century progressed, Jews became the more prevalent ethnic group to perform in blackface (57). Blackface encourages an interesting relationship between blacks and Jews in which Jews could perform blackness but blacks could not perform Jewishness. On one hand, this type of relationship sets up a hierarchy between blacks and Jews in which Jews exert power over blacks, but on the other hand, this relationship destabilizes any sense of a stable hierarchy because by performing blackface, Jews were not only performing blackness but performing Jewishness and whiteness as well. According to Rogin, the performances made by the immigrants allowed them a ticket into the white racial category "freeing them from their guilt by black association" (57). When Jews portrayed blacks in the minstrelsy show, they were performing a role specified for Jews by the white power structure as well as performing whiteness by setting themselves apart from blacks. The minstrelsy shows helped to destabilize ethnic hierarchies by creating a space in which ethnic groups could potentially switch places. Rogin writes, "Demonstrating their mastery of the stereotype, Irish minstrels crossed the cultural border in one direction so they and their audiences could cross it in the other" (57). Minstrelsy, like sexuality in the novels, exposed binary terms, like black/white and black/Jewish, while also allowing for the play of these terms. In

fact, the terms were so unstable that the border that separated them became completely penetrable, allowing for the minorities, the Irish and Jews, to cross into white territory and, at the same time, allowing for the majority to cross into the minority's territory. *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Meridian*, and *The Human Stain* depict relationships between blacks and Jews that at first seem structured by hierarchies in which one group maintains power over the other; however, sexuality, like minstrelsy, destabilizes these hierarchies, allowing for the ethnicity portrayed as less powerful to enact a certain amount of control over his or her victimization.

The New York in Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* becomes a type of jungle landscape in which power is proven by mastering others through sexual conquering. According to Bellow, New York is a barbaric place covered over with distractions. He writes, "[New York] might well be barbarous on either side of the jeweled door. Sexually, for example. The thing...consisted in obtaining the privileges, and the free ways of barbarism under the protection of civilized order, property rights, refined technological organization, and so on" (4). Barbaric behavior in this instance is not considered a negative thing; rather it is just the opposite. It allows for a freedom that civilization suppresses. Consequently, sexuality, which Bellow specifically points out in this passage, is allowed to operate in a less-restrained manner in a barbaric landscape, which allows for the pickpocket to use his sexuality to conquer Sammler. The pickpocket, described using animalistic terms, helps to illustrate barbarism in a civilized space in which the struggle to maintain power affects all interactions. Though the flasher scene supports an ethnic hierarchy in which the black pickpocket maintains power over

the Jewish Sammler, it also distresses the stability of the hierarchy because Sammler allows for himself to be conquered. Bellow writes that even though the pickpocket forces Sammler to look at his penis, “no compulsion would have been necessary. He would in any case have looked” (6). If the display of the pickpocket’s penis represents the point at which Sammler becomes conquered, then Sammler, by looking at the penis, even without being forced to, aids in his own subjugation. Thus, the ethnic hierarchy that the pickpocket attempts to create by proving his sexual mastery is, even just momentarily, unstable because the pickpocket does not gain his power through complete dominion but through Sammler’s complicity.

Walker sets up a power dynamic in her novel in which blacks and Jews are pitted against each other. Though Walker portrays Tommy as attempting to set up a racial hierarchy between blacks and whites when he rapes Lynne, she also portrays the instability of this binary in her descriptions of Lynne. Lynne, a Jewish character, is seen and sees herself as white, not Jewish, when she comes into contact with Tommy. The scenes depicting their interactions, like the minstrelsy shows described by Lott, place Lynne in the white category. When Tommy appears with three friends to rape Lynne, Lynne thinks “(for the first time it seemed to her that black features were grossly different – more sullen and cruel – than white). Though none of them smiled, she could have sworn they were grinning. She imagined their gleaming teeth, with sharp, pointed edges” (174). Walker creates a dynamic here in which Lynne, as an individual, is not only outnumbered by men but in which her whiteness becomes overwhelmed by the representation of blacks as violent and inhumane. Therefore, the conquering that the rape

attempts to cause is not a conquering of Lynne as an individual but a conquering of Lynne's whiteness. The interethnic conquering in Walker's novel troubles the American ethnic hierarchy on several levels. For one, the capture described is one in which blacks take control of whites, overturning the traditional ethnic hierarchy in which whites are the governing power structure and blacks are subjected to that structure. Furthermore, as will be discussed, Lynne's role in her own conquering questions the entire notion of a transfer of power from the conquered to the conqueror.

Walker uses the word "conquer" when she writes about the rape of Lynne by Tommy. Once Tommy returns to gang-rape Lynne, he "Point[s] to her body as if it were conquered territory, Tommy Odds attempted to interest the boys in exploring it: 'Tits,' he says, flicking them with his fingers, 'ass'" (173). Walker's word choice here likens Lynne's body to a newly found territory claimed by a conqueror. By positioning Lynne's body at the center of this scene, sexuality becomes the currency by which race and power trade. Walker shows that by conquering a white body through rape, black bodies now maintain power over the subjugated territory, creating a binary system, and are free to do with it what they wish. Walker furthers the connection between sexual control and power when Lynne's body becomes representative of a chance for blacks to get even with whites. Tommy says, "Crackers been raping your mamas and sisters for generations and here's your chance to get off on a piece of their goods" (175). Therefore, sex, especially forced sex, is a way to even the score between the races, showing the immense amount of power afforded to sexuality.

Conquering, however, is not a stable term in *Meridian*. The power gained from sexual conquering is also unstable because no particular ethnic group gains or maintains all of the power. Walker employs a racist painting to represent the tug-of-war nature of power and control between ethnicities in the novel. She juxtaposes Lynne, Tommy, and his friends with a picture of a “nude white woman spread-eagled on a rooftop surrounded by black men” in order to illustrate a conflation of her characters with the stereotypes in the racist painting. In this scene, Lynne not only compares her friends to tribal savages, but she also compares herself to a sacrificial figure who must allow herself to be conquered in order to make up for past wrongs. Through the black perspective in the painting, the white woman is captured and unable to escape due to an overpowering of the white woman by the black men. But Lynne, by seeing the white woman as a sacrifice rather than as a victim, gives agency back to the conquered white woman; she sees the sacrifice as a performative role. In his book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott discusses the performance as a chance for the minority, or the conquered in this instance, to exercise at least some control over his or her own representation. He writes, “for better or worse [black performance] was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world. Black people...not only exercised a certain amount of control over such practices but perforce sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators” (39). Sexuality in Walker’s novel then takes on the role of black performance as discussed in Lott’s book when Lynne “sacrifices” herself. This role is further explored as the conquered’s sense of agency becomes more apparent during the rape scene between Tommy and Lynne.

