

DISTANT PROXIMITIES: WHITENESS AND WORLDEDNESS IN CONTEMPORARY  
JEWISH LITERATURE

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Combining elements of comparative race and ethnicity studies, memory studies, and postcolonial theory with methodological elements of literary formalism and cultural history, my scholarship on contemporary Jewish literature is framed towards critically, politically, and ethically “worlding” our understanding of diverse Jewish identities and their relationship to the global production of whiteness. By bringing together post-1948 texts from the United States, South Africa, Israel, and Britain, *Distant Proximities: Whiteness and Worldedness in Contemporary Jewish Literature* demonstrates how contemporary Jewish literature de- and re-constructs whiteness through a constellation of multi-layered encounters that transcend national boundaries. In so doing, I aim to shift the discourse around race in Jewish studies in two ways. First, I replace the omnipresent but deeply misleading question, “Are Jews white?” with the more productive, “Under what conditions do Jews understand and/or write themselves as white?” Second, I reconceptualize Jewish whiteness as inherently worlded, shaped by an international network of colonial histories, political commitments, and affective entanglements. In taking this novel approach to Jewish writing in the postwar Anglosphere, my work also reimagines the discourse on whiteness in Global Anglophone literary studies. Over the past few decades, both “whiteness” and the “world” have been the focus of a great deal of scholarly scrutiny, yet the two conceptual frameworks have converged but rarely. My scholarship proposes, among other things, that post-1948 Jewish texts, when read together in certain ways, represent fertile ground for staging this epistemic encounter in the Global Anglophone context.

To effect these discursive shifts, my dissertation is organized around the concept of “distant proximity,” which indexes an encounter between objects, characters, or aesthetics in which layers of meaning are created by the proximate activation of histories, identities, and

epistemologies usually characterized in terms of distance and difference. To demonstrate this phenomenon, *Distant Proximities* historicizes and then juxtaposes a series of ostensibly divergent Jewish texts to illuminate their shared discourses on race, centering on two particularly dense and interlocking sites of transmission for whiteness: colonialism and liberalism. Crucially, in this archive, distance modifies, but does not negate, proximity; instead, both Ashkenazi (a term denoting Jews of Western, Northern, and Eastern European descent, from ‘Ashkenaz,’ a medieval term for Germany) and Mizrahi (literally “Eastern” or “Oriental,” a Hebrew term for Jews of the Arab world) Jewish characters are seen defining their ethno-racial identities in relation to multiple proximities, so that an interracial encounter in one country activates layers of meaning and affective-political significations often misrecognized as “belonging” purely to another national context. Essentially, if the ostensible whiteness of a Jew depends on who they are standing next to, it is also always already conditioned by other Jews in other rooms.

In the first section, I focus on post/coloniality, a term I use to continually mark the crucially overlapping presence of colonial and postcolonial elements in contemporary Jewish texts. Specifically, I examine how Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* (US, 1986), Bernard Malamud’s *The Tenants* (US, 1971), and Ronit Matalon’s *The One Facing Us* (Israel, 1995) reveal the post/colonial circulation of imperial geographies and aesthetics, drawing connections between settler colonialism and transhistorical fantasies of whiteness. In the second section, I explore the convergence of international liberalism and liberal internationalism in Dan Jacobson’s *The Beginners* (South Africa, 1966), Zoë Heller’s *The Believers* (UK, 2008), and Tony Eprile’s *The Persistence of Memory* (South Africa, 2004). These texts demonstrate, to begin with, how constructions of whiteness have circulated through global consumer culture in the Anglosphere, as well as the continued racialized resonance of classically liberal narrative forms like the family

saga. At the same time, they provide exigent insights into how Holocaust memory, particularly as the assumed foundation of the postwar human rights regime, has conditioned our understanding—and, just as often, our misunderstanding—of transnational white Jewish liberalism over the past seven decades.

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To my wonderful mother, who supported me.

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## INTRODUCTION: WHITENESS AND WORLDEDNESS, POLITICS AND FORM, ETHICS AND MEMORY

“I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly: ‘But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?’ Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! Now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time.” – W.E.B. DuBois, “The Souls of White Folk”

“[B]ounded by an ‘I’ and a ‘you,’ [the text] spins out its world-structures in the proximities and distances that the gap between them frames.” – Eric Hayot, “On Literary Worlds”

Whiteness, as W.E.B. DuBois noted so presciently in his 1910 essay “The Souls of White Folk,” is a manifold site of world-making. As a relational mode of subjectivity, a field of interaction between identity formations, and a structure of feeling, whiteness both produces and is produced by a global network of power. It is the constant yet constantly mutating product of a fundamentally transnational project, while also acting as the (often invisible) signifier through which power is assigned and stripped away across and between geopolitical borders. Over the past few decades, both “whiteness” and the “world” have been the focus of a great deal of scholarly scrutiny, yet the two conceptual frameworks have converged but rarely. This project proposes, among other things, that post-1948 Jewish texts from the United States, South Africa, Israel, and Britain, when read together in certain ways, represent fertile ground for staging this epistemic encounter. For, although Jewish literary studies and critical whiteness studies have been consistently constrained within national categories, the whiteness constructed in and through contemporary Jewish literature is always already “worlded,” a term I use throughout to indicate that Jewish whiteness is fundamentally constituted by a global network of political commitments, racialized subjectivities, aesthetic forms, and affective encounters; that both whiteness and Jewish literature are the products of and impetus for cultural, identitarian, and

representational world-building within the Jewish Anglosphere; and that much of that contemporary Jewish writing demonstrates a set of interlocking formal and stylistic traits that index crucial relationships between identity, text, and world.

*Distant Proximities* reframes and reconceptualizes the discourse around whiteness and worldedness in Jewish literary studies in three crucial ways. First, I replace the reductive but seemingly omnipresent question, *Are Jews white?* with the ultimately more productive inquiry, *Under what conditions do Jews understand and/or write themselves as white?* In the tradition of critical whiteness studies, this discursive shift indexes an epistemological turn away from the study of “whites,” which suggests a homogenized and stable group identity, to the study of “whiteness,” a constellation of cultural practices and social signifiers that produce and are produced by structures of dominance.<sup>1</sup> This rhetorical reframing also marks the instability and relationality that whiteness shares with all racial formations. Indeed, DuBois’s own writings about the racialization of Jewish subjects on a global scale, of which there are many, poignantly reveal how intensely accepted and received ideas of Jewish whiteness fluctuated within his lifetime.<sup>2</sup> More to the point, asking whether Jews “are white” erases Jewish communities of color

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am referring to the academic field of “whiteness studies” or “critical whiteness studies,” which cohered into an identifiable branch of critical race theory in the 1990s. It should be noted, however, that scholars of color (like DuBois, for one) had already been identifying and critiquing the structural and phenomenological aspects of whiteness for more than a century before whiteness studies as such came into being. Core texts of this first wave of critical whiteness studies, some of whom I will discuss further down, include but are in no way limited to: Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States*, David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination* (1992), Cheryl I. Harris’s “Whiteness as Property” (1993), Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993), Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (1995), Michael Rogin’s *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1996), Richard Dyer’s *White* (1997), M. F. Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), and Valerie Babb’s *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois’s thinking about Jews and Jewishness was complex. In his correspondence, the light-skinned DuBois recounts being mistaken for a Jew both in the American South and in Germany. In the 1903 version of his landmark text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois made scattered comments that are interpretable as antisemitic, but which he determinedly revised in the 1953 edition. He wrote extensively on the persecution of Jews in Europe, frequently in direct comparison to anti-Black racism in the US. He was also, for a time, a dedicated Zionist, although, as I will discuss in Historical Overture I, he was highly critical of Israel’s role in the 1956 Suez Crisis. Suffice it for the time



all over the world, for whom the question of “being white,” to the extent that it can or should be asked, has an entirely different meaning and a dramatically narrower slate of potential answers. The discursive shift away from *Are Jews white?* further signals a greater, though not exclusive, focus on a more reflexive mode of understanding Jewish whiteness, away somewhat from the study of whether and how Jews are dis/included in the white collectivity by non-Jews to exploring instead whether and how they have written themselves into whiteness or used writing to discover that they already belonged there.<sup>3</sup>

Next, I aim to emphasize and explore the global dimensions of Jewish whiteness, particularly how they shape literary, political, and mnemonic narratives. Reframing the concept of Jewish whiteness as inherently worlded calls attention to how many of the cultural and political forces that have shaped Jewish whiteness since World War Two are fundamentally inter- and supranational, including (but certainly not limited to) Holocaust memory, liberal internationalism, Zionism, anti-apartheid activism, and neo/colonialism. The United States, South Africa, Israel, and Britain emerge from this historical matrix as particularly dense indices of exchange. Crucially, all four countries have racialized power structures that, while not the same, are deeply intertwined with one another in the *longue durée* of modernity. They bear relations to one another that have profoundly shaped not only the post-World War II global consciousness of race, but also the affective, political, and cultural self-understanding of their respective Jewish communities. Spreading my analysis between four countries on four continents

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being to say that repeated attempts to cast him as an antisemite are, in my opinion, utterly baseless. A particularly relevant discussion of Du Bois’s multivalent engagements with Jews and the Holocaust can be found in Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, how we see ourselves is fundamentally inseparable from how others see us—or, more pointedly, how we race ourselves is deeply shaped by how the society we live in races us. But non-Jewish antisemitism, as well as the oppressive historical and contemporary constructions of Jews as “a race,” have already been discussed at great length in every corner of Jewish studies, and I want to shift focus towards how Jews have participated in their own racialization in the contemporary context, which has been paid less attention.

invites obvious challenges, but I see the construction of transnational archives as necessary for understanding how Jewish whiteness is shared, inherited, and performed across and between the territorial insistences of the nation-state.

Contemporary Jewish literature continually stages multiple and multi-layered racialized encounters that are defined by the crossing of cultural boundaries and national borders and thus cannot be fully grasped within any single national context. Put another way, the whiteness of an Ashkenazi Jew in Newark is not only conditioned by, and may fluctuate according to, her daily encounters with white and non-white neighbors, but also by the whiteness of an Ashkenazi Jew in Houghton, an affluent suburb of Johannesburg, as well as the non-whiteness of a Mizrahi Jew in the Musrara neighborhood of Jerusalem or of a Black Jew in London's East End. If one were to examine constructions of race in the culture of the Jews of Newark without accounting for or at least acknowledging the global cultural network through which it was and continues to be produced—as many often do, for example, in critical analyses of Philip Roth—that would mean obscuring the sprawling foundations upon which these constructions were built. And because neither Jewish literature nor Jewish whiteness are unique in this regard, I ultimately hope that tracing the imbrication of whiteness and worldedness through the archive of Jewish texts assembled here will illuminate new possibilities for seeing the connections between them in other contexts where such an intervention is likewise urgently needed.

Finally, to better pursue this reorientation of whiteness and worldedness in the contemporary Jewish cultural context, I introduce the hermeneutic of “distant proximities,” a mode of interpretation that focuses on narrative, aesthetic, and ethico-political encounters in which layers of meaning are made visible by the proximate activation of histories, identities, and epistemologies usually characterized in terms of distance and difference. One of the challenges

of reading whiteness and worldedness together in the transnational contemporary archive has been the lack of an interpretive framework through which to narrow the intersections between them down into something useful. To make this possible, the distant proximities framework attempts to address overlapping scalar problems present in the literary studies discourses on both.<sup>4</sup> Under the aegis of distant proximities, I focus my analysis on literary representations that embody moments of reorganization—and specifically those that occur in relation to other, linked, reorganizations—of values, of people, of wealth, of privilege, and of solidarities. But I also position those literary representations alongside others with which they are not usually associated, which presents the opportunity to identify crucial ways in which global representations and ideologies of whiteness overlap.

For example, as will be discussed in Chapter Three, Ronit Matalon's *The One Facing Us* (*Zeh 'im ha-Panim Elenu*, 1995) maps a global network of racialized proximities encountered and countenanced by the Sicourelles, a Mizrahi Jewish family that leaves Egypt in waves during the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> Some of the Sicourelles end up in Israel, where, as Mizrahim, they are relegated to second-class status, their "oriental" culture treated as a contaminant needing to be quarantined lest it infect the Ashkenazi Zionist vision. They are thus positioned as non-white in a way that enhances the whiteness of Ashkenazi Jews by their difference. Other Sicourelles go south to

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<sup>4</sup> For theorists of whiteness, the difficulty seems to be squaring the fact that the whiteness of a given subject clearly evolves in relation to the subjects in their immediate proximity while also being elementally shaped by what Howard Winant terms "global racial projects." In the field of world literature, the issue comes to the fore in the seeming irreconcilability of close and distant reading, of methods that treat vast bodies of texts as data points moving through world-systems and those that plumb the depths of individual works to excavate and analyze the transnational elements of their internal imaginations. In both contexts, then, the core issue is the inability of the scholarly eye to effectively focus near and far simultaneously. To be clear, in conceptualizing distant proximities, I am not attempting to "resolve" these weighty discursive issues per se. Rather I am experimenting with a way of seeing that might offer a step towards progress.

<sup>5</sup> Mizrahim, which in Hebrew literally means "Easterners" or "Orientals," is an ethnic term used primarily in Israel to refer to Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. Their orientalization and marginalization by the Ashkenazim (Jews from Northern, Eastern, and Western Europe, from the medieval Hebrew word for Germany, 'Ashkenaz') will be taken up at length in Historical Overture I and Chapter Three.

Black Africa and make their fortune as industrialists seizing on the decolonial moment. In the African context, specifically in Gabon and Cameroon, the Mizrahi Jews “become” white in their encounter with Blackness. As European colonists leave, the Sicourelles take their place—Jacquo Sicourelle literally buys and renovates the villa of a departing German merchant—and learn to inhabit the white, imperialist subject position that holds them apart from the Blacks surrounding them. In both Israel and Cameroon, then, we see examples of Jewish whiteness being shaped through post/colonial proximity, yet they seem to be going in opposite directions. When the protagonist Esther leaves her mother’s rundown apartment in Tel Aviv for her uncle’s sprawling compound in Douala, these proximities are reorganized, with Esther entering into a provisional whiteness from which she was excluded at “home.” These shifts in Esther’s identity can be inferred from historical context, but, just as importantly for us, they can also be read in the formal elements of the novel itself. The reorganization causes a crisis of identity, a split consciousness that is translated in the narratological structure through a bifurcation of her voice: sometimes she speaks as Esther (non-white) and sometimes as *la nièce* (white).<sup>6</sup> The point, though, is not to judge whether Esther “becomes” white, but rather to unpack these shifts in order to demonstrate how post/colonial Jewish whiteness is produced through a multiplicity of proximities that are distant from one another yet ultimately inseparable in so far as looking at any single one of them could never give us the full picture.

On a metatextual level, I activate distant proximities by juxtaposing *The One Facing Us* with, among other texts, Bernard Malamud’s *The Tenants* (1971), a novel with which it at first appears to have very little in common. Yet both include representations of and meditations on

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<sup>6</sup> As I will attend to further in Chapter 3, these overlapping and conflicting identities are also evoked in the text’s use of multilingualism and heteroglossia. The shift to *la nièce*, i.e., to French as opposed to Hebrew or Arabic, also works to emphasize the moments in which the Sicourelles identify particularly strongly with the European colonists with whom they mix in both North and Central Africa.

what Toni Morrison and Christopher L. Miller call “Africanism,” a European discourse that envisions Africa as a blank darkness beyond time and language, fundamentally anti-modern, into which can be projected the fears and fetishes of white Europeans. In both texts, “Africa” (that is, Africa in the European imagination, which does not exist) is written as a primitive, preternatural space in which the Jewish subject can become white through its embodiment of modernity.

As in this example, “Distant Proximities” juxtaposes a series of ostensibly divergent Jewish texts to illuminate their shared discourses on race-as-juxtaposition. Crucially, in this archive, distance modifies, but does not negate, proximity; instead, both white and non-white Jewish characters are seen defining their ethno-racial identities in relation to multiple proximities, so that an interracial encounter in one country activates layers of meaning and affective-political significations often misrecognized as “belonging” purely to another national context.<sup>7</sup> As I will discuss in later chapters, Jewish studies and cultural politics have fallen into the habit of privileging attitudes of incomparability, which erects unproductive nationalistic barriers between archives, scholars, and theoretical discourses.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, understanding how

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<sup>7</sup> While I am always trying to retain their spatial implications, over the course of the project I use both “distance” and “proximity” in diverse ways. In later chapters, for example, I will examine how temporal distance (being far away in time) has occasioned reorganizations of ideological proximity (being close, which is to say similar, in ideological outlook).

<sup>8</sup> To the naked eye, this is most obvious in the widespread (though by no means total) resistance to comparison in the politics of Holocaust memory and in global discourse on political Zionism. As I will discuss in the epilogue, though a robust comparative school exists in Holocaust studies, I do not see it being evenly or productively absorbed in mainstream discourse. Jews from left, right, and center are also constantly debating what the modern state of Israel cannot, should, or must be compared to. For example, on the one hand, comparisons between Israel and apartheid South Africa are, of course, verboten in many Jewish intellectual circles. Yet many of the same people who would ban it also argue that it is fundamentally antisemitic to criticize the Israeli human rights record without also noting the abuses of other countries like Iran or North Korea. From a disciplinary point of view, the determined self-enclosure of Jewish studies has been explicated by several scholars, perhaps most relevantly of late by Benjamin Schreier in *The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History*, who critiques “Jewish American literary study’s self-imposed ghetto,” which keeps it cordoned off from other fields of ethnic studies, as well as American studies, and to an extent, literary studies full stop. This closing-off of Jewish studies was instantiated in part by “the unwillingness of Jewish studies (that is, as a hegemonic bloc) either to accept critical literary studies as a legitimate part of its project or to pursue a sustained critique of identity, which would likely include opening itself to thinking its counterethnic other,” as well as “Jewish American literary study’s fairly consistent aversion to sustained theorization and self-critique” (2). Because of this chronic aversion, “While American studies and ethnic American literary formations have been busy putting themselves through rigorous

whiteness is constructed in Jewish literature requires a re-formulation of the relationship between aesthetics and history that has the power to correct this imbalance, while at the same time giving us a productive way of seeing the role narrative form plays in Jewish self-fashioning. This is a complex and unwieldy undertaking, however, so I will begin by addressing a series of terms and concepts that play a role in my approach.

### *Whiteness*

In her introduction to the critical whiteness studies reader *Working through Whiteness: International Perspectives* (2014), Claudia Levine-Rasky argues that explorations of whiteness by white scholars are best understood as having been “organized in tension” (2), in part because they signal an intention to excavate and chip away at racial power structures that maintain power by remaining buried, but also because they demand a reckoning with one’s own conflicts of interest. “[T]he endeavor to work through whiteness,” she writes, “must actively embrace the complexity, the contradictions, the doubt, the errors, the risks, the fear immanent in such questions” (2).<sup>9</sup> I would like to begin my discussion of whiteness by doing just that. First, I should not like to pretend at any point that this project is politically neutral; nor do I wish to simply bypass the problems invited by its conceptualization, particularly the decision to focus largely on Ashkenazi Jews of Northern, Eastern, and Western European descent. This is undoubtedly problematic, particularly in Jewish studies, a field in which scholars of color are

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processes of self-criticism the field of Jewish American literary history has, in a word, not” (2). And while Schreier is writing in the US context, I would point out, first, that US scholarship exerts the most powerful gravitational pull in Jewish studies broadly conceived and, second, that one finds similar patterns in Jewish literary criticism from all four of the countries I focus on here. This makes an interesting comparison to the fields of world literature and/or comparative literature, which as far as I can tell have been ceaselessly questioning and reformulating the terms of their own existence for at least thirty years.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics, and Culture* (2002), Vron Ware and Les Black ponder whether “the study of whiteness necessitates a kind of ethical ambivalence,” suggesting a moment later that, “the critical engagement with whiteness should not aspire to resolve the tension created across the desire to understand. Rather, if the interrogation of whiteness is to possess ethical integrity, it must accept this ambivalence” (57).

especially rare and that almost always speaks from a deeply Ashkenormative position. What's more, as a white Jewish American subject, my taking up of Jewish whiteness is endemically and unavoidably compromised.

And yet, as I have and will continue to argue, such reckonings with whiteness are essential to the future of anti-racist scholarship. I do not mean at all to suggest that we should reverse or discontinue the progress that has been made in broadening our gaze to include BIPOC Jewish authors, and, as will hopefully already be clear in the discussion of Ronit Matalon, I have no intention of leaving them out entirely. But we would be leaving the job half done if we did not also cast a critical eye on the racial epistemologies that first relegated non-white, non-Ashkenazi Jewish authors to obscurity. The simple fact is that making good on anti-racist futurities requires a distinct and ongoing change in *white* behaviors, which demands a deeper and more complete understanding of how whiteness operates locally and globally. I also want to make it clear that I am not claiming, in the manner of a European explorer, to have “discovered” an “unpeopled” territory hitherto unknown. In fact, to be quite frank, I imagine that much of what I have to say will be utterly unsurprising to scholars of color in Jewish studies and beyond. Yet one of the most crucial “realizations” of twenty-first-century anti-racism is that it should not and cannot be incumbent on BIPOC academics to shoulder the burden of pointing to whiteness over and over again in a recursive effort to change white behaviors. In any case, this is a question I will return to at length in the epilogue, which focuses on what Black activist and poet Dionne Brand calls “white people’s work.”

‘Working through’ whiteness in Jewish culture, even on an individual level, is a fundamental part of breaking destructive disciplinary cycles in Jewish studies and beyond. As Alfred López writes in his introduction to the edited volume *Postcolonial Whiteness* (2005),

“One philosophy for the white subject wishing to... distinguish the new antiracist white subject from its erstwhile racist ‘self’... is to work through the relation to nonwhiteness phenomenologically, as an intersubjective relation” (6). Following Heidegger, he thus posits a “postcolonial *Mitsein*... [a] being-with others after the fact of domination, abuse, and outright murder of them,” which, he asserts, is the “most important negotiation between erstwhile colonizers and colonized that postcolonial studies can offer,” because it acts as a phenomenological self-positioning that “undoes white solipsism and escapes the ontological dead end of colonialism” (6).<sup>10</sup> In so far as it examines literary examples of Jewish subjects confronting their own whiteness through a transnational, post/colonial being-with the Other, this project is also my own attempt at a post/colonial being-with myself that avoids retreating into the comforting self-recriminations of white liberal guilt underwritten, in this context, by Jewish exceptionalism. Ultimately, I hope these discursive shifts will help chart a path towards a post-liberal Jewish politics of radical empathy by revisiting the narratives, collective identities, and memorial cultures that have so deeply shaped our understanding of whiteness, of the world, and of the structures of oppression that persist where they converge. This is the task I mean to take up, in my small way: if it is to be a conflicted, tense, and incomplete *mea culpa*, let it be a productive one.

The articulation of whiteness through the language of place and space is by no means novel, beginning with the central premise that ethnic and racial identities can only emerge in relation to one another as the product of a multiplicity of transhistorical encounters between self and Other. In her pathbreaking 1993 book, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Race*, British-American-Jewish sociologist Ruth Frankenberg renders this

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<sup>10</sup> For more on “postcolonial *mitsein*,” see the epilogue.



concept in more concretely topographical language, asserting on the very first page that, “Whiteness... has a set of linked dimensions. First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1). Her goal, she explains, is to “begin exploring, mapping, and examining the terrain of whiteness” (1). Terms like “location,” “standpoint,” “mapping,” and “terrain” emphasize the crucial relationality of whiteness and the subjectivity of how we experience it; they also help explain why a subject position that is often articulated in hyperlocal terms can operate on a global scale. She further helps articulate one of the central reasons why whiteness is sometimes absent from examinations of “race”: to consolidate and protract its power, whiteness hides in plain sight as a set of cultural practices understood as “normal,” and therefore unremarkable. Non-whites are raced; white people are just people.

Hence, one important reason that whiteness is so often theorized through spatial metaphors is that its structure is as much agnotological as it is epistemological, which is to say, organized as much by ignorance as it is by knowledge. In *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), Matthew Frye Jacobson writes early on that, “The awesome power of race as an ideology resides precisely in its ability to pass as a feature of the natural landscape” (10). The project of critical whiteness studies is rooted in defamiliarizing that landscape in large part by reminding us that, like an “actual” landscape, its features change sharply depending on the standpoint from which one views it. But even that small breakthrough requires one to first recognize that one has a standpoint at all, which, for the white subject, trespasses against the basic tenets of what Charles W. Mills calls the “racial contract” and is often understood (albeit implicitly at times) as something like treason.

In its moral, political, and, crucially, epistemological dimensions, Mills's racial contract recognizes an always-shifting-but-always-existing category of people that are "white," who are "coextensive... with the class of full persons," relegating everyone else to a "subset of humans as 'nonwhite' and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons... [who] have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities" (11). The "general purpose" of the contract "is always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them" (11). "All whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract," he adds, "though some whites are not *signatories* to it" (11). Although I will discuss the complex status of Jews as beneficiaries of this contract in later chapters, for now it is more important to highlight its agnotological requirements, which amount to, in Mills's words, "an agreement to *misinterpret the world*" (18). Particularly in a post-Holocaust context, the maintenance of white power requires a certain level of plausible deniability. The notion of white superiority can remain unquestioned so long as whiteness itself is continuously subsumed into a set of norms so deeply ingrained that they become invisible. As Mills puts it, "*[I]n effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology... a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions... producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made*" (18). And in this way, it does take on the qualities of a landscape: there is a tree, there is a hill, there are white people in positions of power, and that is just how the world is.

Other early theorists of whiteness, like Richard Dyer, Stuart Hall, and Howard Winant, also associate it intimately with images of travel and contemporary processes of globalization, and the language of place and space proliferated and evolved across the field of whiteness

studies in subsequent years. Writing in 2016, Zeus Leonardo reports that “the dominant trope for understanding whiteness is through images of travel. Whether Whites are supposed to arrive at a reconstructed whiteness or its abolition, remade or reborn, a journey is assumed.... In this sense, the tropics of whiteness are constitutive of the topic of whiteness” (5). The notion of a “tropics of whiteness” calls to mind a horizon, or, better yet, a navigational (and differentially navigable) field of whiteness. In other words, just as subjects travel the globe, crossing boundaries and reorganizing national-cultural relations, they also travel the vicissitudes of identity, reorganizing relations between self and self and self and Other.<sup>11</sup> These two forms of travel are moreover intrinsically linked and even co-constitutive. Although at times we must resort to speaking of whiteness as if it is static, a pin pushed into a map of the world, we must also be constantly aware that the “topic” of whiteness is always in flux; the self may sail towards or away from the tropics of whiteness, but the horizon itself is an illusion that is undone by the possibility of its own existence.

Although theorists of whiteness have drawn deeply on spatial metaphors, they often appear to have difficulty navigating across and between national-political spaces of whiteness on a global scale. For myriad reasons, then, the study of whiteness tends to be far more constrained by geopolitical boundaries than whiteness itself. That is not to say by any stretch that the field has no sense of the world; however, reading through introductions to collections that attempt to address this lacuna, one does get a distinct sense that the problem persists. In *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (2008), for example, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds report that “‘whiteness studies’ have emerged as a productive new field... but most investigations have

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<sup>11</sup> Relatedly, in *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*, Stephen Clingman identifies navigation as “a modality of existence in, and as defining, both the transitive self and transnational space, adding that, “there is a correlation between how the self is put together and how we navigate ourselves through space and time” (11).

conceptualised their subject within a national frame of analysis, identifying local dynamics at work within histories deemed distinctive or even exceptional” (4). More to the point, even those new projects that acknowledge the global feel compelled to “confine their own analyses within a national interpretative frame,” a problem that is particularly aggravated by the ubiquity of US scholarship in the discourse (4). At the same time, a review of the essay titles in the collection, the majority of which cite a specific national framework, suggests that it may not have fully achieved its stated goal. Similarly, in *Re-Orienting Whiteness* (2009), Jane Carey, Leigh Boucher, and Katherine Ellinghaus contend that “the question of whiteness and colonialism remains a significant and curious absence,” which they approach, as their title suggests, by drawing on the Saidian principles laid out in *Orientalism*, particularly by challenging the elision of settler colonialism in US-centric discussions of race and the minimization of race in scholarship on British imperialism (1-2). Even as new edited volumes in the field—such as Zachary M. Casey’s 2021 offering, the *Encyclopedia of Critical Whiteness Studies in Education*—work diligently to correct them, these oversights are thrown into ever-sharper relief as global phenomena like the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises (and the noticeably different responses of European countries to them) and the transnational radicalization of white nationalists worldwide make it all the more paramount to understand how constructions of whiteness transcend not only the nation-state but also bounded identitarian categories like “Jewish-American culture.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> That said, in Chapters One and Six I will discuss why I think the US-centric origins and framing of whiteness studies make more sense than some will allow, namely, that American constructions of whiteness have probably circulated more heavily via international distribution of US media than those of any other country, leading people all over the world to draw on US vocabularies to describe, and thereby enact, the racial power structures they encounter at home. For now, suffice it to say that there’s a reason “Alabama” and “Mississippi” could function as signifiers of racial inequality and unrest in discursive locations as far afield as Nottingham, England and Kimberley, South Africa and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* could be a point of reference for Mizrahi activists on the outskirts of Jerusalem in the early 1970s.

Likewise at the heart of many early critiques of whiteness is a fundamental shift from an ontological theorization of whiteness to a phenomenological one, that is, from looking at whiteness as a static state of being (something one *is*) to looking at it as a phenomenon (something one *perceives, feels, or does*). In her essay, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” Sara Ahmed explains this shift by “re-posing the question of whiteness... as a question of how whiteness is lived as a background to experience.” Instead of *a given*, whiteness is “that which has been received, or *become given*, over time... an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space” (150, my emphasis). And just as whiteness can be understood as an “ongoing and unfinished history,” history itself “is made out of what is given... history is what we *receive upon arrival*” (154). History too is thus an inheritance that can be translated into the language of movement and space, as “we inherit the reachability of some objects, those that are ‘given’ to us, or at least made available to us” (154). Whiteness itself is not an object, however, it is rather “an orientation that puts certain things within reach” (154). The idea of whiteness as that which one receives upon arrival is instructive in considering, for example, the many Jewish American immigrant narratives produced before World War Two. The (mostly) Eastern European Jews who disembarked in US ports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were (mostly) granted a sort of provisional whiteness, which became more stable and ingrained with each passing decade. The recent cultural and political evolutions among American Jews also constitute a clear example of whiteness as an increase in the reachability of objects that is passed down and ever more deeply entrenched from generation to generation. Ahmed moreover provides an epistemological framework for tracing whiteness in transnational Jewish literature once one replaces the verb “to do” with “to write.” In other words, here I am interested not in what whiteness *is* in Jewish literature, but what

conditions allow whiteness to be *written* both as an explicit focus but also as a “background to experience” in Jewish texts from the past seven decades.

Ahmed’s understanding of whiteness as the orientation of certain bodies towards certain objects, as well as her analysis of how these orientations emerge as products of the “home,” allows us to see how whiteness structures desire and is also a position *within* a structure of desire and possibility. One may desire to be white; and one may desire other objects because one “is” white, that is, because desiring those objects is part of how whiteness is done. As the opening gesture in what will be an ongoing discussion of white liberal subjectivity, let us say, for example, that I, a white American Jewish woman, desire to own a house. A great many factors converge in that desire, such as the deep association between homeownership and good citizenship in American culture, a more emotionally inflected wish to fulfill a goal that my mother set for herself but is unlikely to achieve, or the fact that I grew up surrounded by examples of white Jewish homeowners who became aspirational on the one hand but also seemed to prove concretely if unconsciously that this object of desire is reachable. And if I am ever lucky enough to own a home, my whiteness will be key in doing so: in being shown certain properties, in making a “good impression” on the realtor and on the bank officer that grants me a loan, and in drawing on accumulated intergenerational wealth to pay that loan off.

But to whatever extent these liberal, bourgeois white desires may feel personal to me, they are also fundamentally shaped by ongoing negotiations of power and belonging in US and global culture. As will be discussed at greater length in Chapter One, Dianne Harris’s *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*, explains that, in the postwar period, a “pervasive iconography of white, middle-class domesticity” began to circulate heavily in the US cultural imagination (1). Both houses and images of houses “continuously and

reflexively created, re-created, and reinforced... the rightness of associating white identities with homeownership and citizenship” (1). In this vision, the (often implicitly, but at times quite explicitly, white) American dream was there for the taking. But even to speak of this dream as American, particularly in the case of Eastern European Jews and global racial capitalism, is somewhat misleading. For these Jews, the postwar American project of whiteness was endemically fraught with European anxieties, not only the terrifying memories of pogroms in the Russian Empire but also, more recently and yet in some senses further away, of the Nazi Holocaust. Moreover, as I will touch on in Historical Overture II, American images of white, middle-class domesticity did not merely function as totems in the United States. Instead, they circulated all over the world, creating a transnational image of a global white consumer class. Indeed, the intensive and purposeful circulation of racialized images of desire throughout the twentieth century provides crucial support for the idea that modern whiteness cannot truly be understood in a single national framework. Finally, as both Frankenberg and Ahmed point out, the whiteness that inheres in certain domestic spaces the world over is rooted in and spread globally by colonialism. Should I ever acquire one, my little white house would always already be located on a map of racialized subjectivity, ideology, and desire that includes the entire world.

Naturally, many of the objects that figure in a global understanding of Jewish whiteness are less tangible, but the example of a house—or, in theory, a “home”—connects back to other important elements of Ahmed’s theory of whiteness. She expands on the interlocution of these concepts by meditating on the idiom ‘like two peas in a pod’:

This saying suggests to me that likeness is as an effect of *the proximity of shared residence*.... Likeness is not then ‘in’ the peas, let alone ‘in’ the pod, but is an effect of their contiguity.... In the case of race, we would say the bodies come to be seen as

‘alike’, as for instance ‘sharing whiteness’ as characteristic as an effect of such proximities, where certain ‘things’ are already ‘in place.’ ‘The familial’ is in a way like the ‘pod,’ as a shared space of dwelling, in which things are shaped by their proximity to other things. ‘The familial’ is after all about ‘the familiar:’ this is the world we implicitly know, as a world that is organized in specific ways.... To think this implicit knowledge as inherited is to think about how we inherit a relation to place and to placement...

Whiteness is inherited through the very placement of things. (155)

The house is thus not only an object that one may desire within and obtain through whiteness, but also a space in which whiteness is generated and shared through proximity. And yet, like the home, “The world too is inherited as a dwelling,” and thus “Whiteness might be what is ‘here’, as a point from which the world unfolds” (154). At first, this conjunction of home and world may seem strange. After all, in many ways they are opposites: the home is private while the world is public, the home is contained while the world is open, the home is familiar while the world is strange. I bring this up because it is precisely the dialectic that I am attempting to “resolve.” For the home is the meeting point of many worlds, which is to say, it is also a site of transcultural, transnational exchange, and the world is made up of an endless constellation of homes.

One last note on race and proximity before we move on to worldedness, which I hope will help ground my approach more concretely in Jewish literary studies. Dean Franco locates the concept of proximity in contemporary Jewish American writing in his 2012 book, *Race, Rights, and Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969*. Franco identifies proximity as a term that “suggests a pragmatic first step toward new configurations of being and belonging” (4). For that reason, his core texts feature “people from different ethnic or religious affiliations who find themselves in each other’s paths.” From this vantage point, he argues, we see how



“proximity exposes group affiliation, subjecting it to scrutiny, because proximity is the (often anxious) occasion for thinking about one’s relation to one’s own group.... Who we are and what exactly that means may never be settled, but one thing is certain: we continually end up proximate to one another” (4-5). Thus, “The Jewish American literary contribution to thinking about intergroup relations,” he claims, “is its many-sided and multilayered representation of and mediation on proximity” (5). What I aim to do here is trace the “many-sided and multilayered representation of and mediation on proximity” more explicitly beyond a Jewish *American* context. As in Franco’s archive, the characters in my texts often define their ethnoracial identities in and through their encounter with Others, encounters that lead them, in turn, to question the contiguities they have inherited. Yet I aim to construct a more worlded archive, and in so doing to understand how Jewish whiteness is shared, inherited, and performed across and between the boundaries of the nation-state. My project attempts to build on this understanding of whiteness-in-proximity by accounting for distance, which I pursue under the sign of the world.

### *Worldedness*

For the past three decades—or three centuries, if you count Goethe—literary studies has endeavored to construct new, more inclusive ways of conceiving and perceiving space. These elaborations have resulted in new disciplinary identities like Comparative, World, and Global Anglophone Literature, as well as a dizzying array of conceptual vocabularies: worldliness, globality, transnationalism, the Capitalocene and Anthropocene, cosmopolitanism—and that’s just to name a few. Hence, in many ways, the opening negotiations of “world” in this project occurred at the site of language. To begin with, I have chosen to set aside the vocabulary of diaspora, which I frankly believe would only distort the project’s intentions, as (I would argue) it often does in Jewish studies. For even when the focus is demonstrably outside of Israel (and

“Israel”), the term diaspora effectively re-centers it, even if only in its absence. Here, Israel is but one of four national sites of Jewish cultural production, Jerusalem no more of the center of the map than London, Johannesburg, or New York. And while Zionism is, of course, an ideology with which this project contends, I believe that using the diasporic framework would mean capitulating unproductively to its organization of our reality.<sup>13</sup> In truth, I have had much more difficulty grappling with the difference between—and the epistemological utility of—the world and the transnational.

As will already be clear, although it emphasizes the crossing of such boundaries, this project does not dispense with the nation-state as a category of concern. Yet I also clearly take the “world” as my dominant signifier. In part, this is a function of my focus on Jewish literature, which, as I will shortly discuss, simply cannot be mapped cleanly onto any configuration of the nation-state or of multiple nation-states.<sup>14</sup> But even outside of the Jewish context, I think the use of “world” helps recursively emphasize how contemporary identity narratives circulate both inter- and supra-nationally in an unignorably global affective economy. That said, if one accepts that the “world” introduces an element that is not encompassed by the “transnational,” the next step is to establish what exactly that element might be and why it is necessary. The initial

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<sup>13</sup> As I will discuss again in Chapter Two, the perennial but often cursory return to diaspora as a spatial framework for Jewish identity belies the weight of its epistemological implications. Even though temporally it *can be* though is not always an expression of continuity, spatially, and in the sense of identitarian boundaries, in the Jewish context diaspora establishes a baseline condition of difference. Jewish Diaspora is a center-periphery model, and the center has to be different from the periphery, or else they don’t exist as such. Hence, when one uses diaspora to organize their thinking in the Jewish context, they are inevitably looking for the marks of difference. But working from an essential and often unspoken assumption of difference obscures many crucial continuities, which creates a significant epistemological problem both in Jewish literary studies narrowly and Jewish studies broadly. On a personal and political note, I think so-called “Diaspora Jews” owe it to ourselves to think deeply about the kind of ideological and affective obligations we take on when we style ourselves as such.

<sup>14</sup> I am, for example, taking for granted that there is an entity called “South African Jewish literature,” which bears an indexical relationship to the nation-state of South Africa in its many forms, and that the South Africanness of South Africa in some elemental way conditions each text included in that archive. There is something in a South African Jewish novel that lies beyond “South Africa” and something in an Israeli Jewish novel beyond “Israel.” And even if one were to read them together, the Jewishness of those novels would still exceed the transnational instantiation of “Jewish literature of/between South Africa and Israel.”

description offered by David Damrosch in *What is World Literature?* (2003) is as follows: “I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin... [but] a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (4). That world literature is categorically invested in a *culture* (as opposed to a country) of origin is already promising in the context of Jewish literature, which, since it has almost always been produced from a minoritarian and often marginalized position, has rarely mapped cleanly onto national borders. Yet this also raises the question of a text circulating between multiple Jewish cultures. If a text circulates effectively between an Israeli Jewish reading public and an American Jewish reading public—as is often the case since, as I will touch on in Chapter Three, Hebrew texts in the modern State of Israel are often translated specifically with an American Jewish audience in mind—has it thus achieved the status of world literature? What if it circulates between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi readerships, or religious and secular ones? These questions speak to the panoramic, exhaustive reach of Damrosch’s introductory definition, which, even if one restricts it to the Ashkenazi (or the Mizrahi, or the American, or the Zionist) tradition alone, seems to include almost every Jewish literary text written in the past three centuries.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> These problems persist in the field of world literature as they do through much of Damrosch’s text. In the conclusion, he summarizes the refinements he has added to his initial definition, writing, first, “World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures” (281). If we accept a broad definition of what constitutes a ‘nation’ or ‘national literature,’ which, as he reminds us, is a relatively new construction anyway, then we can likewise recognize that works “continue to bear the marks of their national origin even after they circulate into world literature, and yet these traces are increasingly diffused and become ever more sharply refracted as a work travels farther from home” (283). He continues, “This refraction... is double in nature: works become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture’s national tradition” (283). Although it yields a potentially fruitful geometry of worldedness, the slippages between “Jewish” and “nation/al” remain problematic. These issues are interestingly indexed by a stray linguistic detail Damrosch includes. As part of his explanation for taking a broad approach to defining the nation, he mentions that “A ‘nation’ itself, in early modern English, could designate an ethnic group or culture: in the King James Bible, ‘the nations’ translates the Hebrew *ha-goyim*, the Septuagint’s *hoi ethnoi*” (283). Yet in the modern Jewish tradition *goyim* is not only not the word used to describe the Jews—we say *am Yisrael chai*, or, the Jewish *people* live—it’s the word we use to describe peoples that are *not* Jewish.

To be sure, many theorists in the field of world literature, including Damrosch himself, have taken up the challenge of productively narrowing the category down. But, as I will elaborate at the end of this section, that kind of winnowing is not necessarily one of my goals. First, however, I think it would be most helpful to turn to a specifically Jewish literary engagement with world literature, since the “problem” here, if such there be, derives partially from the ongoing ambiguities of “world literature” as an object of study and partially from the brute facts of modern Jewish life. As Saul Zaritt explains early on in *Jewish American Writing and World Literature* (2020), even Jewish literature produced in the Pale of Settlement,<sup>16</sup> which is often thought of as an entirely closed off environment where Jewish culture evolved in isolation, was marked by a certain worldedness:

The popular image of the shtetl, the overdetermined symbol of Eastern European Jewry, depends, at least in part, on a principle of distance. According to the mythos, the shtetl is a hermetically sealed Jewish space ensconced in its unchanging “traditions” and entirely removed from the larger world. That the nineteenth-century market town was actually embedded in the volatile and crumbling feudal economies of empire, was ethnically and religiously diverse with growing class divisions, was the site of complex linguistic interchange, and was being rapidly exposed to all the ideological and technological trappings of modernity—much of this is glossed over in repeated depictions of the shtetl as the seemingly eternal homeland of Ashkenazi Jewry. (36)

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<sup>16</sup> The Pale of Settlement was a territory established and controlled by the Russian Empire between 1772 and 1917, within which Jews were allowed to settle permanently. It included parts of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltic states; its borders were revised multiple times under various Tsars. Outside of this territory, Jewish rights were strictly curtailed, particularly in terms of residency, freedom of movement, and occupation, leading to an intense concentration of Jews within the Pale. Even there, however, anti-Jewish laws prevented most from engaging in agriculture, and those who lived in the shtetls (villages) were generally impoverished and frequently the targets of brutal pogroms.

Thus, even though “the shtetl and the modern world are commonly portrayed as polar opposites with a vast expanse extending between them” (36), in truth the shtetl was—and, crucially, continues to be—a global intersection, a site, both imagined and real, where “Jewish literature” and “world literature” converge.<sup>17</sup> The assumption that the Pale would have produced the former but not the latter, then, is based on a romanticized and fundamentally flawed image of pre-Soviet Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and yet must also be observed as a shared signifier linking post-World War II Jewish texts the world over no matter how flawed its premise.<sup>18</sup>

Taking a moment to further trace the connection from shtetl to world may help ground our understanding of Jewish literature as world literature, particularly in the context of this project. In many ways, the histories of the Jewish communities in the US, the UK, Israel, and South Africa after World War Two are rooted in the “shtetl,” that is, in the history of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the period roughly between 1881 and 1917, millions of Jews fled the Russian Empire for points south and west. A steady flow of mostly Yiddish-speaking Jews arrived in New York, Boston, and Baltimore, in Cape Town and Kimberley, in London, Brighton, and Manchester, and in Haifa and Tel Aviv. Of course, there were small communities of Jews in all four places before this—predominately German or Anglo-German in the US, the UK, and South Africa and Sephardi in pre-Mandate Palestine—but the

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<sup>17</sup> Pinning down the beginning of “modernity,” let alone Jewish modernity, is difficult, and as an act of self-care I have placed it outside the purview of this project. I would note, however, that the essential facts of translation, circulation, and transcultural impact, which seem to be the basic requirements for designating a work as “world literature,” apply to secular Jewish literature at least as far back as the nineteenth century. See, for example, Naomi Seidman’s discussion of the circulation of early Hebrew-language novels in the Pale in *The Marriage Plot Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (2016).

<sup>18</sup> Zaritt’s insights also point back to the utility of the distant proximities heuristic. If the “popular image of the shtetl,” which “depends on distance,” appears almost simultaneously in two Jewish texts that themselves appear distant from one another, say, a South African short story and an American one in the mid-1960s, how do we understand the reorganization around the signifier “shtetl” initiated by reading these two texts together? Certainly “the shtetl” retains a kernel of distance, but it also produces a proximity between the two texts that draw upon on it—though they themselves are distant, the shared image produces an intimacy between them, a cultural and mnemonic proximity.

massive outmigration of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fundamentally reshaped and reoriented all four of these communities.<sup>19</sup> This is reflected in the authors into whose work my subsequent chapters delve: at least three (Roth, Malamud, and Jacobson), and more likely four (Eprile) of my authors could trace at least part of their ancestry to the Pale. To an extent, a spectral “Jewish Europe” might even be termed a fifth “country,” insofar as it clearly haunts the Jewish Anglosphere to this day. And still, the movements described here are a drop in the bucket of how migration has shaped Jewish cultural traditions; to wit, mapping Jewish history requires a great deal of arrows.

Hence, as Lital Levy and Alison Schachter note at the beginning of their 2015 article, “Jewish Literature / World Literature: Between the Local and the Transnational,” perhaps the most surprising aspect of the application of the world literature framework to Jewish literature is how long it took to happen. After all, it seems only logical that Jews—who have been deemed, in diverse times and places and with varying levels of disdain, cosmopolitan, globalist, internationalist, diasporic, and/or exilic—would produce a literature that is both *worldly* and *worlded*. As Levy and Schachter put it, that archive we call Jewish literature is a “network that spans the cosmopolitan centers, the colonial peripheries, and the complex relations of power inscribed in and between these locations,” as well as a “staging ground for the theoretical questions underscoring world literature’s critical practices” (93). Moreover, as discussed in the last section, it has for some time now been clear that whiteness, like literature, was in fact never

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<sup>19</sup> Some facts and figures: Between roughly 1882 and 1920, it is estimated that around 2.5 million Eastern European Jews immigrated to the United States (Diner). During that same period, 120,000 to 150,000 Eastern European Jews settled permanently in Great Britain (Endelmann). From 1880 to 1910 some 40,000 Jewish immigrants entered South Africa, mostly from Lithuania, with another 30,000 arriving by 1948 (Shimoni); in Ottoman Palestine, the first “aliya” or wave of immigration, from 1882 to 1903, brought 20,000 to 30,000 Russian Jews, and the second aliya, 1904 to 1914, brought an additional 35,000-40,000. The third and fourth *aliyot* brought 35,000 Jews from the Soviet Union, Poland and the Baltic countries between 1919 and 1923, and 82,000 Jews from the Balkans and the Near Orient between 1924 and 1931, respectively (CJPME).

as geographically or politically bounded as we believed. And just as Jewish literature provides a vital “staging ground” for the essential questions of world, so too has it proved fruitful for those who wish to explore the instability and mutability of modern whiteness.

And like whiteness, an effective analysis of worldedness in Jewish literature requires a shift from noun to verb. Damrosch writes, “*World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time*” (281). Instead of setting out to read an impossible canon of “world literature,” we world literature by reading it in certain ways. But what, after all, does it mean to “world” a concept or a text? As Eric Hayot puts it, “worlding” names

a process of orientation or calibration; to world (a person, or a place) would be to locate it “as is” in relation to the whole.... Worlding is gestural; it is an attitude, by which one adjusts oneself, symmetrically, to one’s inclusion in a whole that does not belong to one. Worlding creates worlds because it bespeaks the part’s relation to the whole, but also because in that speaking it imagines (or recreates) the whole that opens to the part. The whole neither precedes the part, nor succeeds it. (“World Literature” 228)

But to this I would add that the verb “to world,” like “to queer,” is often an act of interpretation that reveals dimensions in the text that were already there. One of the reasons I prefer the term “worldedness” is that, to me, its temporality indicates that the relationship between text and world precedes my interpretation of it. To use the terminology introduced by Rebecca Walkowitz, nearly all modern Jewish texts are “born translated,” if not always in the linguistic sense. In the cultural sense at the very least, modern Jewish literature “approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought. Translation is not secondary or incidental to these works. It is a condition of their production” (*Born Translated* 3-4). Nearly everywhere Jewish

writing occurs, it is marked by its minority status, which requires some form of cultural translation to circulate outside of what would otherwise be a very small context, a fact that many Jewish writers in the Anglosphere are highly aware of.<sup>20</sup> As I will discuss in later chapters, Jewish texts also require linguistic, political, and affective acts of translation to have “effective” lives in other Jewish contexts. In so far as one “worlds” these texts by re-orienting or re-calibrating them, that often means changing our interpretive approach to call forth a worldedness that was already there.

Next question: if “to world” is, among other things, an interpretive gesture that reveals worldedness, then what is worldedness? My understanding of worldedness owes something to what Edward Said first calls “worldliness” in his 1991 essay, “The Politics of Knowledge.” Writing about the necessity of expanding the critical imagination beyond the parochialism of national and ethnic categories, he argues, “by linking works to each other we bring them out of the neglect and secondariness to which for all kinds of political and ideological reasons they had previously been condemned,” lest they remain “only as informative ethnographic specimens, suitable for the limited attention of experts and area specialists” (44). This latter is, importantly, a common critique of the reductive effect Jewish studies sometimes has on its objects.<sup>21</sup> The antidote, according to Said, is to adopt the approach of “worldliness,” which signifies “the restoration to such works and interpretations of their place in the global setting, a restoration that can only be accomplished by an appreciation... of the large, many windowed house of human

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<sup>20</sup> For example, at the end of *The Persistence of Memory*, Tony Eprile appended a glossary of both Afrikaans and Yiddish terminology. The terms are mixed in alphabetical order, but I’ve wondered at times if different parts of this glossary were actually meant for different audiences. A non-South African Jewish audience would need the Afrikaner slang defined but not the Yiddish, while a non-Jewish South African audience would need the Yiddish. In any case, the inclusion of the glossary presumes that a significant proportion of readers will need parts of the text translated, and that assumption conditioned decisions made during the text’s production.

<sup>21</sup> Again, see Ben Schreier’s *The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History*.



culture as a whole” (28). In the context of Jewish literature this can mean many things. For example, as discussed above, it may mean recognizing the extent to which globality is a precondition of Jewish cultural products that emerged from a collective history and memory fundamentally shaped by movement. In other cases, which I’ll turn to momentarily, it may mean recognizing the extent to which Jewish texts bear, albeit sometimes beneath the surface, an ideological sensibility that is fundamentally transnational.

To better explore these substrata, I connect Said’s “worldliness” with Eric Hayot’s term, “worldedness.” which he elaborates in an essay that anticipated *On Literary Worlds* (2012), defining it as “the world-oriented force of any given work of art... [that] emerges only at certain scales of the work itself (and hence of the analysis of works)” (139). To an extent, this is the core intention of my introduction of distant proximities as a concept: it is a multi-scalar analysis that attempts to account for both the worldliness and the worldedness of how whiteness emerges in a given text or archive. In *On Literary Worlds*, Hayot goes on to explain,

Aesthetic worldedness is the form of the relation that a work establishes between the world inside and the world outside itself.... Worldedness emerges most often from the collective expression—or impression—of the work as a whole, as a function of all the rules that govern what the work does not include as well as what the work includes without mentioning it. World-creation happens consciously, but also in the ideological “unconscious” of the work, not as an expression of what the work does not know, but of what it knows most deeply, and thus says least... (50)

There are two arguments here that are central to how I understand and use the term ‘worldedness.’ First is the claim that “aesthetic worldedness” is the relationship a text announces between the world created within and bounded by the text—what I would mean if I said “the

world of *The Counterlife*” — and the unbounded world outside of the text, in which I sit drinking lukewarm coffee reading *The Counterlife* while billions of people in hundreds of countries do other things that may or may not involve reading *The Counterlife* and/or drinking lukewarm coffee. Second is the claim that worldedness—the connection between the text-world and the “real world”—can quite often be located in the “ideological unconscious” of the text. That is to say, the connection the text makes between its internal and external worlds often inheres in the ideologies it implicitly reproduces.

But how do the concepts of aesthetic worldedness and the ideological unconscious connect to Saidian worldliness, that is, the sense of a text being uncontainable within the fixed boundaries of the nation-state or of a single “culture” (aka transnational or transcultural) and linked to other works by a political imagination that resists essentialist categories of identity (aka global)? First, insofar as aesthetic worldedness is revealed in the ideological unconscious of a text, so too is the ideological unconscious of the text often revealed in its aesthetics. For example, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, Dan Jacobson’s *The Beginners* (1966) does not explicitly label itself as either a liberal text or as a critique of South African Jewish liberalism, but it’s broad adherence to and occasional violations of the aesthetics of South African liberal realism mark it out as both. What’s more, insofar as the ideological unconscious of a text is worldly in the Saidian sense, much as South African liberal realism was fundamentally shaped by British post/colonialism, the text itself is also worldly. Hence worldedness and worldliness overlap and are expressed in the co-constitutive relationship between aesthetics and ideology that quite often emerges when reading a text against itself at certain scales. I have foregrounded Hayot’s theory of worldedness precisely because the compulsion to look for “what [a text] knows most deeply, and thus says least” is also a fundamental prerequisite for seeing how

whiteness emerges from, produces, and shapes literature. As Frankenberg, Mills, Ahmed, and other theorists have explained, whiteness consolidates power by remaining if not imperceptible then at least indescribable, hard to put one's finger on and even harder to explain if one manages to do so. Hence, not only are whiteness and worldedness co-constitutive, but they also require a shared set of analytical precepts to address.

To unpack the complexities in this set of interwoven concepts and to demonstrate how they intersect with whiteness, I want to turn briefly to Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants*, which will be the focus of Chapter Two. As I will later elaborate, I argue that white imperialism and imperial whiteness, which are inherently worldly, constitute the ideological unconscious of the text. This may seem counterintuitive in that, first, the "world" of the text is small and cramped, with nearly all of the action taking place in a single apartment building in New York City, and, second that, unlike 'blackness,' which appears dozens of times, 'whiteness' is never mentioned. Hence, rather than looking at what the novel says, I look for what it does without saying, recalling that Ahmed asks us to look for "what 'whiteness' does without assuming whiteness as an ontological given, but as that which has been received, or become given, over time" (150). To bring whiteness and worldedness together in *The Tenants*, I focus on its aesthetics, specifically the ways in which Malamud uses the (worldly and white) aesthetics of British Romanticism to figure the Jewish subject within Anglo-American imperialism instead of outside of it. Malamud's use of these globally inflected, racialized aesthetics instantiates a relationship between the text-world and the "real world" that conveys information about the relationship between Jewish whiteness and post/coloniality. As before, "the world of *The Tenants*" is narrow and restrictive; it doesn't even include all five boroughs of New York. Yet its ideological unconscious is global, connecting the microscopic text-world to the macroscopic world of

centuries' worth of conquest, racialization, and epistemological violence. The relationship between the two is how we read the aesthetic worldedness *and* the worldliness of the text, which in turn reveals more information about how whiteness is surreptitiously “done” within contemporary Jewish texts on a broader scale.

Still, in the end, one returns to the problem that, in theory, all texts are worlded and worldly. This is a problem with which, as I mentioned earlier, the field of world literature has long contended. The question of what *isn't* world literature is, however, outside the scope of this project. Instead, I am choosing to look at a cross-section of novels from the post-1948 Jewish Anglosphere that I firmly believe *are* world literary texts to better understand how whiteness is done both in the worlds they produce and also the world of which they are part—our world. My contention is that, by exploring the aesthetic worldedness of these texts, by plumbing their ideological unconscious, we can better understand the ways in which their text-worlds overlap with each other and with our own. Returning to *The Tenants*, in the final sections of Chapter Two I will examine a dream sequence that is set in an imaginary “Africa.” This too is an example of the text’s ideological worldliness. But, as I explained earlier, this interpretive approach can be pushed even further when *The Tenants* is then juxtaposed with Ronit Matalon’s *The One Facing Us*. On the surface, these two texts have very little in common, but their ideological unconscious overlap in the idea of Africa as an imaginary space in which Jews can become white. Both novels are themselves worlded and worldly, but when we look at the relationship between aesthetics and ideology in each, that analysis can also allow the texts to world one another, by which I mean they can show us where their own connections between text-world and real-world intersect, in turn helping to map whiteness in the global Jewish context.

*Politics and Form*

In his contribution to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2012), Hayot asserts that, in the twenty-first century, we can “locate world literature as a concept” in its toggling between

two seemingly incompatible modes of appearance: as a feeling or attitude provoked by intensive close reading of individual texts, tuned to the frequency of their transnational effects and imaginations; or as a discourse and field of social formation, generated by the circulation and development of literary genres, micro-genres, and representational or stylistic forms across the boundaries of nation, culture, and time. (“World Literature” 223)

As will already be clear, I do not believe these two interpretive modes are incompatible at all. On the contrary, I see them as inextricably linked by, among other things, the politics of form. Caroline Levine articulates as much in her 2015 book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, in which she sets the goal of “expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience” by showing how “an attention to both aesthetic and social forms returns us to the very heterogeneity at the heart of form’s conceptual history” (2-3). Levine imports the concept of “affordance” from design theory, which “describe[s] the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs,” subsequently noting that “all forms do share one affordance. Precisely because they are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns are iterable—portable” (7). This portability is precisely what makes form such a valuable tool for exploring whiteness in/as worldedness. While this project is only peripherally interested in the physical movement of authors themselves, it is deeply invested in how forms

travel in post-1948 Jewish literature as an index of the geographical, but more often sociopolitical and affective, movement of Jewish individuals and communities.