Walker writes, “there was a moment when she knew she could force him from her. But it was a flash. She lay instead thinking of his feelings, his hardship, of the way he was black and belonged to people who lived without hope; she thought about the loss of his arm. She felt her own guilt” (172). Lynne, instead of seeing the rape as a loss power, sees it as a chance to gain atonement, giving herself back the power she loses through feeling guilty. As Ethan Goffman says in his book *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*, “Tommy’s rape is made ambiguous by just a hint of acquiescence” (160). By allowing herself to be conquered, Lynne maintains control over Tommy’s sense of power and powerlessness. Walker, in this instance, places the power in the hands of the conquered to determine the outcome of the battle over Lynne’s body. By taking this action, Walker undermines the power Tommy thinks he gained, destabilizing the hierarchy that he created through the rape.

Walker further troubles the notion of Tommy’s conquering when she writes that Lynne forgives Tommy for raping her. Lynne’s forgiveness is manifested in a kiss she places on Tommy’s stump, which is all that is left of his arm after the shooting, before he leaves. By giving Lynne the power to forgive Tommy for his actions, Walker places power with Lynne, the conquered, instead of with Tommy, the conqueror. Tommy’s stump, while it is first his impetus for raping Lynne, becomes symbolic of his sexual impotence as the gang-rape scene with Tommy, his friends and Lynne unfolds. Though Tommy brings his friends to rape Lynne, he is unsuccessful in getting them to see Lynne as conquered territory. When Tommy refers to Lynne as an “it,” reinforcing her conquered status in his mind, Altuna Jones, one of Tommy’s friends says, “It? It?...What

it you talking about? That ain't no *it*, that's Lynne" (175). Tommy is unsuccessful in initiating the gang-rape, though after his friends leave, he attempts to rape Lynne again. However, his inability at drumming up the same feelings he has towards Lynne in his friends proves to be detrimental to his sexual potentiality. Walker writes that, "even before [Lynne] began to fight him off she knew she would not have to. Tommy Odds was impotent" (176). The loss of Tommy's arm that initially incites him to attempt to conquer Lynne becomes representative of his loss of power as he fails to spread his hatred to other black men and of his sexual impotence in his second attempt at raping Lynne.

The power structure Tommy forms, though called into question, does not collapse completely. Walker still writes the rape and its aftermath, in which Lynne gives herself over to black men in an effort to make them like her in an attempt to give herself back a sense of self-worth and power. However, the men only use her, showing Lynne's continuing loss of power after to the rape. Walker's novels helps to raise questions concerning the delineations between the conquered and the conqueror, and without a clear line between these terms, the ethnic hierarchy enacted in the novel is left undefined, allowing for a restructuring of interethnic interactions.

Roth's *The Human Stain* uses internal conquering, in this case Coleman's conquering of his own body after a failed sexual encounter, in order to depict first the breakdown of an ethnic hierarchy and then a rebuilding of the same hierarchy. In his youth, Coleman chooses to let people decide for themselves whether or not they wished to classify him as black or white. While he plays with the idea of passing as white, he

enlists in the Navy as a white man. Though the Navy does not find out his secret, a woman at a white-only whorehouse does and throws him out, placing him in the dangerous situation of being caught in his lie. Instead of admitting the lie, Coleman gets a U.S. Navy Tattoo on his arm. The mark reminds him:

not only of the turbulence of the worst night of his life but of all that underlay the turbulence – it was the sign of the whole of his history...Embedded in that blue tattoo was a true and total image of himself. The ineradicable biography was there, as was the prototype of the ineradicable, a tattoo being the very emblem of what cannot ever be removed. (184)

In an effort to regain control over his secret and to realign himself with the whites of whom he now considers himself to be one, Coleman marks his body and conquers it, at least for a while. Roth uses a failed sexual encounter as the catalyst for this action in order to reveal the binary of an ethnic power structure that Coleman, by passing, attempts to negotiate between.

Sex, in this scene, represents a barrier that the two ethnic groups cannot cross, and Roth uses this barrier as a mirror, represented by the tattoo, that reflects a “true” identity. By tattooing the mirror on his protagonist, Roth allows for the truth to be minimized, controlled, and hidden underneath a symbol. Nevertheless, the mirror is still there, reminding Coleman of his past. Until the tattoo, Coleman’s passing not only troubles the American ethnic hierarchy, it completely subverts it. However, the tattoo itself serves a two-fold purpose in Roth’s novel: it both reaffirms the hierarchy that the passing subverts as well as perpetuates the subversion because it marks a black man as a white

man. By marking himself as white, Coleman chooses to be considered part of the white ethnic group over being considered part of the black ethnic group, thereby defining a hierarchy because he chooses to be white as a result of the privileges afforded to whites. However, the very fact that Coleman has a choice in which ethnic group with whom he identifies himself unsettles the hierarchy by exposing its permeability. Like Tommy's conquest that reveals both his power and his powerlessness, Coleman's conquest of himself unearths a dichotomy of power and powerlessness in which sexuality exposes his powerlessness as well as spurs his quest for power in the larger society. Unlike the other novels discussed in this thesis, the interethnic conquering in *The Human Stain* takes place within the same character multiple times, illuminating the instability of racial and ethnic hierarchies.

Sexuality and the transference of knowledge

Rogin's depiction of the minstrel stage in which the boundary between the actors and the audience becomes permeable enables a visualization of the same type of relationship sexuality engenders between characters in the novels discussed. The crossing of the stage/audience border and the crossing of a border between ethnicities implies that some kind of meeting, however brief, materialized between the separated cultures. Within that meeting space, a balance of power occurs as the majority relinquishes its power to the minority, creating a state of equilibrium between the once hierarchical terms. Lott maintains that the minstrelsy stage and sexuality both create a similar atmosphere. He writes, "Indeed, if for men sexuality is where freedom and play

meet, 'blackness' was for antebellum bohemians its virtual condition – that fascinating imaginary space of fun and license outside (but structured by) Victorian bourgeois norms" (51). The instability caused by interethnic sexual encounters creates an atmosphere within the novels that, like the minstrelsy stage, allows for a play of hierarchical terms resulting in new systems of interethnic interaction in which the terms meet in a shared middle, represented by a sexual union.

Segal begins her novel with a desire for knowledge and ends it with the transference of knowledge. When Carter and Ilka first meet, Carter introduces himself by saying, "I'm a wonderful teacher" to which Ilka replies, "And I want to learn" (16). Then, Carter and Ilka have sex in one of the last scenes of the novel, and Carter says to Ilka, "My, you've learned" (274). The transference of knowledge from Carter to Ilka occurs throughout the novel, with its final installment occurring during a sexual encounter. Segal's novel is an education on becoming an American, and for Segal, this education, what makes being an American different from being any other nationality, is rooted in the ethnic divide, and this is what Carter teaches Ilka. In the beginning of their relationship, Ilka asks Carter if she is color-blind to which Carter responds, "You...are a foreigner, but we're going to get you naturalized. We'll open up your eyes" (47). Therefore, "becoming American" includes seeing skin color, making race consciousness an integral part to the naturalization of Ilka's character.

Naturalization becomes the knowledge that threads Segal's novel together. At the end of the novel, Ilka takes her naturalization test in order to become an American citizen. She looks up the word "naturalize" in her dictionary and finds the following:

“**naturalize 1.** (botanical) to introduce into a region and cause to flourish as if native. **2.** to bring into conformity with nature **3.** To invest with the rights and privileges of a citizen” (270). Metaphorically speaking, Ilka is the non-native botanical species introduced into a new region that is caused to flourish by an African American who teaches her about interethnic relations. But Segal employs these definitions to also illustrate the discord created between natural naturalization and man-made naturalization as they relate to interethnic relationships. The first two definitions deal outside of the realm of man while the third definition deals solely with the man-made structure of citizenship. It seems that, on the one hand, Segal argues that the boundary between native and non-native American ethnicities is a natural part of American society even though, on the other hand, she seems to be arguing that this boundary is a result of minorities being denied the right to become naturalized, making interethnic relations a construction rather than a naturally occurring feature of American culture. This contradiction in the definition of naturalization is the knowledge that Ilka gains through Carter. The last scene in which Carter and Ilka have sex takes place outside, and Carter asks Ilka, “Are you fond of nature?” (274). Ilka leads Carter off the walkway and into a natural setting, illustrating an understanding and mastery of the contradictions involved in the term. This last sexual encounter between the two protagonists represents not only a learning experience but also an enactment of the learning in which the two entities meet and recognize a shared knowledge.

In Roth’s *The Human Stain* sex represents the point at which some kind of truth is revealed, namely Coleman’s true racial identity. The revelation of truth through sex,

however, has the power to both break down and strengthen Coleman, giving sexuality potency. Two scenes, one involving Steena, Coleman's lover during his youth, and the other involving Faunia, Coleman's lover during his old age, illustrate the intersection of power and truth with race. In the first instance, Roth equates physical intimacy with an intimacy concerning truth, which makes sex a powerful force within the novel. After a weekend of lovemaking, Coleman returns to his apartment to find a poem that Steena wrote for him. Reading it quickly, he mistakes the word "neck" for the word "negro," which sends him into a tailspin because he thinks his secret of passing as white has been found out. This scene allows Roth to focus on the complete openness that occurs during a sexual encounter – an openness in which a person becomes completely exposed. Roth writes, "You take off your clothes and you're in bed with somebody and that is indeed where whatever you've concealed, your particularity, whatever it may be, however encrypted, is going to be found out, and that's...what *everybody* fears" (113). The physical body and its relationship to another person during sex has the ability to betray the mind - in this case, a mind that has decided to let the world view the body as a different race than he biologically is. Consequently, when the body is involved in physical intimacy, it maintains a great amount of power because it can reveal truths that the mind tries to blur. For Roth, the adage "mind over matter" is inverted as the body has the ability to transmit truth and knowledge that the mind attempts to conceal. The "complete openness" in a sexual encounter to which Roth refers is similar to the borderless stage in Rogin's book that allows for two individuals to not only switch places but to also meet each other at an intersecting point.

In this scene, the sharing of knowledge takes on a fearful quality because of the new possibilities exposed by sexuality. To continue the borderless stage metaphor, no one can be entirely certain what he or she will find once he or she crosses the imaginary line. Moreover, no one can be certain what he or she will be like once he or she crosses back into his or her original position. Therefore, even after Coleman realizes his mistake in reading the letter “all he could be sure of was his fear” that once Steena realizes his secret, she will leave him (114). The exposure mandated by sexuality has the ability to change everything in its revelation of truth.

Another scene involving sexuality and its exposure of truth occurs later in the novel; however, this time the knowledge transferred does not result in fear. Instead, the knowledge results in a type of freedom not experienced by Coleman in decades. Faunia dances for Coleman, and as she moves, “the formal transfer of power begins” (227). The power transferred in this scene is the same power that Coleman tries to keep for himself in his relationship with Steena – his secret – but this time the secret is shared. Faunia says to Coleman, “Close all the doors, before and after... Everything the wonderful society is asking? The way we’re set up socially?...Fuck all that. What you’re supposed to be, what you’re supposed to do, all that, it just kills everything” (229). Here, Roth gives sex the capacity to transcend time and social structures. Without constraints, Coleman’s secret becomes a moot point. Coleman passes in order to help himself get ahead in life, but without anywhere to go in his sexual encounter with Faunia, he has no reason to hold on to any racial identity at all. Thus, his secret is meaningless when he has

sex with Faunia, making it possible for him to give over his power to her by telling her the truth.