Highlighting the unifying traits through which forms become legible, Levine notes that forms travel in two key ways, first in that “certain literary forms—epic, free indirect discourse, rhythm, plot—can survive across cultures and time periods, sometimes enduring through vast distances of time and space,” and second “by moving back and forth across aesthetic and social materials” (4-5). Likewise, she explains, “*Forms do political work in particular historical contexts*,” since “if they afford the same limited range of actions wherever they travel, and if they are the stuff of politics, then attending to the affordances of form opens up *a generalizable understanding of political power*” (5-7). All of the texts in my archive do political work in their own particular historical context. At the same time, these texts demonstrate how forms can do political work by travelling. When, for example, midcentury South African Jewish writers like Dan Jacobson (see Chapter Four), whose families were of Lithuanian extraction, drew on the liberal realist forms of nineteenth-century British literature to tell South African stories, their importation of these forms was, in itself, a political stance that both separated them from the storytelling traditions of Eastern European Jewish culture and also aligned them against Afrikaner nationalism.

In *The Order of Forms* (2019), Anna Kornbluh compounds and evolves Levine’s approach into a description of “political formalism.” Political formalism is marked by “its willingness to entertain the political imagining that can issue from studying forms, and even more so because its elementary affirmation addresses the formed quality of the political as such” (4). Political formalism “evaluates form’s composedness and form’s agency—the contingent and emergent quality of form’s relationality, the dispensation of interrelation and what relations

make possible— and thereby approaches politics and aesthetics from the purview of the constitution of social form” (4). This cuts to the heart of why formalism is so important to this project. A distant proximity is, among other things, indicative of a pattern that can be traced transnationally across Jewish literary production since 1948 and which, in its very mapping, allows new Jewish political imaginaries to emerge. And this, as Kornbluh explains, is one of the crucial ways that literary *analysis* does political work. In excavating the forms of sociability that circulate in Jewish literature, we can more clearly re-orient our critiques towards progress.

### *Ethics and Memory*

It would be unproductive, perhaps even impossible, to explore contemporary Jewish whiteness without accounting for the ethical and mnemonic tensions contained therein. More to the point, the stakes of this project— aside from, I hope, providing innovative literary analysis—are rooted in the ethics of Jewish whiteness, how we understand it, and what that means for contemporary political and activist discourse. Although I would certainly not argue, as many people in diverse times and places have done, that Jewish whiteness is uniquely upstanding or sensitive, I do believe that it is oftentimes uniquely self-conscious and aware of the moral complexities of transhistorical whiteness even in those moments when it tries vehemently to deny any involvement in them. Of course, this consciousness stems in large part from the centrality of the Holocaust and Holocaust memorial culture in Ashkenazi Jewish politics, rhetoric, and aesthetics over the past eight decades. Collective memories of persecution play an undeniable role in the construction of contemporary Jewish identity to the point where memory and identity can reasonably be—and often are—treated as synonymous in the Jewish context and condition nearly every aspect of Jews’ (mis)recognition of their whiteness. They also tend, in Jewish studies particularly, to cast a long shadow across attempts at comparative analysis,

literary and otherwise. The politics of comparison, the existential unit of the “encounter,” and the problem of distant suffering are central to the ethical theories of Michael Rothberg and James Baldwin, who discuss, on the one hand, how “implicated” subjectivity can help us understand our responsibility for seemingly distant historical oppression, and, on the other hand, how the intersection between historical and contemporary injustices, which could become *inflection* points if understood *ethically*, instead become *deflection* points because they are taken up *ethnically*.

The tension between experiences of privilege and histories of prejudice is an essential example of how distant proximities function in Jewish world literature and indeed how Jewish literature emerges as fundamentally worlded. To discuss it productively, however, we would do well to draw on a new language for this dynamic. In his most recent book, Michael Rothberg identifies “implicated subjects” as

those who occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator. (1)

Rothberg also emphasizes the temporal complexities of the category, writing, “the kind of entanglement implication names almost always has a diachronic (historical) dimension that intersects with a synchronic (contemporary) structure” (8-9). This approach to time, he explains, emerges from the nature of “histories that remain unresolved and thus trouble the distinction between a fully absent past and a fully present present.... There is neither a strict continuity between past and present nor a clean break.... Rather, implication emerges from the ongoing,



uneven, and destabilizing intrusion of irrevocable pasts into an unredeemed present” (9). These passages demonstrate the crucial conceptual overlaps between Ahmed’s “whiteness” and Rothberg’s “implication.” To begin with, both must be understood not as ontological givens but rather as phenomenological positions, which conceptualize subjectivity as an inherently relational orientation towards objects, bodies, and ideologies. Rothberg’s bifurcation of the synchronic and diachronic registers at work in implication also speak powerfully to Ahmed’s framing of whiteness as an “ongoing and unfinished history.” This may not come as a great surprise: clearly, whiteness constitutes the dark heart of the oppressive structures in which Rothberg’s subjects are implicated, often by their very whiteness.

At the same time, the language of implication helps us articulate the relationship between whiteness and responsibility among subjects—like Ashkenazi Jews—whose historical relation to whiteness is characterized by instability. In *Being White, Being Good*, Barbara Applebaum explains that one of the crucial blockages that must be overcome in social justice pedagogy is that white students “*refuse to even engage* with the possibility that they are complicit. Most... see themselves as good people and take the charge of complicity as a serious affront to their moral being. They perceive their moral being as transcending their whiteness” (4). These deflective tendencies also circulate in Jewish cultural discourse, but often in more explicitly diachronic registers. The relationship between whiteness and implication, and how they converge in the ways particularly white, Ashkenazi Jews move through political spaces, is far more broadly *understood* than it is *expressed*. It is this lacuna against which James Baldwin writes in his 1967 essay, “Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They Are Anti-White.” Baldwin asserts: “It is true that many Jews use, shamelessly, the slaughter of the 6,000,000 by the Third Reich as proof that they cannot be bigots or in the hope of not being held responsible for their bigotry. It is

galling to be told by a Jew whom you know to be exploiting you that he cannot possibly be doing what you know he is doing because he is a Jew” (741). As Baldwin so poignantly illustrates, the Jewish refusal to engage is based on the imposition of a diachronic moral condition on a synchronic encounter. In its engagement with Jewish Holocaust memory, particularly in comparison to the suppression of Black memory, much of Baldwin’s critique of Jewish whiteness points directly to the ways in which Jews are centered—and center themselves—in the moral order produced by post-World War II liberal internationalism.

As will be a focal point of Chapter Six, in “Anti-White” and other essays, Baldwin also recognizes that this problem extends well beyond the borders of the United States. Indeed, he returns to this point in a later essay that explicitly links together white American racism, South African apartheid, and the Holocaust. Responding to Northern white liberals who compare themselves favorably to ignorant Southerners, Baldwin writes, “even if Birmingham is worse, no doubt Johannesburg ... beats it by several miles, and Buchenwald was one of the worst things that ever happened” (178). “The world” he continues passionately, “has never lacked for horrifying examples; but I do not believe [they] are meant to be used as justification for our own crimes, [which] empties the heart of all human feeling. The emptier our hearts become, the greater will be our crimes” (178). Building on this worlded perspective, I also read Baldwin through Kevin Bruyneel’s *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race* (2021), which examines how the “simultaneous absence and presence of Indigeneity” inheres in “the popular politics, discourse, and debates about race in the United States, and in U.S. political life in general,” an absent-present dialectic he terms “settler memory” (2). Settler memory “stalls the effort to advance the conversation around race itself, including on some of the pressing issues of our time... by rendering Indigenous peoples and settler colonialism

invisible or barely visible as active contemporary forces” (2-3). Since identifying settler memory helps us see how it “elides from public and political discussion the settler part of white identity and white supremacist policies, practices, and discourse,” it also “offers a way to explain how indigeneity resides so often in the background of race and other political discussions in the United States... [and thereby] helps to reproduce colonial unknowing” (3).

Yet although in the Jewish American context North American indigeneities are often elided in ways similar to those in mainstream US white culture, American Jews do routinely contend with the concept of indigeneity in the context of Israel/Palestine. Hence, in a discussion of “popular politics, discourse, and debates about race” in the *Jewish* American context, Bruyneel’s conclusions, while still instructive, do not fully hold. Meanwhile, as I demonstrate in my discussion of Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*, settler memory in Israel also borrows from the very imagery that produces colonial unknowing in the US context. That is not to say that Jews are somehow beyond the colonial unknowing that settler memory reproduces (quite the contrary, in fact, which is what makes Bruyneel so valuable to this project), nor that Jewish American discourse does not elide Palestinian indigeneity in different but equally problematic ways; rather I am emphasizing that white *Jewish* settler memory cannot be engaged with productively in a single national context because, for example, American Jewish politics of indigeneity are never entirely American.<sup>22</sup> That said, American Jews are by no means the only ones who have a complicated engagement with settler memory. On a global scale, Jews’ relationship to coloniality, as to whiteness, is deeply complex. In demonstrating these principles, the texts in my archive make possible new understandings of the construction of whiteness in the postwar West, the centrality of Jewish trauma and privilege in the emergence and development of mid-

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<sup>22</sup> See also Jewish American author Michael Chabon’s excellent 2007 novel, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* and the less successful but still illuminating *Isra-Isle* (2016) by Israeli Jewish novelist Nava Semel.

twentieth-century liberalism and human rights discourse, and the importance of confronting race in reconfiguring Jewish ethics and activism for the twenty-first century. Fiction, I argue, offers a unique promise to this endeavor, because what binds together race, politics, and memory in the contemporary Jewish context—what, in a sense, makes them dialogically legible—is narrative.

### *Chapter Overview*

The remainder of this project is divided into two parts. Parts One and Two begin with “Historical Overtures,” themed interchapters that trace Jewish history in all four countries from 1948 to present, focusing on moments that capture both the ethico-political relationships between, and the elaboration and transmission of whiteness through, the Jewish communities in these four countries.<sup>23</sup> If, as Alexander Saxton once put it, “Race is fundamentally a theory of history... a theory of... who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what,” then such contextualization is vital to mounting a compelling investigation of whiteness in transnational Jewish literature (14).<sup>24</sup> But these “Historical Overtures” are not—and

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<sup>23</sup> This timespan functions in accordance with, among other things Howard Winant’s assertion that “[S]ince World War II, and particularly since the 1960s, the world has undergone a profound shift in the global logic of race or... in racial formation. This shift was the most significant challenge to global white supremacy that had been mounted since the rise of Europe half a millennium earlier. Yet, world-shaking as it was, it could not dislodge, but only somewhat weaken, that ferocious tradition of white supremacist world rule” (“White Racial Projects” 99).

<sup>24</sup> A quick Jewish American example of what I think Saxton means by this would be the “ethnic revival” in US culture during the mid-to-late 1970s, which provides crucial context for our coming discussion of *The Counterlife*. Matthew Frye Jacobson places the high-water mark of this discourse in 1976, indexed by the “coincidence and enthusiastic reception” of three books, Alex Haley’s *Roots*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and, most importantly in this context, *World of Our Fathers*, written by Irving Howe. As Jacobson puts it, the embrace of these texts in the popular imagination signified “a new phase in the cultural politics of American diversity,” which cast a romantic, if at times rueful, glance backwards on the origins of American ethnic communities (“Hyphen Nation” 183). The narrative that emerged was essentially a celebration of both the supposed anti-modern authenticity of immigrant cultures and also the ability of European ethnics such as the Irish, the Italians, and the Jews to transcend the discrimination heaped on them in pre-World War II America and become successful, and successfully assimilated, members of US society. In a framing of the past that would also become central to American neoconservatism, “a romanticized European ancestral experience now determined the ‘rules of the game’ by which other groups [would] be expected to succeed in American society” (“Hyphen Nation” 185). At least in the Jewish context, I would argue, this can be understood as a theory of history that produces certain understandings of race. According to this theory, American Jews, having faced overwhelming persecution upon arrival, managed to overcome the obstacles of discrimination by working hard, believing in the American Dream, and cleaving to their values. Hence, if Jews are white, their whiteness is not only innocent of the crimes of the American past but also a status achieved through merit and sheer force of will. The corollary to this theory of the history of racism was, of

indeed aren't meant to be—exhaustive or complete. Instead, I take something of a narratological and episodic approach, focusing on transnational moments from the past eight decades in which Jewish identitarian narratives are produced, shaped, reshaped, and erased. Looking, for example, at how Israel's post-1973 transition towards an increasingly close partnership with apartheid South Africa affected the self-perception of white liberal Jews in the United States yields a much deeper and more complex understanding of how novelists in these communities wrote about conflicts that, without this background, might otherwise appear (and are often therefore depicted as) hyper-local.

Chapter One, “Settlement, Suburb, Village: Transnational Imperialism and the Construction of White Space in *The Counterlife*” examines the often-overlooked racial underpinnings of Philip Roth's 1986 novel by focusing on representations of three key symbolic spaces in which whiteness is produced and circulated: the American suburb, the West Bank settlement, and the post-imperial English village. By depicting them as spaces in which whiteness emerges at the intersection of pioneering frontierism and normative banality, Roth takes up the classic settler colonial trope of whiteness as an identity position forged through the taming of a savage wilderness but reframes it around the experiences of Ashkenazi American Jews. In a sense, these Jews arrived “too late” to help conquer the American West, but in Roth's work they replicate the process by striking out not only into the suburban hinterlands of New Jersey but also into the deserts surrounding Hebron and the hostile quietude of post-imperial England. These racially, socially, and ideologically constructed spaces provide an environment in which Jews can construct a muscular, imperial whiteness of their own. More to the point,

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course, that those groups who had not managed to achieve similar measures of success had failed because of an intrinsic flaw in their culture or behavior. This racist trope, which effectively boils down to, *If we could do it, why can't they?* ultimately undergirded much of especially the antiblack rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990.

these parallels allow us, for example, to read the American suburb as a settlement and the Israeli settlement as a suburb, to understand both as sites where whiteness is produced and inhabited by Jews, and to thereby appreciate the way in which constructions of whiteness consciously and unconsciously circulate between different national cultures.

Chapter Two, “‘A face is a face’: Post/colonial Fantasies of Jewish Whiteness in *The Tenants*,” explores Bernard Malamud’s 1971 portrait of the Manichean conflict between misanthropic white Jewish novelist Harry Lesser and aspiring Black radical writer Willie Spears. Despite the novel’s action being largely confined to a dilapidated tenement in New York City, I argue that reading *The Tenants* as a post/colonial novel illuminates compelling dimensions of post-1967 Jewish whiteness. Drawing on the work of Saree Makhdisi, I demonstrate how Malamud’s use of allusions to nineteenth-century Romanticism reorganize the Jewish writer’s relationship to the Anglo-American literary canon, creating a space for Lesser to almost literally write himself into whiteness. I likewise examine the novel’s second false ending through the lens of “Africanism” as conceptualized by both Toni Morrison and Christopher L. Miller. In his Africanist fantasies, Lesser dreams himself into the European imperialist’s idea of “Africa,” once again positioning himself *within* a colonialist ideology that originally constructed its own whiteness in part through a rejection of his Jewish ancestors. Yet, for Lesser, “Africa” becomes a gateway to a distinctly American form of whiteness that arrives via a projection of the Ashkenazi Jewish subject into a teleological narrative of European colonialism.

Chapter Three, “‘A villa in the jungle’: Whiteness, Mizrahiyut, and Blackness from Israel to Africa in *The One Facing Us*” examines Mizrahi novelist Ronit Matalon’s 1995 portrait of Esther, the teenage daughter of Egyptian Jewish immigrants, who moves from her mother’s rundown apartment in Israel to her wealthy industrialist uncle’s sprawling compound in

Cameroon. In West Africa, Esther's Mizrahi family—treated as racially inferior in Israel by Ashkenazi Jews who view them through the lens of Orientalism—achieve liminal forms of whiteness through proximity to and control over black bodies. Drawing primarily from the work of Richard Dyer and Johannes Becke, I demonstrate how Esther's self-conscious attempts to transgress racial norms constantly bring her into conflict with her family's determination to build a "villa in the jungle," that is, a Jewish space of whiteness constructed against a savage darkness. This conflict is also dramatized through formal elements of the text that complicate Esther's positionality. For example, the narrative voice, which alternates between first and third person, indexes Esther's, and indeed the novel's, post/colonial double consciousness that emerges from the complex position of Mizrahi Jews as both colonizers and colonized.

The second major section of *Distant Proximities* is organized around Jewish whiteness, international liberalism, and liberal internationalism. At the most basic level, liberalism is herein taken to mean a rights-based political framework, traceable to late eighteenth-century European philosophy, in which said rights are understood to inhere in the 'individual,' a rational subject with a bounded field of desire and consciousness. It is ultimately invested in the moral-political development of the individual, presuming that a confederation of responsible, rational individuals will act as a rational and responsible body politic, if not a community as such. Most important for now is the fact that liberalism as a political orientation functioned as conduit for recognition and solidarity in the post-World War II Jewish Anglosphere. Although, for example, South African Jewish liberals were not liberals in the exact same way as American Jewish liberals, shared basic ideas of international white liberalism often conditioned political understanding between the two communities.

I take “liberal internationalism” to mean the post-World War II global realignment that was rooted in WWI-era “Wilsonianism,” Woodrow Wilson’s project for American soft power domination through the privileging of liberal democracies and free trade for the sake of supposed collective security. Postwar liberal internationalism affirmed (or attempted to affirm) that the rights of individuals (‘human rights’) can in certain cases supersede the sovereignty of the nation-state, and that the protection of these rights could only be guaranteed by an international oversight community. Throughout the Anglosphere, Jews have cathected onto liberal internationalism through a specifically Jewish narrativization of it: that the Holocaust produced an earth-shaking upheaval in the Western conscience and was therefore the essential catalyst for not only the move towards liberal internationalism in the postwar period, but also for the rise of ‘human rights’ as a framework. Of course, several scholars have come forward in the past few years—perhaps most recently and most notably in James Loeffler’s *Rooted Cosmopolitans*—to demonstrate the considerable inconsistencies between the Holocaust-as-catalyst theory of human rights and the historical record itself. However, in Chapters Five and Six I stake a claim for the importance of understanding identitarian narratives even after they have been “disproven” in one sense or another. The fact remains that it would be impossible to understand a great many phenomena in global Jewish cultural history if we were to ignore a story just because it isn’t true.

In Chapter Four, “‘A White Liberal Trapped By His Prejudices’: Dan Jacobson’s Aesthetic Critique of South African Jewish Liberalism in *The Beginners*,” I read Jacobson’s 1966 text as a plangent insight into the inability of liberal Jewish politics to respond effectively to the violent repressions of the apartheid regime. In my treatment of the novel, which draws heavily on the work of Michael Rothberg, I demonstrate that, in taking the classically white, liberal, bourgeois form of the family saga and bending it into a critique of those very ideologies,



Jacobson does more than show how white Jewish liberalism is and has long been implicated in the suffering of non-white others. He also shows how literary form itself, being both expressive of and a cultural contributor to racial domination, is aesthetically implicated in the same tangled processes. Jacobson also zeroes in on the crucial tension between midcentury liberalism and the emerging postwar Holocaust memory culture, reflecting and anticipating the ways in which affiliative Holocaust memory failed to generate a more ethical politics in the white, liberal Jewish imagination.

In Chapter Five, “Objets d’Activisme: The Affective Economy of White Jewish Liberalism in *The Believers*,” I explore transnational Jewish liberalism at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first by parsing Zoë Heller’s portrait of the Litvinoff family, a generally unlikeable collection of armchair Marxists in various stages of losing their faith. Drawing from David Brauner and Cheryl Greenberg, I examine how Heller’s 2008 novel pits Jewish memory against itself. In so doing, it dramatizes how certain object-signs circulate in the affective economy of Jewish identity politics to reify certain forms of Jewish whiteness, and that these narratives of what Jewish whiteness is or is not circulate on a global scale and are reflected in different national spaces. As *The Believers* attempts to show, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, white Jewish politics was in many ways dominated by a conflict not precisely between present and past but rather between present and the versions of the past onto which Jews around the world have deeply cathected. Under these conditions, the distant becomes an excuse for the proximate, as they veer away from one another at even odder angles.

Chapter Six, “A Jew should ‘know better’: The Post-traumatic Ethics of Jewish Whiteness from James Baldwin to Tony Eprile,” synthesizes several essays by James Baldwin that analyze the matrix of identifications sometimes called “Black-Jewish relations.” Although

Baldwin consistently contends that Ashkenazi American Jews were socially, economically, and politically white in postwar America, he depicts the ethical dimensions of their whiteness as far more complex, enmeshed in millennia of collective trauma. Baldwin also frequently describes the roots and reach of the American Jewish dilemma as transnational, and always contextualizes Jews' moral entanglements as symptomatic of wider problems in post-World War II Western liberalism. I thus read Baldwin as calling on white Jews to practice a productively post-traumatic ethics that recognizes the fundamental instability of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy. I then bring these concepts to the South African context through Tony Eprile's *The Persistence of Memory*, which traces Paul Sweetbread's ethically complex journey from isolated Jewish schoolboy in Johannesburg to SADF soldier in Namibia to citizen of the New South Africa. Paul's narrative arc demonstrates the crucial catalytic role trauma plays in moral development, culminating in his testimony for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As I demonstrate in my reading of these scenes, Eprile and Baldwin both mount a critique of white Jews' understanding of "human rights," and imagine a reconfigured Holocaust memory culture that would encourage them to use historical trauma to illuminate rather than obscure their sometime complicity in white supremacy and their concomitant responsibility for dismantling it.

Finally, the epilogue, "White People's Work: The Proximate Pasts and Distant Futures of Jewish Anti-racism" considers what role the concept of distant proximities could play in a practicable anti-racist politics, particularly amongst white Jews in the Anglosphere, focusing on what Black poet and activist Dionne Brand terms "white people's work." I further contemplate what "white people's work" could or should look like in the Jewish context, specifically on the question of holding memory accountable to history. And since the political and racial positionalities of Jewish communities are always refracting and reproducing one another, this

recognition must be a worlded endeavor. Equally important, however, is a reckoning with the affective dimensions of whiteness and their intersection with the transnational politics of Holocaust memory. This means interrogating the inflective moments in white Jewish history where collective memories of suffering have been leveraged ethically, that is, in service of fighting against the persecution of others, as well as the many deflective moments in which it has been leveraged ethnically, and, in so doing, obscured and upheld the white supremacist status quo.

## HISTORICAL OVERTURE I: SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS, OR, A POST/COLONIAL JEWISH HISTORY OF FOUR COUNTRIES

The purpose of this section is to contextualize the literary analysis in Chapters One through Three by furnishing an episodic overview of the cultural and political history of the Jewish communities of South Africa, the US, the UK, and Israel roughly between 1948 and 2000, focusing on moments will enrich and underscore the subsequent literary analyses of Roth, Malamud, and Matalon. If one looks at this quartet of countries as a dynamic political network within the post-World War II Anglosphere, it becomes clear that they bear relations to one another that have profoundly shaped not only the global consciousness of race and racial power structures in the second half of the twentieth century, but also the affective, political, and cultural commitments of their respective Jewish communities. All four have, to borrow Winston Churchill's famous phrase, "special relationships."<sup>25</sup> Beginning with the broad strokes: in one way or another and to varying degrees, these special relationships are all inherited from the far-reaching sweep of British imperialism. The United States, Israel, and South Africa were all British colonies at one point or another, and these overlapping histories have at times conditioned their interactions. Crucially, the cultural practices through which whiteness was and is constructed, reinforced, and divided in all three ex-colonies have been shaped in fundamental

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<sup>25</sup> The classic "special relationship" is that between the US and the UK, but JFK also pointedly used the same phrase to describe the relationship between Israel and the US in a 1962 meeting with Golda Meir. Numerous scholars have also used it in reference to the ongoing, though at times secretive, alliance between Israel and apartheid South Africa. Historian Keith Feldman also uses the phrase to make similar connections in *A Shadow Over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America*, writing, "I contend that the competing meanings given the 'special relationships' between the United States, Israel, and Palestine are compellingly clarified by the analytical concept U.S. imperial culture. U.S. imperial culture names the crucible within which an enduring U.S. national ideology of territorial expansion and its attendant regimes of racial domination and war-making have been codified, reified, naturalized, and contested. The dominion of U.S. imperial culture produces and circulates knowledge to secure a purportedly stable opposition between the foreign and domestic that provides a symbolic architecture to secure consent for extraterritorial violence as essential for protecting the national home, even as the categories of foreign and domestic are persistently blurred and enfolded one into the other. At the same time, U.S. imperial culture's strongly normative epistemological frames aim to regulate what counts as proper knowledge, casting some forms of knowledge as truth and others as aberrational, subjective, or fictitious" (Feldman 8).

ways by that imperial legacy. Moreover, three of the four share a common language. Israel, meanwhile, invests enough educational energy and cultural capital in English for it to constitute an unofficial but significant national language.<sup>26</sup> And, not entirely by coincidence, all four of these countries were also significant sites of migration for Eastern European Jews fleeing antisemitic violence in the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This resulted not only in a crucial set of cultural similarities between their respective Jewish populations, but also a network of tangible kinship ties between them that ultimately survived even the devastation of the Holocaust.

*“We sang Hatikvah,” 1948-1949*

When Israeli statehood was declared on May 14, 1948, it was done on behalf of a country that was, to an increasing extent, internationally perceived as—and in that sense “was”—racially, politically, and culturally white. The Ashkenazi-led Israeli government was highly conscious of the need to present Israel to the world as a state that was culturally, if not geographically, European.<sup>27</sup> From the beginning of the twentieth century on, the Ashkenazi Yishuv aimed to project an image of themselves as Europeans with the capacity to build and maintain an outpost of Western culture, shifting European Jews’ position from that of an “internal Orient” in Europe to an “external Occident” in the Middle East (Rohde qtd. in Becke 2).<sup>28</sup> As I will discuss shortly and again in Chapter One, a major plank of this campaign was accomplished through spatial mimicry, that is, the construction of distinctly Jewish (in this context, specifically not Arab)

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<sup>26</sup> But that’s not to say that English is as important or prevalent in Israeli culture as Hebrew. Hence my insistence that this project is not so much of the *Anglophone*, but of the *Anglosphere*.

<sup>27</sup> Obviously, this doesn’t constitute “proof” of anything, but in terms of cultural cache it’s worth mentioning that Israel competes in the Union of European Football Associations, one of the six continental divisions administered by FIFA, and has competed in the Eurovision Song Contest since 1973.

<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to locate an English-language version of this essay, hence my quoting via Becke.

spaces that were also distinctly European (hence, again, not Arab). This self-conscious demonstration of Europeanness—whiteness—went hand in hand with the alienation of Mizrahi Jews, whose cultural proximity to the Arab societies of the MENA region could threaten this image if not properly quarantined. As Noura Erakat explains, “well before and leading up to Israel’s establishment, Zionists established an ethno-national mythology of a new and universal Jew who was white and European.... Israel excluded and subordinated the Middle Eastern Jew who required cultural rehabilitation and development in order to become properly Israeli, namely white and European” (70). Moreover, insofar as the whiteness of Israel was a national orientation, from the beginning it was co-constitutive of a transnational Jewish whiteness. The whiteness of Israel refracted on and between the Jewish communities of the US, UK, South Africa, and beyond; the becoming-white of Israel and the becoming-white of Jews in other parts of the Anglosphere mutually confirmed one another.

Then, on May 26, 1948, a mere twelve days after the declaration of the State of Israel, the Afrikaner-nationalist-led National Party swept the South African parliamentary elections and began to implement the apartheid policies that defined their forty-six-year reign.<sup>29</sup> For the Jewish population of South Africa, it was a moment of extreme emotional whiplash. On the one hand, the rise of the National Party produced waves of trepidation—not unreasonably, since before 1948 the NP and its grassroots organizations had been consistently and openly antisemitic at both the state and street level and a significant proportion of the leadership had espoused close ideological ties to the Nazis.<sup>30</sup> According to Gideon Shimoni, the fear that gripped the Jewish

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<sup>29</sup> To be clear, many of the policies associated most deeply with apartheid were in place well before this, but the ascension of the NP was still a seismic shift that cemented apartheid as official government policy.

<sup>30</sup> Prominent examples include Eric Louw, Hendrik Verwoerd, and B.J. Vorster, who will reappear in later sections. Vorster, for example, declared during World War II that “[The NP stands] for Christian Nationalism which is an ally of National Socialism . . . you can call such an anti-democratic system a dictatorship if you like. In Italy it is called Fascism, in Germany National Socialism and in South Africa Christian Nationalism” (qtd. in Polakow-

community in that moment foreclosed, or seemed to foreclose, potential solidarities: “The legacy of Afrikaner antisemitism cast a long shadow over the Jews of South Africa... [U]ppermost in the minds of Jewish communal leaders... was elimination of all vestiges of the Jewish Question from the South African political scene” (23). Because they saw Jews as potential victims of the new government, “Casting the lot of Jews with that of non-Europeans was absolutely inconceivable for... all but the tiniest minority of Jewish communists who had long been alienated from Jewish identification and were peripheral to Jewish affairs” (23). As I will discuss in Historical Overture II, this “tiny minority” still managed to have a sizable impact on transnational anti-apartheid politics and looms large in post-apartheid Jewish memory culture to this day. Nevertheless, May 1948 marked a milestone in the deferral of potential solidarities between becoming-white Jews and non-white others.

In contrast to their reaction to the NP’s takeover, mainstream South African Jews, one of the most fervently and homogeneously Zionist communities outside of Palestine, met the declaration of Israeli nationhood with an outburst of joy. As Jewish South African writer Glenda Woolf recalls, in Bloemfontein, “[A] home-made blue and white flag... was raised. We sang Hatikvah, and slowly a murmur of sobs came from here and there among the crowd. It was then that my mother said, ‘You must always remember this day. For the first time in thousands of years we Jews have our very own country’” (36). The strength of that emotional investment was clear from the beginning. One historical example of non-governmental South African Jewish involvement in the developing State of Israel was the South African Jewish Appeal’s funding,

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Suransky 203), while Verwoerd joined the Nazi-aligned Grey Shirts in protesting the arrival of ships carrying Jewish refugees in Cape Town. It also bears noting that the deepening plight and political negotiations of South African Jews between the early 1920s and the end of World War II bears more than a passing resemblance to the targeting of American and British Jews during the same period. Both communities were the de facto (and sometimes de jure) targets of anti-immigration legislation in the first three decades of the twentieth century. I’ll return to this topic in Historical Overture II.

planning, and construction of ‘Afridar,’ a neighborhood in what would become the city of Ashkelon, which productively foreshadows the discussions of *The Counterlife* in Chapter One and *The Beginners* in Chapter Four. Built from the remnants of Majdal, a Palestinian town whose residents were forcibly relocated to the Gaza Strip in late 1950, Afridar was a planned garden suburb meant to stand as a living tribute of the South African Jewish community’s longstanding commitment to the Zionist project (Levin). With ample green space, comparatively spacious plots, and a range of cultural amenities, Afridar offered a “luxurious suburban model unparalleled in contemporary public housing schemes in Israel” to what was ultimately a very select group. Crucially for my purposes, the suburban-style semi-detached housing also clearly and explicitly evoked a white middle-class fantasy of domestic life imported, in this case, from Britain and the US via South Africa.

According to architectural historian Ayala Levin, the planned list of amenities in Afridar “reveals the influence of interwar modernist housing reforms in Europe, as well as of a longstanding South African association of the aesthetics and etiquette identified with ‘Englishness’ and the colonial ‘civilizing mission’” (293). The South African planners also chose to implement “the Anglo-American concept of the neighbourhood unit... [e]nvisioned originally by American planner Clarence Perry” (293). As Levin explains, historians generally agree that “some [planning] models, predominantly the garden city but also the neighbourhood unit, were useful in implementing racial and economic segregation both in the colonies and in their countries of origin, England and the USA, respectively,” going on to say, “Taking place as it did between one peripheral node and another, the case of Afridar marks a new phase in this exchange, given that it was twice removed from the centre of knowledge production” yet still clearly bore the hallmarks of both internal and external colonialism (289). What’s more,



although the planners assiduously claimed that they were designing a Jewish community that would be free of race and class barriers, “As a kind of unwritten rule, the government directed populations of European descent to Afridar, where they had to be approved by a selection committee. North African and Middle Eastern Jews were generally dispatched en masse to Migdal-Gad and later to the southern neighborhoods” where standards of living were considerably lower (299). This shunting aside was both literal and metonymic, as Menachem Mautner explains, “the pushing aside of the Mizrahim to the geographic margins of the state corresponded with their being driven into its cultural margins as well” (“Liberalism in Israel” 16). As I will discuss in later sections, this is precisely the type of post/colonial moment that offers crucial insights into the broader sweep of history and cultural representation. For now, it’s important to emphasize that a group of South African Jews, including architects who designed the ‘townships’ of apartheid South Africa, worked with the Israeli government to plan a neighborhood based on Anglo-American concepts of middle-class domesticity and public space, literally using the stones of a Palestinian town forcibly evacuated by the Israeli Army to create a community that segregated Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews.<sup>31</sup>

Back in South Africa, the new Prime Minister D.F. Malan quickly began making overtures to the Jewish community, suggesting that, so long as certain conditions were met, they

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<sup>31</sup> To be fair to these Jewish architects, Roy Kantorowich and Norman Hanson, their participation in designing the spaces that would be crucial to apartheid policies was unintentional. As Levin puts it, “In South Africa, this period is characterized by architects’ professional predicament, as the premium sphere where apartheid policies were implemented fell under their purview in the field of town planning. Although segregation was practiced as the norm long before the rise of apartheid, few, if any, of the architects and town planners could have predicted in the early 1950s its future consequences, both legally and spatially. Ironically, those architects who sought to influence social matters in the years leading to apartheid found a sympathetic ear with the apartheid government that supported their research into ‘native housing’, with the objective of making segregation cheaper.... Roy Kantorowich and Norman Hanson, who became unwitting accomplices of the apartheid regime, exemplify the ambivalent position of socially minded South African architects” (297).

would be considered legally white and receive the same complement of rights.<sup>32</sup> As opposed to a signal of waning antisemitism, however, Malan's outreach to South African Jews was a function of realpolitik based on Jews' potential to be absorbed into, and thus increase the power of, the white polity. As Sasha Polakow-Suransky puts it, "Faced with the challenge of maintaining a minority regime ruling over more than nine million disenfranchised nonwhites, the NP needed every white vote it could get. Under these circumstances, excluding Jews was simply bad politics" ("Rise and Fall" 204). Hence when the South African Parliament passed legislation setting formal definitions of and boundaries between racial groups, Jews remained unaffected.

Another key factor in this rapprochement was the new government's friendly position towards Israel. Although the South African government did not recognize the State of Israel until 1949, even before that Malan took an obliging approach to the transfer of cash, clothing, food, and materiel from South Africa to Israel, and worked to develop a cordial and conciliatory relationship with the Zionist Federation. In 1953, Malan became the first head of state to visit Israel while in office. And, as Shimoni and others point out, over time Afrikaner nationalists began more and more to identify with Israel, first as a compatriot in the struggle against British imperialism, then as a parallel bulwark against Communist influence in the Global South, and finally as a model of apartheid in its own right (27). In addition, as the Afridar example shows in miniature, the South African and Israeli strategies of self-presentation and outward-facing narratives of race and identity overlap in telling and crucial ways.<sup>33</sup> It is no coincidence that both

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<sup>32</sup> Shimoni also claims: "The purely intrawhite political context in which the elections of 1948 took place should not be overlooked.... Dr. Malan's party was, first and foremost, waging a nationalist battle aimed at gaining political hegemony for the Afrikaner. The struggle, in essence, was less to keep the black man in his place, so to speak, than to get the country back for the Afrikaner volk. It was in this primary context that the Jews in the country fitted into the picture because, as we have seen, Afrikaner nationalists perceived the Jews as a major obstacle to the fulfillment of their aspirations.... [However,] Dr. Malan's ascent to power inaugurated a gradual process of rapprochement between newly empowered Afrikaner political and intellectual circles and the Jewish community" (21-2).

<sup>33</sup> This mutual identification is, I would argue, a crucial but often conveniently overlooked factor in the ongoing struggle over whether one should compare Israel with apartheid South Africa or use "apartheid" to describe the

nations used the language of modernity and developmental contrast to tacitly construct transnational white/Western solidarities: both expressed an ideological commitment to “making the desert bloom”; both emphasized their Anglo-American-inflected consumer cultures; and both self-consciously presented major urban centers—Tel Aviv and Johannesburg particularly—as advanced cities which, through architectural mimicry and cultural exchange, could be thought of as Euro-American metropolises in the same sense as Chicago or Milan (Grubbs). In both contexts, moreover, the becoming-white of Ashkenazi Jews relied first on the fact that they were, after all, from Europe and were thus viable candidates for whiteness after the Second World War, and, second, that recognizing them as such yielded benefits to white gentile governments in terms of both foreign and domestic policy.

Thus, although for several decades Afrikaner nationalists had defined themselves in part *against* Jewish difference, the narratological and cultural proximity of South Africa and Israel in the latter half of the twentieth century (among other factors) effected a reorganization of whiteness in which the two groups found themselves on the same side. Accordingly, though South African Jews were uneasy about such comparisons, for the most part they set about acclimating themselves to the new regime. Meanwhile, the substantial material support that South African Jews continued to provide to Zionist organizations became a point of contention in American Jews’ reluctance to explicitly condemn apartheid in the 1950s and 1960s, which, like Israel itself, created deep layers of dissonance within their much-bruited-about commitment to international human rights (see *Historical Overture II*).<sup>34</sup> And while in some ways the bond

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current state of Israel/Palestine. Although some Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century maintain that it is a particularly despicable kind of heresy to do so, by the 1970s many Israelis and South Africans had already made the connection themselves and for quite some time actually embraced it, a point to which I will shortly return.

<sup>34</sup> For now, a brief example from Marjorie N. Feld’s *Nations Divided* may help clarify what I mean: “[I]n the 1950s... the World Jewish Congress (WJC) prioritized Jewish unity in its organizational work, and spoke of that unity as a response to the Holocaust. Fearful that American critiques of apartheid would jeopardize WJC efforts to

between the new governments grew out of shared resentment of British colonialism, the UK and the US continued to play a major role in both Israeli and South African diplomatic relations for decades afterwards. As the nascent postcolonial powers of the Global South arrayed against them, it was London's and Washington's support in the global economic and cultural sphere on which Jerusalem and Pretoria relied.

*"The shock troop of two knaves," 1956-61*

Israel's status as a white, Western country was compounded in moments large and small throughout the 1950s, particularly in its varied relationships to different transnational formations on the African continent. In July 1956, sixteen months after the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, which had explicitly and implicitly declared both Israel and South Africa *persona non grata* in the global anticolonial movement, President Abdul Gamal Nasser of Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal. Britain and France, who suddenly found their longstanding interests in the crucial shipping passage under threat, wasted little time in colluding secretly with Israel to wrest control of the canal from Egypt and, they hoped, to force Nasser out of power. On October 29, Israel commenced "Operation Kadesh," a full-scale invasion of the Sinai Peninsula, which quickly fought its way to within ten meters of the canal. The plan then called for France and Britain to step in as "peacekeeping" forces and, in so doing, re-establish control over the waterways. Yet as efficient as the IDF had been, the British and French campaigns quickly unraveled, and, facing intense pressure from (remarkably) both the US *and* USSR, were forced to retreat in under a week. For France and Britain, and perhaps to a slightly lesser extent for Israel, this neocolonial misadventure was an immediate disaster. British PM Anthony Eden's Tory government collapsed; French PM Guy Mollet's government was severely weakened and

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court South African membership—and thus jeopardize Western Jewish unity—top officials prohibited any public antiapartheid statements from their American colleagues" (4).

fell the following year. And while Israel had demonstrated its military efficiency and positioned itself as a player in the West, it fulfilled almost none of its objectives and remained precariously dependent on American goodwill.

Still, according to James Loeffler, “the greatest casualty of Suez was the ideal of Jewish neutrality” (201). And indeed, insofar as the Suez Crisis was certainly one of, if not the, death knell for Britain’s status as a Great Power, it was also a crucial moment in global Jewish politics, in which “the Arab-Israeli conflict had intersected directly with the Cold War,” which “crystallized the geopolitical realignment at work in the Middle East” as well as the axes of power set in motion at Bandung, all of which placed Israel firmly in the western camp (Loeffler 201, 173). More importantly here, with Suez the Arab-Israeli conflict also intersected with the racial politics of the United States and South Africa. Alongside Bandung, Suez had a dramatic effect on the Black community’s perception of Israel in the US. W.E.B. Du Bois who was a proponent of Jewish nationhood in the 1940s, now excoriated it, as in his 1956 poem, “Suez”:  
“Israel as the West betrays / Its murdered, mocked, and damned / Becomes the shock troop of two knaves / Who steal the dark men’s land” (lines 45-48). Only a few years earlier it seemed possible (if not always logical) to read Israeli independence as an anticolonialist victory in which an ethnic minority, having narrowly survived one of history’s bloodiest massacres, rose to take back their ancient homeland from the colonial powers of Europe. In the wake of Suez, however, Israel came across as, at best, cynical mercenaries who were more than willing to invite those powers back in and even go to war on their behalf so long as it served their own ends.

The crisis also introduced new tensions into Anglo-Jewish politics. Although the actual vote shares were not nearly as lopsided, of the eighteen Jewish MPs standing during Suez, seventeen of them belonged to Labour, which was firmly set against Eden’s maneuvers. These

MPs were thus trapped between the party line and the Jewish community's dogged support of Israel. Hence, like the Atlee government's refusal to support the establishment of Israel in 1945, Suez accelerated British Jews' alienation from Labour and the British Left.<sup>35</sup> As Natan Aridan puts it, the crisis was a "defining moment," which "provoked unprecedented controversy as to the behaviour and loyalties of Jewish MPs" (147). It was thus an important catalyst in the noted rightward shift of Anglo-Jewish politics due to "a growing perception that the Tories, once thought to harbour more anti-Semites and anti-Zionists than the parties of the left, have become increasingly sympathetic to Jewish and Israeli interests over time" which "started during the Conservative government's Suez war policy, stalled somewhat during the 1970s, but then gathered steam during the tenure of Margaret Thatcher" (Kotler-Berkowitz 651).

At the same time, in *Nations Divided: American Jews and the Struggle Over Apartheid*, Marjorie N. Feld demonstrates how Suez quickly became bound up in ongoing debates about Jews' position on South African apartheid: "Jews across the world took positions on the Suez Crisis, some continuing to argue that allegiance to their own Jewish community, to Jewish unity and to Israel, meant a disavowal of anticolonialist sympathies" (25). Equally important, Suez was "the backdrop to... [the] debate over the responsibility of the [South African Jewish Board of Deputies], and all Jews in South Africa, to take a stand against apartheid" (25).<sup>36</sup> Whether one

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<sup>35</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Anglo-Jewish politics bore a distinctive, though never universal, leftist bent. The reasons for this alignment range from the general to the particular. Broadly speaking, prior to World War II most British Jews largely belonged to socioeconomic categories that predicted (and, to a certain extent, continue to predict) progressive leanings, being mostly first- or second-generation immigrants in working class jobs heavily concentrated in urban areas. But there were also factors more specific to Jews themselves: Conservatives had a long record of opposing Jewish rights and emancipation, they had attempted to block the entry of Jewish refugees fleeing antisemitic violence in the Russian Empire, and generally tolerated antisemitic attitudes and behaviors in their own party (Barclay, Sololewska, and Ford 1).

<sup>36</sup> One of the most vocal participants in the transnational Jewish debate over both Suez and apartheid was Dan Jacobson, whose 1966 novel *The Beginners* will be the focus of Chapter 4.

describes the conflict as East vs. West, North vs. South, or black vs. white, Israel, and the Jews, were increasingly understood to have chosen a side.

Further complicating the position of South African Jews was the fact that, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Israel began a purposeful and pointed pursuit of development and diplomacy in dozens of countries across West and Central Africa. These efforts began following Israel's exclusion from Bandung, gathering steam after Suez as its need for allies to counterbalance Soviet and North African hostility grew. Administered primarily by military organizations such as Mossad and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), these projects focused not only on providing weapons, ammunition, and training to various national armed forces but also on sharing technological and agricultural knowledge, launching joint business ventures, establishing settlements, and overseeing various endeavors in public works and public health. More important than the programs themselves in this context is the ideological spirit in which they were undertaken, which plays a role in all three chapters in this section. As Yacobi et al. maintain, "At the heart of Israeli aid to Africa... stands the global technopolitics of the Cold War era—the application of technological devices and practices to achieve definite political goals" (937). "The technopolitics of development," they explain, "refer to modernisation schemes permeated by colonial knowledge and practices accrued under European imperialism," adding that, like other post/colonial models of development, Israel's African programs were rooted in orientalist discourses in which the 'backward native' becomes a consumer of modern technologies migrating from territories where such knowledge is produced to territories where its products are consumed, with knowledge exported by Israel contributing to a reproduction of notions differentiating the 'West' (the Western Israeli benefactors) from the 'East' (African indigent beneficiaries). (937-38)

Moreover, the post/colonial technopolitics Israel pursued in Africa intersected with domestic orientalist discourses concerning the racial and civic status of both Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians. Tellingly, the settlements Israeli soldiers built in sub-Saharan Africa resembled the strictly controlled planned communities designed for Mizrahi immigrants much more than the moshavim and kibbutzim the Ashkenazi establishment constructed for themselves (938). And, like the settler movements that proliferated in the West Bank two decades later, these developments were pursued from within the tradition of Zionist pioneering, with volunteers expected to “personify the Zionist ideal of the young, tanned, virile settler-warrior” (940).

In addition to these projects, the Israeli pursuit of African allies carried onto the world stage, leading it to align against South Africa in key United Nation votes in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In October 1961, for example, Israel joined other African UN delegations in voting to strike from the record a speech given by South African foreign minister Eric Louw. This affirmation was made all the more conspicuous by the fact that nearly every other Western country (with the exception of the Netherlands) had either abstained or absented themselves from the motion. Louw, who, it should be noted, was a vocal antisemite and prominent pro-Nazi figure leading up to and during the heated debate over South Africa’s entry into World War Two, claimed menacingly to the international press that “South African citizens who have racial and religious ties with Israel” would be sure to disapprove of Israel’s “hostile and ungrateful” action (qtd. in Shimoni 47). These events, in the context of the growing international condemnation of the apartheid regime in the aftermath of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre (which I will discuss at greater length in *Historical Overture II*), placed South African Jews in a complicated, if not compromised, position. As Shimoni explains,



Within the Jewish community as a whole opinion was divided. Outright supporters of the National Party's policies were still rare. But conformity to the normative political belief in maintaining white supremacy was prevalent. Israel's turn to out-and-out support of the African threat to this fundament of the South African state was regarded by many Jews not only as disappointingly inconsiderate of the situation of fellow Jews in the Diaspora but also as wrong in principle. (48)

While thirteen years earlier Israel and South Africa's shared identities as post/colonial ethno-states engaged in the project of affirming their status as outposts of the West had helped lock South African Jews more securely into the protections of whiteness under apartheid, Israel's distancing itself from South Africa on the international stage was seen as carelessly undermining their position. Even more fundamentally, for many Israel's actions represented a betrayal of common values, an act of treachery against a fellow pariah. And indeed, as we will shortly see, this shared and deeply held sense of isolation and injury would bring the two countries back together before long. In the meantime, the NP government retaliated by blocking the transfer of South African gift funds to the Jewish Agency in Israel, while the SAJBD and Zionist Federation worriedly sent representatives back and forth to Jerusalem. This tense state of affairs remained largely unchanged until the assassination of South African PM Heindrik Verwoerd in 1966. Whether South African Jews' sense of precarity in those moments was proportionate to any actual danger they faced, it had at least become clear that different modes of post/colonial whiteness could be deployed by Jewish communities to counter as much as to affirm one another.

*"Whitism breeds Blackism," 1967-1971*

The late 1960s is one of the most extensively studied and hotly debated periods in American Jewish history. If, as I will discuss at greater length in Historical Overture II, the early 1960s represent the purported pinnacle of collaborative Black and Jewish activism in the US—a partnership which, however overblown, certainly existed—the late 1960s is broadly understood as the primal moment in which this relationship began to unravel. The voluminous scholarship on this period, however, tends to focus on hyper-local events without elaborating the global causes and implications of this fracture. Exemplary of these conflicts, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers’ strike of 1968 in Brooklyn boiled down to a fight for organizational control between the mostly white, Jewish teachers and the suddenly-majority-Black community. Yet the Brownsville strike also echoed longstanding fissures between the Black and Jewish contingencies of the pre-World War II Left, as well as many Jews’ suspicious and fearful reaction to the shift from the framework of Civil Rights to that of Black Power. Additionally, massive demographic changes in the urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest infused these issues with a sense of paranoid immediacy in the minds of many Jews. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black and Jewish leaders publicly traded barbs, viciously mocking and denouncing the new forms that each group’s identity politics were beginning to take. For example, during the strike, a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) official was quoted saying to Jewish teachers that, “Hitler... did not kill enough of you,” while another local teacher charged them with having “educationally castrated” and “mentally poisoned” Black children (qtd. in Sundquist 343). Jewish teachers, in turn, capitalized on such statements by refocusing the dialogue on the supposedly widespread and sui generis phenomenon of Black antisemitism. They publicly mocked Black identity politics and denounced the concerns about the failure of schools to accommodate Black students as feeble-minded special pleading (Sundquist 343-4). Yet the

divergence in Black and Jewish attitudes to imperialisms including, but truly not limited to, Zionism, were in many ways a more powerful driving factor of conflict than more immediate concerns like leadership in organized labor. Enter Black Power.

The phrase “Black Power” was first used as a public slogan at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi on June 16, 1966. Almost exactly a year later, on June 11, 1967, Israel signed a ceasefire with the four neighboring countries it had defeated in less than a week, more than doubling the territory it controlled in the process. Distant though they appear, these two events metonymize the transformation of Black and Jewish collective identities and politics in the United States and the breakdown of the cooperative relationship the two communities shared during the Civil Rights movement. In addition to the Six Day War, which reinvigorated American Jews’ transnational allegiances and prompted a wider acceptance of expansionist Zionism, 1967 also saw the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (later known as the Student National Coordinating Committee, often referred to as SNCC) adopting “Black Power” as their slogan, a more explicitly transnational and anticolonial intellectual and political formation than “Civil Rights.” As Fanon Che Wilkins explains, SNCC had understood itself as an internationalist anticolonial organization throughout the 1960s and indeed “from its inception” (469). As before, these internationalist underpinnings are often lost in historical analysis, hence “SNCC’s rarely acknowledged internationalist work has generally been understood as merely a corollary to its post-1966 demands for ‘Black Power’.... [H]owever, SNCC’s internationalism was far more organically rooted in the organization... [and] operated in tension and in tandem with the organization’s domestic agenda” (469). The Black Power movement also prescribed the eviction of whites from leadership roles in organizations such as SNCC and CORE, as well as a shift in those organizations from a “reformist strategy predicated

on ethnic pluralism to a revolutionary model of national liberation,” which, in turn, “hastened the white liberal retreat from a compensatory agenda” (Sundquist 315).

The Six Day War in June 1967 touched off a renaissance of American Jewish Zionism that far outpaced its half-hearted and capricious political antecedents. Zionism presented itself as a new way of expressing Jewish American patriotism and became interwoven with longstanding American narratives of manifest destiny and the white man’s burden.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, racial conflicts in the US had a profound impact on ethno-racial consciousness in Israel, particularly the protest culture of Mizrahi Jews. As I mentioned earlier, even before the state of Israel was established, the westernization (more specifically in Hebrew, *hishtaknezut* or “Ashkenazification”) of Mizrahi Jews was a project that obsessed the primarily Ashkenazi leadership.<sup>38</sup> The relegation of Mizrahim to second-class status—they were placed in decrepit transit camps (*ma’abarot*), given next to no formal education, and restricted to low-paying, menial jobs—was rooted in a Jewish Orientalist tradition that held up the Ashkenazim as the embodiment of Westernness, modernity, progress, and reason, and derided the Mizrahim as

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<sup>37</sup> In some ways, this was nothing new. As several historians note, the symbolic linkage between US expansionism and the Jewish reclamation of the Holy Land dates back within gentile American culture to at least the eighteenth century. But crucially, post-1967 American Jewish Zionism also intersected with the culmination of the reorganization of whiteness in US culture that began in the late nineteenth century in which whiteness and Europeaness were concretely conflated. In so far as Zionism became a dense locus through which to assert Jewish ethnic identity, it was also an entry point into an Americanness that rooted itself in the US state’s white, imperialist, Christian foundations. For an interesting, specific example of how this played out in US-Israeli politics, I would suggest Lawrence Wright’s *Thirteen Days in September: The Dramatic Story of the Struggle for Peace*, whose minute-by-minute account of the Camp David Accords delves deep into Jimmy Carter’s messianic Christian view of the peace process.

<sup>38</sup> The historical record positively overflows with explicitly anti-Mizrahi statements from Ashkenazi politicians and journalists in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Most often cited is this quote from David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister: “Those [Jews] from Morocco had no education. Their customs are those of Arabs... The culture of Morocco I would not like to have here. And I don’t see what contribution present [Jewish] Persians have to make... We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are in duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and preserve the authentic Jewish values as they crystallised in the [European] Diaspora” (qtd. in Lubin 132). The following passage from *Ha’arets* journalist Arye Gelblum in 1949 is also highly relevant to this project: “This is a people whose primitivity sets a record, their level of education borders on total ignorance, and yet worse is their lack of ability to absorb anything spiritual. . . . They are entirely given to the play of savage primitive instincts. . . . Have we considered what would happen to the state if this would be its population?” (qtd. in Lubin 132-3).

backwards, Eastern, regressive, and volatile. The Ashkenazi Zionist movement recruited Mizrahim for the sake of demographic supremacy and because it was believed that they were natural laborers—two widely-held assumptions with clear racial undertones—but it was imperative that, once they arrived, Mizrahi immigrants would abandon and denounce their history, culture, and traditions in favor of the unmistakably European *sabra* identity.<sup>39</sup> Looking across the ocean, however, many Mizrahim resolved to stand up for themselves. In the words of one publication from 1965, “The days are over when the orientals would gratefully thank their European masters for any little morsel thrown to them in the form of a longer day at school or another Uncle Tom in the Knesset.... To repeat the quotation in last month’s bulletin: ‘Whitism breeds Blackism’” (qtd. in Roby 137). While the reference to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can easily be read as appropriative—everybody’s protest novel, indeed—it was also done mindfully and was in tune with the spirit of post/colonial solidarity practiced by Black radicals across the Atlantic. While some historians tend to focus on the US Black Panthers’ support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), they also recognized the marginalization of Mizrahi Jews as an extension of the white supremacist ideas endemic to European Zionism. The groups shared many of the same painful experiences and suffered the same abuses, including rampant police violence, state surveillance, chronic underemployment, lack of community development, high levels of delinquency, and often quite extreme cultural alienation.

As part of a protest on August 28, 1971 in the destitute, underdeveloped Jerusalem neighborhood of Musrara, a group of Mizrahi youth calling themselves the Israeli Black Panthers

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<sup>39</sup> “Sabra” is a group identity term which technically refers to the first generation of Zionist Jews to be actually born in Israel, the children of the pioneers. ‘Sabra’ or ‘tzabar’ (צָבָר) comes from the Hebrew word for the prickly pear cactus—ironically not native to Israel—which evokes a certain set of characteristics thought to be common to the Sabra personality: prickliness, durability, toughness, hard on the outside and sweet on the inside. Broadly speaking, two of the key characteristics of sabra culture are the centrality of the military as a communally definitive experience, and the shared social preoccupation with a specifically Aryan image of male physical beauty.

(*HaPanterim HaShehorim* in Hebrew, hereafter IBP or HaPanterim) circulated a flyer that, they claimed, had been written on behalf of the people of “Musrara-Harlem.”<sup>40</sup> The flyer poetically demands recompense for a list of injustices perpetrated against the Mizrahi Jews of Israel:

We, a group of screwed-up youths, address all those who have had enough:

Enough with no work.

.....

Enough taking jail and brutality every other day.

Enough with government broken promises.

We’ve had enough disenfranchisement.

We’ve had enough discrimination.

How long will they give to us and we will keep silent. (qtd. in Lubin 134)

Although, for a brief moment during and immediately after the Six Day War, it seemed that Mizrahim were finally going to be welcomed into the imagined community of Ashkenazi Zionism, barely four years later it was clear that no real headway had been made (Hazan). The inequality gap in standards of living was growing, not shrinking, and although Mizrahim made up 52% of the population, they held less than 10% of the seats in Parliament, 9% of available top-level government jobs, and made up just 11% of university students (Cohen and Shemesh 20).

Never numbering more than a few thousand, HaPanterim staged a handful of highly visible but materially unproductive protests in the early 1970s, and, when they did endeavor to

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<sup>40</sup> In his interview with *MERIP Reports*, IBP representative Shalom Cohen mentions that the Hatikva Quarter of Tel Aviv, which in the early 1970s was over 90% Mizrahi, was also frequently referred to as “Harlem.” Although I have not yet found any definitive evidence of this connection, one wonders about the influence of James Baldwin’s 1966 article, “Report from Occupied Territory,” written out of his travels in the region. In the essay, Baldwin affirms that “occupation is occupation,” which happens “in all our Harlems, every single day.”

participate in official politics, never garnered enough electoral support to send a representative to the Knesset. Yet their name, and the domestic and international media attention they drew, were enough to secure a meeting with then-Prime Minister Golda Meir, and, later, enough to ensure that they would be the subject of a relatively large body of scholarship. As Sami Shalom Chetrit explains, “Their most important achievement was to place on the Israeli agenda and in Mizrahi public consciousness the discrimination and unequal economic relations in Israeli society, directly pointing out the overlap with the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi ethnic divide” (53). In a sense, the IBP engaged in what Jessica Lang refers to as “rhetorical passing” for they represented “an effort to document art and imagination as a process of racially informed exchange and acquisition... a commingling of black and Jewish aesthetics, with the boundaries separating the two not always discernable—this being precisely the point” (71). Naturally the IBP’s rhetorical passing was more firmly rooted in the political rather than the aesthetic—if such a distinction is even possible—but the transnational racial imaginary they constructed through their rhetoric was remarkable enough, and the boundaries permeable enough, to shake the Ashkenazi elite out of their complacency.