Sexuality offers a space in which knowledge is free to be shared between ethnicities, causing racial and ethnic hierarchies to disappear, if only for a moment. However, sexual encounters, are just that – encounters – that have a definite time frame, which calls into question the enduring quality of them to alter the hierarchies they help to subvert. The characters who experience a shared knowledge, such as Ilka and Coleman, are changed because they learn from their experiences. However, the voyeurs, like Sammler and Carter can be likened to the audience members of the minstrel shows who refuse to enter into the free play of terms that allows for the transfer of knowledge. Instead, the voyeurs take the knowledge played out for them by the actors without completing an exchange of knowledge. Voyeurism represents something taken, not learned, which helps to keep the hierarchies in place rather than change them. Sexuality plays a number of roles within these novels, illustrating its immense power in defining interethnic interactions.

CHAPTER THREE

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: ENCOURAGING CONFLICT

In his 1939 essay “Minorities: A Challenge to American Democracy,” Maurice R. Davie wrote, “Further extension of the in-group to include on a basis of equality all the different nationalities and races in America is essential to the establishment of a truly democratic society. It has not yet been demonstrated whether this is possible” (456). On the eve of World War II, Davie poses a question concerning American democracy’s possibility with which half a century later American authors still struggle. As chapter two discusses, equality is necessary for an exchange of knowledge. In this chapter equality, a fundamental, aspect of democracy comes into direct contrast with personal sovereignty, creating a paradox that *Her First American*, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, and *The Human Stain* reveal. Davie’s discussion of democracy leaves out the word “liberal” that has come to characterize the modern form of American democracy. According to Chantal Mouffe, author of *The Democratic Paradox* modern democracy stems from two different traditions – the liberal tradition and the democratic tradition (2-3). Mouffe maintains that the clash of these traditions creates the democratic paradox from which her book gains its name. She argues that group identification – a line between an “us” and a “them” is essential to the workings of democracy. She writes that the formation of two distinct groups “necessarily creates a tension with the liberal emphasis on the respect of ‘human rights’, since there is no guarantee that a decision made through democratic procedures will not jeopardize some existing rights” (4). This tension is the subject

explored in Segal's novel *Her First American*, in which a democracy fails because of the denial of its own paradox.

The downfall of democracy creates the space for ways of knowing unmediated by the structure imposed by liberal democracy to flourish. Even without being formally named "democracy" the ways of knowing presented by *Her First American*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and *The Human Stain* tend towards categorization, or the "us" versus "them" that Mouffe describes as essential to democracy. This mindset leads to othering as a way of identification. Othering, though, instead of revealing differences between the categories, reveals a recognition of similitude. The conflict between the ethnic groups in the novels occurs because of a need for distinction as the different ethnic groups struggle to remain separate. The characters' conflicts represent democracy's paradox, illustrating that epistemologies of equality and individual sovereignty exist with or without the label of modern democracy.

The failure of democracy

Her First American explores American democracy through the viewpoints of minorities rather than through a white power structure. *Her First American* complicates the traditional view of America as an idyllic democratic state because the characters attempt to put forth a homogenous society by ignoring dissension. Racism, a central theme in the novels discussed in this chapter represents a lag in the extension of equality that democracy promises and serves as the catalyst for the dissension that occurs in the novel. Tzvetan Todorov argues that racism poses a problem for the democratic ideal

because “Although actual equality does not prevail, the ideal of equality becomes a commonly shared value; differences ... continue to exist, but the social ideology refuses to acknowledge them” (Leach 693). Segal’s novel offers a lens through which to view a democratic society that mutes the acknowledgement of differences, causing the democracy to implode. Segal’s exploration reveals racial inequality at the root of the failed democracy in an effort to exemplify how Americans, while attempting to put forth a homogenized worldview, actually undermine the very foundations of their government’s ideologies. Democracy promises that voices will be heard even if they are dissenting voices, and in the characters’ attempts at avoiding arguments caused by their differences, their democracy is set to fail from the beginning.

Her First American explores the racial hierarchies produced by the “us” versus “them” theory of knowledge that democracy encourages and shows that this mindset, when unacknowledged, causes the democracy to crumble. Moreover, Segal flips the traditional American ethnic hierarchy, placing blacks in charge of the creation of the government, in order to underscore that no matter which group occupies the two-place relationship of the “us” and “them,” racism is still inextricably intertwined with the American form of government. In switching the hierarchical terms, Segal also changes the terms of the “American experiment” that Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont investigated in the 1800s, but she comes out with the same results as their study concerning the production of binaries. Tocqueville and Beaumont argue that “because of the historical experience of racialized slavery, the African and European origins perceptible in the physical appearance of people at the outset of the American

experiment bound the idea of racial difference to the notion of a hierarchy in the psyche of the social state” (Janara 787). Democracy, no matter who runs it, depends upon the construction of a racial/ethnic hierarchy that Janara highlights. In *Her First American*, the characters represent this hierarchy when they travel to Connecticut to vacation at a summerhouse. Segal’s cast of characters includes blacks, Jews, and whites, and on the very first night they all arrive at the house, they divide the housework, make sure everyone has the rooms he or she wants and properly adjourn the meeting with a seconded motion. Though certainly overly performed, Segal makes it a point to begin her democratic experiment with everyone on good terms, but the good feelings do not last. In Segal’s novel, unlike American society in the 1950s, African Americans run the democracy while the other groups are made to feel the injustice of inequality as racial lines get in the way of an egalitarian political structure. Sarah, a white woman, finally has too much of the play at democracy and exposes the dissension that is forced underground through the niceties of the group. Sarah says, “I don’t want [Ebony] to do my work for me! It makes me very uncomfortable not to do my share. I don’t want to be cooked for and I *don’t* want to be served by Ebony” (218). Here Segal points out several problems inherent in American democracy. The clearest problem results from a clash between individual sovereignty and group expectations. Personal pronouns abound in Sarah’s speech, giving the impression that she attempts to maintain her liberal “individual sovereignty” that Janara states is pushed by the wayside when democracy is enacted. In order for Sarah to keep her individuality she leaves the summerhouse, taking away the dissension and leaving a homogenous group identity. Sarah’s exit from the summerhouse

democracy proves to be the downfall of the democratic experiment because it does not work to keep the participants in a political conversation. Segal writes Sarah's decision to leave as not just a threat to but the end of democracy as a working political system. By quelling the dissension Sarah represents, the other characters not only negate the equality promised by their chosen form of government but also show no faith in their ruling structure to handle conflict.

Segal's novel casts a vote for a pluralistic society in which dissension is freely expressed; however, Mouffe cautions against extreme pluralism that, while it may seem more democratic, "prevents us from recognizing how certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination and should therefore be challenged by a radical democratic politics" (20). *Her First American* is careful not to cover up these differences and highlights rather than shadows the "relations of subordination" to which Mouffe refers. For example, Sarah becomes even more upset when she points out that she is held responsible for rules that are made by a person she did not have the opportunity to elect. She says to Carter, "I would have nominated you and voted for you, but you didn't give me the chance! You play at democracy and deny me my vote!" (219). It is clear that Segal recognizes the power dynamics at play within a democracy, which she shows through Sarah's subordination to Carter's rules that Sarah did not have the opportunity on which to vote. Democracy, as it is represented by the summerhouse, does not address the subordination of the minority voice, rendering democracy useless to its original claims of promoting equality among all its members.

A second, and perhaps less clear, issue this passage explores is American race relations' effects on democracy. Sarah, a white character, has difficulty being cooked for and served by Ebony, a black character. Though Ebony insists on doing the cooking and cleaning because it gives her a sense of control, Sarah cannot separate Ebony's skin color from her maid-like actions, causing an extreme sense of discomfort for Sarah. Segal employs the interplay of these characters in order to illustrate the rupture of American democracy, which occurs primarily because no one begins on an equal playing field. The group is "continually preoccupied by the way the baggage of long personal experience is made more cumbersome by the racial element, by a past in which slights and the expectation of slights have become indistinguishable" (Cavanaugh 498). The "expectation of slights" predetermines the failed democracy because no one can move forward from past instances in which inequality existed. Democracy is not only built upon unequal race relations but helps to perpetuate those relations, ensuring its survival.

Taking Segal's microcosm of democracy and expanding it to include the United States shows that the minority culture within America often has little voice and agency when it comes to shaping American democracy because the majority culture silences it. Sarah becomes so furious with the democratic farce that she decides to leave the summerhouse completely, seceding from the "union" that was originally created. In fact, none of the other characters try to stop her from leaving, illustrating how democracy, instead of attempting to work out the dissension that allows for it to exist, pushes out those who create the dissension in order to maintain its sense of homogeneity, completely undermining democracy as a functioning political system. Liberal democracy, Mouffe

maintains extends far beyond just a governing structure; it represents “a specific form of organizing politically human coexistence” (18). Segal illustrates that coexistence is not possible in her summerhouse democracy because of the characters’ refusal to acknowledge the democratic paradox. With liberal democracy no longer able to organize interactions between people, alternate theories of organizing, or knowing, take over, such as Bellow’s social contract theory and othering that is espoused by Roth and Segal.

Organizing social interactions

Bellow published *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* in 1970, and on the cusp of a new decade, Bellow chooses to end his novel with the verb “know” (260). After looking back through the decade of the Holocaust and its aftermath and the decade of the Civil Rights movement, to end a book with “know” points to a new way of knowing gained after learning from past experience. The epistemology Bellow puts forth involves a social contract of which every human being is inherently aware, making the contract enduring. The main difference between the social contract and democracy involves the political nature of the two epistemologies. Mouffe describes the social contract as a liberal theory “whose aim is to transform the state into a voluntary association which ultimately denies the political,” which, in this case, means to ignore differences in favor of presenting a homogenous representation of society (51-52). Despite its differences from American democracy, this social contract shares some of the same problems put forth in Segal’s view of democracy. For instance, Elya, a relative of Sammler who dies at the end of the novel and who represents one who did meet the contract, did “what was required of him,”

showing that this contract exacted from him certain responsibilities in which he may have had to conform and relinquish a part of his individuality. Conforming to the majority halts a sense of dissension upon which democracy needs to function, and for ethnic minorities, in this case Jewish Americans, their required conformity means a certain amount of assimilation. The promise of democracy in which all are afforded equal voice and representation is appealing for a number of reasons, but is especially poignant for ethnic groups that have been marginalized and exiled, such as blacks and Jews. However, with democracy and Bellow's "social contract" the marginalized are forced to relinquish part of their individuality and mold themselves into replicas of the majority culture. Consequently, this contract, like the democracy in Segal's novel, seeks out homogeneity rather than offers a solution for how to handle inevitable dissension.

The social contract model that Bellow introduces is an unsustainable way of organizing interactions between differing groups. In a prayer to God, Sammler says that Elya "...did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it – that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know (260). While Bellow writes that all of humanity is connected by the truth of this social contract that requires relinquishing a certain amount of individuality, he also writes the prayer that enacts this claim as dissipating, or moving farther away from its intended strength. The prayer trails off at the very end to finish with just two words, giving the impression that this way of knowing somehow scatters the farther it gets from contact with the social contract. After all, it is only at the time of death that Bellow brings up this social contract when all other

obstacles, including the material goods in which many of Bellow's characters are interested, are out of sight. This contract is often overlooked during life when it is most necessary, and people are only reminded of it once a life is over. Nevertheless, Bellow's social contract is an alternate epistemology to American democracy because the contract is an innate promise made to each human by every other human whereas democracy is a fabricated governmental structure. Though the social contract weakens over time, it can be renewed, as it is for Sammler, showing its indestructibility that contrasts with the failed democracy in Segal's novel.