The reaction of the Ashkenazi-led leadership was transnationally inflected as well; as a 1967 study of “intergroup relations” put it, Ashkenazi Israelis worried that “If the Orientals... come to dominate the nation, Israel may become simply another Middle Eastern spot on the map, with the result that nearly six million American Jews will have less incentive to support the country” (Smythe and Weintraub 23). These anxieties on the part of the Ashkenazi leadership seem to reflect an understanding of the fact that, as discussed earlier, the resurgence of American Jewish Zionism was conditioned at least in part by its imbrication within American master narratives of settler colonialism, a transference that was only possible if Israel maintained its

identity as a white, Western country. Thus, this apprehension speaks to one of the main points carried across this project, namely, that in the latter half of the twentieth century, Jews understood their own whiteness as transnationally inflected. And it was equally crucial that Israel not be seen as perpetuating the same prejudices that American Jewish liberals so strenuously disavowed and with which the US Black Panthers were determined to associate them. *Ma'ariv* journalist Philip Ben warned, for example, that “American television viewers... could easily surmise that Jerusalem experienced the same mayhem as Harlem, Newark, and other Black ghettos, or even worse. Such distorted perceptions might erode the view of Israel as a ‘Golden State’ predicated on idealism and unified in its values” (qtd. Frankel 16). As before, the support of American Jews was vital to maintaining Israel’s cultural and geopolitical status, but that support was conditioned on Israel’s being at once a white, European country yet also an outwardly liberal, multicultural one.<sup>41</sup>

*“Wheels within wheels,” 1978-1983*

In retrospect, HaPanterim seemed doomed to fail, in large part because of how quickly the nascent Mizrahi left was swallowed up by an overwhelming rightward shift in Mizrahi politics specifically, Israeli politics generally, and, to a certain extent, Jewish politics globally. In Israel, the turn seemed so swift and radical that the 1977 elections—in which Menachem Begin’s Likud Party won a sweeping victory over the left-liberal establishment party, Mapai, which had literally governed Israel since its founding—became known as *HaMahapakh*, or The Upheaval. Yet for all that this electoral revolt shocked the Israeli elite, it was also highly predictable in the sense that Jewish politics in at least three of these countries had been trending in this direction

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<sup>41</sup> As I’ll discuss in Chapter Three, this self-consciousness carried over into the way Hebrew-language novels were translated into English, often guided by the perceived need to curate and revise images of Israel for American Jewish eyes.



since the early 1970s and to an extent lurched rightward in unison. In the 1980 US presidential election, for example, Ronald Reagan received the largest proportion of the Jewish vote of any Republican candidate since Warren Harding in 1920—thirty-nine percent.<sup>42</sup> And while a Republican candidate winning the support of a mere two-fifths of American Jewish voters is not in itself evidence of a much-foretold “Jexit” from the Democratic Party, it should also be understood within the broader context of the 1970s, during which time American Jewish discourse did shift markedly rightward, especially by becoming overwhelmingly “adversarial, if not outright hostile” to left and liberal Jews who advocated or even entertained the idea of Palestinian nationalism or voiced criticism of the increasingly bullish American Zionist movement (Staub 288).<sup>43</sup> Inter-ethnic discourse became more particularist and competitive, fracturing leftist alliances forged in the anti-racist and anti-war movements. Similarly, in Britain, Margaret Thatcher’s 1975 rise to prominence in the Conservative Party in Britain represented a watershed in Jewish support and affiliation with the right. This was due in part to Thatcher’s perceived philosemitism: her home constituency (Finchley) had a sizeable Jewish population, she had a close relationship with Britain’s chief rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, she campaigned vociferously on behalf of Soviet Jewry, and she conspicuously appointed several Jews to cabinet positions during her tenure.

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<sup>42</sup> Or any Republican since—even though Bush I garnered the support of 35% of Jewish voters in 1988, that proportion fell precipitously in the following two decades, only cracking 30% once for Mitt Romney in 2012. It is also worth noting that when Warren Harding won the Jewish vote for the Republican Party, Democrats and Republicans occupied entirely different positions on the political spectrum from those they hold today.

<sup>43</sup> “Jexit,” like “Blexit,” is a favored neologism of conservatives who have spent several decades now insisting that, eventually, certain minority groups, particularly Jews and Blacks, will “see the light” and abandon the Democratic Party en masse. Suffice it to say, at least electorally speaking, this never really happened, continues to not happen, and seems unlikely to ever happen. In 2020, Donald Trump is estimated to have received 22% of the Jewish vote. That, however, is not to discount either the strongly Jewish cast of the midcentury neoconservative movement, nor the many vocal and powerful Jewish right-wing ideologues who have gained prominence in the past decade.

Since it intersects most explicitly with both *The Counterlife* and *The One Facing Us*, in this section I want to primarily explore the Mahapakh, while also looking at how it drew Israel closer to apartheid South Africa, which in turn impacted perceptions of Jewish whiteness all over the world. Menachem Begin's ascendance marked more than a political passing of the torch, rather, "It symbolized a move to center stage of new classes, another culture, a different historical narrative" (Shapira 362). Where the old guard sabras were defiantly secular, Begin was scrupulously and visibly religious, and inveighed his belief in a "Greater Israel" in a manner that, until then, had mostly occurred at the fringes of Israeli politics. The embrace of this outlook was in part an index of powerful changes occurring in Israel during and after the Yom Kippur War. As Anita Shapira explains, "On the eve of the Yom Kippur War, Israel was profoundly complacent, and as a consequence of the war this complacency turned into depression. An entire nation... sank into a national trauma whose traces did not dissipate for decades. Faith in the leadership... was now irretrievably lost" (335). Although the war resulted in an Israeli victory, the culture it left behind was one of embittered defeat. Crucially, before the Yom Kippur War, the Israeli public, as well as the political and military establishment, had been hugely overconfident in Israel's military superiority, which, they believed, would make short work of any invading force. Yet the Egyptians and Syrians had managed to catch the supposedly unmatched Israeli intelligence apparatus by surprise, and moreover inflicted heavy losses on the under-equipped, underprepared, and poorly organized infantry and air force. Meanwhile, televised images of Israeli soldiers as prisoners of war "shook the myth of the brave, strong sabra who never surrendered" (Shapira 331). For the right, particularly the founders of Gush Emunim [Bloc of the Faithful], the war constituted "proof of the Arabs' resolve to destroy Israel and concluded that there should be no concessions or policy that might be construed as submitting to

pressure, since that would only invite further, unending pressure” (Shapira 342). Gush Emunim, who emerged officially out of political organizing among yeshiva students in 1974, became a metonym for a constellation of settler movements zealously devoted to the idea of Greater Israel as an ancestral Jewish homeland destined to be reformed at any cost.

At the same time, the *Mahapakh* was also the outcome of socioeconomic changes in Israel to which Labor Zionism had little response. Some of these changes ran markedly parallel to those occurring in the United States. As Shapira recounts, “In the reality of the 1970s, with the emergence of a new middle class comprising people from the liberal professions, businessmen, and various types of contractors, and clearly oriented toward capitalism, the old socialist slogans sounded hollow” (362). Just as, during this period, Milton Friedman’s rejection of Keynesian economics gained support in the US, in Israel “arguments were heard for a free-market economy and a decrease in state involvement. Intellectuals and businessmen demanded that the socialist ethos be replaced by a Western liberal ethos emphasizing individual rights and freedoms, as opposed to the rights of the collective” (Shapira 362).<sup>44</sup> Yet even as these shifts occurred, the Yom Kippur War, in combination with other global factors, cratered the Israeli economy. Much as it did in the US and UK, inflation plagued Israel throughout the 1970s, while the war itself cost the country a year’s worth of their gross national product (“Rise and Fall” 208). But one sector flourished: the military-industrial complex. As Polakow-Suransky explains, “Israel’s nascent arms industry brought in much-needed foreign currency, helped redress the country’s severe trade imbalance, and provided work for countless engineers and scientists returning from overseas with advanced degrees” (208). As weapons manufacturing expanded, subsequent

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<sup>44</sup> Although it may seem counterintuitive that a burst of political religiosity should coincide with the embrace of hyper-individualistic free market capitalism and neocolonial adventurism, it’s worth noting that a similar admixture characterized the Reagan Era.

surpluses meant that, to boost the economy, Israel would need to find new export markets. Apartheid South Africa, increasingly isolated on the global stage and locked into an endless cycle of violence both at home and abroad, was one of the most promising and lucrative options.<sup>45</sup>

Israeli politics on the African continent shifted rapidly after the Yom Kippur War, as one can observe plainly from the fact that, though in 1972 Israel maintained diplomatic relations with thirty-one African countries, by the end of 1973 that number had dwindled to five. This drew Israel and South Africa closer throughout the decade, an alliance based on the shared experience of moral condemnation from the international community and a growing conviction that they represented the last, best hope of containing Arab-Soviet influence in Africa and the Middle East. This alliance had a global impact, while also leading to fascinating idiosyncratic encounters that demonstrated the creativity with which ideologies, ethical positions, and worldviews could be reconciled. For example, Polakow-Suransky begins his remarkable study, *The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa*, with the striking episode of April 6, 1976, in which South African PM B.J. Vorster, who, like Eric Louw from the previous section, had been an outspoken member of the antisemitic and pro-Nazi contingent of the South African government during World War Two, laid a wreath to commemorate the Nazis' victims at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial. The visit was even more darkly ironic because, while Nazism itself had, of course, fallen largely out of fashion, Vorster was even at that moment overseeing the implementation of the NP's ongoing "separate development" program, which

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<sup>45</sup> As Polakow-Suransky explains, cooperation between Israel and apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s was extensive. In addition to the massive arms deals I cite in this section, Israel and South Africa (illegally) helped develop one another's nuclear programs. The IDF was also heavily involved in South Africa's "secret" wars in Namibia and Angola: they sent officers to train the SADF on strategy and secured a sizeable contract to modernize the South African air forces. SADF officers also visited the Occupied Territories, and Mossad agents instructed SADF police forces on various forms of population control.

forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of Black South Africans to abjectly poor and decrepit “homelands,” under which pretense they were stripped of their citizenship and all rights.<sup>46</sup> Under Vorster the South African government had also banned all mixed-race organizations and facilitated a massive, brutal crackdown on perceived political opponents that included banning orders, detention without trial, torture, and state-sponsored assassinations.

Yet, according to Polakow-Suransky, Vorster faced “surprisingly little opposition” during his visit to Israel, the primary purpose of which was to iron out the details of a \$700 million arms deal. While some were critical, editorials in the *Jerusalem Post* praised Vorster’s leadership, and readers wrote in to contradict or explain away Afrikaner antisemitism and the immorality of apartheid. One such letter, for example, stressed that “[W]hatever Mr. Vorster’s long-past history may be... Black Africans in South Africa enjoy today a standard of living... infinitely superior to that of any free and independent Black African state,” adding that South Africa’s Jewish community has “flourished and prospered” and reminding readers that South Africa was one of the first countries to recognize the State of Israel (Mendel 8). Another offered a counterfactual explanation for the NP’s pro-Nazi, antisemitic history that is particularly interesting in this context:

The fact of the matter was... the Nationalist Party had... been hostile to the Smuts Government for being too British. This hostility was a relic of the Anglo-Boer War and some of this hostility was extended to the Jewish People who naturally supported General Smuts against the Nazis. There are wheels within wheels, and since the Afrikaans settled

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<sup>46</sup> When I say “hundreds of thousands” I’m only speaking of those who had been forced out of their homes since Vorster had taken office in 1966. The total is much larger—from 1960 to 1983, an estimated 3.5 million people were forcibly relocated by the apartheid government.

in South Africa 300 years ago, they have adopted a friendly attitude to the Jewish people.  
(Liebson 8)

More important than these public apologies, however, was Vorster and Begin's shared ideological investment in what Polakow-Suransky calls "minority survivalism," the sense that both countries were founded on the premise of preserving and consolidating a minoritarian ethnic identity, and that anything that identity group had to do—or perceived as necessary—to defend themselves from demographic or literal destruction was essentially justifiable. As retired diplomat and Knesset member David Hacoen put it in the *Jerusalem Post* in July 1977, even though the injustice of the apartheid system was "glaring," "the establishment of complete political equality in South Africa between white and black, when the latter outnumber the former by five to one, is another matter... [it] would mean the end of the white minority, and be a blow to all the inhabitants. It is unacceptable that the white minority be left to the mercies of the black African majority" (12). South Africa and Israel also both regarded themselves as "threatened outposts of European civilisation defending their existence against communist barbarians at the gates, who wished to erase them from the map" ("Rise and Fall" 203).

Indeed, this was a central plank of Pretoria's domestic and foreign rhetorical strategies, the notion, repeated ad infinitum, that South Africa faced a "total onslaught" from global communism, which required a "total response."<sup>47</sup> According to Jamie Miller in *An African Volk: The Apartheid Regime and Its Fight for Survival*, total onslaught gained traction "not only because it provided cohesion to existing anticommunist sentiment or a straightforward paradigm for understanding the hostile world outside the Republic, but also because it fit with and

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<sup>47</sup> In a 1970 speech to the SA Parliament, future PM P.W. Botha announced, apparently without irony: "This is not a struggle about apartheid... It is an onslaught by Communism under the guise of religion or freedom or whatever else, directed against stability, security, and progress... Today, virtually every sphere of life is part of that overall strategy and that total onslaught on the free world and the people of the West" (qtd. in Miller 106).

reinforced the NP's approach to domestic governance" (107). In a manner that at least rhetorically resembles Israel's positioning of all Palestinian grievances as one voice in a transcontinental chorus of antisemitism, "[Total onslaught] supplied a paradigm that positioned the grievances of black South Africans as part of an externally orchestrated assault on the government and simultaneously denied them any legitimacy" (107). That is, the governments of both Israel and South Africa, who saw themselves as practicing parallel forms of division and control, also used parallel rhetorical strategies to delegitimize the complaints of marginalized and oppressed populations by subsuming them within polymorphous global evils.

#### *Rainbows, 1992-2001*

Although I will pursue a much more wide-ranging account of politics in the Jewish Anglosphere during the 1990s in Historical Overture II, for now I want to mark a few points and trends that will be especially important for the discussion of *The One Facing Us* in Chapter Three and set up key intersections between Parts One and Two. The "rainbows" to which I refer in the heading for this section are primarily Desmond Tutu's well-known description of post-apartheid South Africa as a "rainbow nation" and the Mizrahi consciousness movement in Israel that, in 1997, cohered into an organization calling itself HaKeshet HaDemocratit HaMizrahit, or the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow. But I am also using rainbows more fancifully, as a metaphor for the waves of global optimism that infused the early-to-mid 1990s, fed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of South African apartheid and the country's first non-racial election in 1994, the announcement of ceasefires in Northern Ireland the same year, and the beginning of what looked like a promising peace process between Israelis and Palestinians first in Madrid in 1991, which led to the signing of Oslo I in 1993 and Oslo II in 1995. These developments seemed all the more remarkable given that, in the late 1980s, all of these countries had

experienced protracted periods of day-to-day violence and political turmoil. Their surprising turnaround seemed to point ever more hearteningly to the bright, inclusive future promised by transnational commitments to multiculturalism, accelerating globalization, and an incipient wave of techno-optimism.<sup>48</sup> But while this background is crucial, I will again focus on what connects most concretely to my literary analysis, in this case of *The One Facing Us*, which is the demographic and political shifts in Israel itself.

Thanks to overlapping waves of immigration from East Africa and the former Soviet Union, in its own way Israel too became more of a “rainbow nation” in the 1990s. Yet as right-leaning historian Anita Shapira (probably somewhat unintentionally) makes clear, there was a world of difference in the way these two populations were absorbed into the Jewish state. Of the post-Soviet immigrants she writes, “Since the Aliya from Germany in the 1930s, Israel had not encountered a group of immigrants who were so well educated and represented such impressive human capital” (453). And so they were treated. Soviet Jews were integrated into Israel society under a policy of ‘direct absorption’ that afforded them a level of agency well beyond what had been offered to previous aliyot. The Israeli government’s approach to the Ethiopian “Beta

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<sup>48</sup> Writing in 1996, Beverley Milton-Edwards gives a similar but more detailed overview: “Since the late 1960s the political, religious, class and ethnic conflicts of Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine have been characterized as deeply divided with dominant and subordinate communities engaged in increasingly violent sectarian and nationalist conflict. These mutually antagonistic societies have been perceived as engaged in intractable conflicts. By the early 1990s, however, these views were challenged, first by the resolution of other so-called intractable conflicts such as the historic changes in South Africa and then by movement within these societies themselves. These changes were wrought as a result of a combination of both increasing war-weariness following an upsurge in political violence (rather than number of deaths from political violence) and by a changing international context. These factors resulted in the peace processes first in Madrid in October 1991 when, following the Gulf Crisis debacle, America brought the Israelis and Palestinians to the same negotiating table for the first time. Then in September 1993, following months of secret negotiations, the Labour government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chief Yasser Arafat announced and signed the Oslo Accords as an agenda for substantive peace-making between the Palestinians and the Israelis and limited autonomy for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the interim. Finally in August 1994 the Irish Republican Army (IRA) announced a cease-fire which was shortly followed in October 1994 by a cease-fire announced by the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC). The prospects for peace never looked so good and in the period directly following these major political events a mood of optimism quickly prevailed in both societies.”



Israel,” on the other hand, was characterized as “custodianship,” guided by the assumptions, first, that East Africans were (as the Ashkenazi leadership of the 1950s and 1960s had likewise assumed Mizrahi immigrants to be) uneducated, uncivilized, and wholly unprepared for “modern” Israeli life, and, second, that their claim to Judaism was highly dubious.<sup>49</sup> The Jews who had lived for decades under Soviet rule were thoroughly secularized and largely alienated from the practices of rabbinic Judaism. And yet it was the Ethiopian Jews—who were in fact a religiously Jewish community albeit with a somewhat different set of laws and rituals—that were forced by the Israeli government to undergo a symbolic “circumcision” ceremony to be recognized as such.

Unlike the Soviet Jews, moreover, Ethiopian Jews were and continue to be regarded as an alien element in Israeli society needing either to be neutralized or quarantined—in some cases literally. In 1996, for example, it was revealed that Israeli health authorities had secretly adopted a policy of automatically disposing of any blood donated by Ethiopian immigrants, ostensibly because of a relatively high risk of HIV exposure, notwithstanding the fact they also had a policy of testing all donated blood for HIV anyway. Shapira’s description of the scandal gives an interestingly passive tone: “This incensed the immigrants, who developed rancorous feelings that they were being discriminated against.... [T]heir identification with Israel was full of problems because of a profound sense of otherness that deepened in reaction to the host society’s

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<sup>49</sup> Again, Shapira’s rhetorical framing gives an insight into how Ethiopian Jewishness was perceived by recalcitrant Israelis: “*According to their own legend*, they are the progeny of Jews from the Land of Israel who went down to Ethiopia with the Queen of Sheba and her son Menelik, who was sired by King Solomon and became emperor of Ethiopia. Some hold that the first Jews came to Ethiopia after the destruction of the First Temple, when the Jews exiled from Jerusalem journeyed southward and settled in Yebu (Elephantine) in Upper Egypt. These Jews were unfamiliar with Jewish oral law and detached from rabbinic Judaism. They observed part of the Torah commandments and upheld a tradition different from the one accepted in Judaism since the Second Temple period. Contact was established with them in the early twentieth century, and some reached Palestine” (458-9, my emphasis).

reservations” (459). Tellingly, as she does earlier in the text with Mizrahi immigrants, Shapira locates the problem of Ethiopian Jews’ alienation from Ashkenazi Israel almost entirely in their own minds: it is the Ethiopian Israelis who “developed rancorous feelings that they were being discriminated against,” through no fault of the state health authorities who, in Shapira’s telling, may or may not have actually been discriminating against them.

But they were. In their study of representations of Ethiopian Jews in the Hebrew-language media between 1985 and 2004, Germaw Mengistu and Eli Avraham found that “The image of the Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia is an image of a group that is being rejected by almost all the groups that compose Israeli society, and the confrontations occur at various levels of encounter: from the personal to the institutional” (563). Images of Ethiopian Jews were consistently linked to “disturbances of the social order, clashes between immigrants and veterans, and economic hardship” (563-4). Crucially for my analysis of *The Tenants* and *the One Facing Us*, Mengistu and Avraham add that “the media image of the Ethiopian immigrants seems to be primordial, frozen in time... erupting from a cultural environment bypassed by modernity” (566).

For Mizrahi Jews in Israel, still marginalized across various professional, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts, the treatment of the arriving Ethiopian Jews was familiar. As Sami Shalom Chetrit, Mizrahi academic and a leader of the Mizrahi consciousness movement, writes in *White Jews, Black Jews: Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel*, “The state applied the same racist cultural prejudices in absorbing Ethiopian Jews [as they did to the Mizrahim in the 1950s and 1960s]. Generally, they were treated as the offspring of a backward society, who cannot manage an independent family and community life” (51). Ethiopians being “housed in hotels and in absorption centers, where every step they made in the new life was closely supervised” echoed

the Mizrahim's confinement to the *ma'abarot* and the restriction of their educational and professional options for decades afterwards. In fact, it was the powerful Mizrahi rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1973 to 1983, who was the driving force both behind the recognition of Ethiopian Jews *as* Jews and the opening of Israel. In 1984, Rabbi Yosef also oversaw an equally significant milestone in Mizrahi politics, the founding of Shas as an Ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi-Sephardi party, breaking away from the Ashkenazi Orthodox Agudat Yisrael [Union of Israel] and positioning itself as an alternative both to Likud and the Mafdal [National Religious Party]. Insofar as they likewise capitalized on the broad discontent of marginalized, impoverished Mizrahim, Shas can be considered a decedent of HaPanterim, but their ideological, political, and social outlooks are entirely different. Shas, Chetrit claims, was “the first Mizrahi movement that sought to present a complete and ultimate ideological alternative to Ashkenazi Zionism” (160). Shas was thus on balance far more effective in capitalizing on the fifty-years-long enmity between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. Avi Shilon explains, “the Mahapakh had strengthened Mizrahi politics and Begin's departure left a gap in the political arena, to be filled by a party that merged Orthodox values with a Mizrahi ethos and a right-wing Zionist orientation” (549). At the same time, writing from the vantage point of 2010, Chetrit ultimately sees Shas as having “in effect become a release valve for the Mizrahi struggle and a sponge for social protest,” as it has consistently partnered with economically conservative governments and has thus supported “the policy of dismantling welfare institutions in Israel while continuing to absorb social foment among the impoverished Mizrahi communities” (xi).<sup>50</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Shas moved away from its religious origins,

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<sup>50</sup> Although Chetrit consistently and mostly compellingly draws parallels between the experience of Mizrahim and that of Black people in the US, his description here sounds much more akin to the relationship between impoverished rural and semi-rural whites and the Republican Party. That is, like Shas, the GOP has spent several

first in joining a peace-process-oriented coalition with Yitzhak Rabin's Labor and the left-wing Zionist Meretz in 1992 and then with a decisive rightward shift from 1996 onwards.

Like US President Bill Clinton in November of that same year, Yitzhak Rabin's reclamation of the Israeli premiership in June 1992 represented a significant victory over conservative blocs that had controlled their respective countries in one form or another since the late 1970s.<sup>51</sup> Rabin had been defense minister from 1984 through 1990 under Likud PM Yitzhak Shamir, and during the First Intifada had earned the nickname of "bone breaker" for instituting a policy of "might, power and beatings" towards Arab protestors, directing IDF troops to pull Palestinians from their homes and break their hands so that they could not throw stones (Shipler). These actions drew expressions of "dismay," "chagrin," and "shame" from American Jewish leaders, but fundraising for the IDF continued apace (Shipler). The US government, on the other hand, grew so incensed by the Shamir government's intransigence regarding peace talks and refusal to halt settlement construction that they eventually did something the US had refrained from since 1967: they publicly threatened to withhold \$10 billion in aid that Israel desperately needed to shore up a receding economy and cover the massive cost of absorbing three quarters of a million immigrants from the Soviet Union. For many Israelis, this was the final straw, and Rabin was swept into office with a mandate (ironically enough) to make peace with the Palestinians.

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decades dismantling the welfare state apparatus on which many of their constituents desperately rely but has continued to draw support from this same bloc based on their potent brand of identity politics.

<sup>51</sup> To be fair, Republicans only gained three Senate seats in the 1978 election, meaning that their victory was far less conclusive than Likud's in 1977. However, in 1980, on the back of Ronald Reagan's victory over incumbent Jimmy Carter, the GOP flipped a historic twelve Senate seats, wresting control over the chamber for the first time since 1955. Democrats regained the Senate in 1986, but with six fewer seats than they had held before the so-called "Reagan Revolution," and without really turning the tide back on the political realignment that some political historians believe began with Barry Goldwater's candidacy in 1964.

To accomplish this, however, he needed a coalition. For the left-wing Meretz, Rabin's Labor party was a natural ally, and joining with him to support the peace process a straightforward decision. Rabin also had the option of cobbling together votes from small Arab parties, but chose instead to elicit the votes of Shas, preferring to secure the backing of a broader swath of the Israeli Jewish public over a left-wing multicultural coalition. For Shas, needless to say, the prospect of such a coalition was much more complicated. Aligning itself not only with left-leaning parties but with secular ones risked alienating key parts of its base and drawing criticism from the entire right wing. As Moshe Behar explains, in joining with Rabin, "Shas made itself an easy target for its... allies from both the Orthodox Ashkenazi parties and the religious nationalist ones. Shas was indeed attacked repeatedly and vehemently by the entire spectrum of the right-wing opposition that justifiably viewed Shas as the weakest link in, and therefore the best way to de-stabilize, Rabin's coalition" (41). But the real threat to the alignment, at least according to Behar, came from within, as "a petty, altogether avoidable Meretz-Shas friction began to develop" (41). Instead of directing their efforts towards the deplorable situation in the OPT, Behar explains, "Meretz began to invest most of its political time in a futile 'civilizational' struggle within the ruling coalition against the orthodox religiosity of Shas," who immediately recognized in the bourgeois, secular Ashkenazis' criticisms of their "insufficiently modern conduct" the same Orientalist discourse that Mapai had directed at Mizrahim throughout its time in power. Hence, at least according to Behar,

The wearing away of Rabin's exceptional post-election moment did not begin as a result of any consequential collective action against his government by its right-wing, ultra-nationalist opposition. Instead, it originated from within his coalition with the failure of the leading party of the Zionist left to set straight its own—and Israel's—priorities.

During the many months that Meretz immersed itself in a secular crusade against Shas (within the predominantly secular-left coalition), settlement-building in the OPT continued unabated. The innovative and committed settlers used formal and informal channels to advance their anti-peace cause even under the coalition that in theory should have been politically unfavorable to them. During the years of the Labor-Meretz rule between 1992 and 1996, *the number of Israeli settlers in the OPT grew by 49 percent, from 101,000 to 150,000.* (42)

Ultimately, then, Behar blames the failure of the Oslo Accords not on the aggression and behind-the-scenes scheming of the Israeli right wing but on the recalcitrance and condescension of the Zionist left.

While I cannot say one way or the other whether this or any theory is “correct,” I bring it up to highlight the interconnectedness of intra-Jewish racism and the global politics of Jewish liberalism, which invested a great deal of hope in what they believed Oslo meant. The day after Rabin signed Oslo I in September 1993, Shas left his coalition. Though it abstained from a no-confidence motion on September 23 that was effectively a memorandum on Oslo I, Shas was already in the process of re-committing itself to Likud. Then, on February 25, 1994, American-Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein opened fire in a West Bank mosque and murdered twenty-nine Palestinians. Rabin denounced the attack, but instituted a curfew for thousands of Palestinians rather than the few hundred Jewish settlers, and made no moves to stop settlement expansion. As Behar puts it, in reference to more or less the same community we will explore through Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* in Chapter One, “Rabin’s government failed to use these profoundly tragic circumstances to remove from Hebron the small and probably most proto-fascist settler community in the entire OPT” (44). Rabin was himself assassinated by a right-wing Jewish

extremist in November 1995, two months after signing Oslo II. Likud returned to power in 1996 under Binyamin Netanyahu, who ran on an explicitly anti-peace platform. Ehud Barak reclaimed the premiership for the Labor-affiliated One Israel in 1999. At a rally in Rabin Square his supporters were heard chanting “Just not Shas!” but the party was on the rise, gaining an unprecedented seventeen seats. Despite the evident public enmity—what *Ha’aretz* dubbed “Shasophobia”—they joined Barak in another ill-fated coalition. Likud was back in power by 2001, when the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the US “at once removed all barriers and doubts from the Israeli government... which then canceled the Oslo Agreements and launched a war on the Palestinians—while granted international cover by the Bush administration, a backing that continued to serve Sharon’s successor, Ehud Olmert, and his unity government” (Chetrit 240).

In the mid-to-late 1990s, while Shas moved right (not a long trip in any case), the Mizrahi left was also in a process of galvanization and reorganization, out of which emerged the HaKeshet Hademocratit HaMizrahit (Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition, hereafter HaKeshet) in 1997. In some ways, HaKeshet was the true ideological inheritor of HaPanterim, but with an entirely different socio-cultural profile. Since the 1980s, the neoliberal and consumerist transformation of the Israeli economy only gathered steam. In a process some scholars refer to as the “Americanization” of Israel, “American fast food and retail chains [were] established across Israel, a new language imbued with English words and slang [was] introduced, as well as rock music and other (mostly) American musical influences and a multi-channeled commercial television” while demand for consumer goods like appliances and electronics skyrocketed and American-style shopping malls sprang up across the country (Ben-Pora et al. 105). In the government, this trend led to a wave of privatization and dismantling of welfare state apparatuses. It was primarily in response to privatization that members of the “new Mizrahim”

formed HaKeshet, but the seeds of the movement were sown much earlier, in tandem with the emergence of Shas. However, whereas “The founders of Shas based their critique on the foundations of the economic and spiritual oppression... within a religious–ideological framework,” the new Mizrahim “connect[ed] the same foundations with universal theories of oppression relations in the context of first world/third world, anticolonialism, postcolonialism and postmodernism... within the framework of Israeli social reality” (Chetrit 167). This opposition to privatization and intellectual commitment to postcolonial theory is present in HaKeshet’s April 1997 Statement of Principles: “The movement fights against social inequality and the pushing of the Mizrahi public to the margins, and against the ongoing damage to the neighborhoods, towns and the periphery. The movement will act against economic and social mechanisms and trends that constitute and preserve economic gaps and social stratification” (qtd. in Chetrit 204). Yet, because its members were academics and other cultural elites, they were never radicalized like HaPanterim—they had too much to lose (Chetrit 223). HaKeshet also conceived of itself from the beginning as an extra-parliamentary movement, which allowed it freedom in organizing but blunted its political efficacy to an extent. Despite legislative victories on housing in 1998 and 2003, HaKeshet’s major contributions to the Mizrahi cause as they see it have been primarily scholarly and epistemological. Still, their ideological convictions, as well as the circumstances under which the group was formed, provide critical context to Ronit Matalon’s *The One Facing Us* and to post-1992 Mizrahi literature writ large.



## CHAPTER ONE: SETTLEMENT SUBURB, VILLAGE: THE TRANSNATIONAL TRIANGULATION OF JEWISH WHITENESS IN *THE COUNTERLIFE*

### *Introduction*

In his seminal 1998 text, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Matthew Frye Jacobson introduces the fundamental instability of American whiteness (and American Jewish whiteness in particular) by explicating a passage from Philip Roth's 1986 novel, *The Counterlife*. In the scene, perennial Roth surrogate Nathan Zuckerman argues with his white, gentile British lover Maria about the racial identity of Jews:

“It is a racial matter,” she insisted. “No, we’re the same race. You’re thinking of Eskimos.” “We are *not* the same race. Not according to anthropologists, or whoever measures these things. There’s Caucasian, Semitic—there are about five different racial groups. Don’t look at me like that.” “I can’t help it. Some nasty superstitions always tend to crop up when people talk about a Jewish ‘race.’” ... “[A]ll I can tell you is that you *are* a different race. We’re supposed to be closer to Indians than to Jews, actually. I’m talking about Caucasians.” “But I am Caucasian, kiddo. In the U.S. census I am, for good or bad, counted as Caucasian.” “*Are you? Am I wrong?*” (*Counterlife* 71)

Analyzing the epistemological conflict at the heart of the conversation, Jacobson explains, “Once the two characters recognize the slippage in what they had each thought an uncompromising natural fact, both scramble to appeal to some higher authority in order to uphold their initial views” (3). Maria invokes “science,” while Nathan invokes “the state,” and in so doing they identify “two key actors in the creation and enforcement of these public fictions called races” (3). Nor is this merely a parochial Jewish matter, Jacobson argues, because “the vicissitude of Jewish whiteness is intimately related to the racial odysseys of myriad other groups... who came ashore in the United States as ‘free white persons’ under... naturalization law, yet whose racial

credentials were not equivalent to those of the Anglo-Saxon ‘old stock’” (3-4).<sup>52</sup> These points are all important, valid, and accurate, and yet they index a lacuna that is reproduced frequently throughout the scholarship on Jewish whiteness. The oversight begins with the simple fact that this argument is not staged between two Americans, but rather between an American and a Briton. Nor is this incidental to the respective positions that Nathan and Maria take. Coming from the US context, in which racial categories have historically been (at least in theory) demarcated by law and civic organization, Nathan appeals to the state. Maria, on the other hand, appeals to anthropology, a field whose history is inextricable from that of European, and particularly British, imperialism.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, the very fact that Nathan and Maria’s divergent epistemologies are legible to one another and to us is a clear indication that they cannot be considered discrete or mutually exclusive modes of understanding race. Indeed, as Jacobson’s own invocation of the “Anglo-Saxon ‘old stock’” indicates, the construction of whiteness in the United States has a rhizomic history that extends well past the spatial and temporal boundaries of the nation-state. Anglo-Saxons as such never existed in the United States. Indeed, by the time British privateers established their first North American colony in the early seventeenth century, Anglo-Saxons

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<sup>52</sup> This is a reference to the first immigration law passed in the United States, the Naturalization Act of 1790, which reads: “*Be it enacted*... That any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof, on application... and making proof to the satisfaction of such court, that he is a person of good character, and taking the oath or affirmation... to support the constitution of the United States.” Under this policy, the US was obligated to naturalize a great many immigrants about whom it was ambivalent, particularly those from Ireland. The law stood more or less unchallenged until the first race-based immigration law, the Chinese Exclusion Act, was passed in 1882 to prohibit the immigration and naturalization of Chinese laborers.

<sup>53</sup> There are by now countless scholars who have dissected the relationship between anthropology, imperialism, and white supremacy. To my knowledge, one of the earliest and most influential writers on the topic was Talal Asad, who, in his 1973 collection *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, wrote: “We must begin from the fact that the basic reality which made pre-war social anthropology a feasible and effective enterprise was the power relationship between dominating (European) and dominated (non-European) cultures. We then need to ask ourselves how this relationship has affected the practical pre-conditions of social anthropology; the uses to which its knowledge was put; the theoretical treatment of particular topics; the mode of perceiving and objectifying alien societies; and the anthropologist’s claim of political neutrality” (17).

barely existed in England. *Anglo-Saxonism*, on the other hand, which refers not to an identifiable group but rather to a construction of white identity based on a theory of British and American history, is traceable through cultural and geopolitical narratives well into the twentieth century.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Roth's own literary output, wherein he uses the term to construct the whiteness of both British and American characters, testifies to the its persistence as a transnational and transhistorical construction of racial identity.

What Jacobson fails to account for, then, is the worldedness that fundamentally shapes Nathan and Maria's exchange, the echoes of empire without which the contours of ethnicity in the United States would look quite different. This is particularly—though not uniquely—true in the diachronic construction of Jewish whiteness. It is a phenomenon perceptible not only in contemporary Jewish world literature, but also, as explored in *Historical Overture I*, through several decades of global Jewish history. Extending our understanding of Jewish whiteness beyond the borders of the nation-state also highlights the ways in which we as scholars constrain our own analyses by insisting that certain patterns of racialization are “unique” to a single national space or culture. And, in fact, *The Counterlife* itself provides a model through which to unpack this inherent worldedness, as the text is structured around the transnational triangulation of Jewish identity in the US, Britain, Israel, and the Occupied West Bank. More to the point, a great deal of the explication of Jewish whiteness in the novel emerges through its construction of overlapping worlds. As the Ashkenazi Jewish protagonists move between the American suburb, the West Bank settlement, and the English village—all of which turn out to be sites of white racial manufacture—their racialized identities are revealed as the product of a global refraction

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, comments on Mizrahi emigration by Jewish Agency leader and later President of Israel Zalman Shazar in 1951: “This is unfathomable. . . . An Aliyah has come to us who never knew the taste of a high school, and they are unused to so much education, to so much learning. Will the *yishuv* in Israel survive without more Europeans and Anglo-Saxons, Jews like us?” (qtd. in Lubin 133).

of multiple, multi-layered understandings of how whiteness is produced through the organization of space.

*Race, historicity, and the problem of diaspora in Roth criticism*

Recognizing the problematic gaps in critical readings of *The Counterlife* requires, to begin with, a bird's eye view of how the text moves capriciously across space and time. The (frustratingly unsummarizable) novel is divided into five sections, "Basel," "Judea," "Aloft," "Gloucestershire," and "Christendom." As their titles indicate, the novel is also structured around a triangulation of national spaces, with characters rotating chaotically between Newark/New York, London/Chiswick, and Jerusalem/the West Bank. All five sections center on estranged brothers Nathan and Henry Zuckerman, but each one tells a different version of their story, while other characters and plot points are rearranged around them. For example, in "Basel," Maria is Henry's Swiss-German mistress, whereas in the other sections she is Nathan's English mistress and later wife. In "Basel," Henry develops a heart condition, which is treated with medication that makes him unable to be sexually aroused. Desperate to resume relations with his dental assistant Wendy, he has an operation to correct it and dies on the table. In "Judea" he survives the operation but falls into a deep depression, which only breaks when he suddenly decides to leave his entire life behind to live in the fictional West Bank settlement, Agor. At the request of Henry's exasperated wife Claire, Nathan goes to visit him to assess the extent of his newfound religiosity and Zionism but leaves without resolution. In the next section, "Aloft," set during Nathan's flight back to London, he finds himself sitting next to superfan and would-be terrorist Jimmy, who plans to hijack the plane in order to force the Israeli government to close the Yad V'Shem. In "Gloucestershire" it is Nathan who suffers from a heart condition and dies during a surgery he undertakes so that he can consummate his relationship with Maria. In "Christendom,"

Nathan survives, marries Maria, and moves to England with her, only for her to leave him after a heated argument over her family's antisemitism.

As is probably clear by now, one goal of this project is to demonstrate how a more purposefully and consistently transnational approach can open up new and challenging readings of even canonical Jewish texts that have already generated large bodies of literary scholarship. *The Counterlife*, one of the best-known novels by one of the best-known American Jewish authors is one such text. In Roth scholarship, critics who emphasize race tend to focus primarily on Roth's more straightforwardly American works. For example, in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (2007), race is only treated in detail in *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral*. The trend continues in *Philip Roth and World Literature* (2014), which remains, as editor Velichka Ivanova points out, the only collection to take up Roth in an *exclusively* comparative framework.<sup>55</sup> Still, the two essays in the volume that deal with race at length also focus on *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral* and engage primarily with US culture and Roth's relationship to American authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stephen Crane.

Moreover, even in the cases that *The Counterlife* is taken up in the context of race, that analysis often seems to rest uneasily in relation to the novel's fundamental transnationalism.<sup>56</sup> As indicated earlier, M.F. Jacobson was by no means alone in sublimating how constructions of whiteness travel across and are fundamentally influenced by *global* culture. Specifically, subsequent critical readings of the novel seem to struggle with, first, seeing race as a meaningful

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<sup>55</sup> As far as I am aware, that is. Since Roth's death in 2018 a number of collections have either come out or been put in the works, and it is entirely possible that my net, cast in 2020, failed to scoop them up. I do know that the forthcoming Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth will include at least one entry taking up race in a transnational context, because I contributed a version of this chapter to it.

<sup>56</sup> Brett Kaplan does explicitly acknowledge continuities between the American and Israeli racial imaginaries in her analysis of *The Counterlife* in *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* (2015) but does not take them up at length.

signifier in Roth's representations of Israel and the West Bank and, second, identifying the co-constitutive nature of racial imaginaries in all three of the novel's primary locations. In part, I would argue, this is because in studies of Jewish culture, one spatial framework is so normative and ingrained as to be inevitable: diaspora. Of course, as encyclopedic and etymological definitions of 'diaspora' note, the Ancient Greek word, coming from *diaspeirein*, meaning "to scatter about, disperse," was first used to describe the ejection of Jews from Palestine in the fifth or sixth century BCE.<sup>57</sup> Diaspora has been in the Jewish lexicon and used primarily to refer to Jews for more than a thousand years. And even in the post/colonial period, when diaspora is applied to other groups more frequently, Jewish diaspora is still recognized as an ur-text of this specific form of displacement.<sup>58</sup>

Setting aside momentarily the affective and political dimensions of cleaving to diaspora as a framework for understanding post-1948 Jewish culture, I want to tease out its equally important epistemological dimensions. "Diaspora" evokes a center-periphery model for understanding the relationship between place and identity. In the modern Jewish context, diaspora places all Jewish life outside of Israel (or even "Israel") in a bereaved relationship to the Israeli center.<sup>59</sup> What it also does, crucially, is establish an epistemic approach rooted in difference. The center must be different from the periphery for them to exist as such. The differences between them are often understood unidirectionally, that is, diasporic Jews are depicted as being in a bereaved relationship to those who live in Israel, but rarely the other way

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<sup>57</sup> The Hebrew word, *galut*, is much more dire, expressing exile and bereavement.

<sup>58</sup> To be clear, I am not attempting to pass judgment on the use of 'diaspora' in other cultures (i.e., the African or Caribbean Diasporas), on which I am certainly not an expert. Generally speaking, I can see the productive value that 'diaspora' offers to those contexts. In the Jewish studies context, however, I do see it as a limiting and problematic concept that has circulated uncritically for too long, and which may well be ready for retirement.

<sup>59</sup> This bereaved relationship brings with it an array of political and affective obligations, some of which I will discuss later on. For an extended examination of how this positioning produces forms of "implication," see Chapter 4 of Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*.

around. Focusing specifically on the difficulty scholars seem to have in accounting for race and historicity in *The Counterlife*, I hope to highlight how the baseline assumption of difference embedded in the diaspora-Zion binary obscures crucial continuities in how whiteness is constructed across, rather than within, national imaginaries.

One example of this dissonance can be found in Bryan Cheyette's *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing in the Nightmare of History* (2013). Cheyette initially argues that in *The Counterlife*, as in Roth's earlier work, "Roth's protagonists are racially indeterminate, which enables them to engage with an actual history of racism in the United States rather than its fantasized counterpart (the 'imaginary Jew')" (178). Nathan Zuckerman and his brother Henry thus index "racial indeterminacy, neither black nor white" (178). Setting aside, at least for a moment, the question of what constitutes an "actual history of racism," Cheyette's insights into the racial indeterminacy of Jewish American subjects seem out of step with claims he makes only a few pages later: "[R]ace' in *The Counterlife* is meaningful in Europe rather than the United States or Israel. Nathan's sense of 'difference' is, pointedly, 'reactivated' not in Tel Aviv or New York but in London" (182). "One of the few indisputable facts of *The Counterlife*," Cheyette goes on to say, "is the timeless tradition of English literary anti-Semitism... and its present-day incarnations. In stark contrast to the manifold uncertainties of the novel as a whole, it is this age-old race-thinking that fixes Nathan as a Sartrean Jew" (182-3). Roth's England, therefore, is "a place where Jews are still distinguished racially" unlike, one supposes, the United States or Israel (183). But in the very next paragraph, we are told, "Nathan's alienation from the United States, and his strong identification with a Jamesian cosmopolitanism... is caused by a history of American racism rather than anti-Semitism" (183). Israel, meanwhile, is more or less treated as a space in which race is not even a category of concern. But by treating national-

cultural racial discourses as an either/or, Cheyette overlooks, first, that modes of “race-thinking” in the US and the UK (and Israel, for that matter), are not wholly discrete from one another, and, second, the fact that Nathan’s carrying of racial imaginaries across borders, tucked away in his proverbial Jewish baggage, is itself indicative of a more fluid and/between.

Israel (or Zion) is similarly deracinated in Ranen Omer-Sherman’s analysis of *The Counterlife in Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth* (2002). Although he recognizes that “Postindustrial and postwar prosperity neatly dispersed the Jews to suburbia... where [they] nearly vanished into whiteness,” and adds that, in the US, “even the 1948 establishment of the Jewish state enhanced the Jews’ whiteness” (205), he never offers an Israeli counterpoint—again treating race as something that more or less “belongs” solely to the United States. This despite the fact that, as I will shortly discuss, there are scenes in the novel that specifically raise the issue of intra-Jewish racism in Israel. These discontinuities are carried over into Omer-Sherman’s historical analysis of the novel as well. In a comparison between Henry Zuckerman and Hillel Halkin, Omer-Sherman claims that Henry’s “innocence... is emblematic of most Jewish Americans, who in [the 1970s] paid little, if any, attention, to the fatal power relations and territorial discourses that Zionism actually generated” (215). To be frank, this claim that American Jews were not engaging meaningfully with Zionism in the 1970s is patently out of sync with history. Given that *The Counterlife* is set in the fall and winter of 1978, mere weeks after the Camp David Accords, compounded with the global effects of the Yom Kippur War and ensuing OPEC crisis, as well as the fact that Zionism, Israel, American Jewish issues, and the settler movement were, quite literally, front page news throughout the decade, there are in fact few moments when American Jews were more aware of and tapped into “the fatal power relations and territorial discourses that Zionism actually



generated.” Indeed, the Jewish-American organization Breira, which Omer-Sherman identifies in passing as a “peace movement of the sixties” (233), was actually founded in 1973 by a center-left coalition of Jewish religious leaders, scholars, and public figures and dedicated itself to keeping the issue of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians at the forefront of the American consciousness until it was effectively destroyed by its right-wing critics in 1977.<sup>60</sup> Omer-Sherman also repeatedly poses the Diaspora-Zion dichotomy in *The Counterlife* as a conflict between American individualism and Israeli collectivism. But this baseline assumption of difference ignores the multidirectional entanglements of American and Israeli politics in the 1970s and 1980s, the neoliberal shifts in Israeli culture during this period, and their imbrication within and response to global trends.

My point is not to belabor these oversights, nor am I claiming that my own historicist framing is unassailably authentic, true, or correct. Rather, I want to highlight the ways in which lacunae like these skew critical understandings of Roth’s work. Despite its surrealism, *The Counterlife* captures many of the historical, ideological, and geopolitical intricacies of the moment in which it was set, and in so doing, goes out of its way to shed light on the ethnoracial politics of Israel and the Occupied Territories. These historical parallels are what lead me to reject the Diaspora/Zion binary as a heuristic for analyzing Roth. First, despite its title *The Counterlife* is, I would argue, just as if not more invested in transnational sociopolitical continuities as it is in setting up diasporic contrasts. More importantly, obscuring or misreading

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<sup>60</sup> In the final chapter of *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*, Michael Staub provides a fascinating detailed account not only of the rise and fall of Breira but also of how the press covered this “rift” in American Jewry. The historical archive also shows that in the 1970s the *New York Times* ran two dozen stories about Breira, more than a hundred stories on Gush Emunim, over a thousand stories on Zionism, six thousand stories about American Jewish issues generally, and more than fifty thousand stories about Israel. Even allowing for false positives and the fact that, of course, not all Jews read the *New York Times*, these numbers make it hard to argue that American Jews weren’t thinking about or paying attention to Zionism and Israel during this period.

this history leads almost inevitably to a misreading of the text's racial politics. My sense, then, is that many of these analyses are overdetermined by a baseline assumption of difference between national racial imaginaries. This may itself be inflected by Roth's own fundamentally contrarian approach not only to fiction but to public discourse, however, I believe it is more an effect of how dogmatically scholarship on both Jewish literature and whiteness insists on drawing contrasts rather than continuities between how race is enacted in different countries.

This comes across particularly in the character arc of Nathan Zuckerman's Israeli friend, Shuki Elchanan. While some critics read Shuki as Nathan Zuckerman's—and by extension Philip Roth's—Israeli double, he might be more productively understood as an avatar of the drastic political and cultural shifts that occurred in Israel after the Yom Kippur War. Shuki first appears with his father, who is clearly a stand-in for the statehood generation and the Labor Zionist old guard. Yacov Elchanan is a socialist Russian Jew who immigrated in 1920, making him part of the oft-romanticized Second Aliyah. By contrast, Shuki embodies the ambivalence of the second generation, like his father idealistic about Israel but also somewhat removed and sarcastic in his expressions of it. When Nathan comes to visit Shuki in 1978, however, he finds his friend much changed. Shuki keeps more and more to himself, having partially lost his sight and hearing as a reserve military officer during the Yom Kippur War, and moreover having first lost his brother after his unit was taken prisoner in the Golan and later found “castrated, decapitated, and their penises stuffed in their mouths” and then his father to a stroke a month later (63). So many of the elements of this story—Shuki's literal loss of his senses, his brother's grotesque emasculation, his idealistic father's death by heartbreak—are powerful indexes of changes occurring in Israel during and after the Yom Kippur War. As discussed in *Historical*

Overture I, more than a tactical failure, the war was a humiliating experience for Israel, a metaphorical castration that Roth makes quite literal.

Further delving into Israeli politics, much of Shuki and Nathan's conversation in 1978 emphasizes the former's resentment of Menachem Begin, who, as mentioned earlier, swept the right-wing, maximalist Likud Party into power in the 1977 elections, marking the first time in the country's history that its government was not under the control of some version of the left-liberal Mapai.<sup>61</sup> More importantly for our purposes, Begin's political strategy rested in large part on inflaming the already smoldering resentments between the mostly Ashkenazi professional class and kibbutzim and the Mizrahi underclass who had suffered alienation and persecution at their hands. We can see this in Shuki's character evolution as well. Even though he vocally denounces Begin, it becomes clear that he, too, has retreated into racial hostility when he gets into an argument with a Mizrahi Jew over a parking spot. As they drive away from the altercation, Shuki complains, "Have you heard who is now coming to live here? Jews from Ethiopia. So desperate are these bastards like Begin to perpetuate the old mythology that they're beginning to drag *black* Jews here" (78). But even despite his racist assumptions that Ethiopian immigrants cannot read, write, or use a toilet, he still has faith in the Israeli program of enforced acculturation: "[W]ithin a year, I assure you, they'll already be Israelis, shouting about their rights and staging sitdown strikes, and soon enough they will be calling me an Ashkenazi donkey because of how I park my car" (78). Scenes like this make it even stranger that Israel is so consistently abstracted from discussions of race in *The Counterlife*, when it is clearly part of the discourse Roth is attempting to capture. Still, we should consider the possibility that this kind of gap in knowing

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<sup>61</sup> As I will discuss in Historical Overture II, I am here using terminology of political orientation in context. That is, although for good and obvious reasons, many would not consider Mapai or the Alignment "left-liberal," in Israeli politics they were positioned as such.

and seeing is one of the epistemic conditions that the contemporary Jewish politics of ‘diaspora’ demands.

In “Judea,” Henry Zuckerman survives his operation, but afterwards falls into a deep depression that only breaks when he visits Israel. Suddenly taken with religio-nationalist fervor, he literally walks away from his dental practice and moves to a fictional West Bank settlement called “Agor.” Like Israel more broadly, Henry rejects the hegemonic postwar Jewish ethos of the left-liberal professional class in favor of an explicitly religious, militaristic, individualistic, free-market-oriented Zionism (Mautner) The novel even uses the word ‘upheaval’ to describe the transformation from Henry the suburbanite to Hanoch the settler, in a conversation where Henry’s estranged wife Carol asks Nathan to “find out if this really is a revolutionary change or just some upheaval he’s passing through” (152)—a question that white, liberal American Jews might well have been asking as they observed the *Mahapakh* from afar. Although Henry’s positioning as an agent of an upheaval, if not *The Upheaval*, evokes the complex imbrication of Jewish-Israeli and Jewish-American identity in the late 1970s, it also reflects the historical record. In *City on a Hilltop: American Jews and the Israeli Settler Movement*, Sara Hirschhorn claims that sixty-five percent of the first wave settlers in and around Hebron were of American extraction. Moreover, with the exception of his being middle-aged and married, Henry fits quite well into the demographics of this group, who (at least when they lived in the US) were largely not the hyper-religious ultra-conservative zealots that many tend to imagine. Rather, they were mostly “young, single, highly educated, upwardly mobile, and traditional but not necessarily Orthodox... voted for Democratic Party candidates... supportive of and active in the liberal and leftist politics of the 1960s and 1970s” (15). Their vision, she explains, with direct reference to early British settlers in the American northeast, was “building new, utopian, suburbanized

communities in the occupied territories... a kind of ‘city on a hill(top)’ to both Israel and the United States” (20). And, as will be more relevant in Part Two, they justified this messianic endeavor with a “liberal, progressive, rights-based political vocabulary, [and] drew heavily on their American background and history to defend what they perceived as their human and civil rights to fulfill their Jewish destinies” (20). And indeed, the “conversations” Nathan has at Agor, which perhaps might be better characterized as unidirectional rants against the perversity of American Jewish assimilation, actually hew surprisingly closely to those captured in Hirschhorn’s interviews with American Israeli settlers in the Occupied West Bank.

For example, Hirschhorn cites a newspaper interview with the American settler Yona Chaiken, in which he proclaims, “You may say the fact that Jews lived here 2,000 years ago is no reason for Jews to live here now—that it’s an Arab city and it’s not ethical to force them out... There will be a Jewish kingdom . . . [and] you can’t create a messianic Jewish state with 1.9 million Arabs! . . . We came to Hebron out of a sense of adventure and outrage. The adventure is building a Jewish kingdom. The outrage is that Arabs still live here!” To which his wife later adds, “The Arabs are worse than the niggers... but not by much” (qtd. in Hirschhorn 7-8). Compare this to Henry’s West Bank mentor Mordechai Lippman’s pages-long rant justifying any and all settler violence as necessary to survive the Manichean struggle between antisemites (who, in his estimation, include every non-Jewish person on earth and some of the Jewish ones as well) and Jews who are finally taking a stand on their own behalf in the only place they belong.<sup>62</sup> Like Yona Chaiken, he draws on the specter of “two thousand years” of Jewish homelessness and exclusion, shouting, “Let us be wicked winners for the next two thousand years, and when the two thousand years are over, when it is 3978, we will take a vote.... And

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<sup>62</sup> There are definitely some interesting connections here to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew*, but for the sake of time I’ll set them aside for now.

whatever the majority wants, I too will agree.... But in the meantime, *we do not give ground!*”

(122). Turning to the racial politics of the US, Lippman insists that,

In America there will be a great invasion—of Latinos, of Puerto Ricans, people fleeing poverty and the revolutions. And the white Christians will not like it. The white Christians will turn against the dirty foreigner. And when the white Christian turns against the dirty foreigner, the dirty foreigner he turns against first will be the Jew... [B]etween the hammer of the pious white American Christian and the anvil of the dirty foreigner, the Jew in America will be crushed—if he is not slaughtered first by the blacks, the blacks in the ghettos who are already sharpening their knives.... [White Christians] permit the resentful blacks to take all their hatred out on the Jews, and afterward they take care of the blacks.... Thus will come the Great American Pogrom out of which American white purity will be restored. (123-124)

Here, Lippman presents an inversion of common conspiracy theories of white genocide, specifically the idea that Jews control and deploy Black and Brown people as agents of violence with the intention of destroying white Christian civilization. Lippman’s theory, in which white Christians operationalize Black and Brown people as agents of Jewish destruction, feeds into his argument for why Jews can and must claim Greater Israel, no matter how many Arabs are displaced or killed in the process. Still, and even though Lippman’s jeremiad has a certain Rothian surrealism—the feeling that often creeps in when one of his characters goes on a pages-long tirade that no real person could ever speak that vehemently and dizzyingly for that long—the basic content of Lippman’s monologue overlaps with “real” settler rhetoric in important ways. Even more crucially, both Chaiken’s and Lippman’s words bring into sharper focus the extent to which American racism is imbricated in settler Zionism in both literature and

history. Although Hebron and Newark seem (and in the literal sense are) quite distant from one another, there is a convergence between racial narratives there in constructed whose proximity we cannot overlook.