Her First American also puts forth an epistemology that roots itself in a way of knowing based on categories. Unlike Bellow's novel in which each person is connected by a certain truth, Segal's novel is not quite as optimistic concerning an innate quality that link together all humans. Ilka, a clean slate when it comes to American interethnic relationships, creates categories in order to know her new world, especially as it relates to people of different ethnicities. When she first meets Carter, she is unaware that he is black because he does not fit into her rigid guidelines for what she considers to be a Negro. As she gains knowledge throughout the novel, she learns how to name people according to their skin tone. Carter gives her the classification "Puerto Rican" that allows Ilka to form a category into which she files:

the woman in the early-morning subway...; the skimpy brown man with the antique smile and no overcoat; the little brown girl who settled her father, mother and fat brother into the subway both... Ilka had acquired the word by which to distinguish this group of people from other groups of people, with the

concomitant loss of the likelihood that she would henceforward distinguish any member within the group from any other. (142)

In this passage, Segal points out that knowledge gained through classification is a double-edged sword. On one hand, classification aids Ilka in learning about her world by being able to distinguish Puerto Ricans from other groups, but on the other hand, in learning the classification, Ilka is less likely to distinguish individuals from each other, proving detrimental to her ability to resist stereotyping. Though Ilka grows out of some of her naivety as the novel continues, Segal uses Ilka's lack of experience to illustrate that categorical knowledge is the deferred to way of knowing in an American society, which encourages the use of stereotyping in the construction of ethnic identification and thus interethnic interaction. Philip Cavanaugh argues that Ilka "openly, unwittingly enters a pre-established structure which, she vaguely senses, has something to do with elements peculiar to American society. She is not at all aware of the degree to which that structure centers upon Carter" (497). The "pre-established structure" to which Cavanaugh refers is the categorical way Americans order their world, which includes drawing boundaries between different ethnic groups. Carter represents that structure not only in his blackness through which Ilka learns about discrimination and injustice but also through his participation in the structure in which he, as a child, wanted to see "what a Jew looked like" (194). Carter says, "They used to dare each other to scoot past the door and scoot back to make a Jew come out and do whatever Jews did to little black Christian boys – cut their balls at the very least. There were people all the time going in and out of the synagogue...but they never ever got to see a Jew" (194). The othering that occurs in this

passage depicts how deeply entrenched the ethnic boundary lines are. Carter's recollection describes Jews as if they are something other than human – that a difference exists between people and Jews. Othering does not just involve differences based on skin color or religious preference; it can involve, as illustrated, a difference concerning one's identity as a human being, affecting social structure among ethnicities.

The categorical knowledge presented in *Her First American* leans towards the establishment of a society based on othering. Sarah and Victor, a Jewish couple at the summerhouse, want to adopt a black baby, but their attempts at accomplishing this are often viewed with tempered hostility by the blacks in the summerhouse. The reason for this hostility could be, as Goffman suggests, that “Jewish philanthropy, often spurred more by the needs of the Jewish community than a deep knowledge of African American society, may be seen as patronizing or hypocritical” (72). The Jewish couple, in their attempts at bridging the gap between blacks and Jews, actually reinforce it through othering because they want to adopt a baby based on a skin color other than their own instead of just wanting to become parents to a child who needs a home. In referring to the children available for adoption, Sarah and Victor place them into three categories: white, nonwhite, and others. Segal depicts othering as so deeply entrenched in American society that people do not realize they are taking part in it. For instance, Victor and Sarah zero in on the children's skin color. Victor says, “you can ‘match’ thirty out of every hundred nonwhite babies with the thirty available nonwhite families, the fifteen available other babies with fifteen of the other families and there are fifty-five other families with no other babies to adopt and fifty-five non-other babies still sitting in institutions!” (208).

Segal shows that Sarah and Victor, despite good intentions, reinforce othering because they make race a factor in their decision to adopt. Segal illustrates Victor and Sarah tripping over their own categories as they show their outrage at not being matched with a child of a different skin color from their own. The “non-other” babies to which Victor refers at the end of the passage can include babies from both the white and non-white categories. Therefore, according to Victor’s logic, a good number of the “non-other” babies who are not adopted are white, but Victor and his wife do not simply want a child who needs a home; they want a black child who needs a home. In order to further highlight the hypocrisy involved in Sarah and Victor’s adoption process, Segal, through the voice of Carter, stresses the “non-other” category to which Sarah and Victor refer by placing the term in italics; however, Sarah and Victor miss Carter’s emphasis, illustrating their blindness when it comes to the reasons for their desired adoption and their participation in creating a society based on othering. Moreover, the repetition of the word “other” in this passage illustrates a world in which categories determine who can and cannot be matched with whom, making the social boundaries between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds clearer and stronger. Thus, Segal underscores othering as a direct result of an American categorical way of knowing.

Roth draws an explicit connection between blacks and Jews as he explores an epistemology through othering. Othering in *The Human Stain* can be viewed as a direct outcropping of the egalitarian democracy that fails in *Her First American*. This type of othering is revealed through an outburst of Coleman’s anger as he describes his reasons for leaving Athena College. Coleman tells Zuckerman:

Thrown out of Athena...for being a white Jew of the sort those ignorant bastards call the enemy. That's who's made their American misery. That's who stole them out of paradise. And that's who's been holding them back all these years. What's the major source of black suffering on this planet? They know the answer without having to come to class. They know without having to open a book. Without reading they know – without *thinking* they know. Who is responsible? The same evil Old Testament monsters responsible for the suffering of the Germans. (16)

This passage sets up an “us” versus “them” scenario that othering helps to establish and that Mouffe argues is central to the workings of democracy. Throughout the novel, Coleman is concerned about the unfairness with which he is treated by the university concerning his supposed racial slur. Democracy, in its attempts to promote equality, encourages racism as racial discrimination is first used to convict Coleman though it is then quickly hushed up when he is pushed out of the college “for being a white Jew.” The university, in its attempt to maintain a society based on equality and fairness actually encourages discrimination by completely dismissing Coleman’s innocence and his personal sovereignty, thereby ignoring the liberal aspect of the American liberal democracy. In his article, “Democracy’s Dilemma: Explaining the Racial Inequality in Egalitarian Societies,” Colin Leach references Gunnar Myrdal as saying that “racial discrimination had to be denied to protect Euro-Americans’ idealized image of their society as fair and equal; thus...believing the society is equal can blind people to the ways in which it is not” (687). Athena College can be viewed as representative of

Myrdal's argument. The school denies its own racial discrimination against Coleman even as it uses its intolerance of discrimination to placate faculty and students. The othering in this passage occurs because of an act of discrimination that is hidden in an attempt to maintain a homogenous and peaceful society at the expense of individual liberty.