*'If not in race,' in time and space*

As discussed in the introduction, in addition to making whiteness visible, and therefore more vulnerable to challenge and critique, Ruth Frankenberg points out that “naming” whiteness “makes room for the linkage of white subjects to histories not encompassed by, but connected to, that of racism: histories of colonialism and imperialism, and, secondarily, histories of assimilationism in the United States” (7). Sara Ahmed further argues that, instead of *a given*, whiteness is “that which has been received, or become given, over time... an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space” (150). And just as whiteness can be understood as an “ongoing and unfinished history,” history itself “is made out of what is given... as a gift, history is what we *receive upon arrival*” (154). History too is thus an inheritance that can be translated into the language of movement and space, as “we inherit the reachability of some objects, those that are ‘given’ to us, or at least made available to us,” (154). Whiteness itself is not an object, however, it is rather “an orientation that puts certain things within reach” (154). Drawing on both Frankenberg and Ahmed, my reading of *The Counterlife* further emphasizes that whiteness becomes given through certain historical tropes or narrative structures as well as real and imagined organizations of space.<sup>63</sup> These issues converge in the scene preceding (in the text, though not in its internal

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<sup>63</sup> Here’s an example of what I mean when I reference a historical trope through which whiteness becomes given: a group of persecuted or otherwise hard-done-by Europeans, bound together by the strength of their convictions, leave home for an untamed and unreconstructed continent, where, through zeal, integrity, and sheer force of will, they master the land and the native population, and eventually build a society of which the indigenous population could never even conceive. Clearly, this trope features heavily in the origin stories of Israel, the US, and South Africa, and, as such, is one of the mechanisms through which whiteness becomes given.

timeline) Maria and Nathan's argument about the racial categorization of Jews with which I began. He accompanies her to a dinner party where her friends, a collection of "bright and successful" Londoners who work in the media, confront him with their criticism of Israel. As he describes it later to Shuki,

I was put right in the dock: how long can the Israelis keep importing cheap Jewish labor from North Africa to do their dirty work? It's well known in W11 that Oriental Jews are brought to Israel to be exploited as an industrial proletariat. Imperialist colonization, capitalist exploitation—all carried on from behind the facade of Israeli democracy and the fiction of Jewish national unity. (65)

This exchange is read in both the novel itself and in much of the secondary literature as a glimpse into post-1967 left-wing antisemitism in Britain, which may well be what Roth intended. But Maria's friends' accusations also speak to a broader transnational discourse on how whiteness is enacted and signified in a post-Holocaust world. For all that this is a spatiotemporally specific reading of how Jewish whiteness is constructed at this point in the text, it also speaks to a more geopolitically entangled narrative of how certain Jews "became white" after World War Two. As in Chapter Two, this is an example of how narratives of British imperialism were reconstructed around the Jewish subject to index that which was known yet could not be said.

To clarify how this criticism of Israel can be read as a claim *for* Jewish whiteness, it helps to read *The Counterlife* in relation to historical documents like the Peel Commission Report (1937), organized by Parliament to assess the state of affairs on the ground in British-controlled Palestine—in particular the condition of the Jewish and Arab communities and their relationship with one another—so that the UK, and, after World War II, the US, could make decisions on



how to dispatch the “thrice-promised” land. The Peel Report also helps begin the conversation of the multi-layered and multivalent relationship between race and space during and after the Mandate. To begin with, the report frequently and explicitly frames the tensions between Jews and Arabs as a racial conflict. At the same time, it is clear that the authors were ambivalent about the racial identity of the Jews, as in the following passage:

The National Home [in Hebrew *Va’ad Leumi*, which might be better translated as the National Council or National Committee] is a highly educated, highly democratic, very politically-minded, and unusually young community.... Crown Colony government is not a suitable form of government for a numerous, self-reliant, progressive people, *European for the most part in outlook and equipment, if not in race.* (121-2, my emphasis)

As late as 1937, then, the British government did not consider European Jews racially European, which is to say, white.<sup>64</sup> They may have worked, thought, taught, and governed like Europeans, but racially they were still held apart. This framing also foreshadows the discussion of liberal trusteeship in British South Africa in Historical Overture II. In both spaces, as well as in the United States, whiteness has been consistently ascribed through perceived fitness for self-government, ability to mimic the colonizer, and the presence of a dark Other who is markedly further from whiteness than the subjects in question (in this case, the Arabs).

Going further, the Peel Report allows us to see the extent to which Maria’s friends’ criticism of Ashkenazi Israeli Jews is “about” race, despite it never being explicitly named but

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<sup>64</sup> I realize that there is an implicit, and at times explicit, resistance to using terms like “Black” and “white” in the Israeli context, but I think it’s quite important that we be able to do so. As Sami Shalom Chetrit explains in *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews*, “It is difficult for Western supporters of Israel... to contend with the fact that there is not only constant conflict between Jews and Arabs in Israel, but also ethnic tensions and vast economic differences within Jewish society, between Europeans and Mizrahim, or, as the indicates, white Jews and black Jews.... Israel, much like the United States, features all the characteristics of a polarized society, with plainly oppressive economic relations, in which most European Jews most European Jews are in the upper echelons of the social ladder, and most Mizrahi Jews and Arabs are on the lower rungs” (ix-x).

rather sublimated in the language of class. Given the broader historical and intertextual context, what appears on the surface as an argument against the whiteness of Ashkenazi Jews (insofar as, at least according to some, the explicit presence of antisemitism supposedly precludes the whiteness of the Jewish target), can be read as an argument that the Ashkenazi Jews of Israel are, in fact, white. After all, in the British context, what could possibly index whiteness more powerfully than conquering a swath of land in Asia, subjecting it to “imperialist colonization” and “capitalist exploitation,” and then importing “Oriental” human capital as a source of cheap labor, all while proclaiming a uniquely strong commitment to liberal democratic values? After arguing passionately on Israel’s behalf, during the car ride home Maria denounces her friends as hypocrites, while Nathan begins to wonder if “all this indignation might not have something to do with her anxiety about our English future” (71). Yet her anxiety could also be read as stemming from the fact that Maria continues to hold that Jews are not white. And thus, as we will discuss in the following section, she endeavors to construct an “English future”—in actuality a resurrected English past—in which Nathan can become white enough to assimilate into English society.

Before getting there, however, we should discuss the historical roots of the imbrication of race and place that punctuates the novel. For another crucial aspect of the Peel Report is how much of its framing of Jews as ‘white but not quite’ emerges from the Commission’s impressions of the Jews’ organization of space and mimicry of colonial architecture and civic planning. Noting that the Jews’ urban development is “impressive,” they cite Tel Aviv, which they deem a “wholly Jewish town” as a paragon of speedy modernization. They continue:

[I]ts main boulevard... its shops and cafes, and cinemas, above all the busy, active people in the streets already reproduce the atmosphere of ... Europe.... [I]t is essentially

European. From its beginnings the contrast between Tel Aviv, an artificial creation... [with] a purely Arab town... like Nablus, was clearly marked, and it is now quite startling. (114)

Over time, scholars have come to recognize this pattern as a common variable in the enactment of whiteness not only in Israel but in postcolonial spaces more generally. Drawing on Homi Bhaba's concept of colonial mimicry, Mori Ram contends that, in Israel, "whiteness is not just a question of race but also of space.... [T]he physicality of space embodies the interconnectivity between processes of normalization and whitening only in relation to an other" (Ram 748). Unlike the Arab Other, metonymized here in the image of Nablus, Ashkenazi Israelis consciously fashioned their cityscapes, public architecture, and consumer and lifestyle choices to advertise their (white) modernity to the world in general and the Anglosphere in particular. Environments built to resemble European cosmopolitan styles were thus a crucial dimension of the manufacture of white Jewishness in Palestine.

This pattern continued well after the official British withdrawal from the region. However, when Israelis became the primary colonizers in place of the British, the character of their continued spatial mimicry diverged somewhat from other post-colonies, since "In most colonies, the colonial powers produced space that mimics the metropole in order to encourage the colonized to mimic the colonizer" (Ram 745). Meanwhile, in the Israeli case, "[T]he colonial production of space was designed to encourage the colonial settler society to mimic a western or European idea... [T]he assumed binary in the relations between colonized and colonizer are a bit more complex, as 'Europe' serves here as a potent geopolitical image rather than concrete location" (Ram 745). Over time, rural spaces in Israel and the Occupied Territories also came to be constructed, like Tel Aviv in Mandatory Palestine, as sites of white racial manufacture.

However, the way in which these un-built spaces were constructed as white did not try to reflect the whiteness of the European city but rather the rugged white masculinity of the American frontier, which was purposefully, if somewhat ironically, mixed with the gated normative whiteness of suburbia.

In “Dismantling the Villa in the Jungle: Matzpen, Zochrot, and the Whitening of Israel,” Johannes Beck writes, “While American Jews became white by suburbanization, Israeli Jews did so by colonization. In both cases, the crossing of the colour line coincided with the crossing of geographic boundaries” (2). True as this may be, it’s also something of a distinction without a difference. David Newman, who began developing his suburbanization theory of West Bank settlements in the early 1980s, demonstrates that Gush Emunim, like other religio-nationalist settler movements that gained power in Israel during the 1970s, were successful in large part because they were able to tap into already-existing desires for middle-class-ness in Israeli culture. As Newman puts it, “[E]ven the paradigmatic, ideological settlers ... were successful because they strategically positioned themselves in relation to the trends of suburbanization” (34). These cultural trends were already “beginning to emerge in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s,” which allowed the settler movement to cash in on its “understanding that the West Bank was in a prime geographic location, in relatively close proximity to the major metropolitan centers of both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem” (Newman 5). At the same time, however, “The settler movement always portrayed itself as the continuer of the pre-State pioneering activities around which there was, at the time, consensus. It was important for them to be seen as constituting part of the Zionist enterprise” (Newman 37). Clearly, then, the suburban pioneering ethos that Hirschhorn describes as an American-made import also already existed in some form in Israel. But neither cultural turn happened in a vacuum; as with a number of shared epistemologies,

Jewish-American and Jewish-Israeli constructions of whiteness as produced through a dialectic of pioneering and suburbanization developed in relation to one another and, moreover, in relation to shared, if disparate, legacies of British imperialism.

*Suburb, settlement, village*

Perhaps one of the reasons why whiteness is given scant consideration in scholarship on *The Counterlife* is that so much of Roth's race-work in the novel is effected implicitly through the construction of overlapping spatialities. In this section, I will explore Roth's representations of three key symbolic spaces in which whiteness is produced and circulated: the American suburb, the West Bank settlement, and the English village. Because of their actual geographical distance and perceived ideological difference from one another, these built environments are largely thought of as distinct and discrete spaces. In *The Counterlife*, the suburb, the settlement, and the village come together to form a triangulated map of Jewish identity and are all presented as spaces in which whiteness is produced at the intersection of pioneering and banality. Despite being emplaced in different cultural and national topographies, moreover, all three are constructed as responses to the anxiety of attempting to achieve or take on colonial whiteness in a theoretically postcolonial society where there seem to be, to borrow a phrase, no more worlds to conquer. Thus, in *The Counterlife*, Jewish whiteness is revealed as worlded in at least two senses: first, in that it is shown to emerge through a network of locations that transcends multiple national boundaries, and second, in that it is articulated through the novelist's construction of worlds, that is, of chronotopes and landscapes both imagined and "real."

The idea of pioneering as a form of white racial manufacture has circulated in US culture for centuries and constitutes a crucial lynchpin in scholarship on American iterations of

whiteness.<sup>65</sup> As Jacobson explains, throughout US history, “Frontier contingencies combined with rhetorical indulgences [worked] to invest American nationalism with perpetual appeals to ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery,’ to ‘white’ conquest and the defeat of the (always dark) Other” (156). But that does not mean that pioneering-into-whiteness is a uniquely American cultural narrative. As discussed in relation to the Peel Report, even before statehood Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants in Mandatory Palestine practiced a politics in which whiteness was enacted through the organization of space. While Tel Aviv evoked the modern, cosmopolitan whiteness of urban Europe, the *yishuv* also conceived of a whiteness rooted in the conquest of a wild and ostensibly unpeopled periphery. In *Ethnocracy: land and identity politics in Israel/Palestine* (1996), Oren Yiftachel recounts, “For Zionist culture the ‘frontier’ became a central icon, and its settlement was considered one of the highest achievements of any Jew” (61). Its glorification, he adds later, “thus assisted both in the construction of a national Jewish identity and in capturing the physical space on which this identity could be territorially created” (108). That the United States and Israel would share this cultural form should not be surprising. To begin with, as Yiftachel and others including Patrick Wolfe have noted, frontier cultures are endemic to most, if not all, settler-colonial societies (Wolfe 12-13). In both the United States and Israel, the frontier continues to be a particularly dense locus in the ideation of culturally specific yet overlapping concepts of gender and race. In particular, in both national cultures frontier imagery and language was and continues to be used to generate a vision of white masculinity that draws its

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<sup>65</sup> The significance of the frontier in US racialization and culture is already the subject of a large and fascinating body of scholarship. Core primary and secondary texts in this archive include Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation: The myth of the frontier in twentieth-century America* (1998) and *Regeneration through violence: The mythology of the American frontier, 1600-1860* (2000), and Quintard Taylor’s, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (1999), as well as more recent studies like Matthew Rebirth’s *Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier* (2015) and Patrick Wolfe’s *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (2016).

strength from conquering the native and its authenticity from a landscape that, at least before the proverbial cowboys arrived, was in some essential way pre-historic or even pre-human.<sup>66</sup>

Roth also ties pioneering to whiteness directly in *The Plot Against America* (2004), a counterhistorical novel in which the openly antisemitic and pro-Nazi Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 election. Once elected, Lindbergh begins to institute programs designed to isolate and de-Judaize the Jewish American population. The first of these is called “Just Folks,” which sends Jewish teenagers from urban areas to live with rural families, so that, according to the “Office of American Absorption” they can be introduced to “the traditional ways of heartland life” (Roth 2004: 84). As a test pilot for the program, eight-year-old protagonist Philip Roth’s older brother Sandy is sent to spend a summer with a family of tobacco farmers, the Mawhinneys. When he returns, tanned and confident, he is openly disdainful of his family’s cultural attachments. Trying later to understand Sandy’s reverence for the Mawhinney patriarch and his growing hostility towards their father, Philip imagines Mr. Mawhinney as:

[A] long-standing member of the great overpowering majority that fought the Revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness and subjugated the Indian and enslaved the Negro and emancipated the Negro and segregated the Negro, one of the good, clean, hard-working Christian millions who settled the frontier, tilled the farms, built the cities, governed the states, sat in Congress, occupied the White House, amassed the wealth, possessed the land, owned the steel mills and the ball clubs and the railroads and the banks, even owned and oversaw the language, one of those unassailable Nordic

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<sup>66</sup> This adds some interesting context to Shuki’s comment that American Jewish immigrants who are “either religious or crazy or both” are turning Israel into “the American-Jewish Australia.” As another settler colony, Australia has a notable frontier culture of its own. Indeed, Patrick Wolfe’s *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* dedicates a great deal of energy to establishing a comparative Israeli-Australian framework within settler colonial ideologies of space. What’s more, in the 1970s and 1980s, which are often called the Golden Age of Australian cinema, that culture was circulating all over the globe in the form of “outback gothic” films like the *Mad Max* series.

and Anglo-Saxon Protestants who ran America and would always run it... while my father, of course, was only a Jew. (*Plot* 93-94)

The “Anglo-Saxon Protestants” identified here are the very same “old stock” to which Jacobson refers in *Whiteness of a Different Color*. Yet it is not only their Northern and Western European origins that make them white. Their whiteness is forged through imperialism: conquest of the land, subjugation of non-white peoples and the imposition of a linguistic regime, construction of their own infrastructure and agricultural systems and, finally, cementing their power through political institutions. As Jews, the Roths are locked out of this vision. They arrived too late to secure their own piece of wilderness, and their cultural, religious, and linguistic practices make them unsuitable for power in the world that Anglo-Saxons built.<sup>67</sup> But even though the young, fictional Philip Roth imagines this particular form of whiteness-through-pioneering as unavailable to Jews in 1941, Roth’s earlier work had already opened up for them a different path: suburbanization.

As Sara Ahmed explains, whiteness is an orientation of certain bodies towards certain objects that places those objects “within reach.” The familial home is a powerful site for producing these orientations, because it represents a “shared space of dwelling, in which things are shaped by their proximity to other things” in which whiteness is generated and shared in familial relation to objects that are familiar, which is to say, already “in place.” “To think this implicit knowledge as inherited is to think about how we inherit a relation to place and to

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<sup>67</sup> In *Traces of History*, Patrick Wolfe addresses a similar belatedness through the phrase “the post-frontier era.” As he explains, “[I]n both Australia and the USA, racial discourse intensified in the post-frontier era, with Indigenous people becoming subject to the divisive elaborations of blood quantum discourse. Alternatively, where the enslaved or the internally colonised are concerned, as in the cases of the American slaves and the European Jews... racial discourse has intensified in the wake of emancipation, which removes a juridical barrier that had previously set them apart from the dominant society as decisively as the physical frontier distanced Natives. In the context of this challenge, race’s role as a byproduct of democracy becomes particularly apparent in its retrieval of the inequities that the extension of citizenship has theoretically abolished.”



placement,” she continues, because “Whiteness is inherited through the very placement of things” (155). To understand how familiar and familial proximities operate at a distance, we must look at the organizations of spaces and subjectivities that make the inheritance of whiteness possible, which are at once historically, culturally, and geographically specific but also circulated on a global scale. Linking Ahmed’s phenomenology of whiteness to Diane Harris’s study of the post-1945 architectural production of white middle-class-ness, one might say that the postwar designers, builders, and developers who worked together to create white suburbia were engaged in a more abstract project of producing the material conditions necessary for whiteness to be inherited through the placement of things. As Harris puts it, “postwar domestic environments were a poignant cipher for whiteness.... The house and garden, and their representations... appear as the material dimension through which racial and class identity and difference are recursively constructed, assumed, and negotiated” (21). But as emphatically American as those design elements and neighborhood plans were understood to be, they were also often exported far afield. As we saw in Historical Overture I, for example, the South African Jews who designed the luxury neighborhood of Afridar in the Israeli city of Ashkelon drew on American concepts of space and place, which in turn were used to reinforce the Ashkenazi/Mizrahi ethnic divide. And, as will be discussed shortly, the fundamentalist settler movement Gush Emunim likewise drew on the ideologically inflected amenities and organization of the American suburbs to lure both Israeli and American Jews to their illegal developments in the West Bank.<sup>68</sup>

Over the course of his career, Philip Roth often represented the suburbs as a gateway to a post/colonial pioneer whiteness, a form of whiteness-through-conquest that remains open despite

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<sup>68</sup> These examples also harken back further to the practice of colonial elites building houses that ostentatiously reproduced the architectural styles of their home countries as a means to produce and maintain white spaces in non-white places. We’ll revisit this point in our discussion of *The One Facing Us* in Chapter Three.

the ever-diminishing availability of the traditional “frontier.” Throughout *American Pastoral* (1997) in particular, Roth frames the Jewish move into the suburbs in precisely these terms. This motif first emerges in the way narrator Nathan Zuckerman—who may or may not be “the same” Nathan Zuckerman at the center of *The Counterlife*—describes his postwar childhood in Newark and introduces us to Seymour “the Swede” Levov, the tall, blond, athletic Jew, both respected and respectable, whose downfall is the novel’s central theme. “The Keer Avenue Jews,” Zuckerman recalls, “with their finished basements, their screened-in porches, their flagstone front steps, seemed to be... laying claim like audacious pioneers to the normalizing American amenities.... [T]he vanguard were the Levovs, who had bestowed upon us our very own Swede, a boy as close to a goy as we were going to get” (*Pastoral* 10). As the Swede, Roth’s paragon of white Jewishness, grows older and more successful, he treks even further into no-Jew’s-land: “[In 1958], the Swede would himself become... president of [his father’s] company, commuting every morning... from his home some thirty-odd miles west of Newark, out past the suburbs—a short-range pioneer living on a hundred-acre farm on a back road... in wealthy, rural Old Rimrock” (*Pastoral* 14).

In imagining this quasi-suburban area of Newark as a frontier and the Keer Avenue Jews as “pioneers,” Roth is reorganizing the ethos of whiteness-as-conquest for the postwar era and intersecting it more explicitly with what legal scholar Cheryl Harris calls “whiteness-as-property.”<sup>69</sup> Although the American frontier fondly imagined in spaghetti westerns had, by that point, all but disappeared, Jews in the process of becoming-white could still lay claim to a kind

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<sup>69</sup> Likewise, in her seminal work on the subject, *How Jews Became White and What That Says About Race in America* (1998), Karen Brodtkin cites upward social mobility, indexed in part by Jewish out-migration from cities on the East Coast, as *the* pivotal factor in the whitening process.

of homesteading by striking out into the white, gentile hinterlands of suburbia.<sup>70</sup> And to a certain extent, Roth is again simply narrativizing the historical record. As Harris explains, in the fifteen years after World War II, a sizable chunk of the American populace bought their first home and, in so doing, “began to reconfigure and affirm their identities” (127). Yet, as she points out,

Those identified as ‘white’ made up the vast majority of new home buyers because others were largely excluded from suburban housing through the racist practices of government lending programs, real estate steering, and restrictive covenants.... New houses were produced primarily for a generically conceived ‘white’ audience of presumed middle-class status... [I]ndustries attendant to domestic building and design became complicit in the formation of good Americans—which in the context of the postwar era meant implicitly ‘white’ Americans—out of every new home owner in the nation (127).

The primary concern of builders and buyers was privacy, a luxury increasingly coded as white. In keeping with this, Roth focuses on the aspects of the Newark Jews’ lifestyle that most closely correspond to the suburban ideal, in particular the presence of semi-detached, owner-occupied housing, which promises the same hardline division between public and private space as one would find in the suburbs but not the city. Yet, in the second passage, the novel positions even quasi-suburban Keer Avenue as a waystation on the road to another landscape that presents an even purer and more privileged form of whiteness. “Wealthy, rural Old Rimrock” is the purview of precisely the “unassailable Nordic and Anglo-Saxon Protestants who ran America and would always run it” to which *Plot*’s Herman Roth can never aspire. As I will shortly discuss, this mirrors the racial-spatial narrative at play in *The Counterlife*’s Britain, in which suburban

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<sup>70</sup> Not by coincidence, another of the OAA’s programs for the isolation and enforced assimilation of American Jews is called “Homestead 42,” itself a reference to the Homestead Act of 1862, which granted 160 acres of land to any intrepid American who wished to cultivate it—provided that they had not fought against the US in the Civil War.

whiteness is cast off in favor of the theoretically more authentic bucolic whiteness of the “village.”

In *The Counterlife*, the transnational intersections of pioneering, suburbanization, and whiteness are first brought to the fore in the figurative construction of Agor, the West Bank settlement near Hebron to which Henry Zuckerman flees in “Judea.” Nathan, at this point living in London, travels to Israel to meet with his brother and assess his state of mind. From the beginning Nathan is struck by the overlaps between the barren and desolate Agor and his and Henry’s upper-middle-class East Coast milieu. Walking to meet Henry at the settlement’s Hebrew-language school, or *ulpan*, Nathan observes the students, dressed in jeans and lounging on the grass, and tells us, “The minaret of an Arab village was clearly visible... yet Agor’s *ulpan* in December could as easily have been Middlebury or Yale” (97). This impression is compounded by his realization that most of Agor’s settlers are American-born, though he is met with rancor when he says as much. Still, despite being thousands of miles away and framed by an utterly different landscape, the people of Agor are, in terms of both class position and politics, of the same mold as those Henry left behind. Henry himself is a wealthy petit bourgeois professional, as are a number of Agor’s pioneers—and as were most of the actual American-Israeli settlers who arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s. From these observations it’s easy to imagine that, were Nathan to return a decade later, he would find Agor in a similar state to the wealthy real-life American-Israeli settlement of Efrat, which Hirschhorn characterizes as “An upscale suburban paradise stereotyped as ‘Central Park West Bank’ and ‘occupied Scarsdale,’ [which] proffers million-dollar mansions alongside messianic redemption for its yuppie population” (17).

But Agor is not Efrat just yet. Agor is unbuilt, undeveloped, unpeopled, even unearthly. And as such it provides the ideal backdrop for these Jewish American suburbanites to play out their frontier fantasies. The figurative language used to describe Agor repeatedly frames it either as extra-terrestrial or as extra-temporal. As Nathan takes the settlement in, for example, he tells us, “Up close you couldn’t quite believe that life within was very far from the embryonic stage of human development. Everything... proclaimed a world of bare beginnings” (106). “Agor,” he goes on to say,

could have passed for a piece of the moon to which the Jews had been sadistically exiled by their worst enemies rather than the place they passionately maintained was theirs and no one else’s from time immemorial. What [Henry] finds in this landscape, I thought, is a correlative for the sense of himself he would now prefer to effect, the harsh and rugged pioneer with that pistol in his pocket. (113)

Later on, after his fractious dinner with the Lippmans, the two brothers walk along the main road of the settlement, which in the dark resembles nothing earthly. The only visible mark of modernity is the “the steady radar beacon of a missile-launching site,” which Henry points out as an augur of the precarity of Israel’s existence. Still, “Except for that red omen, the distant blackness was so vast that I thought of Agor as a minute, floodlit earth-colony, the vanguard of a brave new Jewish civilization evolving in outer space” (129-30). This, of course, is what the landscape contributes to Henry’s newfound “sense of himself.” Because the land is (ostensibly) empty and timeless, it allows Henry to live out a white masculine frontier fantasy even in 1978.

Believing that he has escaped the banal life of a South Orange weekend warrior, the topography of the West Bank lets Henry see himself as the domineering hero he wishes to be. At the same time, Henry is as invested in feeling precarious as he is in feeling strong, because that

fear is what makes his strength meaningful. Hence, as in other settler-colonial contexts, the West Bank imaginary of whiteness requires a dark and dangerous other to recognize itself. What's more, despite Henry's insistence that he has transcended the petit bourgeois banality of their childhood, whilst in Agor Nathan is repeatedly reminded of it.

In one particularly telling instance, when Henry takes him to the house in which he is to stay the night, Nathan notices a small bedroom that reminds him of the one he once shared with his brother. He reflects, "Two beds were squeezed into it, though not a 'set' fitted out like ours with maple headboards and footboards whose notches and curves we used to pretend were the defensive walls of a cavalry fort besieged by Apaches" (135). Despite his loaded pistol and Zionist bravado, Henry is still playing this same game, just on a much larger and deadlier scale. What's more, despite its prehistoric extraterrestriality, Agor is just another suburb. This is but one of many examples of how the novel constructs what I have called "distant proximities."

When Nathan sees two twin beds in a darkened room in a house in the Occupied Territories—which, as we just discussed, is a place so distinct from where Henry and Nathan grew up that it is literally coded as a different planet—it triggers a reorganization of history and ideology in which locations, political and racial subjectivities, and narratives of identity that are largely understood as running (pardon the pun) *counter* to one another are revealed as being mutually and meaningfully co-constitutive. In relocating this American Jewish memory to the West Bank, Roth aligns Palestinians with Apaches in the sense of a transnational, transhistorical indigeneity, and brings into sharp relief the portability of the settler-colonial imagination by showing how geographically distant but politically proximate frontier ideologies work to confirm one another even in the games of children.

Whilst at Agor, Nathan contrasts its roughness with the finished, cultivated terroir of England. “[Y]ou could see,” he muses, “how someone might get the impression that it had been created in only seven days, unlike England... whose countryside appeared to be the creation of a God who’d had four or five chances to come back to perfect it... to tame and retame it until it was utterly habitable” (113). Yet, although he positions England as comparatively modern insofar as it has been “tamed” and made “habitable,” in the novel’s final installment, “Christendom,” Nathan and Maria (who, in this version of the story, are married and expecting their first child) endeavor to construct their own gateway to a racialized imaginary at the intersection of race and place in post-imperial English culture. To be sure, the suburbs as signifier of whiteness operate differently in the English context, largely (I would guess) because of differences in the perception of middle-class-ness. At the same time, the positioning of Chiswick, the London suburb in which Nathan and Maria buy and renovate a house, in relation to Chadleigh, the small village in which Maria grew up and where her mother still lives, is meaningfully analogical to the contrast drawn between Keer Avenue and Old Rimrock in *American Pastoral*, that is, both Chadleigh and Old Rimrock embody a purer form of whiteness that is out of reach for all but the most gentile Jews. More to the point, Roth’s portrait of the remote and idyllic Chadleigh maps fascinatingly onto Malamud’s Romanticism (see Chapter Two) as well as the “villa in the jungle” in Ronit Matalon’s *The One Facing Us* (see Chapter Three).

The question of whiteness in Britain along the suburban/rural divide has already generated a considerable body of scholarship, although it has not, to my knowledge, been brought to bear on Roth’s representations of Britain. As we shall see, in building a (white) life together, Nathan and Maria tap into what Alan Mace describes as “an imaginary of whiteness

linked to bucolic Englishness” (1033), harkening back to a fantasized pure and pastoral “Deep England” (Byrne). This we can see first in Maria’s mother’s preoccupation with Georgian architecture, which is interwoven with a desire to regain what she sees as an unfairly revoked class-race position. Maria, too, expresses this white-English nostalgia as she and Nathan revisit her old “haunts.” When Maria takes Nathan to Chadleigh, the outing becomes a journey into the English past, redolent of such classic literary chronotopes as Raveloe, the small community at the center of George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*. “[S]et halfway up a very steep, very lonely Gloucestershire valley,” it had once been “a village of poor weavers,” but was now “a picturesque cluster of streets and lanes, situated dramatically across the valley from a hanging beech woods” (266-7). When they walk amongst the ghostly beeches, Maria recalls, ““This is where I’d have my visionary feelings of the world being one. Exactly what Wordsworth describes—the real nature mysticism, moments of extreme contentment.... For an adolescent there is no better place for these little visions than a ruined mill by a trickling stream”” (273-4).

Once we understand that, in England—and I say England rather than Britain or the United Kingdom to reflect scholars’ emphasis on this as a specifically *English* fantasy—the image of the bucolic village surrounded by hills that protect it from the pollutant of Otherness is intimately tied to whiteness, we are able to read the race-work that occurs in this representation of landscape. What’s more, the scene demonstrates how the verdant, rural, unchanging landscape that is so heavily coded as white in English culture is, first, an imaginary shaped as much by literature as by history, and second, a journey into an imagined past. Allusions to Wordsworth, meanwhile, function in a nearly identical way in *The Counterlife* as they will in *The Tenants*, calling forth a purified pre-industrial vision of landscape as apotheosis. In Chadleigh, then, Maria attempts to offer Nathan a pathway into whiteness that conceives of a frontier that is both spatial



and temporal, historically as well as culturally constructed. And yet, perhaps because English whiteness is simply more invested in an implicit rejection of the Jewish subject or because of Nathan's stubborn refusal to assimilate, the transformation never occurs.

Unlike Chadleigh, Chiswick, the neighborhood to which Nathan and Maria relocate in "Christendom," could easily be called a suburb. Yet Maria strongly resists this characterization in a manner that reflects Mace's observation that, "The suburbs are... riven with ambiguity; in relation to the urban and rural, to class and, therefore, to England and, by implication, to whiteness" (1034). "Consequently," he continues, "derogatory views of the suburbs sustained by an urban and rural elite serve to set apart spatially and socially the petit bourgeoisie suburb.... This has resulted in the accusation that the suburbs are not truly English" (1034). What's more, in the London suburbs specifically, "[D]ifferences in constructing whiteness [are] explained by variations in the ability: first, to misrecognise the respective suburbs as a village and so to connect to an imaginary of whiteness linked to bucolic Englishness and; second, to feel at home or to make a home in rural England" (1033). These cultural mores come into play when, after attending a Christmas service with Phoebe, Maria, and Maria's mother and sister, Nathan accompanies them to a reception and attempts to schmooze with the parishioners. Still reeling from his experience at Agor, Nathan is grateful that the new house he and Maria are renovating will provide neutral terrain for conversation:

We talked about how Chiswick wasn't as far out as it seemed... with the gate closed on the stone wall to the street it had the seclusion of a remote rural village.... On the rear-street side there was the wall and a paved garden with daffodils and irises and a small apple tree; at the front of the house, beyond a raised terrace where we could sit on warm evenings, there was a wide tow-path and the river.... The elderly gentleman said that it

sounded as though for Maria it would be like living in Gloucestershire again while only fifteen minutes by the Underground from Leicester Square. She said, no, no, it wasn't the country or London, and it wasn't the suburbs either, it was living on the river ... on and on, amiably, amicably, aimlessly. (262-3)

For Maria, the Chiswick house represents an opportunity to recreate Chadleigh, which still resonates for her as a real and formative space in which she is most able to recognize herself, while still being liminal and fluid enough for her husband to recognize himself as well. Again, as we will see in Chapter two, there are elements redolent of Harry Lesser's fantasy of the "Galilean lake" and the "sweet flowing Thames," the beguiling idea that returning to or recreating a primal site of Westernness will destabilize seemingly ossified identity positions and power relations, allowing what both Roth and Malamud see as the sharp corners and rough edges of Jewish difference to dissolve into white-water depths.

For Nathan, on the other hand, the house, as well as the ahistorical white-English fantasy into which it is being molded, are decidedly alien, if still tempting. Yet he is clearly able to see the ideological underpinnings of her desires, as well as the broader picture of what pre-human landscapes of whiteness offer the modern Jewish subject:

[N]ot even Jews, who are to history what Eskimos are to snow, seem able... to protect themselves against the pastoral myth of life before Cain and Abel, of life before the split began. Fleeing now, and back to day zero and the first untainted settlement... casting off the dirty, disfiguring reality of the piled-up years: this is what Judea means to... that belligerent, unillusioned little band of Jews ... also—let's face it—something like what you and Gloucestershire once meant to me. Each has its own configuration, but whether set in the cratered moonscape of the Pentateuch... or the mists and the meadows of

Constable's England, at the core is the idyllic scenario of redemption through the recovery of a sanitized, confusionless life. (322-3)

Stripped of the historical context offered earlier in the chapter, and without the theoretical framework that scholars like Mace offer, one could conceivably argue that this passage is not “about race.” Yet given especially that Nathan mentions “Eskimos” in a direct reference to his earlier argument with Maria about whiteness, as well as the fact that the landscapes he stitches together in ideology here are all racially coded, it becomes clear what the “sanitized, confusionless life” represents. Equally clear is Roth's fundamentally worlded understanding of how Jewish whiteness is promised, deferred, built, and enacted.

Towards the end of the novel, Nathan and Maria begin to argue about her family's antisemitism, which she had for the most part concealed from him up to that point. She tells him passionately that his Jewishness is not as much of a problem for her as it seems to be for him, shouting, “When I go down to see how the house is coming along, do you think I ask myself, ‘Is the Jew going to be happy here? Can a Jew find happiness in a house in Chiswick?’” (306) But if, as Maria repeatedly insists, Jews are not white, then the real question is whether someone who is happy in Chiswick can be Jewish. If the entire project of renovation is meant to refashion the house in accordance with an aesthetic so heavily coded as white that those who dwell within it are whitened by their very emplacement, if it is meant to resurrect a past version of England in which multiculturalism poses no threat to a world that is endlessly, aimlessly, amicably white, then what is the character of Jewishness in this race-space, if it can exist at all?

### *Conclusion*

*The Counterlife* never answers the question of whether a Jew can be happy in Chiswick—or in Agor or Newark, for that matter. But it does go some distance towards illuminating the

shape and scope of Jewish whiteness since World War Two. As we saw earlier, several of Roth's novels address the way whiteness is "done" and "felt" in the United States and speak meaningfully to the work of whiteness studies scholars, even if those connections remain underexplored in "Philip Roth criticism" writ large. By producing a triangulated and transnational map of Jewish identity, *The Counterlife* gives us a way to begin the work of *comparative* whiteness studies specifically in and through contemporary Jewish literature.

But more importantly, for now, is how crucial points and themes of the project are already beginning to emerge. First, we have begun to see how the application of a multidirectional historical context illuminates new dimensions of even canonical Jewish texts. This occurs, first, at a national level, in mapping Shuki's character arc against the humiliation and disillusionment that plagued Israel in the wake of the Yom Kippur War and the hardening of ethnic resentments in the political upheaval of the *Mahapakh*. On a more global scale, *The Counterlife* gives us an insight into how the multiple rightward shifts of the late 1970s and early 1980s converged to create, for example, a settler movement in the West Bank made up of as many, if not more, American Jews than Israeli ones. As we saw in the comparison between real-life Yona Chaiken and fictional Mordechai Lippman, these American settlers carried their own racial sensibilities with them abroad, to the point where the fear and hatred of the Arab other in Hebron at times merged with that of the Black other in Harlem. And this is but one part of how Roth goes about his conscious construction of worldedness in the text.

Yet as Eric Hayot explains, the worldedness of a text can also be found in its subterranean depths, its ideological unconscious. On the one hand, it is easy enough to observe that a text in which the action takes place in three different countries is transnational, that it constructs between these three points a triangulated Jewish identity. More difficult to detect is

the ideologies of space that Roth embeds in all three of these locations. It begins with two basic understandings of how whiteness becomes given and is subsequently passed on as an intergenerational inheritance. First there is the idea that whiteness emerges through conquest, the taming of wilderness and subjugation of the non-white other. This ideology, which I have called frontierism, is endemic to most settler-colonial societies, certainly to both the United States and Israel. Second is the production and circulation of whiteness in the space of the postwar “little white house,” which is not only designed to produce white subjects but is also built in relation to other such houses that together create a white space that we commonly call “suburbia.” Neither frontierism nor suburbia emerge in the exact same way in the US, Britain, or Israel, but they do overlap in fascinating and informative ways, often calling attention to what I have called distant proximities. As we saw, a mere glimpse of a bedhead in a house in the Occupied West Bank instantiates transnational, transhistorical connections between both Palestinians and Native Americans as well as American cavalrymen and Zionist settlers. As minute as this may seem, it is the product of a global ideological economy emerge in which objects, images, and spaces circulate as a multivariate currency of whiteness.

Finally, towards the novel’s end, we see the English corollaries of these ideologies emerge in the tension between suburb and village. Though we do not find an equivalent to the American cowboy or the Israeli sabra, Roth’s England shares the sense that the higher forms of whiteness, those that offer something akin to gentility, can only be cultivated in the countryside, far removed from the multicultural city. The purer the terrain, the purer the racial identities that can be constructed therein. This Romantically-inflected understanding of race and space will be redoubled in the next chapter, which takes on Bernard Malamud’s *The Tenants*. But where Nathan Zuckerman shies ambivalently away from such an environment, Harry Lesser seeks it

out. The “world” of *The Tenants* will be much smaller—a few square blocks as opposed to a few square miles—but the aesthetic and racial sensibilities at play therein reach even further back into the history of European imperialism and its relationship to the forging of white Jewish identities in the present.

## CHAPTER TWO: CHANGING FACES: ROMANTICISM, AFRICANISM, AND POST/COLONIALITY IN *THE TENANTS*

“A face is a face: it changes as it faces.” – Bernard Malamud, *The Tenants*

“A sahib has got to act like a sahib. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it” – George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”

### *Introduction*

As discussed throughout Historical Overture I, the three decades after World War Two constituted a transnational ideological reorganization not only of Jewish power structures but of white and becoming-white Jews’ positions within non-Jewish power structures. Bernard Malamud’s fractious and controversial 1971 novel, *The Tenants*, is keenly attuned to these multi-scalar upheavals, expressing the reorganization of Jewish power and identity in both content and form. Yet this layered representation of worldliness and worldedness is often missed by scholars who read it within a purely Jewish American context. In this chapter, I will read *The Tenants* as a post/colonial novel that evokes the transhistorical global production of whiteness through literature. Specifically, Malamud draws on the imperialist aesthetic epistemologies of Romanticism and Africanism to reposition the Jewish writer *within* the legacy of European colonialism, despite those imperialist subjectivities having been both implicitly and explicitly constructed in opposition to Jewish subjectivity during the period in which they were being consolidated. Co-constitutive with its worldedness, I see these imperialist gestures and attempts to write the Jew into whiteness as the “ideological unconscious” of the novel—that which, in Hayot’s words, “it knows most deeply, and thus says least” (50).

*The Tenants* follows Harry Lesser, a moderately successful Ashkenazi Jewish novelist attempting to finish his painfully protracted third novel in an empty and decrepit New York apartment building owned by fellow Jew Levenspiel. Levenspiel wants desperately to demolish the building, but Lesser obstinately remains in the squalid, icy tenement, insisting that his book

must be born in the place where it was conceived. One night, Lesser encounters a black writer plugging away at a typewriter in one of the empty units who introduces himself as Willie Spearmint. Sharing conceptual notes and heat, they begin, uneasily, to enter each other's worlds. Throughout the novel they engage in a passionate argument about the importance of "form" in literature—to put it briefly, Lesser believes that form is the essence of the literary, while Willie insists that form is a malevolent mechanism of white control—which at first brings them together. At a party with Willie's friends in Harlem, Lesser has sex with a black woman named Mary, for which he is publicly humiliated and thrown out. Lesser then seduces Willie's white, crypto-Jewish girlfriend, Irene Bell, with whom he falls in love. Lesser reveals their affair to Willie, beginning a cycle of increasingly violent retaliations. After a pair of false endings, the novel culminates in the two men simultaneously hacking each other to pieces in a dark alley, in a gruesome yet oddly sentimental moment when, we are told, "Each... feels the anguish of the other" (230).

In direct contrast to the cramped settings in which the action takes place, the expansive sensibilities of *The Tenants* emerge in the many ways the novel plays with language, time, space, genre, and narrative structure through wild tonal shifts, false endings, interwoven but incomplete allusive and allegorical elements, and an ongoing breakdown of narrative point of view. Like a classical epic, *The Tenants* begins *in medias res* with something like an invocation, a plea to the gods for artistic inspiration. The narrator also frequently adopts a distinctly epic Romantic tone. As Lesser looks out of his window early on in the text, for example,

He smelled the living earth in the dead of winter... Dawn on the sea, rose lighting the restless waves touching an island waking, breathing the fresh breath of its trees, flowers, bayberry bushes, seashells. Ah, the once more sensuous smells of land surrounded by the



womanly sea. Birds rise from the shore, wheel, fly above the ragged, mast-like palms into the lucent sky. Gulls mewling, sudden storms of blackbirds shrilling over the violet water. Ah, this live earth, this sceptered isle on a silver sea, this Thirty-first Street and Third Avenue. (4-5)

This passage aptly demonstrates the novel's propensity for epic and imperial themes, such as conquest, exoticism, seafaring, and celestially ordained toil, as well as a penchant for the kind of interminable and grandiloquent lists that are closely associated with the Homeric form. And as is hinted at by the final clause ("this Thirty-first Street and Third Avenue"), the monumentality of this passage is even more notable if one steps back to consider where and when the novel actually takes place: a dirty, dilapidated tenement marked for destruction in early 1970s New York City, itself practically a byword for urban decay as opposed to "a sceptered isle on a silver sea." As much time as he spends romanticizing it, Lesser lives, in a sense, amidst the rotting wreckage of pre-World War II Jewish New York. In these moments, *The Tenants* represents what might otherwise be characterized as a run-of-the-mill housing dispute in Manichean and eschatological terms, a celestial battle between an anti-hero and his Other that inevitably ends in tragedy. At the same time, as discussed earlier, *The Tenants* is situated in what felt like a cataclysmic turn for the relationship between the Black and Jewish communities, and the operatically ominous tone of these passages does reflect the tenor of that struggle.

By the end, however, all of these classical pretensions have broken down. The tone becomes jagged and vulgar, with long strings of racial slurs, and the point of view begins to switch back and forth between Willie and Lesser without warning. The sense of time, space, and even language fractures as the two men begin to torment each other psychologically and creatively. In addition to short stories fantasizing about the US's first pogrom, Willie begins to

write poetry that utterly rejects Lesser's preoccupation with form. Take, for example, this passage from a piece Willie provisionally titles "Manifested Destiny":

black, white, black, white, black, white, black, white, (go to bottom of page)  
black, whit, black, whit, black, whit, black, whit, black (go to bottom of page)  
black, whi, black, whi, black, whi, black, whi, black, (go to bottom of page)  
black, wh, black, wh, black, wh, black, wh, black, wh, (go to bottom of page)  
black, w, black, w, black, w, black, w, black, w, black, (go to bottom of page)  
black black black black black black black black black black black black black black black  
black black black (make two pages)  
BLACKBLACKBLACKBLACKBLACKBLACKBL  
.....  
BLACKBLACKBLACKBLACKBLACKBLACKBLACK (make five pages of this)  
BLACKNESSBLACKNESSBLACKNESSBLACKNESS  
BLACKNESSBLACKNESSBLACKNESSBLACKNESS (204)

The contrast between Lesser's and Willie's voices is a crucial way in which *The Tenants* destabilizes genre, as it runs an aesthetic gamut from the ancient Greco-Roman epic to narrative Romantic poetry to the challenging experimental imagism of the Black Arts Movement.<sup>71</sup> This complexity is further compounded by the text's false endings, including the two moments where the phrase "THE END" appears in the text, which nevertheless continues. One might also include Lesser's novel, *The Promised End* as a false ending, insofar as it calls for a closure that never comes. Like many experimental post/colonial novels, Malamud denies the teleology of the

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<sup>71</sup> It's fairly clear that Willie's style and characterization is heavily influenced by Amiri Baraka, and his relationship to Irene an analog for Baraka's doomed marriage to Hettie Cohen. For an analysis of these overlaps, see Chapter Six of Eric Sundquist's *Strangers in the Land*.

occidental tradition. In Malamud's case, this refusal is literal, and, at the risk of reading form too literally, I see the false endings scattered throughout Malamud's novel as narratological indexes of the false ending embedded in the post-ness of 'postcolonialism.'

Indeed, perhaps the most succinct example of this relationship between post/colonial form and content can be found in the novel's first false ending, found on page twenty-three:

Levenspiel, resembling mysterious stranger if not heart of darkness, starts this tiny fire in a pile of wood shavings in the cellar. Up goes the place in roaring flames. The furnace explodes not once but twice, celebrating both generations of its existence. The building shudders but Harry, at his desk and writing well ... carries on as the whining fire and boiling shadows rush up the smelly stairs. Within the walls lit cockroaches fly up, each minutely screaming. Nobody says no, so the fire surges its inevitable way upwards and with a convulsive roar flings open Lesser's door.

#### END OF NOVEL

As is the case throughout *The Tenants*, this passage is replete with allusion, signification, and historical resonances: the two generations of the furnace may mark the transformation—and, in a sense, the disappearance—of working-class Jewish New York, the cockroaches burning alive is a gruesome metaphor for the Holocaust and the utter destruction of Jewish Europe, and the disembodied, silent "Nobody" indexes the voices not raised to defend either world. In addition, we find allusions to two colonial texts, Mark Twain's *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* and, more importantly, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Tellingly, these allusions are qualitatively different than Malamud's more explicit references to Wordsworth, Blake, and Coleridge, who are named directly in the text and will be discussed later on. Just as the novel's commentary on

the English literary tradition is far easier to discern than its engagement with post/coloniality, Malamud's allusions to these texts are more oblique yet equally meaningful.

Although it clearly unsettled many reviewers, *The Tenants*, Malamud's sixth novel, was released to a measure of critical acclaim. Taken aback though they were by his apocalyptic vision—many, for example, dwell uneasily on the grisliness and nihilism of the final scene—critics largely admired the brazen confidence with which Malamud tackled the subject of race. Nor was their reaction in any sense divorced from the white Jewish liberalism discussed at length in Part Two; Anatole Broyard, for one, commended Malamud for going “where angelic liberals fear to tread,” whereas Morris Dickstein tellingly praises Malamud for “tak[ing] the measure of what is obviously one of the great subjects of our time, the cultural and psychological upheaval caused by the insurgence of nationalism, separatism, and racial pride among blacks today, which has affected the lives of all of us.” Indeed, while largely ignoring the surrealist and postmodern elements of the novel, many contemporaneous reviews imply that *The Tenants* deserves most of its praise for its willingness to engage in current events. This, it seems, was Malamud's intention. In an oft-cited 1975 interview with *The Paris Review*, Malamud gives a laconic roadmap to understanding the historical context of *The Tenants*: “Jews and blacks, the period of troubles in New York City; the teachers' strike, the rise of black activism, the mix-up of cause and effect. I thought I'd say a word” (Stern). Simple enough; yet, as one examines both the historical record and the novel itself, a series of revelations emerges to destabilize the frame Malamud rather glibly offers.

As before, the post/colonial dimensions of the text tend to disappear when one reads it, as most critics have, as an essentially American novel, a brutal and challenging psychodrama that

captures the post-Civil Rights Act nadir of what is sometimes called “black-Jewish relations.”<sup>72</sup>

But few if any scholars have read *The Tenants* as a *western* or *occidental* novel in the global sense, that is, as positioned within and in relation to a Westernness that transcends the United States and its relatively short history. This oversight may stem in part from some of the unproductive epistemic limitations of postcolonial analysis embedded in the prefix *post*. In so far as I aim to read *The Tenants* as a post/colonial novel written in a post/colonial moment, however, I do so primarily by drawing out the coloniality of its ideological unconscious. While *The Tenants* is doubtless a deeply American story, the novel also draws on epistemologies and aesthetic legacies that, while they have clearly been adopted by and adapted to the American ethos, are rooted in European colonialism.

On a metadiegetic level, Ashkenazi Jews’ uneasy position within the slash of post/coloniality is also reflected by the wide variations in the way they are (or are not) situated in postcolonial theory. As scholars like Derek Penslar, Ivan Kalmar, and Eitan Bar-Yosef note, although the Jews of Europe constituted an internally colonized and consistently Orientalized population in Europe for centuries, by the time postcolonial theory emerged as such, the most obvious way in which the Jews participated in colonialism was through Zionism and the Israeli state, in which context they were positioned as colonizers. Hence, according to Kalmar, “scholarly literature has underestimated the importance of orientalism-about-the-Jews” even though “its empirical weight is so overwhelming that no thoughtful writer on orientalism could ignore it altogether.... [F]rom the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries it was thought to be axiomatic that the Jews were... ‘the Asiatics of Europe’” (348).<sup>73</sup> Identifying this collision

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<sup>72</sup> To be clear, I am not arguing that reading the novel as American or Jewish American is fundamentally incorrect. I’m only trying to point out the limits those categories place on the critical imagination.

<sup>73</sup> I do think Kalmar somewhat overstates the case; writing about orientalism without reference to the Jews does not make one categorically unthoughtful. But I do think the inclusion of more “orientalism-about-the-Jews” would

between the diachronic and synchronic positionalities of Jews within white imperialism is a crucial condition for reading *The Tenants* as meaningfully tapping into a Wordsworthian and Africanist poetics to reorganize the Jewish subject's diachronic proximity to European imperialism.

### *Writing into empire*

Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion on how Malamud uses aesthetics and figuration to reorganize the relationship between Ashkenazi Jews and European colonialism is to adapt the novel's titular metaphor, tenantry, to get a bird's eye view of the relative midcentury positioning of Jews within the US's white, imperial power structure. Jews were once squatters in American whiteness, insofar as they could occupy that position only until they were discovered and evicted, the fear of which haunts pre-World War II novels about Jewish passing. By the period depicted in *The Tenants*, Jews had ascended to the level of tenants and landlords. Yet to ignore the highest, most empowered level of whiteness in the US would be to considerably overstate what both Lesser and Levenspiel represent and the amount of social power they hold. Levenspiel may own the building, and from this race-class position may be able to exert power

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enrich our analyses. One example I find particularly relevant is in the inimitable work of Saree Makdisi, whose *Romantic Imperialism* will be addressed in detail in the next section. In *Making England Western: Orientalism, Race, and Imperial Culture*, Makdisi addresses the Romantic period in Britain and describes "an emergent Orientalist discourse [that] was directed against internal rather than primarily external targets: that is, sites or populations within the space of the nation that would be designated as other in specifically oriental terms" (xii). Undoubtedly, as before, throughout European and to a certain extent American history, Jews have been thought of as an oriental (and Orientalized) community of internal others. Even beyond that, as I will touch on again shortly, the un/assimilability of Jews specifically was a central and highly visible issue in British politics during this time, which witnessed the Damascus blood libel and the intercession of the powerful Sephardic-British diplomat, financier, and Sheriff of London, Moses Montefiore, the legal emancipation of British Jews, and the tenure of Benjamin Disraeli, Britain's only prime minister of Jewish origin. Yet Makdisi never mentions Jews in his analysis—although Zionist collusion with British imperialism is mentioned in a footnote, the words Jew, Jewishness, antisemitism, etc., don't appear in the book. This is not to say that any scholarship that could in theory be applied to Jews *must* be, but *Making England Western* does, in my view, offer an interesting example of where Jews go missing in postcolonial theory not because of where they were during the height of European imperialism but because of where they were a hundred years later, producing, in my opinion, unrealized opportunities for diachronic solidarity.

over Lesser and Willie, but he clearly does not hold the true power in this space. That power, which manipulates the interstices and boundaries of law, economics, and government to suit its agenda, is invested in the White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant ruling class whose dominance is so complete that it manages to remain invisible (the very same White Anglo-Saxon Protestants to whom Philip Roth refers in *American Pastoral*). Lesser's attempts to write himself into whiteness are not based on a fantasy of becoming a landlord like Levenspiel—indeed, he despises Levenspiel, the epitome of the toadying and self-pitying Jewish middleman—rather, his desire is to climb the ladder to the very top, to take on and embody the American whiteness as stable and boundless as the land that it owns. And yet, for centuries, this was a race-class position into which no Jew could truly assimilate, because it long defined itself implicitly and at times explicitly in opposition to Jewishness. How, then, does a midcentury Jewish novelist—especially one living amidst the polluted polyglot urban decay so long associated with the impossibility of Jewish assimilation into gentility—write himself into Anglo-American imperial whiteness?<sup>74</sup> And what does that tell us about post/coloniality in mid-to-late twentieth century Jewish culture?

As discussed in the introduction, my reading of whiteness and worldedness in *The Tenants* proceeds in part from Eric Hayot's claims that, first, "Aesthetic worldedness is the form of the relation that a work establishes between the world inside and the world outside itself," and, second, "World-creation happens consciously, but also in the ideological 'unconscious' of the work, not as an expression of what the work does not know, but of what it knows most deeply,

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<sup>74</sup> By this I'm simply referring to the fact that, between the 1880s and 1930s especially, Jewish immigrant communities in the US and Britain were generally stereotyped as being too loud, dirty, grasping, uncultured, etc. to be assimilated into whiteness. Because Lesser lives the basest and most grotesque version of this (for example, the stairs in his building "stank a mixed stench, dirt, the dirtiest, urine, vomit, emptiness" (10)), he seems an even less likely candidate for whitening.

and thus says least” (50). These arguments also carry commutative corollaries, namely, that insofar as aesthetic worldedness is at times revealed by the work’s ideological unconscious, the ideological unconscious is also at times revealed in the work’s aesthetics. Indeed, the clearest way to read *The Tenants* as a post/colonial novel and thereby to explore its ideological unconscious is through an analysis of its complex and challenging form and aesthetic sensibilities. This, in part, is what it means to transition from the question “Are Jews white?” or even, perhaps more daringly, “Are Jews imperialists?” to “Under what conditions do Jews understand and/or write themselves as white/imperialist?” From the use of form as post/colonial critique to the invocations of colonial aesthetics as a means of writing into empire, these are (some of) the conditions under which the Jewish subject is written as white in the mid-twentieth century.

To explore these conditions further, it helps to understand Malamud’s assimilative use of Romantic aesthetics and allusions in relation to British Romanticism itself in its “original” nineteenth-century form. Lesser’s embrace of Anglo-American colonialist aesthetics can be seen from the beginning of the novel, before Willie has even appeared. Referring to himself in third person as “the writer,” Lesser muses, “on the roof was once an attractive small garden where the writer liked to sit after a day’s work, breathing, he hoped, as he watched the soiled sky . . . and thought of Wm Wordsworth” (11). Yet once the other tenants are driven out by Levenspiel, it was “all gone, disassembled, kidnapped, stolen . . . even the white six-inch picket fence a civilized tenant had imaginatively put up for those like him who enjoyed a moment’s repose this high up in the country” (11). Lesser’s invocation of William Wordsworth is far from incidental, nor should it be abstracted from Malamud’s work as a whole, as literary scholars and critics such as Alfred Kazin and Charles Hoyt remarked pointedly on Malamud’s indebtedness to the English



Romantics in both form and philosophy even in the early 1960s.<sup>75</sup> But Lesser's instantiation of and indebtedness to Romanticism is not merely aesthetic or even philological. Rather, it allows him to take on the imperial and racial attitudes of the Romantic era and figure himself into their project of artistically and rhetorically constructing the Orient and Occident as well as modernity and empire.<sup>76</sup>

As Saree Makdisi explains in *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*, Romanticism represented a "key constitutive element" of the cultural transformations that comprise modernization and imperialism, in part because "[T]he romantic period in Britain marks the earliest sustained (though largely doomed) attempt to articulate a form of opposition to the culture of modernization—including but not limited to imperialism—from its very beginnings" (7-8). Just as importantly in this context, "a certain fascination or even obsession with the pre- or anti-modern... occupied the very center of the British romantic critique of modernization" (10). But the most crucial intersection between Makdisi's analysis and my own comes when he turns his attention to Wordsworth specifically, writing:

This romantic mode of understanding otherness is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Wordsworth. It entails grasping romantic antimodernity on its own terms, as the "discovery" of some of the "other worlds" being surrounded and cut off by the space-

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<sup>75</sup> For example, in his essay "Bernard Malamud and the New Romanticism," collected in *Contemporary American Novelists* (1964), Charles Hoyt writes, "Malamud reveals his personality in his attitude, which is strikingly and overwhelmingly Romantic.... [Malamud's] tormented characters...still cling to the Romantic's determination to reject old evidence, to present a new solution that will be bigger than the sum of its parts. It is this highly characteristic Romantic drive that supplies the impetus of Malamud's greatness; it can be found, in one form or another, in each of his works to date" (66-67). An exhaustive treatment of the topic can be found in Barry Shipman's May 1994 doctoral dissertation, "Wordsworthian Romanticism in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud."

<sup>76</sup> I do attempt, here and throughout, to resist the tempting conflation of Malamud and his protagonist. It is worth noting, however, that in his *New York Times* review of *The Tenants*, Morris Dickstein credits Malamud with effecting the literary translation that Lesser fantasizes about: "Speaking at once in the charged, fabulistic vein of Hawthorne and in the precise rhythms of the Yiddish-American characters among whom I had grown up, [Malamud's novels] helped bridge the gap between an intense parochial upbringing and the newer charms of the Western Tradition which had solicited and assaulted me from my first day in college" (1).

time of modernization. Here Wordsworth's notion of the spot of time... can be grasped as a central concept with which to understand... [how] the proliferation of seeming alternatives to the world of modernization... take on entirely new significance... in romantic literature.... Seen as spots of time, such apparent alternatives can be understood (and meaningfully related to each other) as self-enclosed and self-referential enclaves of the anti-modern, each defined by its own unique structures of feeling and its own distinct temporality. Each is conceived as a hitherto untransformed enclave that, when discovered and colonized by the outside world, is seen to experience a fall which erases, or, rather, rewrites it by weaving it tightly into the history of the outside world. For the spot of time is always threatened by assimilation, by incorporation into that reorganization of spatial and temporal practices and institutions called modernization... (12)

Building on this analysis, I would suggest that, when Lesser stands on the tenement roof and thinks of Wordsworth, the novel is simultaneously offering its own Wordsworthian spot of time. Seemingly trapped between the vomit-and-garbage-ridden streets and the "soiled sky," Lesser conjures a chronotope in which he can remove himself from the polluting influence of modernity, a liminal space that resists assimilation. Lesser imagines himself as following in Wordsworth's footsteps and associates this canonical Romantic poet with the quality of being "civilized," and finding, in even the dirty, proletarian city, a way to breathe in the refined air of "the country."