The "them" to whom Coleman refers in this passage are blacks, but the implicit "us" is a bit ambiguous. Instead of mentioning only whites or only Jews, Roth's placement of the words directly beside each other creates uncertainty about whether Coleman is clarifying the color of the Jews or the specific type of whites that are held responsible for oppressing blacks. The term "white Jews" sets up a discrete group to whom, according to Coleman, blacks address their anger, making the Jewish/black dichotomy clear. According to this passage, blacks "know," or create an epistemology, based on an othering of the white Jew who causes them suffering. However, othering in this instance occurs in a situation twice removed from the group who is accused of othering. Coleman accuses blacks of othering Jews; however, Coleman makes this accusation from the position of a white Jew. Therefore, Coleman others a group for supposedly othering him. Roth critiques othering by writing that it exists as a way of knowing that is divorced from all other sources of knowledge, such as class, books, and thinking in general. But despite Roth's criticisms of othering, he portrays Coleman as a well-educated former college professor who cannot shake the tendency to form "us" and "them" categories, showing how deeply entrenched othering is to an American epistemology.

Common roots of othering

Though Roth nods towards othering as the way Americans think through their positions and others' in society, he does not leave othering as simply a recognition of differences between two racial and/or ethnic groups. Instead, Roth illustrates othering as taking place within the same character, showing that the separation between the "us" and "them" categories is not firm but is instead fluid. Mouffe argues that in a liberal democracy, the opposing viewpoints are not "permanent outsider[s]" to each other (56). For instance, Coleman's relay of a black epistemology is supposedly given through a white Jew's eyes; however, as the audience is aware, this relay actually takes place through a black man's eyes. Consequently, in his effort to determine a "them" – blacks – Coleman actually determines an "us" because he is part of the black ethnic group he others. Difference among others is often simply denied or ignored in an effort to silence the discord created by it, and, as Tejumola Olaniyan writes, this is because "understanding difference relationally and critically could potentially turn a gaze back on itself, interrogating its position and history and relations with the object" (100). By allowing othering to occur within the same character, Roth forces an interrogation of the other as illustrated by the above passage in which epistemologies as they are related to different ethnic groups collide. Because the interrogation occurs within the same person, the othering reveals a common root, in this instance Coleman and his relationship to American society that refuses him an equal voice.

Mr. Sammler's Planet uses others, illustrated as victims and aggressors, in order to illustrate a common connection between blacks and Jews. The novel focuses on three others: Sammler, an American Jew, Eisen, an Israeli Jew, and the pickpocket, an African American. These characters all intersect and confront each other at the end of the novel. Throughout the book, each is portrayed as both a victim and an aggressor depending on his circumstance; however, in this final interaction, the characters are confronted with not only their racial/ethnic and national other but also the other who turned them into a victim or an aggressor. While the pickpocket is busy playing the aggressor, beating up Feffer for not handing over the film that captures him stealing, he does not notice that he is about to become the victim once Eisen, described as a permanent aggressor, beats him over the head with his Jewish/Israeli iron medallions. Sammler is horrified at the aggression Eisen displays but Eisen maintains, "you can't hit a man like this just once. When you hit him you must really hit him. Otherwise he'll kill you. You know. We both fought in the war" (241-42). Eisen appeals to Sammler's sense of aggression – the same aggression Sammler had when he shot a German man twice, killing him, during the war. While Eisen still calls the pickpocket a man, he qualifies his description by saying "like this," implying that the pickpocket is somehow an other because he is not like Eisen. Eisen's statement creates a clear distinction between what he perceives as a man like himself and a man like the pickpocket who must be "put in his place." Bellow aligns Sammler with his American rather than his Jewish counterpart, as shown by Sammler calling the pickpocket "poor man" and even taking on the responsibility for the pickpocket's sudden victimization (243). He not only sympathizes with the pickpocket,

but empathizes with him as well when he associates the crashing of Eisen's medallions over the pickpocket's head with "the crushing of his eye under the rifle butt" during the Holocaust (245). Therefore, though Sammler and the pickpocket are described as others through the majority of the novel, Bellow reveals in this scene their similarities as victims of unjust societies. The line separating blacks and Jews becomes a little blurred as Sammler recognizes a part of himself in his other.

Conflict maintains distinction

Her First American clearly portrays African-American and Jewish-American conflict as an effort to maintain ethnic distinction in America's "melting-pot" society. Ilka takes Ebony, an African American, and Fishgoppel, a Jewish American, with her to serve as her witnesses at her naturalization hearing. Segal portrays Ebony and Fishgoppel comparing their respective ethnicity's struggles, attempting to win the fight over which group has suffered more. Segal writes:

Ebony said, 'Negroes were lynched if they learned the alphabet.'

'We had pogroms,' said Fishgoppel.

'Slavery,' said Ebony.

'Holocaust!' cried Fishgoppel.

'Are there no griefs that aren't racist or anti-Semitic!' shouted Ilka. (273)

It is no coincidence that the conflict that arises between these two ethnic groups takes place as Ilka becomes officially inducted into America as a citizen, illustrating the conflict between the ethnic group's individual sovereignty and the equality that Ilka

attempts to create as the newest member of a supposed unified country. What is clear from this exchange is that both ethnic groups have suffered extreme amounts of loss and terror; however, what is initially unclear is the reasoning behind this outburst. Segal uses the black and Jewish characters to depict the desperation involved in maintaining distinctness. Because the fight ends with a comparison of slavery to the Holocaust, it is evident that each ethnic group is afraid of being overtaken by the other one, losing its specific heritage and history. By reminding each other, and the rest of the world, of the group's painful past, blacks and Jews hope to keep their individual histories alive and untainted by other groups' histories. At Ilka's naturalization ceremony in which "...Americans of many shades and accents took their communal oath" these two ethnic minorities strive to prove their difference, but instead of accomplishing this feat, they essentially prove that they have a good deal in common with each other (272). Ilka, like Coleman in *The Human Stain*, serves as the meeting point between the black and Jewish ethnicities, showing that the members of each group can not only get along but can also co-exist within the same space, literally represented by Ilka and Coleman, and metaphorically represented by the United States.