This juxtaposition of noble, pure nature against urban squalor is, of course, a common theme of British Romanticism, into which Lesser imbricates perhaps the best-known symbol of bourgeois American suburbanites, the white picket fence. In so doing he projects himself into a fantasy of Anglo-American whiteness that literally rises above the class- and race-conflict-ridden

cityscape. For Malamud's imitation of a Wordsworthian spot of time has its own purpose in relation to the "space-time of modernization," which relates back to the Jewish subject's historical positioning in and against Romanticism in its own time. As a growing scholarly discourse has noted, Jews played an important role in the self-recognition of Imperial and Romantic Britain, often by being positioned as an Orientalized other. Ephraim Sicher notes, for example, that in nineteenth-century Britain the figure of 'the jew' [sic] "bolstered a class-determined ideology and contained response to the horrific conditions among the outcasts of London ... at the height of triumphant capitalism" (139). "Diverse and conflicting descriptions," he continues, "variously position 'the jew' within racist and misogynist perceptions of the *other*, the female, the Irish, and the filthy disease-ridden inhabitants of 'criminal' dens and promiscuous 'sinks of iniquity,'" which collectively located 'the jew' "within the larger anxieties of contamination of nationhood, class, and domesticity" (139). Given the way that Romantic Britain consistently positioned the Jewish subject, I would argue that Malamud is actually conjuring a Wordsworthian spot of time that can act as a sort of time machine or portal, that is, a mechanism by which one can return to the past in order to change the future. By returning to a primal scene of imperial whiteness and re-positioning the Jewish author within it, Malamud creates an alternative future (that is, mid-twentieth-century America) in which Jews are stably white and European and therefore do not even need to assimilate into the Anglo-American canon because they already belong to it. The Jew may have represented an external threat to Wordsworth's spot of time, but in Lesser's spot of time the Jew is within its protection; it is blackness (personified in Willie) that represents an external threat to its purity.

Only a few pages later we encounter this passage, which benefits from extended close reading:

A face is a face: it changes as it faces. The words he writes on paper change it.... Lesser, as he wrote, was sometimes a thundering locomotive... cracking along the clicking tracks into a country whose topography he suspected but did not know till he got there. Lesser explorer. Lesser and Clark overland to Manifest Destiny. Or maybe Mississippi steamboat with blooming, splashing paddlewheel, heartrending foghorn, and other marvelous inventions. . . . Lesser in short-masted bark with a puff of wind in its sail on the Galilean Lake, trying to spy out on the apostolic shore what it's all about. Lesser sculling on the Hudson . . . listening to the booming bowls in the metaphysical hills; or rowing to music on the sweet-flowing Thames. . . . Better still, the artist as broad swirling River, flowing freely amid islands of experience... the flow embracing multifarious isles and islets, in flood tide spreading over each and all beyond those muddy riverbanks of life and death. (14-15)

This represents yet another spot of time in which Lesser sees the act of writing as a bridge to aesthetic, historical, and social formations from which he would traditionally be alienated. But which ones? What fantasy does the penniless, unrefined, unreconstructed Jewish novelist herein weave? It is, to begin with, imperial, as the reference to Lewis and Clark, Manifest Destiny, and the final image of water engulfing and homogenizing the peoples of the earth clearly indicate. But it is also Christian; Lesser's avatar sails towards the tellingly *apostolic* shore of the *Galilean lake*, not the Kinneret, meaning that he references this body of water by its New Testament name and not the one it is given in Jewish liturgy and modern Israeli nomenclature. Nor are the other places and activities he describes any less symbolic. Imagining himself as both boat and boatswain, he weaves together iconic landscapes of English and American gentility — with both its *genteel* and *gentile* significations — in a vision of upper-class leisure and conquest. Taken

together, sculling, steamboat travel, the sea of Galilee, the Thames, the Hudson River—home to the Hudson River School of painting, one of the most recognizable branches of upper-class Romanticism in American art—and the Mississippi suggest a free-flowing interconnectedness between the American and English leisure classes, mixed with the Romantic ideal of a pristine, transcendent relationship to the natural world. The colonial violence that historically propped up this seemingly benign lifestyle only emerges at the end of the passage, when the writer is no longer merely *on* the water but *of* the water, which at first laps gently around tropical paradises before swallowing them up, creating a fluid empire that transcends mortality.

Yet insofar as Lesser’s fantasy is Christian, classist, and colonial, it is also above all a fantasy of whiteness, and moreover a specific construction of whiteness to which Jews, no matter how assimilated, could traditionally only aspire. For Jews to “belong” in these imaginary spaces would require a reorganization not only of the mid-twentieth-century US but also of Western history writ large. In imagining his writerly self, Lesser ignores, even rejects, not only his own background but also the historical relationship of the Jews to Romantic imperialism. Malamud’s evocation of British Romanticism uses Wordsworthian pastoralism and Blakean eschatology to reconstruct the twin legacies of Orientalism and Occidentalism and echoes the efforts of British Jews in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to use well-established literary genres as a means to assimilate into gentile whiteness.<sup>77</sup> When Lesser positions himself as the aesthetic

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<sup>77</sup> For example, in writing about David Levi (1740-99), Michael Scrivener adduces a “recurrent pattern” in British Jewish texts of the period, in which “Jewish difference makes itself fit into already existing generic conventions in much the same way that British Jews became acculturated” (159). More to the point, Scrivener describes how these Jewish writers used literature as an entrée into the emergent national imaginary, far before their admittance to British political life (160-1). The Jewish engagement with the Oriental/Occidental dialectic is still clearer if we turn to perhaps the most successful romantic-Orientalist-Anglican-Jew, politician and novelist Benjamin Disraeli. As Ivan Kalmar explains, “the apparently admiring side of romantic orientalism was at first more evident than its reverse, and it allowed many Jews to think of orientalism as holding potential for improving the image of their people among Gentiles,” a possibility that Disraeli himself was passionately invested in, since, “this orientalist was, in his eyes and those of many others, himself an Oriental” (351, 348). In his politics, moreover, Disraeli clearly saw imperialism as the primary vector for a resolution of the Oriental-Occidental dichotomy, and thus implicitly that of

and philosophical inheritor of nineteenth century Anglo-American colonialism, he is using literature as an entrée into gentile whiteness, a whiteness built by conquest, reified by the construction of racial boundaries, solemnized in the poetics of Romanticism, and sealed off behind a white picket fence.

*Lesser's "Africa"*

Given that I am attempting to parse the *The Tenants's* ideological unconscious, it's perhaps unsurprising that I now turn to Lesser's dreams. The relatively understudied second false ending offers an even more elaborate example of how Malamud deploys colonial epistemologies to construct Jewish whiteness, this time in the context of Christopher L. Miller's and Toni Morrison's overlapping conceptualizations of "Africanism."<sup>78</sup> In *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (1985), Miller posits Africanist discourse as the African corollary to Edward Said's Orientalism.<sup>79</sup> Just as the Orient is a figment of the European imagination, constructed as a mechanism of self-determination, so too is Africanist discourse defined by a "gesture of reaching out to the most unknown part of the world and bringing it back as language... [which] ultimately brings Europe face to face with nothing but itself, with the problems its own discourse imposes" (5). However, there is a crucial difference: where the Orient is shaped as an inversion of the West, Africa takes no shape at all. Miller explains,

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the Jew and the Englishman. This attempted synthesis may have no more potent metonym than Disraeli's use of the famously wealthy Anglo-Jewish Rothschilds, whose lineage included the first unconverted Jewish MP, to fund the purchase of the Suez Canal in 1875. Additionally, as will become more important in the next chapter, Disraeli's time in government witnessed the beginning of the industrialized exploitation of natural resources in British South Africa, an endeavor in which British Jews would play a defining role.

<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, neither Miller nor Morrison appear to have read one another, despite the deep similarities between their respective projects. This disconnect reproduces itself in the wider body of scholarship—those who cite Morrison never cite Miller and vice versa—and reflects a decades-long, purposeful separation between Africana Studies and African American Studies, which is only now being reassessed by historians and anthropologists.

<sup>79</sup> As such it must be understood as separate from the Africanism practiced by V.Y. Mudimbe and other twentieth-century African intellectuals precisely because it is a *European* epistemology.

The Orient is a negative for Europe, conforming to the profile of what Europe thinks Europe is *not*.... The two interlocking profiles of Europe and the Orient leave no room for a third element.... The notion of a nullity is a key to understanding European conceptions of Black Africa.... This is because the burden of proving a nullity, and of maintaining it in a logical discourse, is crushing, and the overextension of discourse in relation to this object of its own design is most typical of Africanist utterances. (15-18)

Lacking a logical form, Africa emerged in Western literature as an abyss of pure primitive energy, terrifying, galvanizing, and unmistakably erotic.<sup>80</sup> Predictably, this highly charged void became a space into which the civilized European subject could project un-civilized fantasies. Writing on European conceptions of African religion and spiritual practices, Miller claims, “Instead of a God of authority, repression, and all-defining constancy,” Europe’s imagined Africa worships “a god of released tension, wish-fulfillment, and malleability. While the desire may be all in the psychology of the European speaker, it is depicted as realized in Africa, which conforms perfectly and reflects it back” (47).

Toni Morrison’s 1993 text, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, brings us closer to the American context and aptly demonstrates the connection between US representations of Africa and the constructions of whiteness. Although she does not cite Miller, her understanding of Africanist discourse bears marked similarities:

I use [Africanism] as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people.... Africanism

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<sup>80</sup> An interesting glimpse of this can be seen in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, as much of the story is focused on the secret, forbidden chamber in a fourteenth-century monastic library, which is eventually revealed as the “*finis Africae*,” in which they discover the murdered who has been picking off his brothers one by one and which represents the end of knowledge and the primal moment of chaos.

makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. . . . [I]n the absence of real knowledge or open-minded inquiry about Africans and African Americans, under the pressures of ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation, an American brand of Africanism emerged. (6-7)

As Morrison predicts, *The Tenants* invokes the European imperialist's idea of Africa in much the same way as it does British Romanticism, as a gateway to a distinctly American form of whiteness that arrives via a projection of the Ashkenazi Jewish subject into a teleological narrative of European settler colonialism. In Lesser's case, the desire in question is a colonialist chiasmus: the European's fantasy is the fantasy of being European. This move is dramatically crystallized in his description of a fantastical interracial double wedding that is presented as potential ending both to Malamud's *The Tenants* and Lesser's own unfinished opus, *The Promised End*.

Unlike the rest of *The Tenants*, this second false ending departs from claustrophobic, quasi-apocalyptic New York City, taking place instead in a hyper-eroticized, imperialist fantasy of Africa. There, a nebbish rabbi and a withered tribal chief preside over the double interracial wedding of Lesser to an already pregnant Mary and Willie to a now openly Jewish Irene. The families of all four intendeds assemble and take stock of one another, as the religious tribal leaders attempt to reconcile their starkly different cultural traditions.

The notables of the tribe in soft caps and brightly colored robes sit on their carved wooden stools. . . . The older wives, wearing ivory ornaments and beads, give high-pitched directions to the younger women as they prepare the chicken and yams and pour



out calabashes of beer. . . . The visitors from the distant country, relatives, and friends of the white bride and bridegroom, of varying moods and dispositions, eye each other and wait. The marriage guardian, his indigo toga knotted over his bony left shoulder, sits with the interpreter, their backs to the wall, as the nervous rabbi in grizzled beard and black fedora, stares in amazement at the assemblage. One bridal couple is seated before the toothless chief, the other stands with the rabbi mopping his dry brow with a gnarled handkerchief. . . (208-9)

This passage reveals that Malamud's "Africa" is an ahistorical utopia crafted from scraps of the broadest possible interpretation of "African" culture and experience. Put plainly, Lesser's fantasy is not African, it's Africanist. And as an Africanist fantasy, this scene in *The Tenants* faithfully reproduces the colonial epistemologies that have long shaped the way Europeans and Americans represented Africa in literature. Indeed, the very lack of spatial and temporal demarcation in Lesser's vision is typical of Euro-American Africanist writing, which perpetually imagines Africa as a place out of time, inscrutable, a wild darkness that modernity simply cannot penetrate. And although it is clear from mentions of, for example, "Harlem, U. S. A" and "imported Mogen David" that this scene does not take place in the pre-colonial past, neither does it really take place in the present, because Africa, in the colonialist imagination, never exists in the present. This is yet another element that marks *The Tenants* out as a Western novel in the occidentalist tradition of Conrad, since, as Miller writes, "If the passage of time is an element no Western novel can do without. . . then the role of the Africanist figure, persistently depicted as stuck in time, will be to resist narration from within" (44). Malamud never actually uses the word Africa, let alone the name of an African country or any recognizable topographical features.

Rather, Lesser *implies* Africa through repeated mentions of goats and long spears, grass skirts and camwood oil. Lesser's Africa is not really a place, but rather a quasi-Freudian dreamscape.

Both Miller and Morrison conceive Africanist discourse as a form of dreaming. Miller writes, "Africanist discourse resembles dream in Freud's description. Both are made possible by a condition of blankness—of distance and ignorance, of sleep" (62). To this Morrison adds, "the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive... a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity" (17). Both the visual disjunction in the text—the African ending is set off from what precedes it by an empty circle and three line breaks—and the sharp departure from the grotesque urban realism that dominates most of the novel suggest a transition between different forms of consciousness. At the same time, the African ending is described by Lesser as a conscious desire and gesture towards wish fulfillment. At the end of the section, Irene's voice suddenly breaks in, when she asks him, "How do you account for this, Harry?" to which he replies, "It's something I imagined, like an act of love, the end of my book, if I dared" (217). In Lesser's case, the desire he projects into his post/colonial "Africa" is the desire to reify and possess an unadulterated, historically and culturally distinct bourgeois Anglo-American whiteness. Lesser imagines a whiteness reified by both distance and proximity.

As in Lesser's Romantic effusions, this second "ending" uses longstanding colonialist tropes to reify the whiteness of the Jewish attendees, particularly Irene's family, the Belinskys. Their whiteness is constructed through a semiotics of modernity, which indexes their identity through industry and consumption. As will be crucial in our discussion of *The One Facing Us*, theorists of visual culture Richard Dyer and Noa Hazan connect twentieth-century imperialist

understandings of whiteness to “enterprise” and the mastery of technology. All of these ideas resonate in the way Lesser imagines the Belinskys, of whom we are told,

Irene's father, mother, and younger sister, a genuine blonde, are bunched together at the side of the canopy. The father, David B. Belinsky, a man with florid face and uneasy feet, in black homburg and silk suit, striped shirt and big tie, manufactures buttons. The tall mother sits home all day; she wears a plain white dress, orthopaedic shoes, and a blue cloche hat that hides her eyes. Half her nose is visible. The saddened sister is the wife of a successful insurance broker, home minding the business and three small children.

Though the old chief's long hut is not a ship they all look seasick. (214)

Somber and shabby as they may be, the Belinskys are unmistakably modern, bourgeois, and Western. Their sartorial tastes reinforce their Europeanness to an almost farcical degree, but effectively camouflage their Jewishness: Irene's mother's fashionable hat literally hides her (Jewish) nose. This emphasis on tradesmanship and technological superiority that, in turn, reifies the Jewish characters' Westernness carries over to the description of Lesser's father as well: “A. Lesser, once a healthy tailor, now skin and bones, an irritable old man in a tubular aluminum wheelchair” (213). Like David B. Belinsky, A. Lesser is sad and decrepit, yet both characters receive the courtesy of being named, and at no point are any of the Jewish characters subjected to the Africanist eroticization and animalization Lesser's narration visits on every black character's body. Indeed, the intense focus on the Belinskys' clothes stands in stark contrast to the Africans' nakedness. As before, then, this reflects not only a perpetuation of imperialist epistemologies, but also an understanding of the variations of whiteness produced by modernity, and the extent to which Jews can and cannot inhabit them. The Lessers and Belinskys may never be genteel—despite the latter's apparent ability to produce “genuine” blondes—but they are white.

The Jews' whiteness is also compounded by the fact of their foreignness in Africa, the extent to which they are not at home, their psychological distance from the scene taking place before them. One might pause, for example, on the fact that "Though the old chief's long hut is not a ship they all look seasick." Seasickness is a particularly potent signifier in Ashkenazi Jewish American culture, because it indexes the ubiquitous "Ellis Island" narrative: the long, torturous boat ride from Europe, the overwhelming, almost spiritual relief of the Jewish immigrant stepping foot on solid American ground. In "Africa," however, these Jews remain at sea. They will never belong there, yet that unbelonging works, perhaps paradoxically, to reify their belonging in the white American polity. As with their various class markers, in the context of this fetishized primitivism, their discomfort makes them whiter in Lesser's imagined "Africa" than they would be "at home."

This too is in keeping with the Africanist tradition. As Susan Arndt and Toni Morrison explain, Euro-American colonialist figurations of Africa persist despite the official demise of European colonialism because of their power as tools for reifying and consolidating whiteness. As Arndt writes, "Creating a distance to reality and holding onto racial stereotypes is by no means an irrational process, but rather a functional one. White images of Africa in Europe and North America... [serve a] legitimizing function, [and] stereotypes act as project areas for the [sic] own feelings of deficiency" (Arndt 24). We can see this, for example, when Lesser describes Irene as "the white bride, dark, Jewish, beautiful" (206). It may seem odd to depict Irene as both white and dark in the same sentence, but this only highlights the power of whiteness through proximity. Dark as she may be, Irene is white when she stands at the altar with Willie. Both Irene's proximity to Willie and her family's civilized distance from "darkest Africa" come together to fulfill Harry Lesser's fantasy of being not only stably white, but also an

inheritor of the Anglo-American gentile civilization that constructed its own whiteness in part through a rejection of his ancestors.

### *Conclusion*

By way of conclusion, I'd like to return to the list of contextual touchstones Malamud offered *The Paris Review*: "Jews and blacks, the period of troubles in New York City; the teachers' strike, the rise of black activism, the mix-up of cause and effect." Although I have spent little time with these factors in this chapter, having relegated them mostly to Historical Overture I, that is not my way of suggesting that the book is not "about" them. Like Roth, Malamud's work has been the focus of a fair amount of scholarly criticism and, again like Roth, a lot of that work (at least as it pertains to *The Tenants*) has been invested in unpacking the historical particulars of the novel's milieu. In taking a more post/colonial approach, my aim is to complement that body of criticism in a way that I also believe hints at something independent of Malamud entirely, the extent to which the events and narratives that make up the history of "Black-Jewish relations" are on the whole more global than they are usually depicted. Similarly, *The Tenants* appears to offer up a hyper-local microcosm, but one that, beneath the surface, is layered in with worlded implications, specifically ones indicative of Jews' shifting relationship to imperialism in the wake of Black Power and the Six Day War.

In *The Tenants*, both the worldedness and the whiteness of the text's ideological unconsciousness is first revealed in its protagonist's attachment to British Romanticism. That Lesser sees himself as one of Wordsworth's literary heirs, that he constructs for himself a Wordsworthian spot of time on the tenement roof, indexes his desire to inhabit a form of whiteness to which Jews usually could not ascend. Romanticism itself is imperial, and in aspiring to inherit its literary legacy, Lesser too envisions himself as imperial. But despite the Romantics'

occasional philosemitism and the success of Benjamin Disraeli, the forms of British whiteness embraced in Georgian and Victorian England were most often organized in opposition to Jewishness. Hence, what Lesser seeks is a reorganization, a bringing into proximity of two identity formations usually characterized by distance and difference. Later in the novel, Lesser dreams his way even further afield, to “Africa,” a setting clearly produced in his mind from stereotypical Western scrap knowledge of the “dark continent.” In this fantasy space, the sensual, primitive, earthy Black tribespeople are starkly contrasted with the stoic, seasick, sharply-but-shabbily dressed Jews who arrive to attend his, Mary’s, Willie’s, and Irene’s double wedding. Yet in their evident discomfort, the Jews are whitened by their relative modernity, their connections to industry and manufacture, the world of capital, whereas the Black Africans remained suspended in pre-modernity. The Jews may be out of place, but the Africans are out of time.

In Chapter Three, we will once again encounter Africanism, but this time on an African continent that feels, in multiple senses, more real. For starters, the people there are much more like people and less like stick figures, the landscape described reflects industrialization, as if, at the very least, Africa has made it to the twentieth century. And of course, being Mizrahi, the protagonist Esther is already positioned quite differently on the navigational field of racialized identities. Still, the sense of African primitivism, of anti-modernity, of a certain un-Western wildness penetrates *The One Facing Us*, this time in contrast to the Ashkenormative society of Israel. Like *The Tenants*, albeit much more directly, *The One Facing Us* thus engages with the Cold War technopolitics of whiteness and post/colonial development. Where *The Tenants* is a novel demonstrably about race that becomes, once reframed, a piquant reflection of the Ashkenazi American Jew’s assimilation of colonialist modes of thought, *The One Facing Us* is

quite plainly a meditation on post/coloniality that can be read interstitially as an illustration of the ambivalent possibilities of Jewish whiteness. At the end of *The Tenants*, Lesser and Willie's descent into incoherence is marked by rage and the triumph of nihilism. In *The One Facing Us*, on the other hand, the blurred inscrutability of the images atomize those identities that, in Malamud's text, become hardened past the point of no return, and, in so doing, gestures toward empathy and hope.

### CHAPTER THREE: 'A VILLA IN THE JUNGLE': WHITENESS, MIZRAHIYUT, AND BLACKNESS FROM ISRAEL TO AFRICA IN *THE ONE FACING US*

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.... One ever feels his two-ness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." – W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

#### *Introduction*

At the 1996 Plenary Session of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council in St. Louis, future Israeli prime minister and then foreign minister Ehud Barak told his American audience that, in Israel, "We still live in a modern and prosperous villa in the middle of the jungle" (qtd. in Berman). The following year, he traveled to the poor development town of Netivot to issue an apology for the "mistakes" made by the Ashkenazi Labor Zionist leadership in overseeing the absorption of about a million Mizrahi immigrants during the 1950s: "Entire communities were uprooted, tradition was broken, the fabric of the family damaged... It wasn't done maliciously, but the result was a great deal of suffering. We didn't always know how to respect the wealth of the (Jewish) sources from which we drew. In my name and in the name of the Labor Party—I ask forgiveness" (qtd. in Halevi). The two speeches offer an interesting study in contrasts. The first clearly draws on Orientalist tropes—it would be difficult to take "jungle" literally in the Middle Eastern context, so it's fair to suggest that the "jungle" to which he refers is the untamed, uncivilized, and unreconstructed domain of the non-European other. The second, meanwhile, is effectively an apology for Ashkenazi Orientalism.

Taken together, Barak's statements evoke the long and complex narrative arc of East/West dialectics in global Jewish history. For example, in terms of reference and meaning, Ostjuden, Mizrahim, Mizrahiyut, and Orientalism evoke both a transhistorical spectrum of East/West otherness and also a representation of how Jewish Westernness shifts in and between



different proximities. Ostjuden, literally “eastern Jews,” was a German term used by Jews of Western Europe to other the Jews of Eastern Europe (particularly those who, like Barak’s parents and grandparents, lived in the Pale of Settlement), who they saw as backwards, provincial, fanatical, and generally uncivilized. When those Ostjuden emigrated to Palestine, they became the Yishuv, the vanguard of political Zionism, Ashkenazi nation-builders who later formed the nascent Israeli state’s political elite. It was in this capacity that they met the “Mizrahim,” in Hebrew literally “easterners,” the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East, who, as we have already discussed, were seen by the Ashkenazi Yishuv as uneducated and undisciplined, with an Arab-inflected sensibility that needed to be quarantined lest it endanger the Westernness of Israel. “Mizrahiyut,” or “Easternness,” is both a term introduced in the late twentieth century to embody an affirmative Mizrahi culture and also (intentionally or not) a literal Hebrew translation of “Orientalism,” the term famously coined by Edward Said to capture the multivalent ways in which the West has othered and essentialized the East in service of imperial power. In and of themselves, then, these terms represent a series of rearrangements of historical power relations and sensibilities brought on by new encounters with new racial others that, in turn, engendered a reorganization of the self.

These East/West unsettlements resonate throughout Ronit Matalon’s 1995 novel, *The One Facing Us*, which takes up the image of the “villa in the jungle” in a strikingly literal manner. *The One Facing Us* focuses on the story of Esther, a rebellious, impulsive, and creative sixteen-year-old, who lives with her mother and maternal grandmother, both Egyptian Jewish immigrants, in a small and rundown house in Israel. The novel begins when Esther is sent to Douala, Cameroon to live with her Uncle Jacquo (referred to throughout the novel as “Uncle Sicourelle,” although her mother actually has two other brothers who could theoretically claim

the title), his gentile wife, and his feckless adopted son Erouan. The text follows Esther's attempts to adapt to her relatives' idle and luxurious lifestyle—so different from that of her mother, who works as a maid for an Ashkenazi rabbi—and the relationships she develops with the young French engineer Jean-Luc and the Sicourelles' Black servant Julien.

This narrative, which seems to take place in the mid-to-late 1970s, is interrupted and interspersed with scenes from the family's past, Esther's parents' childhoods in Egypt, and her uncles' and father's encounters with Zionism, Mizrahi identity politics in Israel, and post/colonial Africa. Matalon organizes her novel through a series of photographs, supposedly from the Sicourelle family archive, some of which are missing.<sup>81</sup> The novel jumps back and forth between different moments in roughly a fifty-year span—approximately between the late 1930s and the late 1980s—and a global network of spaces, including Douala, Jerusalem, Cairo, and New York. Throughout the novel, the narrator switches between first and third person. The first-person voice belongs to Esther, ambivalent but headstrong, disgusted by her relatives' racism and insularity, daughter of a fierce but failed Mizrahi politician and an even fiercer Mizrahi maid. The third person voice belongs to "*la nièce*," sometimes rendered in English (that is to say, Hebrew, in the original) as "the niece," who is assimilated into the wealth and power of her Cameroon-French-Egyptian-Jewish relatives.

As discussed in the introduction, one of the central goals of this project is to reorganize our understanding of Jewish whiteness by bringing together texts from seemingly disparate contexts and examining their ideological, identitarian, and aesthetic overlaps. While Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth have a great deal in common in terms of their backgrounds, influences, and canonical status, Ronit Matalon, born in Ganei Tikva in 1959 to Egyptian-Jewish

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<sup>81</sup> In the English version of the novel the editor inserted empty grey boxes to represent the "missing" pictures, which have captions beneath them just like the other images. In the Hebrew version there are only captions.

immigrants, looks like an outlier. Even beyond biography, Mizrahi literature has most often been studied *sui generis*, so, while I cannot say this with utter certainty, it seems highly unlikely that her work has ever been considered alongside these two comparatively more famous Ashkenazi American Jewish authors. In this chapter, I want to make a case for why texts like these should be read together more frequently by exploring some of their meaningful and productive intersections and showing how they help us think towards a better understanding of the global Jewish unconscious. Hence, in what follows, I will mainly focus on taking concepts and structures of whiteness that emerged in Chapters One and Two and re-locating them within *The One Facing Us*, including the home as a site of production for whiteness-in-proximity, the slash in post/coloniality, the technopolitics of whiteness along the Israel-Africa axis, and the Jewish revisioning of Africanism.

*Post/coloniality on la terrasse, or, “À nous les Orientaux!”*

As discussed earlier, in the postwar world the home functioned as a site for the production and circulation of whiteness both intimately and on a global scale. In Cameroon, the Sicourelles literally live in a villa in the jungle, a domestic space that ostensibly whitens them as they dwell within, drawing ever sharper contrasts to the dark wildness outside. Arriving to West Africa just as the European colonialists are leaving, the Sicourelles take their place, supplanting them while also building on the imperial foundations laid centuries before. Indeed, Uncle Sicourelle purchased the villa from a German merchant in 1967, then dug up the garden and “destroyed and rebuilt” the villa from the ground up. Yet he chose to retain one vestigial remnant of the German’s design, a space referred to throughout as ‘*la terrasse*’ or ‘the terrace.’ Sicourelle keeps the structure because, “It was the terrace that had first caught his eye from the gate, white, immaculate, almost mysterious in its dignity” (49), and when he later photographs the renovated

compound, it appears as “a white spot like a puddle of spilled milk, with a bit of black frame and barely discernible pale trees: ‘*la terrasse*’” (49). Esther too recognizes the terrace as aloof and overbearing, yet strangely human, describing it as “something blinding, stunning, white as a ship just christened: *la terrasse*” (101), adding later that, “The terrace is like an island unto itself, snobbishly turning its back on the house behind it, the thing that gives it meaning... The terrace has a human face, but without eyes, lips, or nose; all the human details are erased yet its expression is still clear” (101). These descriptions give a clear indication of how the terrace fits into the structure of power relations in which the Sicourelles live, as a white, colonial space that has been grafted onto the Oriental home and remains in some elemental way set apart from it, haughty and expressive. As Johannes Becke explains, “the Orientalist metaphor of Israel as a villa in the jungle points to the colonial dimension of the Zionist project [and] the acquired whiteness of Israel’s state-building elites” (3). In Matalon’s *Africa*, however, this imagery is inverted: the villa is not a metaphor, its inhabitants are not Ashkenazi, and the domestic site around which whiteness most clearly coheres is an edifice affixed postmortem to an Oriental space that it stubbornly refuses to acknowledge.

But even though the villa is literal, it does metonymize the complexity of the Sicourelles’ emplacement, and the fluctuating racial power structures in which they attempt to find an affirmative identity. As discussed in earlier sections, I use the term “post/colonial” to denote the crucial simultaneity of colonial, postcolonial, and anti-colonial elements in transnational Jewish identity, politics, and aesthetics. This is influenced in part by Derek Penslar’s observation that the Zionist project was “historically and conceptually situated between colonial, anti-colonial, and post-colonial discourse and practice” (91). Throughout Part One, I have attempted to show that, although there is certainly truth in this statement, it limits Jewish post/coloniality by

expressing it in the context of Zionism alone, when in fact this phenomenon has been and continues to be played out well beyond Israel proper or its relationship to the “Diaspora.” This more than apparent from the map the novel draws. As Shimrit Peled points out, “the journeys in the book are all between spaces that have already been affected by colonialism: Egypt, Israel, Gabon, the Congo, Cameroon, New York, a factor that does not detract from the force of the oppression taking place in each of these places” (344). *The One Facing Us* thus illuminates these dynamics because of how literal it makes them while preserving their historical and cultural specificities.

Many of these historical details are embedded in the development of the characters themselves. Jacquo Sicourelle Jr., whom Esther refers to as Uncle Sicourelle, is the first of the Sicourelle siblings to leave Cairo, striking out into Africa in 1946 to “make a fortune” (19). In 1954, he marries Marie-Ange (known to Esther and the help as “Madame Sicourelle”), the daughter of impoverished farmers in Brittany, in a ceremony held in Brazzaville, then the capital of French Equatorial Africa, which comprised what are today the countries of Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, and Gabon. It is difficult to trace his journey after that, but we see glimpses of him running a leather factory in Gabon in 1956 before he finally settles in Cameroon to incorporate and oversee a shipping concern out of the Port of Douala in 1967. He accumulates massive wealth, purchases a sprawling estate, and attempts to acclimate himself to post/colonial Douala “society,” as Esther describes:

He has held on in Africa for thirty years partly because he minds his own business and respects the social barriers; he is able to fade into the landscape or the human throng, to come and go without fanfare, without explanation. He has seen and heard much and been silent about even more. Like a sponge, he has absorbed first the self-righteous, self-

serving blather of the colonialists, then the post-colonialists' talk of development, investment, and expertise; he has seen the young engineers, economists, and agronomists make their money and run.... These foreigners are supposed to form his social circle... But the day always comes when, disgusted, he reverts to the habits that have earned him a reputation as a loner, an ill-tempered eccentric. The distaste for Europe that he brought with him long ago from Egypt underlies his disdain for "those people." He doesn't like the way they attempted to show him his place. Nevertheless, he eventually found that place... Alienated from the white elite, he was fearful of the black masses, scornful and suspicious, yet he felt an affinity for them, even a familial bond. (190)

Despite this alienation, and despite Zionist rhetoric determinedly painting it as such, Israel never emerges as an alternative, a place of succor. Uncle Sicourelle is not a Zionist. In fact, he leaves Cairo specifically to get away from the "'Zionist scourge'—from Hashomer Hatzair, *le mouvement*, and all that—which had taken hold of [his] two other brothers" (20). Yet he is still affirmatively post/colonial. Although the Sicourelles have (according to his mother) distant European blood, as an Egyptian Jew, Uncle Sicourelle was raised to detest the British colonizers. Like his father, he views Zionism as a form of collaboration; Esther's grandfather "did not hide his preference for Uncle Sicourelle and 'that Africa' of his, which he felt suited the *esprit de la famille* better than the Zionist dream, a foreign, even traitorous, path" (239). More to the point, Jacquo Sr. recognizes "the uncle's consuming fear of Europe and of Palestine as part of it," and therefore sees "continuity in the twisting course the uncle had taken from Egypt to Africa, for in his world there was no place for national identity but ample room to carry out any conceivable human whim" (239). What Uncle Sicourelle ultimately wants is to hack and slash his own path to identity, unfettered on the one hand by the Jewish nationalism that in any case does not belong

to him, nor on the other hand by British imperialism that traps Egyptian Jews in a liminal space between colonized and colonizer.

Yet when Uncle Sicourelle finally finds a semi-permanent home on the West African coast, he finds himself in much the same situation. What allows him to “hold on” in Africa is his ability to silently occupy a liminal space between colonial, postcolonial, and anticolonial; he absorbs all three discourses yet does not belong to any of them. In the last scene of the novel, seated at a table with his friends and family, he pounds his fist for their attention and raises his glass for a toast: “*À nous les Orientaux!*” (296), that is, *To us Orientals!* It is interesting, first of all, that this proclamation in French, which he learned as a child in British-controlled Egypt but which is neither the language of the colonizer (English) nor the colonized (Arabic), both of which the characters speak at varying points in the text. The other striking aspect of Uncle Sicourelle’s toast is the affirmation of “Oriental” as a collective identity. This calls to mind Atalia Omer’s framing of “hitmazherut,” or “Orientalization,” as an expression of Mizrahi double consciousness, whereby “Mizrahi public discourse internalizes the logic of orientalism, even while reclaiming a domesticated Mizrahi cultural habitus that appears to resist Ashkenazi normativity,” which emerges as part of hitmazherut, “a historically grounded process of rearticulating sociopolitical categories and the... Mizrahi project of reclaiming pre-Zionist Jewish-Arabness as a foundational resource for re-conceptualizing space and identity” (950). Uncle Sicourelle’s Orientalism is an explicit rejection not only of the Zionist project, but also of the British colonial project as well as the self-serving neocolonialist enterprises pursued by Europeans (including Israelis) in postcolonial Africa. In defiance of both, he embraces (and interpellates his family into) the narrow space carved out for Egyptian Jews between these competing Orientalisms. Unlike the Saidian formulation, in which the oriental in some ways

does not really exist, being an imaginary inversion of the Western self, here ‘orientals’ not only recognizes the existence of a unique Mizrahi culture that exists outside of how others would construct it.

In so far as Uncle Sicourelle’s double consciousness is an expression of his attempts to forge an affirmative identity in the liminal space between colonizer and colonized, it is also a way of positioning himself between whiteness and Blackness. I would argue that, in a sense, it is precisely this double consciousness that underlies his “affinity” for Black Africans; it’s not so much that he identifies with them as people but rather with the fractured way in which they negotiate their identity against white colonialism, surviving ongoing attempts to destroy parts of their consciousness. This emerges again in the representations of Esther’s double consciousness. On the night of her arrival, the Sicourelles host a dinner party in honor of their new guest. Esther is overwhelmed by the luxury of the Sicourelle compound, the omnipresence of Black servants, and the abundance of rich food laid out before her. When Esther expresses her discomfort at being waited on by “the ‘boy,’” Jean-Luc waves it away:

“Another week and you won’t even see him.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll acquire the white people’s gaze. You’ll simply look past him.”

“I hope not. That sounds terrible.”

“Terrible or not, that’s the way it is. Each side sticks with its own.” (43-44)

Moments after this exchange, Esther vomits all over the table in a palpably literal rejection of the Sicourelles’ white, colonial privilege. Yet, when Esther goes to the bathroom to clean herself up, she finds herself transformed: “The niece washes her face and neck in the bathroom. In the fluorescent light her white face stares from the huge, three-sided mirror” (44). This reflects one



of the novel's central concerns: is it possible to *resist* whiteness-in-proximity? Esther certainly tries, but, as will be discussed shortly, is wont to be overcome by fear of the Other when she tries to venture beyond her comfort zone. At the risk of being glib, I would argue that her nausea is brought on by a literal and figurative double vision. In this moment she sees herself seeing, or not seeing, as it were, from her family's "side," which, in Cameroon, is that of the colonizer.

Esther's bifurcated narrative voice—initiated by this moment in which Esther becomes "the niece" or "*la nièce*"—is likewise an index of her post/colonial double consciousness, which, as in Omer's formulation, parallels the complex position of Mizrahi Jews as both colonizers and colonized. Yet it also reflects the equally complex positioning of Mizrahim between Black and white. Coming from Israel, Esther was raised in a context where she was positioned as racially inferior. Her mother sends her to Douala, she tells us, so that her uncle could "screw my head on straight, get me to settle down, if not here then there, what does it matter as long as something—if not the beef, at least the broth—the merest smudge of a notion of the patriarchal *famiglia* rubs off on me" (15). Part of this re-orienting procedure, the screwing on straight of her head, is teaching her how to be white. Being white means, among other things, not seeing servants even though, at home, her own mother is a servant. And the cognitive dissonance of this new racialized subject position and the double consciousness it requires is so sudden and strong it literally makes her sick.

#### *Technopolitics of the Mizrahi image and whiteness-as-enterprise*

One feature that differentiates *The One Facing Us* from nearly every other novel in this study is its use of visual imagery in the form of photographs, both absent and present, strewn throughout the narrative. These images demonstrate a deep understanding of the visual repertoire of whiteness and its imbrication with colonialism, while also giving destabilizing glimpses into

the intimate tyranny of neocolonialism. Perhaps the best way to begin is by looking at a pair of photographs of Uncle Sicourelle, who is a clear avatar for whiteness-in-proximity and whiteness-as-enterprise. He is the central figure of the first photograph on the first page, which captures him overseeing a group of Black workers in his warehouse. Esther describes, “That’s my uncle... the one with the hunched shoulders and thick waist, his back to the camera: his is the most important back, the back in white, the back that speaks” (3). The seemingly paradoxical inversion here evinces the power relations embedded in the announcement of whiteness. How can Sicourelle, the only one whose back is turned fully to the camera, also be the one who speaks? How can we even know he speaks, since we cannot see his mouth? In the context of post/colonial whiteness, however, Sicourelle is the only one who *can* speak because ‘speaking’ is a symbolic index of power. We needn’t even see his face to know that his power is organizing the scene; it is embedded explicitly and implicitly in the whiteness of his back.

The photograph and its description thus strongly echo the theory of whiteness-as-enterprise in Western visual culture proffered by Richard Dyer. According to the imperial understanding of white supremacy, he explains, “The white spirit organises white flesh and in turn non-white flesh and other material matters: it has *enterprise*” (15). Later, he continues,

‘Enterprise’ is an aspect of both spirit itself—energy, will, ambition, the ability to think and see things through—and of its effect—discovery, science, business, wealth creation, the building of nations, the organisation of labour (carried out by racially lesser humans) ... The most important vehicle for the exercise and thus the display of this dynamism, this enterprise, is imperialism.... This gave to enterprise an unprecedented horizon of expansion, of dangers to face, of material—goods, terrain, people—to organise. (31)

Clearly, Uncle Sicourelle is positioned in the photo as the organizer, the colonizer, the man of enterprise. That the photo was ostensibly taken more than a decade after Cameroon gained independence from France ultimately matters little, because the exploitative power structure is still in place. But even leaving that aside momentarily, it is striking to see the through-lines between this moment in *The One Facing Us* and the passages we discussed in *The Tenants* and *The Counterlife*, not to mention the technopolitics of Israeli development in Africa discussed in Historical Overture I. In all these cases, Jewish whiteness is reified through the post/colonial taking-on of imperialist epistemologies, most prominently in the parallels drawn between white masculinity and enterprising spirit.

The power relations present in the opening photo also echo and reproduce those put in place by centuries of European domination, as Esther continues, speaking of the Black dockworkers her uncle oversees, “Chance has erased the faces of these people, melding them into one mass, forging the multiplicity of their diffuse desires into one will, one intent, one response to the dominion of my uncle who stands there with his arms crossed, all eyes and observation” (4). Jacquo Sicourelle’s gaze, like his “speech,” takes on the panoptical qualities of the colonizer. It organizes the black bodies under its control into a single mass to be observed, studied, categorized, and dominated; in this overseeing, this organization, the Mizrahi Jew “becomes” white. If whiteness emerges in the orientation of certain bodies towards certain objects, in this case it is evinced in the orientation of certain bodies towards other bodies that become objects and thus co-constitutively reify the whiteness of the objectifier. This I would like to tie back to the Cold War technopolitics discussed in Historical Overture I. As mentioned, Israeli aid in Africa during the 1960s especially was “rooted in orientalist discourses in which the ‘backward native’ becomes a consumer of modern technologies migrating from territories where

such knowledge is produced to territories where its products are consumed,” which reified and reproduced “notions differentiating the ‘West’ (the Western Israeli benefactors) from the ‘East’ (African indigent beneficiaries)” (Yacobi et al 938). Although Uncle Sicourelle is a private entrepreneur, the Orientalist politics of his business in Cameroon are similarly rooted. But whether or not this effectively or permanently transforms the Mizrahi Jew, literally an easterner, into a Westerner, is left somewhat open.

The historical grounding of this transformation can be explicated through Israeli art historian Noa Hazan’s recent article, “The elasticity of the color line,” which helps to bridge *The One Facing Us* and the racial politics of image in the Israeli news media in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, she explains, in photos of the Six Day War—which were so popular among the Israeli public that they were bound up in albums and sold as keepsakes—Mizrahi soldiers are purposefully whitened so that they can be smoothly incorporated into the Ashkenazi-Zionist imaginary. Technology also plays an essential role in visually articulating and reifying whiteness: “[T]he presentation of typically Mizrahi-looking soldiers as combatants wearing uniforms, helmets, or operating... technological equipment ... serves to ‘whiten’ them” (54). Hazan continues, “They are the carriers of violent force, and their violence does not erupt in direct contact with their victims, but rather through the mediation of modern weaponry or various technological means” (54-55). In these photos, moreover, both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi soldiers are individuated yet represented as parts of a unified collectivity. The images are at once an attempt to humanize the soldiers by giving them faces, in both the literal and philosophical sense, and also to collapse racial distinctions by showing groups of identically outfitted soldiers engaged in various activities together. By contrast, photos of Israeli Black Panther rallies almost never showed a single Mizrahi protestor’s face, and clearly emphasized the division between the

non-white rabble and the white-helmeted agents of the state, even when they themselves were Mizrahi. As Hazan puts it, “The same male body that had signified the erasure of racial borders during the war now functioned in the protest photographs as the platform upon which these differences were re-etched” (69). The Mizrahi body in pictures can thus be whitened or darkened by its orientation towards certain objects, particularly those representing the technological power of the implicitly white state.

The racial ambiguity of the Mizrahi Jew in Africa is made even clearer when we juxtapose the photo of Uncle Sicourelle overseeing his black laborers to one in which he is shown standing alone. Unlike the first image, this photo is not described at length by the narrator; we only hear snippets of the conversation between Esther’s mother and aunt as they look at it. The photograph appears to have been taken on the same day as the first, since Jacquo is wearing the same clothing, but his position and attitude are far different. Here he stands alone in the foreground, looking off to the side, his hands behind his back, and his feet cut off by the frame. Turned towards us, the contrast between his white shirt and brown skin is sharper, but that is not necessarily what makes him appear less white. He is dwarfed by the factory that looms behind him, and he certainly no longer looks as though he owns it. Without the black laborers under his gaze, without people and commodities to organize, the whiteness he embodied in the first photo fades. Looking at the photo, Esther’s Aunt Marcelle turns to her mother and says, “*Regarde*, Inès, he’s got a face like an animal” (137). This suggests that in standing alone, Jacquo is not only racialized, he is dehumanized. He becomes the object rather than the subject of the photo.

Analyzing one more photo, the titular photo of “the one facing us,” will help re-orient us towards the next section. As before, *The One Facing Us* troubles and blurs the boundaries

between black and white, colonizer and colonized, seer and seen. Nowhere is this clearer than in Esther's consideration of this photo—which is also the only image to appear twice—captioned simply “Missing picture: The One Facing Us.” Unlike all the other “missing pictures,” however, there *is* an image that accompanies this description, a shadowy, unsettling picture of a figure at the edge of a pool. It appears to be a negative rather than a photo—black and white, but inverted, so that where there “should” be light there is dark, and vice versa. Esther's description is itself fragmented, dream-like, and difficult to parse. “A man stands facing us at the edge of a pool,” she tells us, “casting his shadow, trying, it seems, to emerge.... He is being screened onto it in fragments, as something other than his true self, vaporized into parts that will soon be transported to another place, another time, that will regroup and try to appear once more” (229). Even more intriguingly, she claims, “But the place is the water. At one with the place, the man standing out of the water is, at the same time, out of place.... He is trying to take the form of a man, to be a man, but instead he is a situation. Situated in this pool scene, he himself is the pool scene: not a person but a place” (230).

This image, and the passage that describes it, represent a disarticulation of the self, a search for meaning beyond the visible, static identity into which the Sicourelles so often retreat. As such it accords well with the minoritarian visual culture that Nicholas Mirzoeff calls “disorientalism,” which he defines as “a disidentification with Orientalism that inverted its categories of serial pathology into minoritarian collectivity” (54). For the disorientalist, Mirzoeff goes on to say, “Incoherence was a strategy of excess, in which symbol, paradox, and pun pushed the indexical language of taxonomy to the visualized point of failure, which was precisely the place of connection” (54). Echoing the insistent incoherence of Esther's engagement with the one facing us, Mirzoeff describes disorientalism as “minority dream-work

[that]... expressed itself as a fluid system whereby words were pushed beyond coherence into images, or images were accumulated to the extent that they failed to signify” (60). The inversion of light and dark, and the image’s distinctive lack of a signifying subject, create the conditions for a new understanding of identity. The man is not a man, he is a scene, a situation, one which can be taken apart and reconstructed transhistorically and transnationally. Following Mirzoeff, then, this image indexes the possibility of mutual understanding and recognition across and between the proscribed boundaries of ethnic consciousness.

*“You won’t even see them,” redux*

The power dynamics in all three photos also point meaningfully to the regimes of looking that are explored throughout the book. As discussed earlier, when Esther arrives in Douala she is expected to take on the white gaze, in which the Black servants are rendered invisible (as Jean-Luc puts it, “You won’t even see them”). In another scene to which I will return in the following section, Esther goes with Jean-Luc to visit the Black servant Julien at home. When they finally find his apartment, Julien’s hostility profoundly destabilizes Esther’s understanding of their relationship: “His eyes were black and his pupils dilated; they looked full of hatred. I’ll never forget those eyes and their dark, blank, hateful stare. ...I couldn’t understand what I’d done to deserve his contempt” (200). Julien’s stare unsettles Esther so deeply in part because it represents an inversion of the regime of looking to which she has become accustomed. As Karen Grumberg explains, “Choosing to look back at the perceived oppressor, denying her any identity besides whiteness, overturns conventional racial configurations in a manner that most painfully implicates Esther in upholding those configurations” (246). Indeed, throughout *The One Facing Us*, the tribulations of empathy and transracial recognition, particularly between Black Africans and Mizrahi Jews, are expressed through the language of eyes, faces, looking, seeing, and being

seen. Moreover, it is the white, colonial gaze which is a considerable part of the “inheritance” that Esther, a member of the Mizrahi underclass in Israel, is sent to Africa to “reclaim.”

What Grumberg passes over, then, is the portability of the “white people’s gaze” and its circulation through transcultural exchange. One of the most fascinating examples of the post/colonial regime of looking occurs during Esther’s father’s run for local political office in Israel. Aside from vague and well-worn phrases about class and ethnic consciousness, he has little in the way of a political platform. When he holds a “rally” on the eve of the election, he shows his prospective Mizrahi constituents the slides he collected during his travels in “Africa”:

Years after his African adventure Father was still crossing the globe with his slides and stories like a one-man traveling circus act bringing out his dancing bear. One of the last times he showed them was when he was running on an independent ticket for head of the city council.... More than three hundred people crammed into the field on the eve of the election, hungry for entertainment. One by one Father’s slides were projected onto the large screen: pygmies, copper mines, lions, straw huts, droopy-teated women with infants slung on their backs, tribal chiefs, wooden fires and cauldrons, the infinite green of the jungle, the rivers and the savanna. (208-9)

This scene reaffirms the notion, discussed in the following section, that Robert’s travels echo those of nineteenth-century European explorers of the African continent, who returned home with gorilla skeletons and tall tales with which to enthrall circusgoers and the like. And like those imperialist explorers, Robert uses the images of “Africa” to interpellate his Mizrahi audience into a form of colonial spectatorship. The collection of signifiers he uses to show them “Africa” is remarkably similar to those Lesser uses in *The Tenants* to construct his Africanist fantasy because they come from the same place: the European imagination. And just as Lesser



and Irene are whitened in the context of his Africanist dream-work, so too is Robert's Mizrahi audience whitened precisely by their being an audience to this spectacle.

A final example of white spectatorship occurs when Esther and her mother meet with Esther's American cousin, Zuza, daughter of Robert's missing sister, Nadine. After enjoining Esther and Ines to meet her at the Tel Aviv Hilton, Zuza presses her aunt for details about the family's history, peppering her with questions for a book she imagines will play into the zeitgeist. "Roots are a very hot topic in America at the moment," Zuza explains, to which Ines replies dryly, "There was that program on television, *Roots*, about those slaves and—what was his name?—Kunta Kinte" (271). The program, of course, is the 1977 miniseries *Roots* based on Alex Haley's 1976 novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, which was at the time the most-watched series in history and a significant milestone in African American culture. This is one of the few concrete cultural references in the novel, which allows us to date this scene to the same year as Menachem Begin's upset victory.

It is hardly surprising that Matalon, writing amidst the emergent New Mizrahi discourse of the 1990s, should want to revisit this moment. And, like Robert's slideshow, it suggests a certain hollowness to the Mizrahi fetishization of Black bodies and culture. Zuza's interest in *Roots* is clearly appropriative; she wants to capitalize on the program's success by selling her own story, which she imagines as having "immense dramatic potential," with "Colorful characters, the disintegration of the family, the disintegration of the colonial world" (271). Zuza responds enthusiastically when Ines recognizes the reference but becomes increasingly frustrated that her aunt cannot supply the family saga that her imagination demands. She presses for details about the Sicourelles' life in Egypt, their culture, their food, the gendered structure of their domesticity, their relationship with their Arab neighbors, hoping to find the conflict that her

narrative demands. In a sense she is searching for the novel Matalon has written, but in her desire for simplicity, her mismatched cultural framing, she cannot write it. Finally, exasperatedly, she asks Ines if she regrets leaving Egypt. When Ines shrugs this question off as well, Zuza cries, “But your roots are there, Tante Ines. What is there for you here?” “Roots, roots, roots,” Ines sighs, “A person doesn’t need roots, Zuza, a person needs a home” (278). The distinction between having roots and having a home is interesting, but more relevant here is how “roots”—as an extension of *Roots*—represents an appropriated cultural narrative that cannot lead to self-understanding. In that sense, I would argue, Zuza’s invocation of *Roots* indexes yet another form of white, colonial spectatorship. She wants to tell her own story in someone else’s language, a language that she hardly understands and, worse, that she is only interested in using for the sake of its cultural cache.

*“Beasts, beasts, and more beasts”*: Africanism in *The One Facing Us*

As mentioned early on, one of the primary investments of this chapter is to find ideological and thematic parallels between *The One Facing Us* and the two Ashkenazi American novels that preceded it in our analysis. One of my basic contentions in this project is that contemporary Jewish texts, even those from very different contexts, share certain ideological, affective, and aesthetic concerns, overlapping with particular meaning on the subject of race. One of these ideological and epistemological overlaps is in Africanism. In *The One Facing Us*, there are basically two forms this Africanism takes. The first, embodied by Esther’s parents’ generation, particularly her father Robert, very closely resembles the Africanist discourse observed in the second ending of *The Tenants* and theorized by Christopher Miller and Toni Morrison. As mentioned earlier, Robert frequently abandons his family in Israel, a place he

loathes, often to explore Black Africa, and, in so doing, to reaffirm his Europeanness. For example, Esther recalls,

My father came [to visit Jacquo in Gabon] with all his friends in tow.... They were on their way to central Africa, to the depths of the jungle, and Father would not return for two years, until the year before I was born, bringing back slides and stories that he had published in five European papers. He and the others were in quest of the three kingdoms that burned in his brain like a mantra: the kingdom of diamonds, the kingdom of gorillas, and the kingdom of the pygmies. (19)

As in Lesser's fantasy, Robert's "Africa" is timeless, boundaryless, and untouched by modernity. It has kingdoms, not countries, and even those are marked by colonialist signifiers rather than any clear cultural referents. He moreover projects himself into another imperialist figuration of whiteness-as-enterprise, the explorer-scientist. Small wonder that the objects he seeks echo the "booty" brought home by nineteenth-century Euro-American explorers of sub-Saharan Africa: diamonds, of course, but also the skeletons of gorillas and chimpanzees, and living Pygmies who were caged and displayed as curiosities (Hochschild). The images he brings back with him show only, in Ines's words, "'Beasts, beasts, and more beasts'" (207).

Despite all that disturbs Esther about her father's colonialist instincts, she too reproduces an Africanist discourse throughout *The One Facing Us*. The central difference between Robert's and Esther's Africanisms is that where his is colonial in some ways liberal, hers is *postcolonial* and *neoliberal*. Her imagery is therefore different, yet no less constructed or self-reflexive than that of Robert or Lesser. For example, where they describe an unmappable, untamable jungle, she focuses on sprawling urban decay. Driving to her uncle's factory on her first day in Douala, Esther describes the landscape she sees passing by outside her cousin's car:

Outside the airport it is humid, cloudy, and still. The earth on the other side of the narrow road where the limousines and taxis are parked is burned, black. Some distance away stand strange, flimsy structures, shacks or makeshift houses, built of crooked plywood boards. Beside them, immense scorched barrels give off smoke. The place looks like an ancient wound: the scarred, afflicted earth and the unsightly attempt at a miserable, dubious urbanity. (8-9)

When we compare this passage to, for example, Robert's fervent quest for diamonds, gorillas, and pygmies, it is clear that Esther's gaze is much more sensitive and aware of the damage done to Africa by centuries of imperial violence. Yet the agent of the violence is missing from her portrait of the Cameroonian landscape; we see only the charred remains of a fire, the arsonist apparently long gone. Moreover, the land degradation is presented as so deep and longstanding as to be utterly irreparable; modernity can hardly take root in this space, where nothing besides misery can grow. In particular, it is her instantiation of Douala's "dubious urbanity" that provides insight into Esther's version of Africanist discourse.<sup>82</sup> Her "Africa" has a more developed sense of space, but it is still quite unstuck in time, for it is always indexed through a lack of modern technology, a primitive but fractured domesticity, and the absence of rudimentary hygiene.<sup>83</sup>

The emptiness of her benevolent self-perception, and the extent to which, however unwittingly, Esther becomes white in Africa, is on full display when Esther decides on a whim to go with Jean-Luc to visit Julien in his home and congratulate him on the birth of his son. Up until

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<sup>82</sup> In Hebrew the word used is **מִפּוֹקֶקֶת** [*mefokfeket*], the adjective form of the verb 'to doubt,' or 'to be suspicious of.'

<sup>83</sup> Of course, this collection of signifiers is not attached to "Africa" alone in contemporary discourse. Indeed, it would perhaps be more accurate to designate this as a form of 'Australism'—a discourse in which the Global North constructs the Global South as an irredeemable inversion of itself, in which images of extreme poverty and violence circulate largely to reaffirm the North's superiority and to create opportunities for virtue signaling and paternalism.

this point, Esther's relationship with Julien is warm, friendly, and subtly sensual. Indeed, Madame Sicourelle, who throughout the novel takes it upon herself to police the domestic boundaries between white and black, identifies their closeness as transgressive, and admonishes her niece to spend less time in the kitchen. Esther responds by, essentially, calling her aunt a racist, but even though Esther ignores Madame and continues to develop what she seems to believe is a genuine friendship with Julien, her encounter with the part of Douala in which he lives is marked by fear and revulsion:

[W]e'd come to one of those black shantytowns. We had to drive slowly because the alleys were so narrow and sandy. Everyone was staring at us, practically devouring us with their eyes. They were all sitting on the ground outside their tin shacks, men, women, and children, lighting fires and grilling fish and *manyuk*.... The smell of fish, smoke, and sweat was awful, and Jean-Luc closed the car windows and turned on the air conditioning. I was a little afraid. I didn't like the way the people stared at us and I tried not to stare back. I started changing stations on the radio. Jean-Luc asked if I was okay.... He admitted he'd been scared the first time. Not of something specific, like a knife in his back—it was just a vague sense of anxiety, of distress, as if what he was seeing—the poverty and filth—would stick to him forever. I felt a little like that too. (198-9)

Esther's neo-Africanism is distinctly more self-conscious than that of her father's generation, but it is equally prone to stripping away the subjectivity of the Black Africans on whom her gaze falls.<sup>84</sup> Crucially, Esther's empathy and sense of mutual recognition fails when she crosses into

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<sup>84</sup> There are also echoes of Africanist texts of the past. Several passages from Conrad come to mind here, including the famous: "It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible

territory that she identifies as African, as opposed to the distinctly European space of the Sicourelle compound. But, of course, Esther *does* know, or at least is capable of knowing, that as a member of the Sicourelle family she is a representative of white imperialism. Her fear, though it seems so different from her father's *esprit de corps*, is still rooted in the colonial past. It is an anxiety spurred by the realization of her own prejudices and privileges, and of the terrible horror that imperialism has visited on Black Africa, but also a retreat *into* prejudice, a rejection of recognition.