Segal portrays the Bible's validity as the meeting point for Ebony and Fishgoppel. However, once they reach the point at which they find common ground, "they put on their coats and walked out the door in different directions" (273). Ralph Ellison also uses the Bible as a meeting point for blacks and Jews. He says, "...It requires real poverty of the imagination to think that [understanding of oneself] can come to a Negro *only* through the example of *other Negroes*, especially after the performance of the slaves in recreating

themselves, in good part, out of the images and myths of the Old Testament Jews” (25). The Bible, at least for Ellison and Segal, is the point to which blacks and Jews trace their similitude. According to Ellison, Jews offer an angle through which black can think through their identity, and according to Segal and other novelists like Bellow, blacks do the same for Jews. However, instead of portraying Ebony and Fishgoppel as re-imagining themselves through shared visions of Biblical texts, Segal portrays the characters as completely opposing each other. The othering that results in the fight between Ebony and Fishgoppel is an attempt at distinguishing their ethnic groups from each another when, in fact, the groups know about and represent a shared heritage.

The fighting between Ebony and Fishgoppel portrayed by Segal represents a necessary part of American liberal democracy. Mouffe writes, “Without a plurality of competing forces which attempt to define the common good, and aim at fixing the identity of the community, the political articulation of the demos could not take place” (56). The dissension that the liberal tradition allows is therefore necessary to the production of the equality espoused by the majority. *Her First American*, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, and *The Human Stain* recognize the paradox of a liberal democracy and their novels serve not only as a recognition of but also a discussion of this paradox, which, as Mouffe argues, is essential to the continuation of American democracy. The ethnic-American novels offer lenses through which to view dissension not as a hindrance to democracy but as a necessary feature of it.

CONCLUSION

“AIN’T BEING ONE OR THE OTHER BAD ENOUGH?: THE BLACK AND JEWISH
FIGURE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

In *The Victim*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Meridian*, *Her First American*, and *The Human Stain*, Jewish ethnicity operates in a liminal space between black and white racial categories. While some of the novelists align Jews with whites and other align Jews with blacks, the Jewish characters serve as a way for the authors to trouble notions of blackness and whiteness in American culture. Consequently, Jewish ethnicity helps to upset the white/black binary that serves as a scaffolding for interethnic relationships within American society. In most of the novels, the Jewish characters represent the embodiment of a third ethnic term that disrupts the binary construction of ethnic interactions. But Roth's novel introduces an interesting take on this third term in his portrayal of Coleman, a black man passing as a Jew. While Coleman does not claim both ethnicities at the same time, Roth's character introduces the possibility of the black Jew and the abruptness with which this type of figure can break invisible ethnic barriers, as shown by Coleman's passing.

The authors discussed in this thesis employ Jewish ethnicity as sometimes representative of whiteness and other times as representative of blackness. Jewish ethnicity, when viewed across these novels, can be considered as representative of both the black and white terms. Rather than classify Jews as belonging to a white or black racial category, the novels, when looked at in conversation with each other, reveal not a black, white, or Jewish-centered structure, but instead, reveal the possibility of a both/and rather than an either/or relationship between ethnicities.

Gloria Naylor in *Bailey's Café* and Bernard Malamud in "Angel Levine" deal specifically with a both/and character in the form of a black Jew, represented by Miriam

and Alexander Levine. The introduction of the black and Jewish figure in these stories, like Roth's Coleman, is accompanied by an abrupt change in the society of the stories, which mirrors a sudden breakdown of binary relationships. Without a hierarchical structure in place, racial and ethnic terms once dictated by a binary are free to interact in new ways. For example, Miriam's arrival on Bailey's street causes not only concern among the other characters about what to do with her and the impending birth of her child, but also concern over the street's, or the characters' society's, very existence. The introduction of a black and Jewish character causes a complete disruption in the street's normal social structure, which involves the often antagonistic relationship between African-American Bailey and Jewish Gabe, who owns a pawnshop beside Bailey's cafe. Though Gabe's pawnshop is never open and always has a sign on it pointing towards Bailey's café for newcomers to follow, for Miriam, "Gabriel had broken the pattern" when he is the one who introduces Miriam to the street instead of Bailey (145). It is important that the Jewish character is the one to disrupt the system like the Jewish characters discussed in this thesis. However, in this instance a Jewish character not only disrupts the normal social structure; he enables its demise with his debut of a both/and character.

Malamud employs the black and Jewish figure to both reveal a binary structure as well as to undermine it. For Manishevitz, the story's protagonist, Levine, a black and Jewish angel, forces a confrontation and subsequent breakdown of ethnic binaries between whites and blacks and blacks and Jews. Levine draws a stark contrast to Manishevitz's perceived notion of all angels as white and Jews as non-black. Malamud

uses Levine's character as a sounding board off which these binaries are formed; however, he also uses Levine's character to disrupt these binaries as Levine himself cannot be forced into them. Malamud describes a feather falling from Levine's newly-granted wings that changes from black to white and then disappears altogether as it transforms into snow. The changing form of the feather until it is unrecognizable mirrors a change in a Manishevitz's view of social order once he is confronted with a both/and figure. Malamud's employment of a black and Jewish figure not only troubles ethnic and racial binaries; it escapes them completely, as represented by feather's transformation.

The black and Jewish figures in Naylor and Malamud's works represent a both/and character whose effects are similar to those of the Jewish characters in the novels in that they expose ethnic and racial binaries as well as maintain the capability to subvert them. In discussing binary structures in the works of Bellow, Walker, Segal, and Roth, it is difficult to talk about ethnicity and race outside of the binaries that construct them. The black and Jewish figure, however, creates a space outside of the either/or construction of race and ethnicity. Whereas Jewish characters are pulled toward one race or the other, by simply existing, the black and Jewish character escapes the racial terms that pull at his or her Jewish counterpart. The black and Jewish figure then is the embodiment of the effect the Jewish characters have on the American racial hierarchy as they operate in a liminal position between opposing racial groups.

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