### *Conclusion*

In January 2017, a small news item out of Israel caught my eye, prompting me to go back to certain passages in the Hebrew version of *The One Facing Us*, which I had only recently finished in English for the second time. The story concerned the popular Chasidic singer and native Brooklynite Mordechai Ben David, the son of Holocaust survivor and Orthodox cantor David Werdyger, known to his fans as the “King of Jewish Music.” During a concert in Jerusalem in December 2016, Ben David paused his performance of a peace song to celebrate the election of Donald Trump: “Do you know when there will be peace? In a few weeks, when there will be a new president in the United States and the *kushi* goes home” (Walker). The audience, which included several government officials, burst into applause. The significance of this anecdote is thus: in the original Hebrew text of *The One Facing Us*, I noticed that the characters use two words to refer to Black people. The first, *shehorim* [שחורים], literally refers to the color black. The second, *kushim* [כּוּשִׁים], is a racial slur for Black people that derives from the name of the ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Kush. Although at one point it was largely used to refer to Ethiopians specifically, as Ben David's use of ‘*kushi*’ to describe Barack Obama indicates, it

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frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not?”

quickly became a more generalized anti-Black slur. But in the English translation of the novel, and despite the availability of any number of anti-Black racial slurs that would have been highly legible to the audience (*kushi* among them, perhaps), both words are rendered as “blacks.” For example, when Jean-Luc is explaining that “most of the blacks who adopt the white man’s behavior and live in his world leave something of themselves behind” (96) or when Esther tells the Sicourelles that “‘It’s just not right that all of the blacks are servants and all of the whites are masters’” (107), both use the word *shehorim*. On the other hand, when the vicious and spiteful Edouard tells Jacquo “Either give me a free hand or don’t, but I can’t work with you breathing down my neck and humiliating me in front of those blacks” (131-132) or when Esther herself complains that “[Jacquo’s] a tyrant... He thinks everyone is one of his blacks” (167), the original word is *kushim*. Because *shehorim* is used much more frequently, the moments in which the slur appears seem meaningful, all the more so because they effectively disappear in the English-language text.

As Omri Asscher explains in “Israel for American Eyes: Literature on the Move, and the Mediated Repertoire of American Jewish Identity, 1960–1980,” the bowdlerization of Israeli texts as part of the Hebrew-to-English translation process began in the early years of the state and gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s as American Jews turned more and more to Israel as a touchstone for the construction of identity. Often earmarked for either curation or removal were expressions of contempt for Jews of the Diaspora, anti-religious sentiments, and content that might undermine the idea of “high moral standards... as an inherent feature of Judaism” (24), such as scenes of Jewish violence against Palestinians. In line with many cultural theories of translation, Asscher locates the impetus for these changes in the desires and mores of the target culture. He thus concludes that “imported content related to Israeli or Zionist identity was

negotiated within the frame of reference of the internal cultural needs of American Jewry” (24-25). At the same time, he attributes this “protective tendency” to “an American Jewish inclination to appropriate Israel so it could fill its quasi-religious role as a mainstay of communal identity” (37), explaining that, “By emphasizing, in a specifically Israeli context, that moral dicta are the mainstay of Judaism... this subdiscourse projected a higher morality on American Judaism and diasporic Jewry” (37). To an extent, Weinstein’s translation follows this pattern. Although she does leave a fair amount of racial strife intact, it makes a certain amount of sense that she (or the publisher) would assume that having Jewish characters use racial slurs would be a bridge too far for an American Jewish audience of the time.

But what do these sorts of changes amount to? Asscher looks specifically at translations whose changes relate either to religiosity or Diaspora-Zion relations, using them to sketch a kind of bilateral exchange rooted in a need to preserve the ability of American Jews to visualize Israel in the way that most confidently affirms the kind of Jews they want to be. Clearly, the politics of translating Blackness in *The One Facing Us* have much more to do with race than religion; they also, I would argue, point to something more multidirectional, a *global* economy of white Jewish self-perception. The transmutation of *kushim* to *shehorim* does not so much erase Blackness as it does certain forms of whiteness that, by the 1990s, Jews in the Anglosphere broadly wished to firmly disavow. In a stripped-down sense, that is what Part Two, which focuses on international liberalism, whiteness, and Holocaust memory, is about: the way in which certain Jews perceive themselves in the context of race on a global scale. For it is not merely that it mattered to American Jews that they be able to perceive Israel as a state that accorded with their sense of Jewish morality (not to mention that they be able to believe that Israelis generally reciprocated their attachment), it also mattered deeply to the Israeli state that American Jews perceive them as



white but not white supremacist, and certainly not an agent of marginalization towards their fellow Jews. Domestically, the relationship between American Jews and the Black community was affected by the partnerships that Israel chose to make, for example their cooperation with the French and British colonizers during the Suez Crisis. It mattered to South African Jews that Israel be perceived as a European country, that Jews in New York and London saw them as a culture under threat in a way that would keep them from coming out too strongly against apartheid, and, after apartheid, that they not be understood as having aligned too deeply with it. And it mattered to all four communities that the Holocaust be memorialized in specific ways, positioning Jews at the heart of the post-World War II human rights project without infringing on their privileges or prerogatives. Yet, as Mordechai Ben David's use of *kushi* to denounce Barak Obama and the Israeli audience's enthusiastic response demonstrates, even now the global economy of Jewish self-perception is shifting rapidly.

## HISTORICAL OVERTURE II: FROM LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM TO INTERNATIONAL LIBERALISM

*Liberalism, “liberalism,” and liberalism*

The second Historical Overture covers the same period as the first, but instead focuses broadly on liberalism, liberal internationalism, and Holocaust memory. Of course, anyone who wishes to write productively about liberalism, especially in a comparative context, is obliged to confront the array of variations, distortions, and pretensions that can make it seem nearly impossible to define. First is the necessity of setting aside the way “liberal” is used as a label within nationally specific party politics, which can easily produce flawed or misleading symmetries.<sup>85</sup> The Liberal Party of South Africa (LPSA), for example, did not align politically with the Liberal Party of the United Kingdom, despite their identical nomenclature. Nor did the British Liberal Party’s reconfiguration into Liberal Democrats in 1988 signal a closer resemblance to the Democratic Party in the United States.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, to focus on which party was truly “liberal,” or whether a majority of Jews voted for that party, often risks occluding the broader picture. In all four of these countries there have long been and still are Jews on the far left, in the center, on the far right, and everything in between. And even though, at certain moments, Jews in each of these political positions have pretended the others do not exist, in none of these places have Jews ever been a monolith, whether racial, cultural, or political. Hence,

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<sup>85</sup> Nor, in the British context, am I addressing the Liberal Judaism movement.

<sup>86</sup> So, for example, when Jewish MP Helen Suzman left the United Party in August 1959 with several other liberals to form the Progressive Party, of which she was the sole representative for thirteen years, they proposed “a franchise which enabled adult citizens who qualified on an educational standard or economic achievement to have the right to vote” (Suzman 48). This actually put the Progressive Party to the right of the Liberal Party, which by the 1960s advocated an unequivocal “one person, one vote” policy. And of course, this voting rights policy would not have been considered “progressive” in the United States at any point in the past eighty years. Still, Helen Suzman was by some stretch the leftmost MP in the South African Parliament for more than a decade, and she was very much a progressive in spirit. And because she was Jewish, and elected out of Houghton, a largely Jewish constituency, she continued to represent a link between South African Jews and the most tolerant, anti-racist, and human-rights-minded elements of the South African government during her thirty-six-year tenure.

although I will be discussing Jewish liberalism throughout Historical Overture II, I never mean to imply in doing so that all Jews are liberals any more than I mean to imply that all Jews are white by discussing Jewish whiteness.<sup>87</sup>

Exploring twentieth-century liberalisms moreover forces us to constantly toggle between liberalism in theory, as it presents itself to us, and our knowledge and experience of liberalism in practice, which so often fails to fulfill the task it sets for itself. This is all too apparent in the undeniable examples of facially liberal democracies that implicitly tolerate and/or explicitly pursue imperialist, racist, and xenophobic policies. Apartheid South Africa was, for most of its white citizens, a liberal democracy in the *structural* sense, by which I mean that white citizens were able to vote for representatives who made decisions on their behalf and were granted some measure of rights and autonomy.<sup>88</sup> The United States describes itself as a model of liberal representative democracy while perpetually engaging in the denial and suppression of voting rights to wide swaths of its population. Since its founding, Israel has struggled with the very possibility of being both a Jewish state and a liberal democracy, and clearly does not treat its citizens equally. Britain, too, has often conceived of itself as a liberal paragon while pursuing ruthlessly illiberal colonial projects. And, in general, the liberal discourse of human rights offers very little to those whom the powers that be do not consider fully human. Hence, the world has rarely if ever made good on the promises of liberal internationalism. Even beyond those cruel contradictions, liberalism often introduces itself as a non-ideological ideology, an apolitical

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<sup>87</sup> I do think, however, that you'd be hard pressed to find a Jewish political movement in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that is not grappling both with the basic concepts of liberalism as well as the specter of "Jewish liberals."

<sup>88</sup> I want to be clear, though, that I am not saying apartheid SA was *actually* a liberal democracy. In the sense of democracy as a free and equal mode of government, it obviously was not. But for white people who were willing to capitulate to its terms, including many Jews, it offered some of the structures and protections of one. Speaking from an American point of view, I think we've been so inundated with the idea that "democracy = freedom" that it's hard to contemplate that oppressive societies can be democracies. (And for some self-protectively idealistic Americans, it's equally difficult to contemplate that democracies can systematically practice oppression.) But a herrenvolk democracy is still, in some sense, a democracy, if only for the volk in question.

politics, a problem that particularly affects any discussion of liberal literary aesthetics and form, which, like the politics they embody, often attempt to hide in plain sight.

At the most basic level, liberalism is herein taken to mean a rights-based political framework, usually traceable to late 18<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy, in which said rights are understood to inhere in the 'individual,' a rational subject with a bounded field of desire and consciousness. It is ultimately invested in the moral-political development of the individual, presuming that a confederation of responsible, rational individuals will act as a rational and responsible body politic, if not a community as such. It takes for granted an inherent value in private property and a relatively free market, although it allows for and even encourages certain mechanisms of governmental control over the economy. This, of course, is what primarily distinguishes it from neoliberalism, which treats the government at best as a security guard in the lobby of a global corporate headquarters. Under liberalism, the government does hold power and serves an important function: to ensure, however asymptotically, the equality of opportunity for those it considers its subjects.<sup>89</sup> The liberal nation-state's most vital designation is therefore that of the citizen, for citizenship is the political recognition of the liberal subject and their attendant rights.

Also at stake in the second half of the project is the global political ethos of "liberal internationalism." I take liberal internationalism to mean the post-World War II global realignment that was rooted in WWI-era "Wilsonianism," that is, Woodrow Wilson's project for American soft power domination through the privileging of liberal democracies and free trade

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<sup>89</sup> This is, of course, the fundamental loophole through which herrenvolk democracies operate—illiberal states can in theory continue to style themselves liberal democracies if the people to whom they deny basic rights can be deemed non-subjects, even non-humans. The difficulty for people who want to understand how such states work is that, even though we know these aren't "real" democracies, we still have to take seriously their insistence on being identified as such and ask why. Despite being five foot two, I may walk around insisting I'm six feet tall to everyone I meet. They will know immediately that I am not, but it would still be worth asking what ideological, affective, and psychic energy I've invested in tallness that would lead me to attempt, perhaps even myself believe, the lie.

for the sake of supposed collective security. Postwar liberal internationalism affirmed (or attempted to affirm) that the rights of individuals ('human rights') can in certain cases supersede the sovereignty of the nation-state, and that the protection of these rights could only be guaranteed by an international oversight community. Throughout the Anglosphere, Jews have cathected onto liberal internationalism through a specifically Jewish narrativization of it: that the Holocaust produced an earth-shaking upheaval in the Western conscience and was therefore the essential catalyst for not only the move towards liberal internationalism in the postwar period, but also for the rise of 'human rights' as a framework. Of course, several scholars have come forward in the past few years—perhaps most recently and most notably in James Loeffler's *Rooted Cosmopolitans*—to demonstrate the considerable inconsistencies between the Holocaust-as-catalyst theory of human rights and the historical record itself. But the fact remains that, for sixty years, this narrative has played a significant role in transnational Jewish politics, and it would be impossible to understand a great many phenomena in global Jewish cultural history if we were to ignore the story just because it isn't true.

To better understand this narrative and the role it has played in worlding Jewish self-understanding, Historical Overture II will focus on several key intersections. First, it will examine the fundamental early shifts in the use of Holocaust memory as a political tool, in particular the sense in which the collective memory of genocide, which could well have become a transcultural, transracial *inflection* point for a global anti-racism instead became, thanks to the gravitational pull of both white power politics and Cold War anti-Communism, a *deflection* point feeding into particularist ethnicisms. In addition, we will explore the transnational schisms between liberals and radicals (which were also often, though not always, generational conflicts) that spurred intra-communal Jewish hostilities throughout the twentieth century, driven in part by

Jewish liberalism's persistent insistence on styling itself as an apolitical, even antipolitical, politics. Next, it will discuss the massive white Jewish out-migration from urban to suburban spaces and from working to professional class occupations, which clinched their entrée into the white global middle class, an anxious, ambivalent transformation at once celebrated and denied. Lastly, it will elaborate on the self-conscious mnemonic-identitarian narratives that white Jewish liberals produced in order to elevate, or at least justify, white Jewish liberalism.

*"A postwar bounty of human freedom," 1947-1948*

On December 10, 1948, seven months after Israel declared its independence and the National Party took power in South Africa, the United Nations ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Though it was not a particularly Jewish document, its ratification was meaningful for Jews throughout the Anglosphere and even now retains a certain mnemonic cachet, particularly in the American Jewish imagination. Like UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which had been ratified in November 1947 and called for the partition of Mandatory Palestine into two states, it was a test of both Anglo-American cooperation in the immediate postwar period and of international Jewish diplomacy and political power after the defeat of Nazism. Somewhat (but only somewhat) more abstractly, the UDHR was a site of negotiation for what global whiteness would look like after World War II, and what kind of power would be invested in it. As several scholars have noted, affinities between the US and the UK took on a distinctively racialized cast in the late nineteenth century, which has continued, albeit less explicitly, well into the present.<sup>90</sup> But this was more than apparent in the late 1940s, as bargaining began over what shape the postwar human rights regime would take.

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<sup>90</sup> See Srdjan Vucetic's "A Racialized Peace? How Britain and the US Made Their Relationship Special." Vucetic emphasizes the racial ideology of "Anglo-Saxonism" as producing a strong bond between the two countries, and, interestingly, points to the Boer Wars as a moment of clarifying solidarity for the US and Britain: "In their respective, wars against Spain (1898) and the Boer republics (1899–1902), London and Washington were each

At both the Dumbarton Oaks Conference in 1944 and the San Francisco Conference in 1945, representatives of Black organizations were repeatedly rebuffed over their demands for the inclusion of anti-racist language in the UN's Charter and the guarantee that any economic development or industrialization projects on the African continent be designed to benefit Africans themselves and not merely their colonial imperators (Von Eschen). In the months leading up to the UDHR's ratification, conflicts continued that made ever clearer the relationship between attempts to block anti-racist politics at home and the deferral of anti-racism abroad. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt, who chaired the UN Commission on Human Rights and is often remembered as an advocate for racial equality, was "more responsive to the public relations exigencies of the Cold War, which called for sanitizing and camouflaging the reality of America's Jim Crow democracy," and thus joined with several Southern congressmen in opposing an official UN complaint against South Africa for racial discrimination and human rights violations (Anderson 3). As Carol Anderson explains, "Roosevelt... and the other members of the U.S. delegation voiced strong concerns that, if the complaint succeeded, it would set a dangerous precedent that could ultimately lead to the United Nations investigating the condition of 'negroes in Alabama'" (3). The demands of Black organizations strained the UK delegation's commitment to putting international human rights laws in place as well, as they

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other's only cheerleaders. On both sides of the Atlantic, and in public as well as in private, the policy of 'benevolent neutrality' was framed as consonant with the idea and practices of Anglo-Saxon racial unity. The pro-British policy in the South African War proved difficult for Washington, since the relative majority of Americans probably supported the idea of two small white settler democracies rising against the rapacious British Empire. Two frames helped the US government stay the course. In the first frame, order always trumped justice in Africa. Even President Roosevelt went against his own 'Dutch blood' to argue that only Britain could civilize that part of the world. In the second frame, whatever their racial extraction and their cause, the Boers were evolutionarily stuck in a past marked by slavery and religious fundamentalism. Arguably, US policy held because the government its supporters argued in favor of a racialized hierarchy in which British Anglo-Saxons bested South African Boers by evolutionary necessity. Had Washington attempted to frame its policy as a matter of, say, economic interests... the identity-reality misfit would have greater and so would the pressure to change policy" (414). Anglo-Saxonism can also be seen intersecting with Holocaust memory at midcentury in Flannery O'Connor's 1948 short story "The Displaced Person."

threatened to call attention to the exploitation and strict control of indigenous development in the remaining British colonies (Von Eschen 82).<sup>91</sup>

During these same meetings and conferences, agents of the British and American Jewish communities, particularly Jacob Blaustein, Jacob Robinson, Maurice Perlzweig, and Hersh Lauterpacht, also wrangled for influence, seeking to shape the emerging human rights protocols so as to guarantee protections for Jews all over the world (Loeffler). Blaustein in particular recognized an opportunity to enshrine “a new vision of individual human rights etched ambiguously into the structure of an American-led global order,” and saw that, by positioning themselves at the forefront of this international transition to an Americanist civil liberties model, Jews could “display their democratic loyalty at home and protect their brethren abroad” (Loeffler 87). In terms of the actual negotiations that led to the UDHR, none of these parties were particularly successful in their attempts to wield influence, and the document that was eventually adopted was laced throughout with language intended to proactively moot its power. As James Loeffler explains, “It was never likely that the United States... or the British would risk exposure of their internal moral and political weaknesses by agreeing to sweeping changes to international law that would allow the UN human rights program to overcome the bar of sovereignty” (124). Blaustein’s public relations coup, however, was far more complete. For even though, as Loeffler

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<sup>91</sup> To better understand these dynamics, it is instructive to compare the UN’s approach to Mandatory Palestine to their decisions regarding the former German colony of South-West Africa, what is now Namibia. In 1946 and 1947, South-West Africa became a flashpoint for a burgeoning anti-racist post-colonial politics. The Council of African Affairs and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People threw their lot in with such African organizations as the Joint Passive Resistance Council of the Natal, the Transvaal Indian Congresses in South Africa, and the African National Congress to oppose the Union of South Africa’s attempted annexation of the territory. They urged the UN to place it under an international trusteeship and, furthermore, to open an investigation into racially motivated human rights abuses perpetrated under South African PM Jan Smuts’s government. British and American representatives once again demurred, preferring white control of Southern Africa but attempting to appear neutral, and suggested instead that South-West Africa be placed under the trusteeship of South Africa—viewed by many as a legal fiction meant to paper over what was actually an exploitative annexation. The illegal secret war to maintain South African control over Namibia continued through the late 1980s, and is a major historical plot point for *The Persistence of Memory* (see Chapter Six) (Von Eschen 81-83, 91).



demonstrates throughout *Rooted Cosmopolitans*, Jews and Jewish suffering did not actually play a unique role in the composition of these texts, “So linked are the Holocaust and human rights in our imaginations that we routinely assume that the Nazi mass murder of the Jews was the main impetus for the global advance in law and ethics. The ultimate wartime atrocity yielded a postwar bounty of human freedom” (xii).

Despite how integral this narrative has become to contemporary Jewish identity, the text of the UDHR itself did not contain the word ‘Jew.’ Loeffler further explains,

The story of the Jewish role in the rise of human rights... exposes a truth conveniently forgotten by contemporary lawyers, activists, and even most historians. Today we may imagine that the Holocaust shocked the American conscience into action, producing a reflexive moral embrace of human rights. We may likewise assume that Jews viewed the unfolding European nightmare as a cautionary tale about the dangers of racism and the need for international law to protect humanity. Yet, in reality, the rise of human rights in wartime America had surprisingly little to do with the Holocaust or Nazi antisemitism. The [UDHR] was in large measure the brainchild of American policy makers and intellectuals who replaced the delegitimized European model of minority rights with a new ideal of American-style civil liberties. (87)

This narrative, which will be treated at length in Chapters Five and Six, represents a major through-line of this project, because it has so often conditioned Jews’ in/ability to think of themselves as white. Under this theory of history, the Holocaust represents the incomparable apex of racist persecution, placing the figure of the Jew at the center of the Western moral order, and, in some estimations, obviating any responsibility they might share in other forms of

oppression.<sup>92</sup> Whatever "actually happened," the narrative that the Holocaust and Jewish victimhood, even when not explicitly named, were the most important catalysts for the liberal internationalist human rights framework is a narrative around which many liberal Ashkenazi Jews seem to have constructed their identity. Even the abstract idea, for example, that Jews have a nebulous but inexorable propensity to feel-with, or authority to speak on, the suffering and persecution of other groups locks one into an unresolvable dialectic of comparativist and exceptionalist frameworks of Holocaust memory.

These negotiations over the category of the human in Western politics also coincided with a global reorganization of discourses around race. As discussed in Chapter One, in the Peel Commission's report on Mandatory Palestine, British investigators identified the Yishuv as "European for the most part in outlook and equipment, if not in race" (122). Issued ten tumultuous years later, the report of the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry, which was commissioned yet again to report on the state of Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine, does not explicitly position the Jews within racial Europeanness either. In fact, the language of race is almost entirely absent from the AACE's report, referred to only in affirmations that, in accordance with the UN Charter, they promise to demonstrate "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (Art. 2). Paradoxically, it is precisely the absence of race in the document that indicates that the assimilation of Jews into European whiteness, both in Palestine and elsewhere, was already in process. As Matthew Frye Jacobson points out, after World War Two, Europeanness and whiteness were conflated in such a way that deracinated white ethnics

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<sup>92</sup> As James Baldwin put it, in the 1967 essay that will be a centerpiece of Chapter Six: "[M]any Jews use... the slaughter of the 6,000,000 by the Third Reich as proof that they cannot be bigots or in the hope of not being held responsible for their bigotry" ("Anti-White" 742).

(including Jews) while preserving certain discursive mechanisms that allowed their whiteness to be recognized and asserted. As Jacobson explains in the US context,

[B]y the 1950s... ethnicity was adopted to describe a new brand of “difference” whose basis was cultural .... ethnicity itself provided a paradigm for assimilation which erased race as a category of historical experience.... Not only did these groups now belong to a unified Caucasian race, but race was deemed so irrelevant to who they were that it became something possessed only by “other” peoples. (110)

Hence, though Jewish difference did not disappear, it was decoupled from race in public discourse. However, as the AACE report implies, this palimpsestic conflation of whiteness and Europeaness, and the attendant absorption of European Jews into at least provisional whiteness, is not a purely American phenomenon. Rather it is one of many interlinked patterns of racial politics that circulate in multiple national contexts.

The defeat of Nazism and the revelations of the Nuremberg Trials also impacted the positioning of Jews in overlapping racial power structures the world over. Official and unofficial antisemitism ebbed in the US, the UK, and South Africa, where Ashkenazi Jews were officially designated as white by the apartheid government. In the United States explicit antisemitism quickly became taboo, and, though it did not disappear, was understood as a marker of fringe politics on both left and right.<sup>93</sup> Even in Britain, as I will discuss in the following section, the influence of certain kinds of explicitly antisemitic elements waned, as with the short-lived British League of Ex-Servicemen and Women (1937-1948), which went from staging fifteen outdoor

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<sup>93</sup> Less so now, perhaps. After all, Donald Trump got away with making a string of obviously antisemitic comments during and after his election. Then again, what “counts” as antisemitism for the American right wing has shifted considerably since the 1950s. For example, where in the past one of the most common tropes that was considered antisemitic was the suggestion that all American Jews had a dual loyalty to Israel and were therefore not fully American, now some conservatives consider it antisemitic to suggest that Jews do not (or should not) have an unshakeable loyalty to Israel.

meetings in London per week to obsolescence in two years. Tellingly, as Todd Endelman reports, “When British fascism revived... in later decades, it was less interested in Jews than in recent immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Middle East, whose ‘difference’—in fascist eyes—was more marked than that of Jews” (233).

*Signing the racial contract, 1950-1956*

In both the United States and South Africa, midcentury white Jewish liberalism emerged at the nexus of collective fear and individual desire. In the 1950s and 1960s, both communities grappled with their changing positions in polities that were ostensibly liberal representative democracies, but which only offered liberal democratic privileges to their white subjects, up to and including the central privilege of liberalism: the ability to move through political and cultural spaces as an individual. Throughout this period in South Africa, in which the National Party swiftly and viciously implemented their vision of Manichean segregation, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) released statement after statement echoing their claim that they were an apolitical organization, and that South African Jews could, or at least should, only act politically on an individual basis. As one such report averred, “The Board of Deputies takes no part whatsoever in the party-political struggle.... The position of the individual Jew is, of course, entirely different. As a citizen it is both his right and his duty to play his part in the political life of the country, in terms of his own viewpoint and party affiliation” (qtd. in Shimoni 24).<sup>94</sup> Jewishness, the SAJBD at times seemed to maintain, was a purely personal, apolitical, identity marker, but it was the responsibility of Jews to be personally political in their capacity as citizens.

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<sup>94</sup> At least to me, it seems like the exception was always Israel. Because it could be considered an inarguably Jewish issue, the SAJBD and other Jewish organizations routinely took public positions on Israel that were much more direct than their statements on race relations.

To better explain how and why the SAJBD positioned themselves in this way, and because it is so important to the textual analyses in Chapters Four and Six, I want to pause for a moment and give an overview of the evolution of the South African Jewish community from the late nineteenth century to the beginning of apartheid, particularly in the context of liberalism. The history of South African Jewish liberalism begins in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, during which, even before the influx of Eastern European Jews dramatically swelled their ranks, English and Anglo-German Jews were central to the British extractive imperial project in South Africa.<sup>95</sup> An estimated 40,000 Jews entered South Africa between 1880 and 1910, that is, roughly between what the British called the First Boer War (1880-1881) and the declaration of the Union of South Africa (1910-1961), a semi-independent dominion made up of the Cape Colony, Transvaal, Natal, and Orange Free State. By the time apartheid began in 1948, another 30,000 Jewish immigrants and refugees had joined them. Throughout this time, enmity between Brits and Boers grew. As Jamie Miller puts it,

For decades, Afrikaans [cultural institutions] ... incubated a resentment-filled Afrikaner identity defined against both the imperialist British and the African native. Defeat and humiliation in the Boer Wars, Britain's conquest of the Afrikaner republics, and subordination in the anglophone [sic] economy were at the forefront of cultural and political discourse, all set against fears of the latent threat of black numbers, heathendom, and barbarism. (31)<sup>96</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, British whiteness was commonly held to be a more tolerant mode of whiteness than that of the Afrikaners, if only in comparison. Both the British and the

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<sup>95</sup> By the end of the 1870s, for example, four of the largest diamond mining concerns in Kimberley were either owned by Jews or substantially backed by them.

<sup>96</sup> I don't mean to suggest that the British weren't equally contemptuous of Afrikaners, but we have limited space and, to be honest, Afrikaners' abhorrence of most (not all) things British is more relevant to our story.

Afrikaner identities were fundamentally rooted in white supremacy, but their respective approaches to maintaining white dominance in Southern Africa often looked and sounded quite different. But although these ideological divisions would linger in South African politics through the twentieth century, the difference was, in some ways, purely rhetorical. As Martin Van Staden explains, “The liberal doctrine of trusteeship—the notion that oppressed peoples in what are today the developing countries should be protected and their status and rights elevated to that which was enjoyed in the West—was ironically used as a basis for both the [British] Cape liberal tradition and... Apartheid” (268). Still, whereas Afrikaner proto-nationalists espoused the principle of *baasskap*—literally ‘boss-ship’ but usually translated as ‘domination’—an uncompromising and unabashed philosophy of white supremacy intent on denying any rights whatsoever to non-Europeans, British ‘trusteeship,’ which drew on the usual imperial mixture of classical liberalism, paternalistic racism, and cutthroat corporatism, at least included room to *imagine* a non-racial democracy in South Africa.

It was thus into a fundamentally bifurcated white polity that Litvak Jews arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Gideon Shimoni explains, despite the considerable hardships faced by these immigrants, “Of fundamental importance for the future socioeconomic prospects of these Jewish immigrants in South Africa was the fact that they had the status of being Europeans, that is to say, whites. From the outset the Jewish immigrant entered into the dominant, caste-like white sector and lived therefore within its confines,” which meant assimilating into one of the two (broadly speaking) extant modes of South African whiteness (3). To be sure, both versions of South African whiteness were complicated by class, as was the Jewish encounter with them. To begin with, a not-insignificant proportion of the Jewish immigrants arriving from the Baltic openly identified as radical leftists, syndicalists, and

Bundists. As in the United States, impoverished socialist Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe were notable for their insistence on nonracial membership in the labor unions they formed, and Jews often opened businesses to cater to the Black population that many white merchants of both Afrikaner and English derivation refused to serve. In particular, Jews were known to allow and even encourage Black mineworkers to eat in their restaurants; the Jewish operators of these cafeterias and those who served there were the objects of scorn and hostility both from non-Jewish whites and other Jews.

This strand of radicalism in South African Jewry never disappeared entirely, but over time it was increasingly alienated from the mainstream South African Jewish community, who even before apartheid was wont to dissociate from non-white groups when it served their self-interest. One early example—which, I would argue, mirrors in important ways a series of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century court cases on naturalization law discussed by M. F. Jacobson in *Whiteness of a Different Color*—was South African Jews’ response to the restrictions and oppressions directed at the burgeoning population of Indian laborers and their families, particularly in 1902-3, when legislation was proposed that would bar immigrants who could not write in a “European” language.<sup>97</sup> Though it was directed at South Asians, this law might have potentially blocked Eastern European Jews as well, whose mother tongue, Yiddish, is written with Hebrew characters. While a small cross-section of leftist Jews recognized these

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<sup>97</sup> In Chapter 7, M. F. Jacobson gives an in-depth analysis of a string of court cases in which immigrants, primarily from Southern Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, petitioned US courts to recognize them as white and thus grant them citizenship under the 1780 Naturalization Law that only recognized white immigrants. As such, like South African Jews, these plaintiffs stopped short of contesting the white supremacist structure of US law, opting instead to challenge their classification within it. For example, writing about the case of Syrian-Turkish Tom Ellis in Oregon in 1910, Jacobson specifically claims, “Liberal though the decision appears to be, it nonetheless derives from a kind of pretzel logic whose very twists are defined by white supremacy. The matter before the court was whether or not Tom Ellis was a member of the ‘white’ race, and what, precisely, ‘white’ might be taken to mean,” adding later, “Thus did the racialized legalisms and the legalistic racialisms of both claimants and the courts conspire to protect property-in-whiteness and the core principle of ‘whites’ supreme claim to fitness for self-government” (238, 240).

developments as an opportunity for transethnic solidarity, most of the Jewish activists involved were opposed, not to the law itself, but rather to the classification of Yiddish as a non-European language (Shimoni 6-7). And although several well-known Jews participated in the antiracist campaign spearheaded by Mohandas Gandhi between 1906 and 1914, with the exception of those radicals, Jews generally did not raise alarms about the white supremacist politics of immigration in South Africa unless and until they themselves became the explicit targets of it.

In practice, only one of the two South African modes of whiteness was available to Jews, since Afrikaner identity was fundamentally Christian and, increasingly over time, expressly antisemitic. Contrary to the Israeli letter to the editor discussed in Historical Overture I, Afrikaner antisemitism was not a mere by-product of their hostility to the British. According to both Milton Shain and Gideon Shimoni, antisemitism became an increasingly explicit element of nativist and nationalist rhetoric in South Africa, particularly (but by no means exclusively) amongst Afrikaners. As in other Western countries, including the US and the UK, this rising tide of antisemitism was fueled in part by increasing anti-Bolshevik paranoia. Because of South African Jews' primarily Baltic origins, and because, frankly, a vocal cross-section of them were indeed affiliated with some form of socialism, Jews became the target of this early red scare. Thus, the Immigration Quota Act of 1930, unlike the proposed restrictions of 1902-3, was directly intended to staunch the flow of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe.<sup>98</sup> The deepening plight and political negotiations of South African Jews between the early 1920s and

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<sup>98</sup> Similar legislation was, of course, passed in the American context, specifically the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which included a "National Origins Formula" that set categories and caps for immigrant groups. In the British context, see the 1919 Aliens Restriction Act and the 1920 Aliens Order. It should be noted, however, the UK was much more generously disposed towards Jewish refugees in the 1930s than either the US or SA—at least domestically, that is, since they continued to bar Jewish immigration to Mandate Palestine in adherence to the White Paper of 1939.



the end of World War II thus bear more than a passing resemblance to the travails of American Jews during the same period.

In the 1930s, as American Jews attempted to hold their ground against virulent antisemites and pro-Nazi groups with broad public support, most famously Father Coughlin, the German-American Bund, and the Silver Shirts, so too did South African Jews contend with J. B. M. Hertzog, Ossewa Brandwag, and the paramilitary Grey Shirts.<sup>99</sup> Still, as Shirli Gilbert explains,

In the 1930s, [South African] Jews generally perceived the antisemitism they were experiencing to be a different category than racism against non-whites; terms like ‘racial antagonism’ often referred solely to conflicts among white groups. In the debates around Jewish immigration restrictions during that period, few, not even anti-racist liberals, made connections between antisemitism and South African racism more broadly. (41)

As with US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, United Party Prime Minister Jan Smuts’s determination to enter World War II on the Allied side won him great support from the Jewish community, who felt it prudent to overlook his ambivalence towards antisemitism in both public culture and the government itself.<sup>100</sup> As Daniel Mackintosh points out, despite their post-1948 protestations of apoliticism, during this period the SAJBD explicitly aligned itself against the

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<sup>99</sup> ‘Ox Wagon Sentinel,’ a reference to the supposed hardiness of the nineteenth century *voortrekkers*, pioneering Afrikaners who emigrated from the Cape Colony in the 1830s and 40s. In the volkish mythos, the *voortrekkers* were rugged traditionalists who rejected British racial reforms, opting instead to preserve their white supremacist values on the colonial frontier (Miller xvi). From an identitarian narrative standpoint, voortrekkers resemble the American pioneers who, in emigrating West along the Oregon Trail, were said to embody the spirit of American westward expansion that characterized the same generation. Numbering almost 300,000 at its peak, Shimoni attributes Ossewa Brandwag’s “mass-based membership” to its “rather loose ideological content and strong appeal to Afrikaner *volksseenheid* (national unity), its rejection of participation in the war on Britain’s side against Germany, and its advocacy of a republic” (15).

<sup>100</sup> And in any case, as in the United States, antisemitism was rampant in both of the viable political parties. As Shimoni explains, “[I]t is a matter of key significance for comprehending the fears and concerns of South African Jews that throughout this intra-Afrikaner ideological conflict, antisemitism, so far from being a bone of contention, was a central point of consensus, if not the very linchpin of accord between the adversaries” (16).

NP—in both its *Gesuiwerde* [Purified] and *Herenigde* [Reunited] forms—and actively raised money for the UP. South African Jewish leaders also began to explicitly affirm their commitment to liberal principles. For example, Gustav Saron, who led the SAJBD for almost forty years, claimed in a 1945 speech that the struggles of South African Jews were “directly bound up with liberal democratic forces” (qtd. in Mackintosh 35). Hence, as discussed in *Historical Overture I*, Jews looked towards the National Party’s 1948 victory with trepidation.

After 1948, the political valence of Holocaust memory in the United States and South Africa underwent a symmetrical shift. For a period in the 1930s and 1940s, it had been common, or at least not uncommon, amongst both American and South African Jews to evoke Nazism as an analog to the white supremacist power structures they witnessed at home (Gilbert; Staub). By the early 1950s, however, the Jewish mainstreams in both countries considered such comparisons *verboten*; for at least a decade and a half, the only acceptable analog for Nazi Germany was Soviet Russia. As Michael Staub explains of the American context, “the analogy was pointedly abandoned... in the late 1940s.... [T]here are a number of clues [as to why]—all of which point directly to... cold war liberal anticommunism” (26-27). Around the same time in South Africa, even though formal Holocaust commemorations remained common, “comparisons between Nazism and apartheid became increasingly less acceptable... [B]y the end of the [1950s] references to the lessons of Jewish history in the context of apartheid had by and large faded from the public realm” (“Racial State” 49). I emphasize this transnational discursive pattern first because it represents a particularly relevant example of how human rights concerns were subordinated to Cold War anti-communist exigencies throughout the postwar period. More to the point, I would argue that this shift indexes what Charles W. Mills calls the “racial contracts,” discussed in the introduction, to which American and South African Jews tacitly became parties

during this time. If Jews were to assimilate successfully into the white polity, it would not do to compare that polity to the Nazis, which would, among other things, give credence to Soviet narratives about the hypocrisy of racial capitalism.

As the SAJBD continued to hedge their bets and emphasize individual political choices, similar statements emerged from mainstream American Jewish organizations during and after the 1951 trial of accused Soviet spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, which, like the Rivonia Trial discussed in the next section, became a crucible in which the Jewish community felt compelled to set public boundaries around which Jews they would or would not support, defend, or even recognize, as Jews. Despite their protestations of innocence, the Rosenbergs were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage and executed in 1952, notably the first peacetime execution on these or similar charges to be carried out in the United States. During the trial, Judge Irving Kaufman was positioned in public discourse in much the same way as Jewish Rivonia prosecutor Percy Yutar. On the one hand, he could be read as an avatar of Jewish loyalty to the state who dutifully carried out his job without regard for the ethnic ties he shared with the defendants while also proactively mooting any accusations that the trial was tainted by antisemitism. For the leftist opposition, meanwhile, Kaufman was only the newest iteration of the Jew whose blind adherence to a malevolent state and base desire to appear patriotic allowed them to be used as a tool against other Jews (Greenberg 191-3). But when Jewish socialists and Communists made these accusations openly, they were met by unqualified denunciation by mainstream Jews. In May 1952, for example, seven national Jewish organizations released a joint statement affirming that,

Any group of American citizens has a right to express its views as to the severity of the sentence in any criminal case. Attempts are being made, however, by a Communist

inspired group ... in the Rosenberg Case, to inject the false issue of anti-Semitism. . . .

We denounce the fraudulent effort to confuse and manipulate public opinion for ulterior political purposes. (qtd. in Greenberg 192)

To this, ADL director A. Abbot Rosen added that if those who opposed the verdict “desire to express their point of view, they should do so as individual Americans” (qtd. in Greenberg 192).

*“The Jewish community condemns illegality,” 1960-1964*

The sharpening of Cold War polarities throughout the 1950s had a profound impact on Jewish politics and identity all over the world. The shift towards liberal anti-Communism—alongside other, more nationally and generationally specific, factors—also produced a deep split between mainstream and radical Jewish politics, which remained cleft in both the US and South Africa before being, as I will discuss in the final section of this Overture, hastily sewn back together in the 1990s. More broadly, from the 1957 integration crisis in Little Rock, AK, to the 1958 Notting Hill race riots against “Rachmanism” in London<sup>101</sup> and the consolidation of a UK-based Anti-Apartheid Movement, to the 1959 founding in South Africa of the Progressive Party by the Jewish MP Helen Suzman, to the uneasy but highly productive collaboration of Black and Jewish leaders in the US Civil Rights Movement, the late 1950s and early 1960s were a clear inflection point in what Jewish scholars often call “black-Jewish relations.”

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<sup>101</sup> “Rachmanism” was a term given to a collection of exploitative practices by English landlords in the 1950s and 1950s. As John Davis explains, the term “is often loosely used to mean rack-renting, but... is more precisely applied to the use of intimidation and other illegal or antisocial practices to remove rent-controlled tenants, either to take their tenancy out of control or to gain vacant possession with an eye to sale” (70). These predations were largely visited on the large population of West Indian immigrants who arrived in Britain as part of the “Windrush generation.” The term itself was a reference to Perec or Peter Rachman, a Polish Jewish refugee who became a prominent landlord in London in the mid-1950s and a “specialist in the art of making a profit from twilight-zone property in the metropolitan housing market” (70). In 1963, the year after Rachman died, he became notorious through his bit role in the Profumo scandal, which led to his name being used as a by-word for racially discriminatory housing practices. Interestingly, Todd Endelman cites the lack of reference to Rachman’s Jewishness in media coverage of the scandal as evidence of the ebb of public expressions of antisemitism in the UK.

At the same time, the international politics of apartheid were shifting. As Ryan M. Irwin explains in *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*, South Africa's discriminatory policies increasingly emerged as a "lodestar," that "sharpened opinions in ways that attached specific, shared meaning to amorphous words like freedom, justice, and equality, and.... highlighted well the agency of and the differences between actors in the pan-European and non-European worlds" (5). Throughout the 1950s, the US and UK had consistently shielded South Africa from rebuke on the international stage—as you may recall from Historical Overture I, both abstained from the motion striking SA ambassador Eric Louw's speech from the record—but those alignments began to shift. Washington and London's support of Pretoria became "steadily less unconditional," and "By 1960, the South African government was vulnerable in the international arena. In the emerging decolonized world, apartheid was a propaganda liability that undermined the West's ability to project its influence in independent Africa" (Irwin 6-7). Of course, by the end of the decade those alliances were once again firm, and the US and UK "not only supported the legitimacy of the apartheid state, they also embraced the wholesale containment of Third World political campaigns," but the 1960 moment, in which empire, once a celebrated vehicle of globalization and modernization "reemerged as the nation's antipode and as an agent of economic exploitation and racial supremacy" remains important (Irwin 9-10).

These fluctuating issues converged in the Jewish and geopolitical reaction to the Sharpeville Massacre perpetrated on March 21, 1960. That evening, a crowd of about 7,000 gathered to protest constrictive pass laws and marched peacefully to a police station in the

Sharpeville township<sup>102</sup> near Johannesburg and offered themselves up for arrest, at which point the police panicked and began firing indiscriminately into the crowd. At least sixty-eight people were murdered and one hundred and eighty injured, most of whom were shot in the back as they ran away. The event itself—as well as, in particular, the gruesome images circulated by the international media—set off a worldwide reaction and galvanized the nascent Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM).<sup>103</sup> Although Sharpeville was clearly an inflection point for the AAM, it had already been gathering steam in Britain for several years. It was not an officially Jewish-led effort—I would wager that, in Britain in the 1960s, styling it thusly or even acknowledging the large Jewish presence in its ranks would have been a serious political misstep—but a number of South African Jewish exiles played key roles in shaping its mission and organization, including Ruth First and Joe Slovo, Max and Saura Joffe, Solly Sachs, Ronald Segal, and Cynthia and Simon Zukas. Despite the radicalism of (most of) these Jewish activists, the movement’s principal organizers were careful to portray themselves as non-partisan and “liberal with a small ‘l’,” emphasizing individual morality over collective ethics and refusing to publicly acknowledge the support and resources they received from the British Communist Party (Fieldhouse; Gurney). And while the grotesque spectacle of Sharpeville and the violently anti-democratic crackdown that followed continued to underscore the urgent need for anti-apartheid action, the AAM was deeply wary of committing to what they saw as radical strategies such as international economic sanctions, which they would not embrace for another twenty years.

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<sup>102</sup> In South Africa, the terms ‘township’ and ‘location’ usually refer to the often underdeveloped racially segregated urban areas that, from the late 19th century until the end of apartheid, were reserved for non-whites. Townships were usually built on the periphery of towns and cities, and the non-whites who were forced to live there suffered abysmal conditions, ongoing stochastic violence, and constant surveillance.

<sup>103</sup> Although I refer to this group as the Anti-Apartheid Movement throughout in order to avoid confusion, prior to April 30, 1960, the movement was known as the “Boycott Committee”

As with anti-racist organizations in the US, like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the *white* contingent of South African anti-apartheid organizations was disproportionately Jewish, a fact that would be highlighted time and again in later years. In both countries, however, the mainstream Jewish reaction to Sharpeville was noticeably ambivalent. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies released an ambiguous statement, which, though it affirmed “the right, and indeed, the duty” of Jews to speak out in accordance with Jewish ethics, also reminded readers that “the board has emphasized the duty which rests upon all to deal with those important matters in moderate and sober language and with a due sense of public responsibility” (qtd. in Shimoni 34).<sup>104</sup> In the US, the American Jewish Congress (AJC), in part deferring to the more conservative World Jewish Congress (WJC), passed resolutions strongly denouncing apartheid in 1960 but only disseminated them internally. Thus, even at what is broadly considered the high point of Black and Jewish collaboration in the US, American Jewish organizations resisted the push to replicate that solidarity internationally.

The SAJBD, WJC, and AJC’s marked reticence to engage assertively in public debate was attributed to a fear that the South African government would retaliate against Jews if they criticized the regime too sharply or loudly, a fear which most historians of Jewish South Africa agree was well out of proportion to conditions on the ground. Nevertheless, as with the AAM, it established a pattern that would hold until the late 1980s in which, although leftist and radical Jewish *individuals* participated visibly in the anti-apartheid struggle, Jewish *communities* remained largely equivocal and ambivalent. The split between Jewish radicals and the

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<sup>104</sup> It would be problematic to rely overmuch on the statements of any one organization to represent the perspective of an entire community, and my use of the SAJBD is no different. However, since the bulk of the historians I draw on use the SAJBD’s statements and publications as their key primary sources, I find myself doing so as well.

mainstream in South Africa was highlighted by the 1964 Rivonia Trial. Five of the Rivonia defendants were Jewish, as were several lawyers for the defense and one of the prosecutors.<sup>105</sup> South African Jews' reaction to the trial, which Gideon Shimoni directly compares to the American Jewish response to the 1951 trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, was largely to dissociate themselves from these activists. Noting the presence of Jewish names in the lists of defendants and detainees, the SAJBD stated, "The Jewish community condemns illegality in whatever part of the population it might manifest itself.... [I]f individuals break the law, they expose themselves to the penalties of the law" (qtd. in Shimoni 71).

To understand this dynamic, which has had a dramatic impact on Anglophone Jewish literature and cultural memory, one must parse what makes "liberals" and "radicals" different in the first place. In the South African context, Shimoni uses the terms to make a "serviceable, even if artificial distinction" amongst white opponents to apartheid. He uses 'liberal' to refer to "those whites who sought to conduct their opposition, however vigorously, only within the parameters deemed legal by the regnant white polity" and 'radical' for "those who joined or actively identified with parties, groups, or movements that, in the face of legislative and police

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<sup>105</sup> While multiple Jewish lawyers worked for the defense, only one worked for the prosecution, Percy Yutar. He did so, however, specifically to prove the loyalty of Jews to the South African government. As his son, David Yutar, later remembered, "I don't like to use the word sycophant... it's a strong word to use, but there were elements of sycophantism. I have to say that. I think what he was trying to prove was that not all Jews are bad communists, there are Jews who are loyal to the regime, to the system, to the status quo" (qtd. in Rathbone 159) Claudia Braude has also been harshly critical not only of Yutar himself but also of the Jewish press, which she claimed "drew thinly disguised relief from the fact that so patriotically zealous a Jewish state prosecutor counterbalanced the embarrassing prominence of so many Jews in the ranks of the accused" (Shimoni 267).



repression, determined to go beyond those parameters” (74).<sup>106</sup><sup>107</sup> I find this a helpful first proposition, though it certainly doesn’t tell the whole story. One could also add that, in both the US and SA, Jewish liberals defined themselves against ethno-nationalism (with the exception of Zionism), conservatism, *and* Communism. It should also be clarified, though, that between 1950 and 1991 in the South African context, disavowal of Communism and a determination to protest apartheid only within the parameters of the law amounted to the same thing, since the Suppression of Communism Act and after that, the 1982 Internal Security Act, made it impossible for a political party or organization to be legally Communist. And, of course, many of the non-violent demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement were illegal, leaving aside the question of whether the laws that made them illegal were themselves legal after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. It’s also worth adding that, in the US, liberals tended more than radicals to express their platforms in the language of adding rights as opposed to pulling down structures, hence the Civil Rights Movement was (some would argue) at root a liberal movement, while Black Power was a radical one. In the South African context, it would be harder to draw such distinctions, since there was virtually no way to extend the vote to the Black majority without upending the apartheid state in its entirety.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> According to Shimoni at least, “It needs to be noted that notwithstanding the government’s constant sharpening of its instruments of suppression, a considerable spectrum of possible forms of resistance by ordinary white citizens remained. At one end was the simple exercise of the vote—available of course only to whites—and of expression through the media and literature in support of the small Liberal or progressive segment of the parliamentary and local governmental opposition to the National Party. In the middle were various civic actions such as protest demonstrations in cooperation with the victims of the apartheid system in ways antithetical to apartheid purposes” (74).

<sup>107</sup> Although these definitions are in some ways simplistic, they do speak compellingly to why liberalism in South Africa (and in the US to an extent) came to be thought of as a white form of political subjectivity. In apartheid South Africa (and in the US, though less officially), it became near impossible for a Black person to protest structural racism “within the parameters deemed legal by the regnant white polity.” With their bodies, movements, interactions, labor, and housing dictated by the state, there was no oppositional space that a Black person could *legally* occupy. Ultimately, only whites could be liberal in this sense.

<sup>108</sup> To be completely honest, we could go round and round forever on the difference between liberalism and radicalism and would probably only arrive at some version of Potter Stewart’s old saw, *I know it when I see it*.

Black activists in both countries were often highly critical of white liberalism. Steve Biko, who was at the forefront of the South African Black Consciousness Movement until he was brutally murdered by the police in 1977, wrote of them scathingly in his 1970 essay, “Black Souls in White Skins?”:

The role of the white liberal in the black man's history in South Africa is a curious one. Very few black organisations were not under white direction. True to their image, the white liberals always knew what was good for the blacks and told them so.... The myth of integration as propounded under the banner of liberal ideology... makes people believe that something is being done when in actual fact the artificial integrated circles are a soporific on the blacks and provide a vague satisfaction for the guilty-stricken [sic] whites.... Although [the white liberal] does not vote for the [NP] (now that they are in the majority anyway), he feels quite secure under the protection offered by the Nats and subconsciously shuns the idea of a change. This is what demarcates the liberal from the black world.... [N]o matter what a white man does, the colour of his skin—his passport to privilege—will always put him miles ahead of the black man. Thus in the ultimate analysis no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp. (20-22)

This compares instructively with Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous assertion in his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that “the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is... the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice... who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the

myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait” (3).<sup>109</sup> Apart from highlighting a crucial moment in transnational Jewish history, then, the point I aim to make here is one to which this project will perennially return: like white supremacy, white liberalism is a white identity formation, one that has been foundational to the construction of white Jewish identity since World War Two. This is not at all to say that white liberalism and white supremacy are morally, ethically, or culturally equivalent. Still, by drawing on and participating in the symbols, aesthetics, rhetorics, and political organizations of white liberalism, Jews in these countries were writing themselves into a transnational white identity culture that has endured in one form or another ever since.<sup>110</sup>

Another crucial driving factor behind the vehement mainstream American and South African Jewish rejection of leftist radicalism was the transformation of the Jewish communities themselves. In the postwar period, becoming-white American Jews climbed the socioeconomic ladder almost en masse and at a clattering speed. As countless scholars from Karen Brodtkin to Eric L. Goldstein to Matthew Frye Jacobson have explained, their upward movement in terms of class and status was coextensive with their becoming-white. But thus far, considerably less attention has been paid to the parallel—and, to an extent, even more dramatically meteoric—

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<sup>109</sup> At the same time it’s worth considering Nadine Gordimer’s thoughts in “Letter from Soweto” (1976): “The black moderate Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, whose position as a Bantustan leader fiercely attacking the government that appointed him has made him exactly the figure – legal but courageous – to whom whites have talked and through whom they hope to reach blacks, lately is reported to have made a remark about ‘white ultra-liberals who behave as though they are making friends with the crocodile so they will be the last to be eaten’. He also said, ‘Nobody will begrudge the Afrikaner his heritage if it is no threat to the heritage and freedom of other people.’ It seems old white adversaries might be accepted but white liberals will never be forgiven their inability to come to power and free blacks... Nevertheless, I don’t think the whites he referred to would be those with the outstanding fighting record of Helen Suzman, let alone radical activists like Beyers Naude of the Christian Institute, and others, of the earlier generation of Bram Fischer, who have endured imprisonment and exile alongside blacks in the struggle.”

<sup>110</sup> The statements and organizational decisions I highlighted in this section also emphasize again the overlap in white liberalism’s approach to both whiteness and liberalism. The repertoire of white liberalism includes various mechanisms for denying whiteness—for example, the language of colorblindness—as well as for denying the political nature of its construction. As discussed earlier regarding the obscurantist conflation of whiteness and Westernness, the way white liberalism constructs itself makes it all the more difficult to pin down its racial character.

change in the socioeconomic standing of South African Jews. Still less has been done to place these ascents in the broader context of the bourgeoisification of white South Africa and its considerable impact on the cultural and ideological relationship between South Africa and the United States.

The remarkable socioeconomic rise of (many) American Jews was the subject of fascination, celebration, resentment, and contempt even in the moment in which it occurred. Writing in 1958, sociologist Nathan Hurwitz already felt confident asserting that, “American Jews have climbed the social status ladder more quickly and achieved middle-class status more widely than any other ethnic group during the same period of American history” (qtd. in Berman 416). In the northeastern and midwestern US especially, Jews left the city for the suburbs in droves. As Jews entered the professions, their membership in labor unions, already hemorrhaging thanks to anti-communist crackdowns, dwindled further. No longer was union organizing considered a pillar of American Jewish politics; in fact, in the age of Joseph McCarthy, Jews’ pre-World War II connections to Yiddishkeit leftism became rather an embarrassment, if not a serious liability. This also fundamentally changed the relationships between Jews and other minority groups, Black Americans in particular. For though Jews moved out of the urban landscape, they retained ownership of businesses there. As neighborly camaraderie leached away, all that remained in many cases were embittered landlord-tenant and employer-employee relationships (Greenberg; Staub).

After 1948, those Jews who remained in South Africa experienced a similar renaissance. Although the roots of Jewish commercial and professional success pre-dated the implementation of apartheid, under the conditions the National Party created during its decades in power, Jewish wealth, and white wealth in general, accumulated exponentially. And like American Jews, South

African Jews left working class occupations for the professions on a large scale. A few statistics might help paint the picture. According to a sociological study of Johannesburg Jews conducted in 1977, by 1951 the median income of Jews was nearly sixty percent higher than that of Anglicans (i.e., English-speaking whites) or members of the Dutch Reformed Church (i.e., Afrikaners). By 1960 Jews accounted for twenty-three percent of all practicing doctors in South Africa. While Jews made up only 3.9% of the white population in 1970, they constituted 10.2% of the total whites in commerce (Dubb; Arkin). This also had a notable effect on the tepid response of Jewish organizations in the US to apartheid since many “hoped to benefit from the immense wealth and historic philanthropic generosity of organized South African Jewry” (Feld 11). Yet, as before, Jews were still a microcosmic example of the extent to which whites in apartheid South Africa amassed wealth. And as capital concentrated itself ever more heavily, and international tensions over apartheid grew, it became increasingly important to South Africans that they project their commonalities with the West, particularly the US and Britain, through the imagery of bourgeois consumption and lifestyles. White South Africans “self-consciously fashioned their personal appearance, public architecture, and consumer and lifestyle choices to demonstrate... their distinctness from the nonwhite majority and to advertise their modernity” (Grubbs 407). Whatever else could be said about them, ran the implicit message, they too were living the good life.

And it worked, particularly with the American businessmen and journalists who came to visit South Africa and were more dazzled by the white South African lifestyle than they were troubled by the violent exploitation on which it was based. As Grubbs puts it,

[T]he two societies shared a distinctive blending of white privilege and consumerism, one white Americans and South Africans both found congenial, and meaningful.... White

South Africans impressed American observers with the fervor of their embrace of “American consumer icons and lifestyles,”.... With U.S. advertising introducing “what was perceived as an international culture—an escape from both colonial British and Afrikaner heritage,” whites learned to love Hollywood movies and Coca Cola.... South African’s consumerism made the country seem even more familiar and nonthreatening, their whiteness making them almost ideal consumers. (422)

What’s more, white South Africans seemed to be living the very same fantasies of suburban opulence that circulated in postwar US culture and were, as discussed in Chapter One, intimately bound up with whiteness.<sup>111</sup> Many were impressed, for example, with the proliferation of private pools in the Johannesburg suburbs, which in both countries were the symbol of wealth and segregation par excellence. Indeed, by the 1960s, “even Americans hostile to South African injustice accepted the premise of South African economic dynamism and modernity” (Grubbs 415). And, in any case, the cruelties of apartheid were also familiar. One imagines that many white Americans implicitly identified with or at least understood the National Party’s stated goal of “separate development” for Africans and Europeans, which bore more than a passing resemblance to Jim Crow. Even more important in this context, however, is the shared vision of a global white consumer class. As discussed in the introduction, the intensive and purposeful circulation of racialized images of desire throughout the twentieth century provides crucial support for the idea that modern whiteness cannot truly be understood in a bounded national framework.

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<sup>111</sup> “Drawing on white myths of an empty South Africa, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial insisted, ‘the whites are not colonists; they settled a wilderness generations ago and built a thriving nation out of it.’ Now that whites were ‘greatly outnumbered by nonwhites’ and faced a dilemma, critics and other countries ‘might ask themselves how they would find a just solution in that situation.’ Whites lived, as Secretary of State Dean rusk vividly put it, in a ‘sea of blacks’” (421).

*“The source of self-regard,” 1991-1996<sup>112</sup>*

As I discussed at the end of Chapter Three, much of the discourse I am trying to unpack in Part Two circulates in a global economy of Jewish self-perception. In the transnational Jewish context, the 1990s was a period of intense myth production and revision. Writing broadly on US culture in the 1990s, Colin Harrison explains, “In many of the key events and spectacles... it was the memory of the 1960s that became the site of conflict, as members of the ‘sixties generation’ came to assume positions of power and fought bitterly over what that decade ought to mean” (3). In the US context in particular, what this often came down to for many middle-class whites generally as well as for many white Jews specifically, was a fervent desire to reconnect with, celebrate, and advertise their involvement in the youthful radicalism of the anti-war, anti-nuclear, pro-Civil Rights, and pro-feminist movements that blossomed then virtually collapsed thirty years prior, while maintaining an ideological distance from Johnson era programs aimed at fighting economic and racial inequality. Hence, “[T]he 1960s lingered in the 1990s as a kind of spectre: its legacy was worked over, denied and decried in popular culture, in battles over the meaning of multiculturalism, in the politics of race and gender, and in party politics” (13). At the same time, relations between Blacks and Jews hit a series of extreme lows. Though American Jews still voted for the Democratic Party by wide margins, a comprehensive analysis of the

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<sup>112</sup> This phrase is taken from the title of a lecture given by Toni Morrison in 1992. I’m using it, in a way that I sincerely hope is not appropriative, for two reasons. First, because the lecture in question speaks at length about jazz and the Jazz Age as a site for the reconstruction of Black identity, which reminded me ruefully of the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, in which the singer in question is a Jew who performs in black face. In the movie he, too, is attempting to construct a new American identity for himself outside of the old world, but his way of doing so is through an act of epistemological violence that, if one considers jazz the way Morrison does, is a much deeper act of betrayal than it first appears. Second, and probably more importantly, I think the phrase speaks beautifully to the issue at hand, which is, essentially, what mnemonic and historical narratives did white Jews construct in the 1990s to produce collective self-esteem? This is not just a Jewish phenomenon, of course. All people share a basic desire to feel that they are good and right, and all groups of people find ways to tell the story of history that help satisfy that desire. Those stories aren’t always lies, but they’re rarely complete truths, and they have done, to put it mildly, a great deal of violence in the world.

community's politics between the 1960s and 1990s, found that "some aspects of Jews' vaunted liberalism, including their sympathy for African American causes and its ascription to a universalized compassion stemming from Jewish values, were largely chimerical" (Sundquist 92).

As ever, not all of the factors in play were local. Indeed, Alex Lubin goes so far as to claim, "One could argue that, more than any other factor, mainstream African American support for the State of Israel was challenged by Israel's support for South Africa during most of the 1970s and 1980s" adding that, "The Black Panthers made Israel's support for South Africa a central component of their analysis of the Middle East conflict, forcefully arguing that Zionism and apartheid were twin evils of imperialism and racism" (125). As discussed in *Historical Overture I*, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, "Black-Jewish relations" had already begun to deteriorate, and Israel's burgeoning relationship with South Africa cast further doubt on the global Jewish commitment to opposing racism. When Wolf Blitzer informally polled members of the Congressional Black Caucus in 1985, "Five... said that Jews were not opposed to apartheid; seven said Jews were opposed, although three of these said the Jews were not strong enough in their opposition... [O]ne said the Black community had no perception of Jewish opposition to apartheid. One specifically said: 'In theory, they are against it; in practice, they are not.'" In the same article, however, a Jewish American lawmaker claimed that Israel's acceptance of Ethiopian refugees "'dramatically proved that Zionism is not racism,'" despite admitting that "'a more clear-cut opposition to apartheid by the Israelis... would do wonders in bolstering Israel's image in America, especially among Blacks'" (Blitzer). As you'll recall from *Historical Overture I*, the actual experiences of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to Israel cast doubt on whether their admission should be held up as proof of Israel's racial progressivism. Still,



Black and Jewish acts of dis/loyalty to one another, or perceived acts of disloyalty in any case, were constantly being stacked against one another during this period.

At the same time, the specter of black antisemitism in the US loomed large in the Jewish consciousness especially from the mid-1980s on. From the 1991 Crown Heights riots, to the Nation of Islam's publication of the antisemitic and error-riddled book, *The Secret Relationship of Blacks and Jews* (1991), which itself compounded a number of vitriolic and at times genocidal comments made by NOI leaders against Jews, to a series of high-profile conflicts about Jewish racism on university campuses, to many, in Eric Sundquist's words, "moral time seemed to march backward" (86).<sup>113</sup> These events challenged dearly held narratives of Black-Jewish cooperation, suggesting that, even during the Civil Rights Movement, these partnerships were born of mere convenience. As Sundquist explains,

To the extent that the alliance was formally articulated—by groups such as the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, for example—it was mainly an artifact of the postwar years, part myth and part reality... with selfless devotion and high idealism accompanied at every point by friction and suspicion.... By the last decade of the twentieth century, amidst frequent acrimonious charges and countercharges, a few Jewish and black compatriots, occasionally on the neoconservative right but more often on the liberal left, were still pressing forward with strong convictions. At the same time, African American observers across the political spectrum cast serious doubt on the alliance. (92)

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<sup>113</sup> This will probably seem hyperbolic, so an example may help, such as Louis Farrakhan's exclamation in a 1985 speech at Madison Square Garden: "Jews, this... is your last chance, because the Scriptures charge [you] with killing the prophets of God... [If the Jews] bring on this generation the blood of the righteous. All of you will be killed outright. You cannot say 'Never Again' to God, because when He puts you in the oven, 'Never again' don't mean a thing." (qtd. in Sundquist 88)

Cornel West, for example, “contended that there was no golden age, only a better age lasting through 1967 but then undermined by Jewish neoconservatism coupled with... black sympathy for the Palestinian cause and resentment of Jewish assimilation and economic success,” while Glenn Loury explained that this falling out was essentially the inevitable ““end of an illusion”” (qtd. in Sundquist 93). Writing in 2005, meanwhile, Cheryl Greenberg argues that, “It is not blacks and Jews so much as postwar liberalism that has splintered. The Jewish community, still liberal on race and on social issues, has become more conservative economically. The black community, by contrast, remains liberal on economic issues but far less unified on traditional liberal approaches to civil rights” (251). Whatever the cause, amid this air of questioning and recrimination, and despite some continued cooperation in various political arenas, a younger generation of Black and Jewish activists came to believe that the narrative of mutual respect, shared histories of suffering, and revolutionary partnership was little more than a bedtime story.

Still, crucially, despite the evident and widespread doubts about its veracity, the narrative of a Black-Jewish partnership such as that suggested by photos of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Heschel marching side by side from Selma to Montgomery continued to be told and retold:

Proving, perhaps, that the black-Jewish relationship is stronger in the life of the mind than in reality, there has been no subsidence in analytic commentary, memoir, and literature—sentimental, ironic, epic, farcical—devoted to the topic.... But such narratives, like much contemporary fiction and historiography, often carry a sense of wistfulness for alliances lost... [for] an intimate relationship now difficult to imagine and unlikely ever to be revived. (Sundquist 93)

Like the Holocaust-as-catalyst theory of the postwar human rights regime, the story of Jewish allyship during the Civil Rights Movement retains a cachet out of proportion to historical fact. Many of these narratives belonged to the school of Jewish political storytelling that Cheryl Greenberg refers to as “Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish.” In the introduction to *Troubling the Waters*, Greenberg briefly meditates on the historical-political discourse that metonymizes Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner—two CORE field workers who were murdered with their Black colleague James Chaney in Mississippi in 1964—as stand-ins for what they consider the outsized contribution of Jews to racial justice activism. “[B]oth scholars and polemicists often use idiosyncratic individuals to represent their communities,” she explains, and yet, “That Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish says nothing about the commitment of the Jewish community writ large to the problems facing African Americans” (4). Although, as discussed earlier, Jews did in fact represent a disproportionately large contingent of the white activists who participated in the Civil Rights and anti-apartheid movements, that cannot really be extrapolated as “proof” that the Jewish community as a whole was dedicated to the cause, particularly in situations where anti-racist programs could encroach on their prerogatives.

The early 1990s also witnessed what is often referred to as a “memory boom,” the culmination of a trend beginning in the late 1970s wherein Holocaust memory in particular moved to the forefront of transnational consciousness. For American Jews, this echoed and strengthened the midcentury inscription of the Holocaust at the center of a post-World War II consensus on human rights. In the 1990s, this consciousness was quite often mediated through American pop culture in films such as Steven Spielberg’s globally successful *Schindler’s List* (1993), a phenomenon often called “the Americanization of the Holocaust.” As Peter Novick famously documented in *The Holocaust in American Life*, by the end of the twentieth century,

the Holocaust had assumed a central place in Jewish American identity. “We choose to center certain memories because they seem to us to express what is central to our collective identity” Novick explains, “Those memories, once brought to the fore, reinforce that form of identity. And so it has been with the Holocaust and American Jewry” (7). As if to compound Novick’s point, a study published by the Pew Research Center in May 2021 reported that seventy-six percent of American Jews, including those who identify as irreligious, cited “remembering the Holocaust” as “an essential part of what being Jewish means to them,” a higher proportion than those who gave any other response.<sup>114</sup> This suggests that Novick’s claims have held true well into the twenty-first century. Building directly on Novick’s work, Judith E. Berman similarly argues that Holocaust commemorations of the 1990s were key in the reconciliation of various disunited Jewish groups in Britain. As she puts it,

Many have shared the aspiration for Anglo-Jewish unity at Holocaust commemorations, but a narrow definition of “unity”, as taken to mean centralization, uniformity and consensus, has been restrictive and has not served the desired end.... [D]espite the high level of cohesion achieved by the rituals of the ceremony and the collective mourning, Holocaust commemorations have also been occasions of conflict and disunity. It is the recent proliferation of commemorations in the 1990s, taking place in a diverse range of Jewish organizations and institutions rather than one combined memorial gathering, that has led to Anglo-Jewry’s uniting in common moments of remembrance. (51)

Despite the emphasis on American media, then, the memory boom was a global phenomenon. In the “new South Africa” this resurgent Holocaust memory culture intersected with the reparative politics of the post-apartheid period in fascinating ways. As Shirli Gilbert explains, after the end

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<sup>114</sup> Interestingly, that proportion is even higher than it was in 2013, when 73% of American Jews cited “remembering the Holocaust” as an essential part of being Jewish.

of apartheid, “the Holocaust was central to a wider process of creating consensual memory cultures with the aim of reconciliation and nation-building,” a reference the newly elected government frequently called upon when “proclaiming its commitment to human rights and restoring the country’s image on the international stage” (369). Much of this discourse converged on the image of Anne Frank, who served as an inspiration for anti-apartheid activists. A handwritten copy of her *Diary* was passed so often between prisoners of the notorious Robben Island that it quickly fell apart, and she often figured in post-apartheid political rhetoric (Gilbert 366).

At the same time, in South Africa, Jewish organizations endeavored to reorganize and reconstitute the narrative of Jewish opposition to apartheid. As touched on previously, even though under apartheid Jews were consistently more liberal than the white population as a whole, Jewish organizations remain largely neutral until the 1980s. Interestingly, in the landmark 1994 elections, 58% of South African Jewish voters supported the Democratic Party, which only received 1.7% of the overall vote. A further 31% of Jewish voters supported the National Party while only 11% supported the ANC (Kotler-Berkowitz). Jews also began leaving South Africa at a steadily increasing rate, with Australia being the new preferred destination.<sup>115</sup> Most cited personal safety and rising crime as reasons for departure, as violence that the apartheid authorities had kettled in Black areas moved outward. In response, the SAJBD and Zionist Federation advanced the slogan “either stay home or go home,” restricting the acceptable choices for South African Jews to either staying in the new South Africa or making *aliyah* to Israel. While they were certainly concerned about what the ebb tide of South African Jewry would mean materially for the future of their organizations, according to Shimoni the slogan also

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<sup>115</sup> Shimoni reports that, by the mid-1990s, an estimated 40% of emigrating SA Jews headed for Australia, while 20% relocated to the United States, 15% to Israel, and 10% each to the UK and Canada (263).

suggested the “unspoken cognition that that there was nothing to be proud of in the spectacle of Jews, who had enjoyed the ill-gotten gains of white minority domination... now choosing to leave rather than face up to the hardships of apartheid’s legacy” (263).

For those who remained, the question loomed of how that legacy would or could be framed. After apartheid collapsed, Jewish ANC and SACP members like Albie Sachs and Joe Slovo were rehabilitated and became towering figures in South African Jewish culture where before they were outcasts. In the South African context, then, “Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish” could easily be transmogrified into “Slovo and Sachs were Jewish” and be just as meaningful and as readily observable. Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Albie Sachs, Denis Goldberg, Ronald Segal, Lionel Bernstein—these are but a few of the Jewish anti-apartheid activists who are consistently invoked in the collectively self-constructed history of the South African Jewish community in the three decades since apartheid fell. And yet, as I only just discussed, these individuals were not representative of the community as a whole, and what’s more, mainstream liberal Jewish leaders and organizations repeatedly, publicly distanced themselves from leftist Jewish radicals. In the United States as well, “There was movement... in the way the community was re-orienting its history with regard to radical (and liberal) Jews’ contributions to the end of apartheid. Up until those years, Jewish leaders had treated radical activists, especially, with tremendous hostility” (Feld 128). In both South Africa and the US, then, there was a drive to “‘recononise’ radical Jews in the eyes of ... the world. Laying claim to a collective Jewish heritage that included this successful struggle for human rights gave meaning and ethnic distinction to Jews beyond whiteness” (Feld 128). Given the SAJBD’s actual statements during the Rivonia Trial, it is difficult to take seriously the article published in the Rosh Hashanah 2016 issue of their newsletter *Jewish Currents*, titled, “The Jewish Connection in the Rivonia Trial,

1963-64,” which focuses on the fact that all of the white defendants in the infamous trial were Jewish. Authors Gene Eisen and Les Glassman go so far as to begin their essay by asserting, “Jews were involved in ‘The Struggle’ against South Africa’s apartheid mainly because it is part of our DNA,” going on to claim that “Because of their traditions and history, many Jews in South Africa felt compassion and kindness towards oppressed blacks” (78). Of course, it would be impossible to objectively disprove such statements (and I am in any case not arguing that they are categorically untrue) but that’s hardly the point. The point, rather, is that, since World War II, Jewish whiteness has been the (often unacknowledged) centrifugal point around which global political-mnemonic narratives have cycled, which must be approached with productive skepticism. Hence, as we move on to consider literary narratives that, like liberal politics, are deeply invested in the moral development of the individual and the family unit, we should be aware of how those stories intersect with broader Jewish political narratives, contradicting or reproducing them, but always complicating them.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ‘A WHITE LIBERAL TRAPPED BY HIS PREJUDICES’: DAN JACOBSON’S CRITIQUE OF SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH LIBERALISM IN *THE BEGINNERS*

“[T]he history of liberalism in South Africa has been a history of failure, but nonetheless a proud history.” – Martin Van Staden, “The Liberal Tradition in South Africa, 1910–2019”

### *Introduction*

In May 1953, Dan Jacobson, then a young and largely unknown South African Jewish writer, published an essay in the American Jewish periodical *Commentary* titled, “A White Liberal Trapped By His Prejudices.” The piece begins with a confession and a promise: “I offer myself: I am racially prejudiced, and I don’t believe in my prejudices. I would like to get rid of them, though I do not believe that under the present circumstances I can, and I am willing to help in the fight against them within myself and others” (454). The conflicts of conscience he goes on to describe would likely have been quite familiar to American Jewish audiences then and now.<sup>116</sup> He writes, for example, of laughing and joking with the Black men who work in his father’s mill, being conscious all the while of his need for them to stay in their “place.” He recounts affecting an air of friendliness with the Black people he meets in the streets and being proud of this openness yet knowing that as much as his desire to be kind is deeply felt, it remains an affectation, or as he puts it, “I pass on, warmed by my generosity, flattered by his gratitude, and soothed by the feeling that things aren’t so bad after all. Later, being a liberal, I shall revile myself, but in the meantime it has been very pleasant” (456). In the second half of the essay, he

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<sup>116</sup> For example, after the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on May 26, 2020, a wave of protests swept the country, revealing among other things an underlying political heterogeneity among American Jews. Although, as mentioned earlier, Jews in the US continue to strongly support the Democratic Party, there were striking variations in American Jewish responses to looting on the one hand and police brutality on the other, both of which quickly became features of media coverage of the protests. While many progressive Jewish organizations joined the marchers, other centrist and right-wing Jewish groups implicitly or explicitly sided with the US police state.



shifts focus to an uprising that had recently occurred in a location next to his hometown of Kimberley.<sup>117</sup> He describes hearing a barrage of noise, of sirens, shots, political slogans, and screaming, distant at first but then, suddenly, near. His family's home is down the road from the local police station, and he writes that, gripped by fear, "I was sure that the Africans were storming the police station, and how long would it be before they were coming up the Central Road, coming for us?" (458) But the deeper pain comes a short while later, when he and his family of white Jewish liberals must recognize their fear for what it was:

We knew that we were lost when we stood with our white neighbors, our sharp physical fear of death guttering away from us, and agreed with them that all the police could do was shoot.... We knew that we were lost when we agreed with Mr. Collins... that the government should give every white man a revolver. And most terribly and desolately of all we knew that we were lost when we wandered into the back yard of the house, and saw our two servants standing there.... [W]e opened [the door] and closed it behind us, to get away from their dreadful rigid silence. And that was how the riot, one savage and hopeless uprising against the authority of the white ruling race, touched me, a member of that race. (458)

Despite their liberal intentions, and despite knowing that the heavily armed South African police were more than capable of containing (which is to say, slaughtering) the protestors, the white Jewish family was consumed by an "immediate and overpowering fear of death by violence at the hands of a black mob" that led them to side with the oppressors, with the white supremacist state (458). "I was as dependent as the most fanatical white African-hater on the Sten guns and

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<sup>117</sup> As mentioned earlier, "location" and "township" were euphemisms used in apartheid South Africa to refer to the decrepit areas to which non-whites were forcibly relocated and confined. Probably the most famous of these is Soweto in the Gauteng province outside of Johannesburg. "Soweto" is an acronym for "South West Townships."

rifles of the white police,” Jacobson admits, “For the Africans could not have distinguished between us; and in all humility I have to ask—why should they have distinguished? And there is no answer” (458-9). Concluding the essay in this way, Jacobson offers a strikingly candid affirmation of his own whiteness while also condemning South African Jewish liberalism as an ethically feeble politics that ultimately does nothing to distinguish its adherents from the more explicit forms of white supremacy they claim to abhor.

Of all the novelists discussed herein, Dan Jacobson is the one whose biography maps most cleanly onto the transnational structure of this project. Born in Johannesburg in 1929 to a Lithuanian- and Latvian-Jewish immigrant family, Jacobson grew up in Kimberley, which he describes in a 1960 essay as having been “a very ‘English’ city in many ways” where “[Cecil Rhodes’s] ideas of empire still lingered perceptibly” (23). As discussed earlier, many (not all) South African Jews cathected quite strongly onto post-imperial English culture, and Jacobson was in this context exemplary, developing an especially keen attachment to the English literary tradition. He graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1948 before leaving South Africa for the newborn State of Israel. After living on a kibbutz for nine months, he returned home briefly before making his way to England in 1950, the thrill of which he attempts to capture in several of his novels and essays.<sup>118</sup> Despite his enthusiasm for the UK, Jacobson returned to South Africa for three years, and in that time plunged deep into the mainstream culture of postwar Jewish South Africa: he worked for several months on the editorial staff of the SAJBD, he attempted to involve himself in the running of his father’s cattle feed manufacturing

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<sup>118</sup> In his 1960 novel, *The Evidence of Love*, for example, the unnamed narrator rhapsodizes: “How can one explain what England is to the South Africans who come to the country as visitors, tourists, immigrants, students? ... England is like a mirror in which they see their deepest selves reflected, the selves they have sought for... England is their own past; yet they have never seen it before.... England contains nothing less than the meanings of the words they have used all their lives; yet they understand them no better for having seen her” (3).

company, Mills and Feeds (Pty.) Ltd., and he married Rhodesian Margaret Pye. In 1954, the year after he wrote “A White Liberal Trapped,” Jacobson returned to London where he remained until his death in 2014, save for multiple residencies at US universities and regular visits to Israel.

Jacobson’s oeuvre, which includes some sixteen novels and novellas, three short story collections, five essay collections, and two memoirs, reflects to a tee the border-crossing complexity of Jewish literary culture in the mid-to-late twentieth century. For example, despite the fact that a number of Jewish South African authors wrote, lived, and published in England, Dan Jacobson is the only writer whose work is collected in both *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland* and *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa*—a coincidence, perhaps, but also an accurate reflection of the fact that a wide swath of his work is set in South Africa and deals with South African themes and structures while also being distinctively and thoroughly indebted to the British literary tradition. At the same time, a significant cross-section of his work was published in New York, he continually placed essays in American periodicals, reviewed American novels, and composed several pieces contemplating American culture. Finally, though he lived in Israel but briefly, both his fiction and nonfiction deal often and at length with Zionism and Jewish history going back to biblical Palestine. In fact, *The Beginners* marks the point at which Jacobson’s fiction leaves South Africa for a long while. According to Sheila Roberts, in her monograph on Jacobson, *The Beginners* “brings to epic culmination his career as a South African writer and as one who had been perceived... as belonging in the mainstream of traditional fiction” (55).<sup>119</sup> So, while Jacobson is in no way the paradigmatic South African

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<sup>119</sup> Just to give a sense of the shift in Jacobson’s work after 1966: his next novel after *The Beginners* was *The Rape of Tamar* (1970), a retelling of the titular biblical story from the perspective of King David’s nephew, Yonatab; *The Wonder-Worker* (1973) is set between London and a Swiss sanitarium; *The Confessions of Joseph Baiz* (1977) is set in a fictional totalitarian state called Samedia that resembles South Africa but isn’t; *Her Story* (1987) is set in the future year 2296 and is loosely based on a story from the Christian Bible. He only really returned at length to the Jewish South African context after apartheid fell, in memoirs *The Electronic Elephant* (1994) and *Heshel’s Kingdom* (1999), although the latter is more directly focused on his unknown Lithuanian grandfather. Interestingly, though I

Jewish author, he does embody the politically and ethically fraught circulations and migrations of Jewish whiteness that I am attempting to capture in this project.

*The Beginners* is one of Jacobson's most autobiographical novels. Like the author, the central protagonist Joel Glickman is the son of a Jewish factory owner who leaves South Africa in 1948 for a brief and unfulfilling sojourn on an Israeli kibbutz before finally settling in London. It is also the most Dickensian in structure, style, and scope, comprising almost five hundred pages, divided into seven parts and one hundred and fifty-five chapters, and peopled by more than forty characters, major and minor. It begins with the emigration of Avrom Glickman and his sons, Meyer and Benjamin, from Lithuania to South Africa in the early twentieth century. Of this first generation we are shown only a brief, telling moment in which the sensitive yet feckless Avrom, bringing his sons' earnings home to pay passage for the rest of the family, gives them away at a train station in Germany to a widowed mother who claims she has been robbed. As if in defiance of this charitable act, Benjamin and Meyer grow into hard-nosed, self-interested, successful businessmen. Benjamin marries Sarah, another Litvak immigrant whose adolescence was spent as a nursemaid to her dull, elderly uncles in a rickety house on the empty, dusty veld. Benjamin and Sarah have three children, Joel, Rachel, and David, who ultimately receive, Joel in particular, the vast bulk of the novel's fastidious attention.

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have less knowledge of her oeuvre so cannot say for sure, Nadine Gordimer's work seems to have shifted away from South African liberal realism at almost the exact same time, as Paul Rich noted in 1985, her 1966 novella *The Late Bourgeois World* perhaps "marked the beginnings of the end of the liberal novel genre in South Africa and its submersion into a dialectic of popular culture that awaits the emergence of a group of black interpreters for the authentic expression of a South African cultural identity" (78). Gordimer's work stayed in South Africa in terms of setting and theme, but after 1966 it seems to have become noticeably less realist/liberal and more experimental/radical. Like Jacobson, she too returned at least somewhat to a more realist (and more Jewish) mode after apartheid. While again I cannot say definitively, Rich's explanation makes a certain amount of sense to me, basically, that liberal realist forms and aesthetics were fundamentally ill-suited to the irrational horrors of apartheid. When both Gordimer and Jacobson recognized this, they moved on, albeit in strikingly different directions.

After being demobilized from his army service during World War II, the alienated and chronically ambivalent Joel enrolls in the University of the Witwatersrand but ends up spending most of his time and energy at a training compound organized by a group of young South African Zionists, having fallen for a passionate member of the movement named Natalie.<sup>120</sup> Like other members of the group, Joel moves to a kibbutz in the early years of Israeli statehood, despite Natalie's last minute decision to remain in Africa. Although he adapts to the kibbutznik lifestyle, he is disenchanted by the Yishuv, who remind him of Afrikaners, and is pushed over the edge after meeting with his cousin Yitzchak and hearing the harrowing story of how he survived the Holocaust in Lithuania. Wandering off during guard duty one night, Joel is shot, leaving Israel as soon as he has healed. Ultimately, Joel immigrates to England, where he teaches history, has an affair with and then marries his father's *shiksa* secretary, also a South African expatriot in London, and starts a new generation. Rachel, after being impregnated and abandoned by her first cousin Jonathan, marries the leftist agitator Bertie Priess, who abandons politics altogether and takes over Benjamin's butter factory. By the end of the novel, she is the only Glickman child left in South Africa. David enrolls in university, but, after rebelling against the fraternity-like social structure of his dormitory, drops out and heads for England. Rejecting the flash and glamor of Jonathan's London lifestyle, David unexpectedly turns to religion, and ultimately decides to study engineering at the Technion in Haifa, where he can immerse himself in his faith.

*The Beginners* adapts the classically British, liberal, imperial form of the family saga as the framework through which to explore (and expose) the transnational convergences and

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<sup>120</sup> The book specifically names the organization as Hatzofim, Hebrew for "the scouts," an organization founded in Palestine 1919 as a Zionist version of the international scouting movement. Hatzofim is one of several Zionist youth organizations that has had a proportionally significant presence in South Africa since the 1930s.

tensions that inhere in white Jewish liberalism. Written in the shadow of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, the novel draws on the fundamentally Anglophilic aesthetics of South African liberal realism to reveal the abiding emptiness of Jewish liberalism at midcentury, presenting it as a solipsistically apolitical ideology that allows bourgeois Jews to abstract themselves from the suffering of non-white others. And yet, by using liberal forms and liberal aesthetics, *The Beginners* constructs a biting critique of liberalism from *within*, ultimately producing a deep and detailed record of liberal Jewish implication, individual and collective. As such, the novel demonstrates the insuperability of whiteness and liberalism in the post-Holocaust era and attempts to confront the ethical crisis therein. And of course, like the other authors in my archive, Jacobson represents Jewish whiteness as a function of distance and proximity, both geographical and symbolic, emerging at the crucial, conflicted intersections of traumatic memory and political expediency, public performance and private prejudice, and collective fear and individual desire.

*The (Jewish) family saga, liberalism, and imperialism*

The word ‘liberal’ only appears in *The Beginners* twice, both times during a single conversation between Jewish radicals Adela and Bertie, who are discussing events in South African politics in 1946: “‘It’s terrible, isn’t it?’ [Adela] said.... ‘The way [Prime Minister Jan] Smuts answered the NRC ultimatum. He really doesn’t believe the Africans are human at all! And he’s the great liberal world statesman!’... ‘Yes,’ [Bertie] agreed.... ‘He’s a kind of walking embodiment of the bankruptcy of liberalism’” (77).<sup>121</sup> As in earlier chapters, then, looking at *The*

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<sup>121</sup> I cannot say this with absolute certainty, but I believe the “NRC ultimatum” refers to the Natives Representative Council’s (1936-1951) denunciation of the brutal police suppression of a large-scale mine workers’ strike on the Witwatersrand in 1946. As Leonard Thompson describes, “By that time, the Smuts government had finally lost the confidence of the older Africans who controlled the Natives Representative Council... The councillors had become increasingly frustrated. They had taken their assignment seriously, but the government had continued to ignore their advice. In August 1946, when the council assembled in Pretoria for its regular session, the white chairman refused to make a statement about the massive strike of African miners... The council then passed resolutions denouncing the shooting of strikers, calling the government’s maintenance of discriminatory laws and practices ‘the antithesis and negation of the letter and spirit of the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Charter,’ and demanding the abolition

*Beginners* as a novel of and about liberalism requires an excavation of the text’s “ideological unconscious,” which emerges “not as an expression of what the work does not know, but of what it knows most deeply, and thus says least” (*On Literary Worlds* 50). In order to understand Jacobson’s critique of South African Jewish liberalism—or even to decide whether *The Beginners* is a critique of South African Jewish liberalism as opposed to a flawed or failed defense of it—we must return to the questions of what liberalism is, what it was or could have been under apartheid, how it intersects with a post-Holocaust understanding of Jewishness, and the extent to which it is co-constitutive with certain forms of whiteness. Having already gone through at least a few of the issues endemic to South African Jewish liberalism in Historical Overture II, I want to focus on a more abstract liberal conflict, that between the morally good life and the materially good life, and how it manifests in the family saga form. To do so I will loop the text through the articulation of liberalism in the work of American political theorist (and Jacobson’s contemporary) John Rawls, particularly in his magnum opus *A Theory of Justice* (1976). There are crucial conceptual overlaps between how Rawls and Jacobson understand liberal politics and liberal subjectivity. Rawls’s privileging of the moral-political development of the individual over and above that of the community, his theory of the good, and his emphasis on rooting the goodness of the citizen-subject in the fulfillment of a rational plan of life all emerge as powerful foci in Jacobson’s critique of the white liberalism of Jewish South Africa.

The moral-political development of the individual who possesses a rational plan of life and works progressively towards the good is the basis of multiple literary forms that emerged in tandem with classical liberalism in eighteenth-century Europe. As we will discuss in Chapter

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of all discriminatory legislation” (182-183). Adela and Bertie’s conversation could also refer to the National Party’s publication of the Sauer Report (often cited as at least a symbolic blueprint for apartheid), which called for the Natives Representative Council’s abolition. Smuts did not comply, but the NRC was abolished in 1951 anyway under the Bantu Authorities Act.

Six, the bildungsroman is one such literary form. Here I focus on another: the family saga. As John P. Zomchick points out, “Together the law and the eighteenth-century novel displace the subject... to the newly emergent nuclear family, which is in turn represented as the natural home of the rational, pleasure-seeking individual” (Zomchick 10). This theoretically deracinated ‘rational, pleasure-seeking individual’—the same liberal subject on which Rawls bases his conception of the good—has been the ideal subject of liberalism since the “the codification of the subject's ancient rights and liberties” in the late seventeenth century (24). As much as liberalism and capitalism eschew collectivity, they do celebrate it in one iteration: the family. The family, for example, is the one form of shared ownership that does not definitionally challenge the ideology of personhood-through-proprietorship. On the contrary, Zomchick points out that the family “appears at once as the subject's source and telos,” because, “It is in the family that the person in the state of nature first comes to realize the value of association” (Zomchick 13). As Zomchick explains, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this ideological subject was “itself subjected to yet newer discursive forces that further modify it,” that engender “a change from a more or less pristine form of *homo juridicus* to an ever more complex form of *homo economicus*,” a term to which we will return in later sections (24).

The family is also, as Sara Ahmed explains, a crucial nexus for the production and inheritance of whiteness. Indeed, Ahmed’s claim that whiteness is “inherited through the very placement of things” speaks back to Zomchick’s argument that both the family and the novel collude in the “ideological emplacement” of the subject. In citing “emplacement,” I would argue that both scholars are describing the positioning of the subject in relation to other subjects, opportunities, and objects of desire. When the subject is “emplaced” with the family unit, for example, the subject’s identity becomes at least partly a function of the family’s other subject-



members and is able to inherit the family's broader emplacement in society.<sup>122</sup> Theorizing a whiteness that is not only worldly but also co-constitutive with what we recognize as "world," Sara Ahmed evolves the spatial framework of whiteness. And while holding the world in place, so to speak, she also zooms in on the affective structures, social proximities, and figures of language through which whiteness is personally known and given. In so doing, she develops our understanding of the relationship between whiteness and the familial past the more straightforwardly cruel way in which genealogy functions as a conduit of personhood in racialized structures of power. While it is comparatively obvious how anti-miscegenation laws and one-drop rules were used throughout the Anglosphere to police the boundaries of racialized subjectivity by exerting state control over the familial, what Ahmed shows us is that these controls are also set in motion through the transmission of symbolically powerful images and ideas of un/likeness that position subjects as proximate to, and therefore 'of,' whiteness. Like the family itself, the family saga is a form that does political work as a site of production for whiteness.

It is somewhat difficult to locate a consensus definition of the family saga, in part because many of the scholars who write about it seem to assume that a consensus definition already exists.<sup>123</sup> In one of the few critical texts that sets itself this explicit task, *The Family Novel: Toward a Generic Definition*, Yi-Ling Ru identifies the genre's four cornerstone characteristics:

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<sup>122</sup> It might help to clarify if I point out that this is particularly evident among well-known and wealthy families. When Donald Trump was born to millionaire real estate magnate Fred Trump, his identity was shaped in contiguity with the "Trump family." This emplacement also opened a broad range of opportunities to him; it put many things in reach. Donald Trump's emplacement, for example, made it possible for him to attend prestigious universities despite his lack of academic distinction. Ultimately, the ideological and racial emplacement of Donald Trump as a subject and as a member of the Trump family made it possible for him to be elected president of the United States.

<sup>123</sup> For a fascinating journey down the rabbit hole of problems in defining the English family novel, see Anna Berman's "The Family Novel (and Its Curious Disappearance)."

[F]irst, it deals realistically with a family's evolution through several generations; second, family rites play an important role and are faithfully recreated in both their familial and communal contexts; third, the primary theme of the novel always focuses on the decline of a family; and fourth, such a novel has a peculiar narrative form which is woven vertically along the chronological order through time and horizontally among the family relationships. (2)

*The Beginners* bears many of these hallmarks. It focuses on a single family in a temporally linear and implicitly teleological narrative, beginning and ending with meaningful familial touchstones. The novel opens with Avrom Glickman and his sons Meyer and Benjamin arriving in South Africa from Lithuania and closes with the death of Benjamin's wife, Sarah, and the birth of his granddaughter, Avrom's great-granddaughter, also named Sarah. It focuses primarily on a nuclear family unit, two parents and three children, each of which take a different path, and even these narratives hit a certain predictable trifecta: one child returns home, one leaves to be with an outsider, and one turns towards religion. Thus, the Glickman family declines, or at least disperses, and none of the characters find fulfillment, despite making choices that align with the expectations of the rational, pleasure-seeking liberal subject. Finally, as mentioned earlier, the novel proceeds vertically/chronologically but also, as Ru describes, spreads out horizontally to interweave a multiplicity of voices of or related to the Glickman family.

Malka Magensta-Shaked and Jeffrey M. Green work implicitly from a similar definition to conceptualize the difference between what they call the "European" family saga and its Hebrew and Yiddish counterparts:

In novels recounting the history of extended families over the generations in Yiddish and Hebrew literature the historical narrative accompanying the story of the family plays a far

more dominant role... than in parallel European novels of the type... [In] works such as *Buddenbrooks* or *The Forsyte Saga*... we find that historical background mainly appears between the lines of the family chronicle embedded in it. The representation, to use the terms developed by E. Auerbach in *Mimesis*, is in the background rather than foreground. In contrast, family history novels in Jewish literature... generally present the events of history directly, the foreground. The actual historical narrative appears openly, and one can easily find clear parallels to it in works by historians. (Green and Magentsa-Shaked 28-29)

I bring this point in, however, to establish a crucial *contrast*. For, based on this distinction, *The Beginners* is much more of a European family saga than a Jewish one. Like the European family saga, it uses major events and cultural upheavals as mere backdrop to an interlocking series of intimate relations. As we've already caught a glimpse of in the conversation between Adela and Bertie on the "NRC ultimatum," *The Beginners* never offers clear touchstones from which to orient oneself historically. Major events like the National Party's victory and the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, the Defiance Campaign, the Treason Trials, and the Sharpeville Massacre are only alluded to in passing, never in detail, and only insofar as they affect the characters' lives. The novel is thus situated, as it were, inside the family home, peering occasionally through its windows as history unfolds outside.

Returning to Hayot, I want to briefly consider this insulation of the family from history as a function of the novel's approach to "completeness." All literary worlds are incomplete insofar as they cannot show us every single detail in the world the text creates. Hayot refers to this as the "price of apples problem." What is the price of apples in Dan Jacobson's *The Beginners* (or in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Anna Karenina* for that matter)? Even though one could theoretically

deduce the price of apples in the 1950s in Kimberley, one could never be sure that that is indeed the price the characters would pay. To carry this further, even if one is aware of the political dimensions of the price of apples during a period in which South African fruit was the subject of a boycott in the UK, one could not necessarily observe this in a novel where no one eats or buys an apple. The question then becomes to what extent and in what ways do literary texts address their own incompleteness. As Hayot explains, “we can focus on the way a given text manages incompleteness—whether it, for instance, assumes it, dramatizes it, ignores it, and so on. A work’s relation... to the problem of incompleteness constitutes another variable in its world-orientedness” (61). Because it is a realist novel form, the family saga evinces a high level of completeness—we may not know the price of apples in *The Beginners*, but we can safely assume that, in the world the characters inhabit, there are apples that have prices—but it also manages incompleteness in its literary world by anchoring the forces of history in the characters and their genealogical relationships to one another. Unlike Hebrew or Yiddish family sagas, which manage incompleteness in a distinctly different way, the European, in this case British, family saga organizes the passage of time and event around the moral-political development of the individuals that are its main focus. Its world-orientedness is effected through its ideological emplacement of the liberal subject, and thus within the white liberal family saga form, its worldedness is in part constituted by the ongoing inheritance of whiteness. Yet the question remains: in what context does it matter that Dan Jacobson, a self-consciously Jewish writer writing self-consciously about Jewish characters, produced a family saga that aligns much more closely with the British tradition than the Jewish one? What does it tell us, for example, about the politics of the postwar Anglosphere, and many things besides?

Beyond these generic considerations, exploring what political work *The Beginners* does and does not do requires a more intimate understanding of what the family saga, in this case as it developed in the liberal Anglophone tradition specifically, meant in the context of, first, imperialism, and, later, fantasies of consumption and the nuclear family. Clearly, the family saga novel is not unique to the British literary tradition. It does, however, carry a certain crucial valence in imperial Anglophone culture, radiating outward from the metropole to the periphery. It is an enduring form, genealogical in its affordances but also bearing and sharing its own compelling genealogy of ideas as it evolved globally from the late eighteenth century to the present. As Jobst Welge explains in *Genealogical Fictions: Cultural Periphery and Historical Change*, throughout the age of empire,

[N]otions of family and pedigree have served as powerful images for the discourse of nationhood, the emergence or transformation of collective identities and communities, especially...when the continuity of succession came under threat.... [T]he figure of the family lends itself so much to the sense of nationhood because it is a convenient device to represent the synchronic group of an “imagined community” as well as the cross-generational succession that links private and public history ... Insofar as genealogical narratives are necessarily developmental in nature, they are oriented toward both the past and the future, and thus they often take on a certain recursive direction, where, for instance, decline is the flip side of inheritance. (Welge 2)

As before, the “inheritance” that precedes or induces decline is whiteness, but in Jacobson’s context it also encompasses the remnants of British South Africa. As discussed earlier, Jacobson’s generic choices are also ideological choices. His family saga, deeply indebted to the Anglophone tradition, is an implicit aesthetic rejection of Afrikaner nationalism. At the same

time, intentionally or not, Jacobson's use of the form to capture the implication of South African Jews in apartheid also evinces the extent to which the family saga form is itself implicated in British imperialism.

In the nineteenth century, images of the white British royal family juxtaposed against the black and brown "children" of the empire played a significant role in affectively shaping white British identity and demarcating the structure of racialized power through contrast (McClintock). These images were translated into political strategies and rhetoric as well: the notion of Imperial Britain as the white paterfamilias to a family of black and brown dependents provided affective and ideological support for the doctrine of "trusteeship," which, as discussed earlier, laid the foundation not only for white South African liberalism but also, at least rhetorically, for the apartheid project. Hence, in taking up the British family saga form, Jacobson is also taking up the mantle of an imperial literary tradition, not only in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forms, but in its twentieth-century iteration as well. Beginning in the early 1900s, "individualism and consumerism emerged as two important differential components of modernity in Britain, which cemented the ideology of nuclear familialism" (Chambers 198). Industry and the state worked together to "valorize a privatized, aspirational version of the family, dependent on consumerism" (198). At the same time, "the white nuclear family came to be the nation's embodiment of an ideology of individualism founded on liberal notions of democratic citizenship, laissez-faire capitalism and freedom of speech, but which, in practice, preserved patriarchal and white-raced structures of power" (198).

In the postwar period, family saga novels or novel cycles (such as John Masters's *Savage* family saga and John Galsworthy's *Forsyte* saga) attracted a level of popularity that confirms familialism's centrality in postwar British pop culture. At this point, as Laura Brown points out,

they merged with the “cultural fable” of “the good life,” which overlaps with the Rawlsian good life in crucial ways. Brown describes this cultural fable as “an ideological emanation of the period of postwar prosperity” (103). “Very generally,” she goes on to say, “the good life refers to an imaginary proposal about the nature of happiness that is grounded in a fantasy of satisfaction... based on the assumption of material prosperity accompanied by certain normative structures of individualism, identity, and social conformity” (104). Like certain forms of postwar liberalism, “It is individualist rather than collective, decisively apolitical, and, largely for that reason, ahistorical” (104). Although *The Beginners* is set in South Africa, there are several reasons to link it ideologically with this trend, some of which I have already addressed. First is Jacobson’s personal attachment to the British literary tradition.<sup>124</sup> Second, as mentioned above, Jacobson’s cathection onto this literary tradition was one means of rejecting Afrikaner nationalism. Third, as we will discuss momentarily, many critics saw Jacobson as working within this postwar trend. Finally, British imperialism, as well as how South African Jews were positioned in relation to it, is one of the lynchpins of the novel and one of the principal agents of power *The Beginners* critiques. We have to perceive the overlaps to understand the disavowals.

### *The family saga as implicated aesthetic*

To clarify the complex connections between Jacobson’s adaptations of the family saga form and the ethical entanglement of liberal Jewish whiteness in South Africa, I want to briefly

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<sup>124</sup> Jacobson’s somewhat uniquely intense Anglophilia echoes across many of his early works, often colliding and intertwining—both in his life and his fiction—with strains of bitter contempt for English-speaking South Africans, with Jewishness and Judaism, and with the colonial’s self-effacing ambivalence upon entering the metropole. In *The Evidence of Love* (1960), for example, the narrator rhapsodizes: “How can one explain what England is to the South Africans who come to the country as visitors, tourists, immigrants, students? To them England is reality, and it is pure vision. England is like a mirror in which they see their deepest selves reflected, the selves they have sought for... and have known only by the sense of incompleteness that haunted all their previous days; yet England is chillingly, vastly, uncomfortably strange, with a strangeness made only the more poignant by the sense of dream-familiarity that accompanies it. England is their own past; yet they have never seen it before... [It] contains nothing less than the meanings of the words they have used all their lives” (3).

consider the reception of *The Beginners* at the time of its publication in 1966. Though all agreed on Jacobson's technical skill and descriptive abilities, praising in particular the aching beauty of his South African topography, most reviewers criticized what they saw as an unimaginative, old-fashioned approach to form and style. In the *Jewish Advocate*, Sylvia Rothchild describes the novel as unfortunately "boring for the reader" because "The Glickman experience in South Africa is so much like the experience of similar families in America that everything they do and say seems familiar.... There are many dull parts, dull not because they are untrue or irrelevant but only because they are perfectly true and completely familiar."<sup>125</sup> The *Illustrated London News*'s Patricia Hodgart specifically connects the problem to the British family saga form, writing, "As a chronicle of a Jewish family it is packed with action and incident of some documentary interest, but stylistically it is depressingly flat, even banal.... In rejecting the emotionalism and the crankiness of so many Jewish writers Mr. Jacobson comes perilously near Galsworthian [i.e., John Galsworthy, author of *The Forsyte Saga*] dullness." Critics likewise found it difficult to pin down the book's politics, though for several this represented a strength rather than a weakness. For example, Henry W. Levy writes that "Jacobson handles the problem of South African racialism with great understanding and subtlety.... [*The Beginners*] may irritate the racist or the rabid reformer, but... most people will find [it] provocative and fascinating."

Reviewing the novel for *Commentary* in August 1966, Robert Alter observes several of these same issues, noting "[Jacobson] attempts to resuscitate the family saga novel in order to explore a full range of possible lives, showing how the alternatives of an individual life are elaborately implicated in the surrounding group and in history" (66). From there he spins out his

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<sup>125</sup> Others, such as Arnold Beichmann, echoed Rothchild's complaint that the story was simply too universal to hold the contemporary reader's interest: "It is the story of the Glickmans, but it could've happened in America, particularly in the South, or in New York City. It could have happened in the Midlands or London, and did. It could have happened anywhere during the bimillennial diaspora of the Jews."



central critique of the novel, which is that Jacobson has failed to develop formal and stylistic techniques capable of reflecting the complexity of modern life, especially in the unendingly complex context of apartheid South Africa: “Jacobson does not attempt... to create equivalents in narrative technique for this sense of muddle and incommensurateness” (66). Alter continues, “[P]eople and events [are represented] from a steadily omniscient narrative viewpoint, with uniform visual lucidity, as though we all still believed that a moral world could be inferred from precisely reported physical facts” (66). Jacobson clings to old fashioned forms and aesthetics, Alter concludes, because he “lacks... an adequate fictional form to body forth his sense of life in its full subtlety” (Alter 68). All of these observations are more or less accurate, and yet, I would argue, in continually insisting on a *disjunction* between the aesthetic form and political content, Alter misses an opportunity to read the novel’s form against itself. True, *The Beginners* is an adaptation of the traditional and, yes, somewhat old-fashioned, family saga form, and it does entangle its characters in a longer history of suffering than they seem capable of understanding, which produces an at times frustrating incommensurability at the heart of the novel, as if it is attempting to tell a story that it cannot bring itself to fully understand. Yet, I would argue that all of these aspects actually speak to a deep-seated *unity* of politics and aesthetics. The novel is a critique of liberal Jewish politics written from within liberalism and shaped by a fundamentally liberal aesthetics.

In the 1985 essay in which he coins the term “South African liberal realism,” Paul Rich focuses on how, in the postwar period, white English-speaking South African writers drew on a British novelistic tradition that coincided with the growth of a middle class reading public whose attitudes and values were structured around the holding of property, a division of labour buttressing capitalist enterprise... [that facilitated] bourgeois political and ideological control...

centred around the particularity of the individual and his or her own social and moral development over time” (Rich 48). At the center of this tradition sits, “an archetypal *homo economicus*, in order both to better his condition and express the philosophy of economic individualism” (50). Unlike British liberal realism, however, the South African variant was in crisis from the beginning. Writing in 1979 about strains of liberalism in Nadine Gordimer’s early work, Robert Green claims, “There is now no place for ‘liberalism’ in South Africa; it is a bankrupt ideology, without viability or respect. [Gordimer] foretold its present insolvency” (53). The problem, he specifies “is the imbalance between the lightness of the novel’s liberal commitment to private life and the harsh solidity of those forces shown arrayed against personal fulfilment.” By contrast, *The Beginners* often appears highly aware of this tension, and that, in large part, is where implication comes in. The incommensurability of the novel’s form to account for the pain of its subject is a mirroring forth of white Jewish liberalism’s inability to represent or even really grasp its implications or implicatedness in apartheid.

As discussed in the introduction, in *The Implicated Subject*, Michael Rothberg identifies “implicated subjects” as those who “occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, and inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate [those] positions” (1). Rothberg applies this concept to the work of, among others, William Kentridge, a Jewish South African multimedia visual artist whose complex techniques Rothberg connects to what he sees as an “implicated aesthetic,” which “rewrites the conventional liberal narrative of change,” and “recognizes the artist’s *genealogical relation* to Jewish suffering in the past... [but] responds above all to the evidence of his ongoing *structural*

*implication* in irrevocable violence and stubborn inequality” (91). Unlike Kentridge, Jacobson is not particularly experimental or disruptive—quite the contrary. He does not offer an “implicated aesthetic” in Rothberg’s sense of an aesthetic style born out of a fraught and fractured understanding of oneself as implicated. And yet Jacobson’s aesthetics *are* implicated. The family saga novel itself, being both expressive of and a contributor to imperialism and racist paternalism, is implicated in diachronic processes of domination. Like Kentridge, and like Jacobson himself, the Glickmans are complexly implicated in South African apartheid (and, to an extent, in Palestinian dispossession), in particular through genealogical relations. But even beyond this, on a metatextual level, in taking a classically white, liberal, bourgeois form and bending it into a critique of those very ideologies, Jacobson does more than show how white Jewish liberalism is and has long been implicated in the suffering of non-white others. He also, intentionally or not, reveals the implication of the literary tradition through which he tells the story. This is a crucial element of the global context to keep in mind as we turn to the movements of the characters themselves.

### *Bertie Priess’s good life*

One of the few focalizing characters outside of the Glickman family, the narrative arc of Bertie Priess explores the dissonance between the morally good life and the materially good life, a deep and abiding conflict at the intersection between Rawlsian liberalism and racial capitalism. When Bertie is first introduced, he is the novel’s most radical white character besides Adela Klein, with whom, as we saw earlier, he shares doubts about the value (or even the existence) of liberalism in South Africa. A Johannesburg Jew who attends school with the youngest Glickman child, David, he spends his time inveighing passionately against white supremacy in the locations, teaches Africans to read at a secret night school, and organizes anti-racist rallies. But

even though he bonds with Adela in reviling the Smuts government, he is in love with Rachel Glickman, whose failure to notice him is a constant source of pain and insecurity. At the party, Bertie gets ruefully drunk and staggers out into the dark to be sick. He is helped by Jacobus, the Glickmans' servant who attends the night school at which he teaches. Rachel then comes out to talk to him, and they kiss. After she leaves, Bertie is so inspired by these encounters he begins to declaim, whispering alone in the night: "'The people must be free.... It can be done. We have history on our side, justice, and our own strength. Opposing us there is only greed, obscurantism, prejudice and inertia. Away with them!'" (97). As he makes this speech to a moonlit tree in the Glickmans' yard, he imagines "The world could be a place of justice" (97). "Bertie was sure," the narrator explains, "[that] he could win fame, applause and power within such a world. Rachel could love him and he love her; every darkened house... could be filled with the peace and brotherhood he had felt when he had grasped Jacobus's hand in the garden, the pride and delight he had felt when Rachel kissed him" (97).

Much like other South African Jewish radicals, Bertie's politics are implicitly Marxist, and he rejects Zionism as well as what he views as an obscurantist and regressive understanding of Jewishness to which Jews in South Africa cling. He makes these positions clear in a subsequent argument with Joel Glickman, who at this point has been recruited by the Zionist youth movement Hatzofim, remarking that "The Jewishness you people keep talking about isn't a religion, it isn't a real nationalism because the nation doesn't exist, it's not a social force or class" (135). "What is it, then?" Bertie asks rhetorically,

'A habit? A burrow you hide inside? Or is it a prison that you've let other people drive you into and that you're now afraid to leave? I live here and I'm going to stay here.... I'm not going to let anyone tell me what my social role must be. I've chosen it. My job is to

understand the way the class struggle is developing here, and to help the progressive forces emerge... that have to emerge because we reached a particular stage of industrial and social development. All sorts of exciting things are going to happen in the next few years – and you expect me to get worked up about some fantastic, archaic, imperialist, racialist scheme in the Middle East! Not on your life!’ (135)

With this jeremiad, Bertie anticipates many of the ethical conflicts that Joel encounters when he makes aliyah the following year. In particular, he raises the possibility that the promised Jewish state is little more than a Middle Eastern version of the “fantastic, archaic, imperialist, racialist” ideologies that produced South Africa. He likewise questions the content of Jewishness on a global scale, to which Joel’s non-Jewish friend Peter replies, “As far as modern history goes, sometimes I think the Jews are the people with the most authority to tell us what’s been happening in the world. So much more of it seems to have happened to them than to any other people” (137). But Bertie dismisses this, too, replying, “And what do they do about it? They buy and sell and boast about their doctor sons” (137). Yet Bertie's own radicalism proves surprisingly fickle. In fact, by the time Joel reaches the kibbutz, Bertie has forfeited his revolutionary dreams entirely for the sake of bourgeois happiness and romantic love with Rachel Glickman. This retreat from the political into the personal happens suddenly, at a demonstration that he himself helped to organize. The event turns violent when the peaceful marchers are set upon by the heavily armed police, and Rachel, secretly pregnant and having been abandoned only that morning by her cousin Jonathan, is swept up in the melee. She and Bertie meet, and she reaches out to him. Within weeks he has abandoned Adela, married Rachel, and gone to work for Benjamin Glickman.

In Bertie's arc, the novel plays out the inherent problem in the liberal conception of the "good life" that follows Rawls's "rational plan." For liberal political philosopher John Rawls, a rational plan of life is always centered on the primary social goods: "rights, liberties, and opportunities, and income and wealth" (54). "Indeed," Rawls continues, "we can think of a person as being happy when he is in the way of a successful execution (more or less) of a rational plan of life... [and] is reasonably confident that his plan can be carried through" (359). Were *The Beginners* to follow the narrative formula prescribed by this liberal bourgeois ideology, Bertie's transformation into a propertied patriarch, a *homo economicus* living the good life, would be his happy ending. Instead, it generates a deep and abiding sense of emptiness:

He gave up his intention to take law, he gave up his political ambitions, he gave up the ideological beliefs which had sustained him.... For what? For what had he giving them up? It was a question he asked himself many times... until the cynicism of his answer corroded his capacity even to ask the question. The answer was, for nothing. For so many trivialities.... For Rachel's gratitude and smiles, her trust and a share in her passions. For a directorship in the Central Creamery (Pty.) Ltd. He told himself, and believed, that these were nothing; yet they were all he had.... If he was to be nothing else, he was determined now to become a rich man. (245).

The crisis of conscience here arises at the collision of collective responsibility and individual desire, not to mention the essential incompatibility of anti-racist activism and free market liberalism under apartheid. Perhaps the most fascinating point in this passage, though, is the idea that Bertie's choice—and he certainly understands it as a choice and not an inevitability, itself an incisive critique of South African Jews, who, while Jacobson was writing the novel, were positioning themselves as having little option but to accommodate themselves to NP rule—to

commit to his desires rather than a larger cause ultimately renders him *incapable of even asking questions* of ethical responsibility. Because he has chosen the materially good life, the morally good life is foreclosed: if he is to be a rich man, he *cannot* be anything else.

As discussed earlier, in *The Beginners*, history unfolds at a distance; we observe its passing obliquely via the narrative arcs of the main characters. By the end of the novel, the radical leftist firebrand has turned into a debauched industrialist who spends his time speculating, gambling, and cheating on his wife. “He had done particularly well for himself and his father-in-law,” the narrator recounts, “in buying heavily in gold mining shares just after the countrywide strikes, riots and shootings of 1960, when prices were at their lowest and there was a panic flight of capital out of South Africa. He had been convinced that the revolution which everyone all over the world was expecting would not take place” (448). Within a couple of years, he is proven right, and yields massive returns. He uses his windfall to move with Rachel into a sprawling house in the wealthy suburb of Saxonwold, where from his veranda (in the parlance of *The One Facing Us*, ‘la terrasse’) he can see his gardens, tennis courts, and swimming pool. Not long after he purchases the house, Adela Klein is sentenced to four years in prison for belonging to “a group conspiring to bring about the violent overthrow of the government of the Republic” (448). The fact that Bertie becomes fabulously wealthy specifically by betting against the revolution he once foretold, compounded by the fact that he manages to buy at low prices because of the Sharpeville massacre, is in itself a scathing indictment of his politics. On the other hand, by including the details of Adela’s simultaneous imprisonment (likely an allusion to the 1956 Treason Trial, which did not reach a verdict until 1961), the novel is not hiding the dangers of radicalism in apartheid South Africa. Ultimately, however, I do not think *The Beginners* is as invested in a critique of South African Jewish radicalism as it is in questioning first, as discussed

earlier, the ability of the liberal family saga to actually confront history, and, second, the myth of being able to both do well and do good. Later, when Rachel expresses a desire to volunteer with an anti-racist charity, he snaps at her, “‘Suddenly you must do good works! Who’re you trying to reproach? Who are you trying to justify yourself in front of?’” (404). He reminds her that her entire family, now scattered across the world, benefits from the wealth he has generated. “‘And so are the Africans you’re suddenly so concerned about,’” he tells her, drawing on the line of reasoning that, as we saw in *Historical Overture II*, neoliberals all over the world used to justify their ongoing relations with apartheid South Africa, “‘They don’t stand a chance unless this country becomes rich and developed. If they want to cut my throat then I’ll say good luck to them. If they’re capable of doing it’” (404).

*“Just lousy Johannesburg”*

In this argument, Bertie not only raises the specter of widespread South African Jewish implication in Black suffering, he also suggests that, as the money he has raised by exploiting their exploitation flows outward to the Glickmans who live in Britain and Israel, so too flows implication on a global scale. But that is not the only way that *The Beginners* maps transnational Jewish implication. As discussed earlier, even before the State of Israel was founded, the Yishuv was already cultivating an image of *Jewish* Palestine as a white and European, and thus civilized and modern, space. This perception circulates heavily and meaningfully among the South African Jewish characters in the opening sections of *The Beginners*, which sets up the twin crises of ethics and racialized identity that the Glickmans experience once the action moves to Israel. Returning from his service in the European theater of World War II, Joel ambivalently rejoins a South African Jewish society from which he feels increasingly alienated. Not unlike Bertie, Joel too follows his romantic inclinations: falling in love with a girl in the Zionist youth movement,



he becomes a Zionist himself. Yet his reaction to the declaration of the State of Israel on the one hand, and the victory of the National Party on the other (events that, as you'll recall, occurred within days of one another in May 1948) reveals more complex motivations. Imagining Israel as a liberal European country, Joel wishes to retain his privileged position as a European (that is, white) man, while leaving behind his feelings, conscious and unconscious, of being implicated in the cruelties the new government promises to inflict:

Joel's reaction to the... Nationalist victory was a selfish one; it was almost one of relief. Now he knew he had been right to want to sever himself from this country.... Everything that was least welcoming in it, everything that was most provincial, most bigoted, backward, barren, cramped, divisive and suspicious, had been given power. He could hardly be bothered to grieve for it. He had turned elsewhere. Back to Europe (for he thought of Palestine as a part of Europe); back to the Jews; away from the haphazard disorder and fortuitousness of the country of his birth, which, he told himself, had never uttered a single, clear word he could understand and attend to with an undivided soul... [T]here has merely been estrangement, pity, guilt, fear, contempt, roused at one time or another by every group in it—the blacks, the Coloureds, the Indians, the Afrikaners, the English, the anxious, prospering Jews, all brought by chance together, and held together only by their needs and greeds... (225)

This sense of Israel as fundamentally a European-style liberal democracy is compounded by Joel's father Benjamin, who maintains that Israel could never be anything like South Africa because, in Israel, Arabs are able to vote. Tellingly, Benjamin's nephew-in-law Max later uses a very similar justification to differentiate apartheid South Africa from Nazi Germany: "We can still vote against [the National Party]. Hitler didn't even let the good Germans do that" (386).

Clearly these characters are deeply invested in being able to point to the structural façade of liberal democracy, whether or not their protestations are accurate or relevant. Yet Joel, too, is invested in certain self-justifying modes of perception. He wants to see himself as never having been a South African in the first place. In reassuring himself of this, he points to the various forms of antisemitic rejection that Jews like him had experienced for decades. And in that he is not incorrect. But, for Joel, reminding himself of Afrikaner antisemitism is ultimately a solipsistic way of reconciling his desire to retain his privilege while not having to feel that he is inexorably associated with a white supremacist project that he knows is deeply wrong.

After he arrives, however, Joel finds that Israel is "disappointingly less like Europe than he had hoped" (251), and indeed much more like South Africa. He finds the native-born Israeli Jews, the "sabras," to be "rather dour, neurotic provincials, more like the Afrikaners than any other group he had ever met" (263). Beyond the kibbutz, also called the *meshek*, Joel observes the even more disappointing landscapes of what he had imagined from afar to be a white space. In reality, the nascent Jewish state is littered with "Bluegum trees, shattered Arab villages, small green fields, nondescript, huddled Jewish townships with centers that looked like outskirts and outskirts that looked like builder's scrap, intersections aswarm with people begging for lifts or offering each other trash from trays and barrows or simply standing about in forlorn idleness" (262). Joel's mention of bluegum trees, which in the novel's early sections represented a consistent motif of the veld, is compounded by the word "townships," which had a profound resonance in the apartheid politics of "separate development" as a euphemism for the underdeveloped and impoverished areas in which non-whites were forced to live. That Jews should be living in "townships" made up of "scrap" and "aswarm" with forlorn beggars dismays

him, while also signaling to him that though he has left South Africa, he has not escaped (as he had hoped to do) the violent and desperate politics of race and space.

When Benjamin arrives in Israel several chapters later, he reacts to his surroundings in much the same way:

Benjamin felt cheated, thwarted, baffled and disappointed everywhere he went. Was this the Zion he had dreamed of, comforted himself with, propagandized and given money for.... [How could he tell his family] that he found Tel Aviv hot and crowded, filled with rough mannered and poorly dressed people? ... That there was so much haste in the streets and so much idleness; so much noise and so much inefficiency? That the buildings all looked so unspeakably rubbishy to him? ... That there were no big factories, no department stores, no wide thorough fairs, no railway station – nothing that made up what he thought of as a real city? And what was he comparing it with, after all? Not Paris, not London, not Rome: just lousy Johannesburg! Outside Tel Aviv the small towns were hideous; the kibbutzim were for people who could put up with wooden huts, flies, heat and communal feeding; the refugee camps were worse than the locations for Africans in South Africa—he couldn't help thinking them worse, simply because most of the people in them were white, were Jews. (324-5)

Both Joel's and Benjamin's reflections in Israel index complex but concrete instantiations of the distant proximities that produce Jewish whiteness in various transcultural contexts. In South Africa, these characters cling to a vision of Israel as a white, European country that would thus allow them to be free not only from South African antisemitism but also from the ethical burdens of the racial state without having to renounce their whiteness nor yield its privileges. At home, the Glickmans and most of their Jewish friends also come across (as many South African Jews

saw themselves) as a comparatively tolerant and generous subsection of white South Africa that takes more care than either Englishmen or Afrikaners to recognize the Africans' humanity and to deplore the conditions in which they are forced to live. In Benjamin's butter factory, he is the boss but not a *baas*. He protects his Black employees from the abusive excesses of the Afrikaners he employs to manage them. Like Joel, he prefers to see himself as not South African at all—through his Zionism he conjures an image of himself as an Israeli-in-waiting. Yet once he is actually in Israel, Benjamin begins to realize that he shares more with the Afrikaners than he was willing to admit. When both Joel and Benjamin encounter Jews living, in a sense, as Africans, they become more conscious of how invested they are in whiteness and white privilege because they are forced to recognize their previously unconscious belief that such suffering only becomes truly unacceptable when it is visited on whites.

This drawing out of South African Jewish whiteness intersects once more with liberalism and its commitment to an idealized good and rational life when Joel receives word that his cousin Yitzchak, son of Benjamin and Meyer's sister Sarah, has arrived in Israel. Yitzchak's entire family—who probably would not have been in Lithuania in the first place had Avrom Glickman not given away his savings a generation before—was wiped out by the Nazis, leaving him to search (like many Holocaust survivors) for whatever relatives he might have left over in Israel. Joel travels to Tel Aviv, sits down with his cousin, and asks him what happened. Yitzchak tells a harrowing story of bare life, of hiding in the woods eating roots and leaves, raw potatoes and animal carcasses, eventually finding a hut where he was taken in and ended up depending for months on the mercy of a peasant couple who physically and emotionally abused him. After the couple was murdered (whether by Nazis or by Soviets is unclear), Yitzchak spent three years in a Soviet labor battalion before making his way back to the shtetl where he was born, only to find

that all of his friends and family were dead. Assuming a variety of false identities, he begged, stole, and smuggled his way from Lithuania to Latvia to Poland to Austria and then, finally, to Italy, where he lived in a transit camp until he was at last allowed to emigrate to Israel. Joel is obviously affected by his cousin's testimony, an internal disturbance compounded by the response he receives when he asks his cousin what, having so narrowly survived death, he wants to do with his life. Yitzchak replies, "To learn a trade, to get a flat, to get a wife. I want everything you want." As he declares this intention,

Yitzchak spoke with an air of challenge, as if Joel might deny him his right to these things. And deep within himself, though he had no impulse to deny the other whatever he wished for, Joel did feel a pang of an emotion like despair.... Having gone through such experiences, should he not be thinking of other things? But of what? Of what? (273)

Joel's "Of what?" is reminiscent of Bertie's "For what?" because they are essentially asking the same question. If, according to liberal principles, the goal of a good and rational life should be to fulfill for oneself the basic and theoretically universal goals of health, wealth, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, does it (or even can it) matter that such a path does not produce more good in the world? That it neither justifies nor ameliorates suffering and oppression, and in many cases even produces more? Yitzchak's intentions also call back to the argument Joel, Peter, and Bertie have about Zionism earlier in the novel, as when Peter opines that perhaps Jews have experienced more history than any other people on earth, Bertie retorts "And what do they do about it? They buy and sell and boast about their doctor sons" (137). Similar to Bertie's own narrative arc, the issue is not so much that Yitzchak has chosen a rational plan that will set him on the path towards the essential social goods of liberalism so much as the idea that, once he has

made that choice, it forecloses the other characters from finding a deeper meaning in his suffering.

After this meeting, Joel is beset by nightmares in which “He was Yitzchak, he was himself, he was killing, he was hunted” and from which he emerges dazed and utterly disconnected from life on the kibbutz. Yet it is not, I would argue, the deeply traumatic experiences that Yitzchak recounts that haunt Joel, but rather that his cousin emerged from the abattoir wanting only those bourgeois comforts and liberal affordances that Joel desires for himself. In a sense, Joel needs his cousin’s suffering to be politically meaningful so that it might fill the emptiness he senses in himself. The novel is not critiquing Yitzchak’s desires or questioning the magnitude of the Holocaust trauma. Rather, it reflects and anticipates the ways in which affiliative Holocaust memory fails to generate a more ethical politics in the white, liberal Jewish imagination. As I will discuss further in the next two chapters, the novel here attempts to mark how a collective experience that could be an anti-racist inflection point if narrativized ethically, becomes a deflection point because it is narrated ethnically. And indeed, when Yitzchak reappears in a later chapter, now employed by Meyer, saving up to buy a flat, and engaged to a South African Jew, he seems more or less resigned to his position in late-1950s South Africa and the cruel racial architecture erected by the apartheid state. When questioned about the country's politics, he admits that he doesn't like them "so much," but qualifies that by saying, "I'm so new here, I haven't really got opinions" (386).

*That, too, was a result*

The final scene I wish to briefly explore before closing this chapter is anomalous within the text in that it not only centers on black characters but does not show them interacting with any of the Glickmans directly and employs a third person omniscient narrator rather than a

limited one. During a raid by dispossessed Palestinians, Joel is sent to stand guard on the outskirts of the kibbutz. Having slept poorly since his encounter with Yitzchak, he is barely lucid. He sits for a few hours, until, dazed, he simply wanders away, and is shot by an Israeli soldier who mistakes him for an Arab. His parents come to visit him in the hospital, and while they are gone, their servants Annie and Jacobus host a small party in the backyard. Their neighbors' servant, who dislikes Annie, convinces his white employers to call the police. The police come, violently break up the gathering, and arrest several of the partygoers. Afterwards,

Jacobus had been summarily tried and convicted on charges of being unable to produce all his documents on demand and for being in illegal possession of 'white' liquor. He had been sent to a farm prison in the Bethel district. He never returned to Johannesburg.

Annie never heard from him again. That too was one of the results of the shot which had been fired at Joel in the hills of Samaria. (321)

To begin with, this scene in a sense violates, or at least punctures, the totality expected of the family saga novel by leaving the Glickmans in Israel to concern itself, if only for a chapter, with someone who "should" be only of marginal concern. The novel goes out of its way not just to include this scene, the exclusion of which would have no real bearing on the main narrative arcs, but to draw a straight line several thousand miles long between Joel's carelessness and the ruination of Jacobus's life. As in Rothberg's schemata, the novel is not literally saying that Joel is the architect of Annie's and Jacobus's misfortune, but rather that the position Joel holds in the racial power structure of South Africa means that his actions produce the suffering of others, even if unintentionally. But what makes this instantiation of implication so unique in the novel is the distance between the cause and the effect, which likewise gives us the opportunity to consider the dimensions of transnational Jewish whiteness as *The Beginners* portrays it.

Jacobus's imprisonment is not Joel's fault per se, but he "causes" it insofar as he and Jacobus inhabit a world constructed by white supremacy, in which, as Rothberg puts it, "Forms of violence and inequality premised on racial hierarchy take shape in small-scale encounters and large-scale structures" (2). Joel may have left South Africa, but his implication in apartheid follows him. This scene is thus a microcosmic example of the project's broader argument: because it is enmeshed in overlapping transnational structures of power, and because Jewish subjects carry versions of whiteness with them as they travel between spaces, Jewish whiteness can only be understood through a worlded and worldly lens, most productively by focusing on the moments in which proximities between Jews, others, and Jewish others are reorganized and refracted.

One last point will help us make the leap towards Chapter Five. As discussed earlier, Joel seems to emigrate from South Africa to Israel in part to proactively separate himself from the depredations promised by the newly minted Malan government. When he ultimately leaves Israel, he admits as much to his friend Harry: "It wasn't only disadvantages we wanted to get rid of by coming here. It was the advantages as well. We wanted to get rid of the advantages of being lucky Jews, Anglo-Saxon Jews, rich Jews, Jews who escaped" (342). Making his case to his brother David, Joel shouts:

"I'm tired of trying to find justifications for myself and for what I do.... The hell with it! I don't owe anyone any explanations or apologies for being alive, or for being a Jew... or for being white and having a father who made some money in South Africa. I don't have to exonerate myself in front of anyone. Not the *goyim*, not the 6 million dead, not the blacks, not my father, not the Israelis – no one!" (339)



And so, like Jacobson himself, he immigrates to London. These insinuations are echoed in the gibes that Bertie thrusts at Rachel when she expresses a desire to do volunteer work: “Who are you trying to justify yourself in front of?” For both Glickmans, I would argue, the answer is memory. Joel and Rachel are, perhaps unconsciously, projecting themselves forward, attempting to forestall the bitter judgement they believe will eventually come. In this way, I see *The Beginners* as a kind of “previsionist” text. That is, I believe that Jacobson is trying to foresee the way South African Jewish liberals would construct a narrative of apartheid that circumvented or at least eased their sense of culpability. As such, he anticipates how “Mainstream vocabulary remains limited by the individualist and legalistic assumptions of liberal culture and inadequate to the systemic forms of violence that surround us” (Rothberg 7). Liberal narrative structures similarly fail to capture these complexities. By using liberal forms and liberal aesthetics, Jacobson constructs a biting critique of liberalism from within, with the ultimate intention of producing a deep and detailed record of liberal implication, individual and collective, which ultimately is one of the key reasons why this 1966 text is so relevant to the twenty-first century texts we turn to next.

## CHAPTER FIVE: OBJETS D'ACTIVISME: THE AFFECTIVE ECONOMY OF WHITE JEWISH LIBERALISM IN *THE BELIEVERS*

“If there is such a thing as white consciousness as a way to human justice and honest self-realisation, whites will have to take their attitudes apart and assemble afresh their ideas of themselves.” – Nadine Gordimer, “What Being South African Means To Me”

### *Introduction*

In June of 2008, the same year *The Believers* was published, presidential candidate Barack Obama gave a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). The audience was skeptical: Obama’s controversial relationship to Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose sermons carried traces of Black militancy, conspiracy, and antisemitism, had emerged three months prior, and in interviews and roundtables Obama had intimated an aversion to Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party. Yet the speech was a resounding success. As Ron Kampeas of the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* recounts, “It takes a lot to bring an AIPAC crowd to its feet invoking anything other than Israel, and yet he did it.” According to Kampeas, the passage that so roused the crowd went as follows:

In the great social movements in our country's history, Jews and African Americans have stood shoulder to shoulder. They took buses down south together. They marched together. They bled together. And Jewish Americans like Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were willing to die alongside a black man — James Chaney — on behalf of freedom and equality. Their legacy is our inheritance. We must not allow the relationship between Jews and African Americans to suffer. This is a bond that must be strengthened. Together, we can rededicate ourselves to end prejudice and combat hatred in all of its forms. Together, we can renew our commitment to justice. Together, we can join our voices... [and] make even the mightiest of walls fall down.

Of course, Obama was well known for his oratory skill, and he could “work a Jewish room” (Kampeas). But the AIPAC convention’s enthusiastic response to the story of Goodman and Schwerner cannot purely be explained by this prowess. What’s so fascinating about the crowd’s response is, first, that AIPAC would hardly have aligned with the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), the organization for which Schwerner and Goodman were volunteering at the time of their murders, either in 1964 or afterwards.<sup>126</sup> At the time, there were certainly many Jewish neoconservatives who were openly contemptuous of young Jews who chose to join a struggle that was “not theirs” on behalf of organizations like SNCC and CORE that they regarded as antisemitic since, as discussed in Historical Overture I, they were vocal supporters of Palestinian rights. Second, neither Schwerner nor Goodman were practicing Jews, and had already dispelled the very connection between their Jewishness and their activism that Obama herein projects.<sup>127</sup> Finally, as Kampeas himself notes, it’s striking that the passage that so galvanized an AIPAC convention seems on its face to have nothing to do with Israel or Zionism.

Perhaps even more remarkably, the narrative Obama drew on to win over his Zionist audience was (and is) similarly treasured by the American Jewish left. As discussed throughout Historical Overture II, the right and left wings of the American Jewish community have been consistently at loggerheads for decades. Their conflict is particularly dense and complex at the site of identitarian-ethical narratives, the stories different segments of the Jewish community tell

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<sup>126</sup> I searched hard for direct historical evidence of interactions between them and could not find any. As far as I can tell, AIPAC was more or less a one-man operation through about 1974. Major newspapers do not even seem to have written about AIPAC until the 1970s, by which point CORE’s influence and membership had dwindled significantly. Given the pro-Palestinian platform adopted by CORE’s organizing partner SNCC in 1967, and the overarching hostility between American Zionism and the Black Power movement, which CORE joined a couple of years after Goodman and Schwerner’s deaths, I feel confident asserting that the two organizations were probably never on the same page.

<sup>127</sup> In “Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and American Jewish Memory,” Edward Shapiro cites an interview with Goodman’s mother Carolyn in which she explains, “It never even occurred to any of us or to Andy that he went down [to Mississippi] as a Jew.... They went down because it was the most important thing to do at the moment.” (qtd. in Shapiro 554)

themselves about themselves in order to reify their idea of what being a Jew ought to mean. It is thus always striking when any one of those narratives appears to have achieved consensus. In “Notes from the Black-Jewish Monologue,” Daniel Itzkovitz recalls that when left-liberal Jews learned that older and more conservative pockets of American Jewry were suspicious of Obama’s blackness,

[T]hose stories achieved their greatest sting because the narrative about Jewish racism stands so starkly against the mythmaking among many in the Jewish community about the history of Black-Jewish togetherness. The more we heard about the racist Jews of South Florida, the more we were reminded of the golden age, when black and Jew marched arm in arm, united in struggle. (12)

Yet I would not entirely discount the idea that these “racist Jews of South Florida” were similarly attached to the “Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish” narrative of American Jewish history.<sup>128</sup> Goodman and Schwerner, like the famous photo of Rabbi Abraham Heschel and Martin Luther King Jr. I mentioned in *Historical Overture II* and to which Itzkovitz gestures here, are densely layered indices of that “golden age,” invested with a great deal of psychic and emotional energy among Jewish liberals *and* conservatives the world over. In the US, Rabbi Marc Schneier of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding went so far as to gush that, in Obama’s presidency, “We’re close to the heyday of Black-Jewish relations.... It [is] thrilling in recent weeks to see the alliance at its most rarefied level” (qtd. in Itzkovitz 3). Whatever this alchemy was, it worked. In the summer of 2008 Obama was polling around fifty-seven percent with Jews, considerably below the numbers Democratic candidates consistently scored amongst the reliably liberal group.

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<sup>128</sup> I’ll probably never have the evidence to “prove” this, but my gut instinct says that, if one were to visit South Florida and ask these Jews if their hostility towards Obama may have had something to do with his race, they would have immediately insisted that it couldn’t possibly be, and offer as proof something along the lines of “Look what we did for them in the Civil Rights Movement!”

That November he received seventy-eight percent of the Jewish vote. It seems that Goodman and Schwerner, and the golden age of “Black-Jewish relations” they indexed, were one of the exceptionally few things about which American Jews across the political spectrum agreed.

To explain the seemingly universal and enduring appeal of Goodman and Schwerner as signifiers across the American Jewish political spectrum, we need to understand them as object-signs, or even as fetishized commodities, circulating in an affective Jewish economy, what I have previously called the global economy of Jewish self-perception. And although I am focusing on the US context here, Schwerner and Goodman’s “martyrdom” was the subject of articles in Jewish newspapers as far afield as Australia, Sweden, and Algeria, and was reported on extensively in the *Times* of London and the *Rand Daily Mail* of Johannesburg. As Sara Ahmed explains in her 2004 article, “Affective Economies,” “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (119). But to understand them as such, “we need to consider how [emotions] work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (119). Moving from a psychoanalytical to a Marxist framing, she writes, “[E]motions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation” going on to say that,

Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an affect [sic] of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time). Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect. Another way to theorize this process would be to describe “feelings” via an analogy with

“commodity fetishism”: feelings appear in objects, or indeed as objects with a life of their own, only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories... (120-121)

Goodman’s and Schwerner’s bodies operate as object-signs that hold value in how they make the Jewish subject feel. In Obama’s AIPAC speech, for example, Goodman and Schwerner hold affective value because their invocation provokes an enthusiasm among the Zionist audience that neutralizes their skepticism towards the candidate. And the fact that, in all likelihood, Schwerner and Goodman as living subjects would not have had the same effect on such an audience at the time that they died demonstrates the principle that affective value accumulates through circulation and the elision of the object’s history rather than inhering in the object itself. On the Jewish left, Obama’s invocation of Goodman and Schwerner reminded liberals why they have and must continue voting Democrat, that this commitment to social justice is who Jews are and have always been. That is not to say that the story of Goodman and Schwerner has no value in and of itself—I’m not quite that cynical—but rather to point out that, as an object-sign in an affective economy, Goodman and Schwerner accrue value in their ability to “mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective,” which is to say, to make certain Jews feel certain things not only about themselves but about Jews as a whole and to act on those feelings collectively in certain ways, independent of the specificity and historicity of the object-sign itself. It is moreover crucial to recognize how certain object-signs circulate in the affective economy of Jewish identity politics to reify certain forms of Jewish whiteness, and that these narratives of what Jewish whiteness is or is not circulate on a global scale and are reflected in different national spaces.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> As I mentioned in HO II, “Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish” would translate in South Africa to something like “Slovo and Sachs were Jewish.” But not just that—it’s probably never just that—Goodman, Schwerner, Slovo, and Sachs all operate as object-signs in relation to one another, forming an affective-political constellation. To put it more bluntly, in both South Africa and the United States, there’s an underlying desire among white Jews to reify

Zoë Heller's *The Believers*, centering on the Litvinoff family, a generally unlikeable collection of Jewish political zealots in various stages of losing their faith, likewise circulates around an embodied-but-disembodied affective object-sign: the prone form of a comatose Joel Litvinoff, the William Kunstler-esque Civil Rights lawyer and champion of the oppressed. Ultimately, the central conflict of the novel is who will get to narrativize that object. Like what I call the "objets d'activisme"<sup>130</sup> that decorate the multistory Brooklyn townhouse he shared with his family, and even, to an extent, like the Litvinoff family as a whole, Joel is an empty signifier knowable mostly through what others are determined to feel about him. In examining this affective-political economy, the novel also revisits and carries forward a number of the central themes examined in the previous chapter, particularly the nuclear Jewish family, the essential differences (or lack thereof) between liberalism and radicalism, the inability of individualistic liberal narratives to capture the complex ethical entanglements of Jewish subjects in structures of racial oppression, and the affective economy in which the good Jewish liberal becomes a fiercely protected signifier of the Jewish commitment to justice.

*"That kind of American novel"*

*The Believers* was Zoë Heller's third novel, coming five years after the highly successful *Notes on a Scandal*.<sup>131</sup> Reviews were generally positive, remarking in particular on the biting

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their status as the "good white people," the ones who treated Black people with kindness and generosity, who recognized their suffering, the ones who fought and died alongside Black activists in the campaign for Black freedom. And because we're (always) talking about a global politics, in order for American Jews to be the good white people in the world of Jim Crow, they also need to be able to say that Jews were the good white people under apartheid and vice versa.

<sup>130</sup> To be clear, I don't speak French. I am merely playing with the loan-phrase "objets d'art" as it circulates in Anglophone culture. But to be honest, I think the fact that I do not speak French is quite apt for this coinage, because it redoubles the pretentious artificiality of the object-signs I am discussing.

<sup>131</sup> Born and raised in North London, where she attended Haverstock School with future Labour politician and Foreign Secretary David Milliband (brother of Ed Milliband), she received a first in English at Oxford before moving to New York City to take MA courses at Columbia University. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Heller was an ex-patriot columnist reporting on New York life for British newspapers, columns that reveal, to be frank, consistently high levels of disdain for Americans in general and American politicians in particular. Still, as Sally Vincent for *The Guardian* put it in 2003, "Look, she likes America... More importantly, she likes herself in

realism of the descriptive language Heller uses to conjure the remarkably unrelenting personalities of the Litvinoff family. As Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* writes,

Nearly all the characters in Zoë Heller's ambitious new novel... are all in thrall to their own certainty, self-righteous about their own beliefs and contemptuous of anyone dimwitted enough to disagree. They are also believers in their own mythologies: the roles in which they have been cast... the personas they have had thrust upon them and have, over the years, internalized as their own. Zeal is their default setting; sanctimony, their favorite defense.

Nicole Rose of the Sydney-based *Sun Herald* concurs: "The Litvinoffs proudly raised their children on an intellectual diet of... the same ideas that moved a generation in the 1960s to question the US government and defy the establishment." "Heller's cast of social liberals," Rose continues, "are perfectly poised to test the philosophical premise that what we believe ought to align with how we act. It's a noble idea, caricatured and exposed in all its hypocrisy by Heller's satirical study" (Rose). British reviewers, meanwhile, frequently commented on its sheer Americanness, with Joanna Briscoe noting in *The Guardian* that "*The Believers* is at heart an American novel: a larger, more considered, layered and utterly assured study of a family driven by political passion whose personal lives refuse to comply with prescribed ideology." Writing for *The Independent*, Katy Guest adds that "Perhaps, then, this is that kind of American novel – about conviction and loyalty, belonging and self-doubt. And, though Heller is a recent newcomer to the country, this is without doubt an insider's account," adding that, for the brashly unlikeable character of Audrey, Heller "does earn... a grudging, but undoubted, British respect." This

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America, or, at any rate, despises herself less. It suits her to be in it but not of it, at home but slightly outside. That is the allure, you see. And her literary heroes are American; Saul Bellow, Philip Roth." I do think there are interesting, if not exactly revelatory, connections to be made here not only between Heller and Jacobson, but between Heller and Joel Glickman, who also moves abroad in search of a context in which he despises himself less.



review of the reviews makes clear just how close Heller's text is to so many of the issues at stake in this chapter and in this project as a whole—that is, except for one.

Curiously, none of the reviewers appear to have considered race and racism to be part of the story that Heller is telling. In “The politics of identity: cultural appropriation and black-Jewish relations in Zoë Heller's *The Believers*,” one of the exceptionally few scholarly treatments of the novel, David Brauner notes this paucity and attempts to correct it, arguing that, “black-Jewish relations are at the heart of the novel... it can in fact be read, allegorically, as an account of the fluctuations in those relations in post-war America, and of the marginal role played in those fluctuations by British Jews” (265). Of course, I am likewise attempting to read the novel as “about race” in a transnational context, but in a different, perhaps more American, way. I first want to set aside the troublesome term, “black-Jewish relations,” the arguments against which are playfully distilled in Adam Zachary Newton's *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America* (2004):

The nomenclature often seems to take on a life of its own, agglutinatively, to become *blackjewishrelations*, like those portmanteau words by Faulkner or Joyce that were meant to evince compression or dissolve boundaries.... As a term over and above its empirical referents, the phrase is being asked to do too much work, a beanpole on steroids, simultaneously overwrought and underweight. (10)

But it's not just the term I take issue with, it's that, while *The Believers* is “about” race, it isn't really about Black people at all. For that reason, I prefer the term used by Daniel Itzkovitz, drawing on the work of historian Jonathan Karp: the “Black-Jewish monologue,” with the caveat that I still object to the erasure of Black Jews it reproduces. But it is helpful in the sense that it

re-directs our attention to certain stories white Jews tell themselves about themselves, in which Black people are only signifiers of various modes of white Jewish virtue.

*Litvinoff family values*

As it happens, *The Believers* picks up almost exactly where *The Beginners* left off, in London, 1962, before jumping forward forty years to post-9/11 New York. Like *The Beginners*, *The Believers* bears many of the hallmarks of a traditional family saga. At the same time, Heller's novel is, from the outset, deeply cynical towards every one of its characters and indeed the very notion that they constitute a "family." In the opening scene, Jewish American civil rights lawyer Joel Litvinoff meets Jewish British student Audrey Howard at a party in 1962, when she happens upon him defending Paul Robeson against her snobbish New Left socialist friends, who consider Robeson a "champagne socialist," to use the British phrase, remarking 'Paul Robeson suffers in a very good coat and an excellent car. I wouldn't waste too much sympathy on him if I were you,' adding later that Robeson is "basically a minstrel figure" (7-8).<sup>132</sup> Audrey defends Robeson, earning Joel's gratitude and recognition. Their courtship is quick, intense, and strange. He accompanies her on a visit to her decrepit parents, and on the train ride there he "described his work with the Freedom Riders ... joked about the time he had been kicked by a police captain in the bus station in Jackson... [and] mentioned, with what he hoped was appropriate humbleness, that he had recently been asked by the Reverend Martin Luther King to join his legal team" (11).

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<sup>132</sup> Ironically, these criticisms are very close to those directed at Robeson by writers in *The Crisis*, the NAACP's official magazine, in 1949, specifically for being pro-Communist. At a speech before a conference in Paris that year, Robeson remarked that, "It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind" (qtd. in Staub 27). In response, a scathing essay in *The Crisis* denounced and dismissed Robeson, writing "He made great phonograph records, gained fame and fortune on the legitimate stage and in the movies. He lived in England, traveled and sang abroad, put his son in a fashionable school in Switzerland. He was a lion at social affairs, moving in very select British and Continental society. . . . So Mr. Robeson has none except sentimental roots among American Negroes. He is of them, but not with them" (qtd. in Staub 27-28).

When Joel meets the Howards, he shows them a condescending gallantry that irks Audrey, after which she decides to take him to bed. Her sexual assertiveness repels him (“She had behaved like... like a slut” (17)), so he proposes to her. In a romantic flight of fantasy that resembles Bertie Priess’s imagined future with Rachel Glickman, Audrey accepts: “They would live together in an ‘apartment.’ In a skyscraper, perhaps. They would be comrades in the fight against injustice, sharing the action and passion of their time. They would go on marches and hold cocktail parties attended by all their Negro friends...” (17). As David Brauner writes,

The juxtaposition here of bourgeois aspiration (the apartment in the skyscraper, the cocktail parties) and political idealism (the fight against injustice, implicitly legitimized by the presence of ‘Negro friends’) is presented satirically, as the product of Audrey’s naivety. However, the idea of African-Americans as symbolic guarantors of left-wing political authenticity, particularly for secular, liberal Jews, is a potent one that extends well beyond the fantasies of a jejune English girl. In fact, notions of cultural appropriation—of blackness but also of different kinds of Jewishness—are at the heart of the novel. (266)

Although I agree with Brauner’s assessment of the ideologies juxtaposed ironically in Audrey’s flight of fantasy, I harbor certain doubts that “appropriation” is the most productive framing of it. In Brauner’s reading, Heller’s appropriation of American Jewishness is redoubled satirically by Audrey’s, which is then complicated by Anglo-American-Jewish appropriation of Black American culture. Instead, I see what Brauner calls “bourgeois aspiration” and “political idealism” as co-existing, and at times overlapping, affective economies of status, neither of which can properly be called American *or* British because they are both fundamentally global. Nor would I necessarily call the reference to “Negro friends” appropriative. It is, rather, a form

of objectification or commodification, because said friends are possessed as objects that indicate status in the affective economy of white Jewish liberalism. And in any case, by the end of the novel we have seen no evidence that Audrey has any non-white friends at all.

After Audrey accepts Joel's proposal, the novel jumps forward several decades to New York City in 2002, and almost immediately takes up the issue of what the Jewish liberal/radical divide looks like in the twenty-first century. As he wakes up on the morning of his fatal stroke, Joel anxiously anticipates the arguments he will make in defense of his client, Mohammed Hassani, one of the "Schenectady Six," a group of Arab Americans who allegedly spent time at an Al-Qaeda training camp prior to 9/11 and on that basis are being charged as terrorists. The case that Joel intends to make is in many ways the *sine qua non* of an assimilationist liberal defense, which counters the accusation of terrorism by pointing out that,

*Mohammed Hassani is an American citizen with three American children and an American wife to whom he has been married for fifteen years. He is a grocer, a small businessman, the sponsor of a Little League team—a person who has lived and worked in upstate New York all his life. Does he possess strong religious beliefs? Yes. But remember, ladies and gentlemen, whatever the prosecution tries to suggest, it is not Islam that is on trial in this courtroom. Has Mr. Hassani voiced criticisms of American foreign policy? Certainly. Does this fact make him a traitor? No, it does honor to the constitutional freedoms upon which our country was founded. (22)*

In making this argument, Joel effectively intends to deracinate Hassani and reconstruct him as the ideal American liberal subject: the propertied and productive patriarch of a nuclear family. It is also, pointedly, an assimilationist argument, in that it takes Hassani's ability to assimilate into US culture as evidence of inherent goodness. Audrey, meanwhile, favors a more radical strategy,

insisting that Joel should defend Hassani "on the grounds of legitimate Arab rage" against the American imperium (23). While Joel dismisses her argument with a typically condescending misogynist gesture, remarking to himself that it "was a feminine prerogative to hold unreasonable political views," for the reader it sets up an evocative contrast between the liberal and radical approaches to postcolonial Jewish politics (23).

As discussed earlier, in addition to generational, class-based, and gendered differences between white liberalism and radicalism, one of the basic methodological conflicts between the two lies in the former's insistence on opposing structural racism *within* the parameters established by the quasi-liberal racial state pitted against the latter's insistence on transgressing those parameters. As a legal strategy, Audrey's position would be dead on arrival, for neither US culture nor US law recognizes any form of Arab rage as legitimate. At the same time, Joel's arguments knowingly reproduce the oppressive boundaries set by the white supremacist state that dictate what can or should be recognized as human. Audrey and Joel's dynamic replays this historical drama in other ways as well, including their class positions (she working, he professional), generational differences (she was eighteen when they met, he in his early thirties), geo-cultural backgrounds (she European, he American), and gender identities (she she, he he). And yet a direct liberal-radical conflict never truly plays out, because, only a few pages later, Joel Litvinoff has a stroke and falls into a coma from which he never wakes up. As the avatar of white Jewish liberalism lies inert for several hundred pages, the true struggle of the novel emerges: how will his story be told, how will "Joel Litvinoff," now dead, circulate as an object-sign in the affective economy of Jewish politics, conferring value onto whomever is able to possess him.

After Joel's stroke, the narrative then begins to follow not only Audrey's aggressive and selfish attempts to deal with Joel's illness but also the emotional and political crises of their two biological daughters, Rosa and Karla, and their adopted son, Lenny. Only when he is comatose does Audrey discover that Joel was in a long-term affair with a Black artist named Berenice, with whom he fathered a son. After this revelation, Audrey spends most of the novel terrorizing her friends and family and behaving in a pointedly deplorable and often explicitly racist manner as she lords the purity of her leftism over everyone she knows. Rosa, a pretty, self-righteous, dogmatic Marxist, having recently returned from a disillusioning sojourn in Cuba, unexpectedly begins to explore the world of Orthodox Judaism. Karla, who is kind and generous to a fault but also deeply self-loathing, bitter, and insecure, works as a social worker at a hospital while helping her vain and hypercritical husband, a union organizer named Mike, to adopt a child she doesn't really want. When she is violently attacked by a patient, her life is saved by the Egyptian gift shop owner Khaled, with whom she begins an emotional, and then a physical, affair, ultimately leaving Mike for him in the novel's closing scene. Lenny, Audrey's favorite, struggles with addiction and unemployment, often manipulating his mother and sisters for support. For a time, he moves to the country, learns carpentry, joins Narcotics Anonymous, and seems to make considerable progress, but the novel's end finds him returning to the city and his old habits.

As Nicole Rose notes, the characters are all "perfectly poised to test the philosophical premise that what we believe ought to align with how we act." For example, Lenny himself represents one of Joel's failed attempts at transcending liberal social constructs. After one of Lenny's parents (both of whom are depicted as Weather Underground-style radicals) was killed by a bomb and the other sent to prison, Joel adopts the boy, being "very high on the idea of subverting traditional models of family life" (26). Thus, he considered it "no mere act of

bourgeois philanthropy,” but rather “a subversive gesture—a vote for an enlightened, ‘tribal’ system of childrearing that would one day supersede the repressive nuclear unit altogether” (26). Yet Lenny proves “an uncooperative participant in the tribal program,” who bedevils the household by flying into violent tantrums as a child, committing frequent acts of delinquency as a teenager, and ultimately developing serious substance abuse issues as an adult that prevent him from holding down a regular job or cultivating any healthy relationships. Of course, “Joel would not have minded... had Lenny ever put his rebellious impulses to some principled use: run away to join the Sandinistas, say, or vandalized U.S. Army recruiting offices,” but, disappointingly, “the boy’s waywardness had never served any cause other than his own fleeting satisfactions” (26). By the time he has “grown up” (which is to say aged, not matured), Joel sees Lenny as a “mendacious, indolent fuckup, that was all—a mortifying reminder of a failed experiment” and resents the motherly attention Audrey shows on him instead of their “real” children (27). As David Brauner explains, “The irony here is that while the adoption of Lenny seems to provide irrefutable proof of the sincerity of Joel’s progressive credentials – to demonstrate that he lives by his ideals – it transpires that as a father he reverts to a reactionary hierarchy of values in which Lenny is inherently inferior to his biological children” (Brauner 270). Like Audrey’s much-desired “Negro friends,” Lenny was originally acquired as an object to signify the “authenticity” or “sincerity” of the Litvinoffs’ beliefs. But the failure of this “experiment” indexes the problem with using living and specific bodies as currency in an affective economy. Simply put, they don’t always do what one wants them to do.

*Objets d’activisme, or, the anti-bourgeois commodity fetish*

The forty-year gap in the narrative means that the reader never really witnesses Joel and Audrey’s activism. Instead, artifacts of their radical past circulate as fetishized commodities in

the interstices of their comfortable life, made to appear all the more hypocritical by the fact that Joel is consistently sexist and Audrey consistently racist in both their mental life and explicitly in their interactions with women of color. What particularly interests me here is the way that paraphernalia of the anti-apartheid movement frequently appear as decorations with which Joel and Audrey have festooned their three-story Brooklyn townhouse. The contrast between these objets d'activisme and the wealth that Joel and Audrey have obviously accumulated while obtaining them, symbolizes the novel's engagement with what has already been identified as one of the central conflicts of transnational Jewish liberalism: the inherent incompatibility of the morally good life and the materially good life in the context of global racial capitalism. Take, for example, the following passage:

Most of the residents on this eighteenth-century street had solved the problem of their low-ceilinged, north-facing parlors by tearing down the first-floor dividing walls... But Joel and Audrey sneered at the yuppie extravagance of these renovations.... [I]nsofar as they were aware of interior design... they thought it a very silly business indeed. Over the years, they had assembled various artifacts and souvenirs pertaining to their travels and political involvements—an ANC flag signed by Oliver Tambo; a framed portrait of Joel, executed in muddy oils by a veteran of the Attica riots; a kilim depicting scenes from the Palestinian struggle—but there was not a single item... that could be said to represent a considered aesthetic choice. (27)

I call these pieces “objets d'activisme” first and foremost to mark them as commodities in an affective-political economy of status. Like “objets d'art,” decorative pieces often used primarily to project an image of wealth and taste, objets d'activisme are decorative pieces meant to project ones' alignment with an ideological or political movement, but they are similarly bereft of



feeling. As much as the Litvinoffs dismiss what they see as the bourgeois preoccupations of their neighbors, they live on the same street and own an equally stately and valuable property. But even beyond that, they too participate in a form of conspicuous consumption. As David Brauner points out, the Litvinoffs' collection acts as "material evidence that testifies to [their] radical credentials," while also "implicitly rais[ing] the big political questions that have complicated and at times polarised black/Jewish relations not just in America but in Britain and elsewhere" (267).

But even if these objects *raise* big political questions, they don't really answer them. The reader never sees Joel or Audrey engage in any way with these "souvenirs," or speak meaningfully about the anti-colonial struggles they represent. They reappear throughout the novel as symbolic gestures rather than plot points. For example, Audrey's brother-in-law Colin later appears scrubbing her filthy kitchen while wearing "one of Audrey's old aprons emblazoned with an image of a black fist and the word *AMANDLA!*" (64) and on the next page learn that Joel's office is decorated on with "A large framed photograph of Joel shaking hands with Martin Luther King Jr" (65). Yet none of these objects take on *narrative* significance, which is to say, nothing ever happens to, with, or about them. Of course, as Eric Hayot points out, no object in a literary text can have a zero-degree of significance because the mere fact of their existence indexes the absence of infinite possible alternative objects (*On Literary Worlds* 64-65). Still, the Litvinoffs' objets d'activisme really only have characterological significance, that is, they only exist to tell the reader something about who their owners are. As such, they fulfill a parallel role to that of objets d'art in a bourgeois parlor or front room. In theory, symbols of the Attica Prison Uprising, Palestinian liberation movement, and the ANC's resistance to apartheid could index precisely the type of worlded solidarity this project is working towards. Instead, they emerge as fetishized commodities in the global economy of self-perception.

As discussed in other chapters, part of the reason we can understand post-World War II whiteness, and within it, post-World War II Jewish whiteness, as global is that it circulates through a transnational consumer culture. Dianne Harris maps this “lexicon of white consumption” in *Little White Houses*, and, as Larry Grubbs points out, it was the adoption of this same lexicon in white South Africa that facilitated an affiliation between the two countries even in the face of liberal concerns over apartheid. Audrey and Joel position their home as the diametrical opposite of bourgeois white consumer culture, not only in the artifacts listed above but also in the deliberately abject squalor of their home. Yet, in *The Believers* at least, their paraphernalia are no less symbolic, no less fetishized. Adding to the complex portrait of the Litvinoffs’ patently white, leftist, and Jewish hypocrisy are scenes like the one in which Audrey haughtily disregards her housekeeper, Sylvia whilst the latter is cleaning the very room in which Audrey and Joel have created a shrine to their own righteousness. Despite feeling a certain “embarrassment” for “having an elderly Latina scrub her toilets,” she also resents Sylvia’s attempts at friendly chatter, musing that, “Maintaining the fiction of chummy equality with your help could be very wearing at times. Privately, she thought her socialist conscience could have survived a tiny bit more deference” (86). Unlike Bertie’s shift from revolutionary to venture capitalist, the clear contrast between Audrey’s beliefs and her behaviors is never really presented as a crisis, but rather as a muscle strengthened over time. This is one marker of the transhistorical conversation between the two novels: leftist hypocrisies that began, perhaps, as a crisis of faith in the 1960s by the early twenty-first century have become habitual.

#### *The object of her affectations*

Undoubtedly, the most meaning-laden affective object in the novel is Joel Litvinoff’s body. As mentioned earlier, after Joel falls into a coma, Audrey discovers that he had had an

ongoing affair in the 1990s with a Black poet and photographer named Berenice, with whom he has also fathered a son. Berenice approaches Audrey at the hospital after word reaches her of Joel's illness. From the beginning, it is clear that Audrey's vituperative hatred of Berenice is not, or is not entirely, that of a jealous wife towards her husband's mistress. Audrey had long before accepted that Joel was a compulsive and incorrigible philanderer. Or at least that's what she tells herself:

God knows, it wasn't the infidelity that shocked her: she had always prided herself on her realism about that part of married life.... What did it matter if a few little tarts got to boast about sleeping with Joel Litvinoff? Infidelity was short; married life was long. She was going to remain Joel's wife and the mother of his children, long after all the tawdry, loveless fucking had been forgotten. (158)

In place of fidelity, what Joel offers Audrey is affective-political status: everyone loves and respects Joel, and Joel loves and respects her. He is the one who gave her life meaning, because "Without Joel, she would still be typing in Camden Town, or living in some hellish suburb, married to a man like her sister's husband" (285). Politically speaking, Joel is a trophy husband.

Given that Audrey's attachment to Joel is often mediated by a desire for status, it makes sense that her vicious resentment comes from the possibility that Berenice might usurp her position in Joel's heroic legacy. When they first meet, for example, Audrey recovers from her shock by telling herself that "[Berenice] was a fan. A camp follower, one of the "lost souls" who "turned up at Perry Street every year, hoping to establish—or imagining that there already existed—some special relationship with Joel, their radical hero" (102). Similarly, she later denounces Berenice's request to have Audrey and Joel's children meet their half-brother, saying, "[I]t's not *just* about money. It's worse than that, isn't it? She wants a piece of [Joel]. She wants

to be *part of my family*. She's a very homely woman who's lived in obscurity all her life... and now she sees her chance to be at the center of things. Having Joel's baby is the most glamorous, important thing that ever happened to her" (190). However, in her desperate attempts to maintain her hold over Joel's life and reputation, Audrey is constantly contradicting that legacy by levying pointedly racist attacks at Berenice. At the hospital, Audrey threatens to call the police on her, which she later regrets only because "She and Joel had always maintained that privileged white people should not seek the assistance of the police, except in cases of direst emergency" (103). Despite this moment of hesitation, when she goes to meet Berenice at her friend Jean's house, she "jokes" beforehand that she and Jean had better hurry before Berenice "nicks all of your candlesticks" (186). She accuses Berenice of being a single mother trying to latch parasitically onto Joel and his wealthy friends, asks if she is high, and interrogates her about why she did not seek an abortion. As the novel continues, Audrey herself does more and more to erode whatever political and moral legacy she and Joel might have made for themselves, yet even after Joel's condition has completely deteriorated, she refuses to consider pulling the plug because she refuses to let "that woman have the last word on my marriage" (283).

And indeed, after Joel dies, Audrey does manage to get the last word. She definitively assumes control of Joel's legacy in the novel's final scenes, which take place at his funeral and the reception afterwards. Joel's status as an anti-racist icon seems assured: thousands of people attend his funeral, including real-life figures such as Charlie Rangel, Patti Smith, Lauren Bacall, and Chuck D of the rap group Public Enemy, whom Joel had (fictionally, of course) defended against obscenity charges lodged against their anthem, "Fight the Power." This last allusion is very telling, since, although "Fight the Power" was never targeted by the government, it was the subject of a controversy in many ways typical of the strained relationship between Blacks and

Jews in the 1980s and 1990s. Speakers also include testimonials from poor clients that Joel had defended pro bono, including a woman charged with panhandling and a homeless man who recounts how Joel had “visited him every day in prison for six months” while attempting to overturn his conviction for assault. This cavalcade has the desired effect on Audrey’s friend Jean, who is moved and thinks to herself, “Joel had been a good man... An old scoundrel in many ways—but a good man who had done good things” (329).

Amidst these luminaries, Audrey takes the stage and delivers a eulogy that does a great deal of work, both narratively and politico-culturally speaking. “[Joel] was a lawyer” she begins. “But to me, he was and always will be a warrior—a warrior who fought all his life for equality and justice. Over the last forty years it has been my great privilege to fight alongside him” (329). She then announces that she plans to start The Litvinoff Foundation, which will give grants to “progressive political and community initiatives that further the cause of social justice” (330). To raucous applause she then continues,

“No one as uncompromising as Joel was in his fight for the poor, the disenfranchised, the victims of racism and inequity, could have lived his life without earning the hostility of the right-wing press.... And I have no doubt that in days to come, those forces will do their best to taint his legacy. The family that Joel and I made together was not a conventional family in many ways. Joel always used to say that he didn’t really believe in families. He believed in tribes. But let me say for the record now, ours was a joyous tribe.” (330)

Audrey then gestures to Berenice, whom she now calls her “dear friend,” to stand up with “Joel’s son, *our* son—Jamil” (331). In this moment, Audrey is not only completely reversing her feelings about a woman she detests and a boy whose existence she wished fervently to erase, she

is also re-presenting what Joel himself considered a “failed experiment”—the “tribal,” post-capitalist, post-racial family—as a dogma by which he faithfully lived his life. Where before Berenice represented a threat to Audrey’s narrative, she has now been smoothly resorbed into the story Audrey wants to tell.

But those are not the only affective-rhetorical moves Audrey makes. To foreclose any aspersions that might be cast on this legend in the future, she proactively insists that any such corrections of her record will be nothing but right-wing smear. The Litvinoff Foundation seems to index precisely the kind of bourgeois philanthropy that Joel eschewed, but that too will ultimately matter little if that is the edifice Audrey has decided to erect in his name. Most importantly, in curating Joel, she reimagines herself. Where before she admitted, at least inwardly, that without him she would have remain a typist in dreary England, now she has canonized herself alongside him as a sister in arms. As Jean observes:

[T]his was Audrey’s choice: to be the keeper of the flame, the guardian of the fable. Like the tired old priest who loses his faith, but cannot bring himself to disavow the church, she would hide whatever sacrilegious sentiments lurked in her heart and carry on the official forms of worship, regardless. From now on, until she died, she would burnish the myth of the Litvinoffs’ perfect union; she would fund-raise tirelessly for Joel’s ‘foundation,’ attend conferences to accept posthumous awards on his behalf, and oversee the archiving of his papers. At some point, she would no doubt handpick an appropriately pliable young person to write his authorized biography. (331)

By controlling the narrative in this way, she keeps for herself the “profits” of selling and re-selling Joel Litvinoff as an object-sign in the affective economy of white liberalism. In framing Audrey’s choice in this way, Heller also dramatizes and (cynically) resolves two phenomena

discussed in Historical Overture II, the re-emergence of the 1960s as a site of ideological conflict in the 1990s and the so-called “memory boom.” When we overlook the way that certain bodies circulate as currency in liberal Jewish affective economies, she implies, we are liable to create a sort of barter system, as we see here. For example, in Historical Overture II, we read a Jewish congressman defraying the cost of Israel’s partnership with apartheid South Africa with the currency of their supposed welcome of Ethiopian Jews. At a certain point, we begin to overlook crucial emotional cues embedded in political narratives that produce affects that are, frankly, dangerous. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, when certain affects like hate and fear circulate economically, attaching themselves to one object-sign and then another, for those in the market it ultimately “justifies the repetition of violence against the bodies of others” (123). That is not to say that Audrey’s appropriation of Joel’s legacy is a call to violence. Rather, because she narrativizes his activism in a solipsistic way, she forecloses certain possibilities to take from his legacy lessons that make this kind of violence less likely.

### *Conclusion*

In a project focused on worldedness, *The Believers* poses much the same problem as *The Tenants*. Where, in a narrative that seems for the most part so locally contained, should one look for globality? Unlike Malamud’s, Heller’s novel is explicitly transatlantic, and names both Israel and South Africa specifically as meaningful sites of political struggle; yet, as we have seen, the novel does very little with these more worldly elements, and again like *The Tenants* focuses intimately, even exhaustively, on New York City alone. Yet even conceding that the novel may not qualify as “world literature,” it still relates an interesting and important version of, first, how texts can be worlded, and, second, why it would be a mistake to read Jewish political narratives as bounded by a national border. The worldliness of the Litvinoffs’ international activism is

important precisely because it has so little effect on the way they interact with people of color “at home.” Certain objects, moreover, do circulate globally. Sometimes, in those cases, the distant becomes an excuse for the proximate, as they veer away from one another at even odder angles.

By way of conclusion, then, I want to return to Goodman and Schwerner, in particular to an article published in the *Australian Jewish Times* on August 31, 1967, under the title “Negroes turn on Jews, Israel”:

The Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (commonly known as “Snick”), which has increasingly turned to violence in recent months and was the first to raise the cry of “Black Power”, has begun to follow the Arab line on Israel.... Snick’s charges “come with ill-grace from an organisation whose contemporary history has as its martyrs Schwerner and Goodman”, said Mr. Theodore Ellendorf, the president of the New York Chapter of the American Jewish Committee. He was referring to Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who were killed together with a Negro in 1964 while doing field work for Snick in Mississippi.

Here Goodman and Schwerner also circulate as affective object-signs, but charged with a seemingly different valence from that which would be employed by Barack Obama forty years later. As symbols of Jewish sacrifice measured against Black betrayal, their martyrdom generates resentment and fear. The sense of *After all we did for them* metonymized by Goodman and Schwerner works to delegitimize Black critiques of Israel. The article misses several particulars of the situation, down to the fact that Goodman and Schwerner were actually doing field work for CORE, not “Snick,” as the writer derisively calls it. It says nothing about the actual content of the SNCC newsletter or Civil Rights leaders’ reaction to it, not to mention the general attitude of the Black community in the US regarding Israel. James Chaney is erased almost entirely,



reduced to a nameless “Negro.” If, even in a very limited way, this is how Australian Jews in the 1960s were forming their opinions on the relationship between American Jews and Blacks, they would be doing so based on a deeply skewed portrait.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I am not entirely convinced that the US-centric evolution of whiteness studies is purely the product of American academic domination or solipsism. Rather, based on the frequency with which writers, protestors, and politicians in the three other countries to which this project attends use specifically American references to express their understanding of race relations at home, I wonder if this focus may have also emerged somewhat (not entirely) “organically” from the sheer concentration of American images, events, and people in the global affective economy of race and racism. In Chapters One and Two, I explained that one of my goals was to revisit canonical Jewish American texts and read them in a more worlded manner. This is one of the ways in which we decenter the US, by emphasizing its interconnectedness with cultures around the world. But we must also examine the outward flows, the influence that US racial imaginaries have on other spaces, particularly in the age of film and television, and perhaps more so in the digital century. To be clear, I am not saying that we should re-center the US, just as I am not advocating for re-centering whiteness despite it being my primary focus. But the deaths of Schwerner and Goodman were written about all over the world; the impact of this American event radiated outwards in a way that we must understand. If we do not address it, we are left with little but the constant re-circulation of resentments.

## CHAPTER SIX: “A JEW SHOULD KNOW BETTER’: THE POSTTRAUMATIC ETHICS OF JEWISH WHITENESS FROM JAMES BALDWIN TO TONY EPRILE

It is compelling to remember the ordeal of suffering, the times and places where one has experienced profound affliction or known it to be present in one’s family, community, or people. At the same time . . . it is dangerous to place that experience at the center of one’s identity or to let another do so, as if it were the sum of one’s life and inheritance. When one forgets, one forfeits something essential to one’s dignity, something tangled in the moral fiber of one’s being. When that memory is rendered absolute, however, one may find one’s humanity no less diminished. (Karl A. Plank, “Decentering the Holocaust”)

### *Introduction*

On September 16, 1982, about three months after Israel invaded Lebanon in what is now called the First Lebanon War, IDF soldiers stood by as Lebanese Phalangists entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, where, over the next forty-eight hours, they massacred hundreds of innocent Palestinian civilians. Though the Israeli soldiers did not actively participate in the murders, they had moved into West Beirut on September 15<sup>th</sup> precisely, in theory, to prevent such acts of vengeance after the assassination of Lebanese president-elect Bashir Gemayel. Not only did they fail to protect the Palestinian refugees, as was powerfully dramatized in the 2008 Israeli documentary *Waltz with Bashir*, they spent the nights sending up flares over the camp so that the murderers could identify their victims despite the darkness. That same year, in the Italian publication *Il Manifesto*, Holocaust survivor, theorist, and novelist Primo Levi is said to have remarked that, “Everybody is somebody’s Jew.... Today, the Palestinians are the Jews of the Israelis” (qtd. in Butler 202).

I chose to begin with this moment and statement for several reasons. First, because it helps to re-ground our literary analysis in history. We are, to an extent, back where we started in Chapter One, the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this period, American Jews joined Israeli settler movements like Gush Emunim in significant numbers, moving with them to illegally occupy the West Bank. This was also the high-water mark of the relationship between Israel and apartheid

South Africa—in fact, Constand Viljoen, Chief of the South African Defence Force (SADF), personally visited Israeli military encampments in Lebanon and spoke admiringly of their organization (Polakow-Suransky 147). Yet Sabra and Shatila was also an ethical inflection point for the Israeli public, which led them to question, among many other things, the South African alliance (Polakow-Suransky 154). The massacre also produced a global reckoning with the nature of perpetration in a specifically Jewish context—to what extent were the IDF, and Ariel Sharon in particular, responsible? It was furthermore in 1982 that Yosef Haim Yerushalmi published his influential book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, which declared that “Remember!” is the essential imperative of Jewish life. Finally, this is also when a great deal of the action in *The Persistence of Memory* takes place, as protagonist Paul Sweetbread, born in 1968, goes through adolescence in the early 1980s and is enlisted in the SADF around 1986. But I also think Primo Levi’s supposed quote—which he himself somewhat walked back and which some claim he never even said (Butler; Acocella)—helps frame our discussion of James Baldwin’s thinking about Jews and Jewish whiteness.<sup>133</sup> Levi’s remarks caused a stir, of course, because they seemed to equate the IDF soldiers with Nazis. When pressed a few months later, Levi clarified that he believed no such thing and put no stock in such simplistic analogies (Butler 203). But I want to set that aside to an extent, because what interests me here is the complexities

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<sup>133</sup> Suffice it to say, the quote has been the subject of multiple controversies. In an essay in the *New Yorker*, Jane Acocella claims that Italian reporter Filippo Gentiloni wrote the second sentence himself, that it was not part of Levi’s original statement nor originally attributed to him. Then, according to Acocella, Levi’s biographer Carole Angier “either made a mistake or repeated someone else’s” in putting those words in Levi’s mouth. To be frank, this is another moment where I am distinctly less concerned about the facts than I am the effect. Marie Antoinette never literally said “let them eat cake,” but when that statement was attributed to her, and more to the point when it began to circulate through history and pop culture as a metonym for class struggle dynamics, it still had an effect that remains worth studying whether or not the original story was true. “Everybody is somebody’s Jew.... Today, the Palestinians are the Jews of the Israelis” is similar in that its very attribution to someone of the gravity and background of Primo Levi, not to mention its ability to metonymize a set of highly charged ethical questions, gives the phrase a meaning worthy of attention either way.

of his conflation of “Jew” and “victim,” how natural it might appear to certain uncritical audiences, and the deceptively broad cast of its meaning.

*‘A Jew should know better’*

Very few thinkers, I would argue, are as well-positioned as James Baldwin to help us decode the ethical and affective politics of “the Jews of the Israelis” in the context of Jewish whiteness. To get there, I want to parse two of Baldwin’s essays that speak specifically to the relationship between Black and Jewish people in the US. But I also want to take seriously the suggestion implied in the title of the more famous of these essays, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” and look more broadly at how Baldwin frames whiteness in relation to history and memory, to see how his arguments about American whites generally apply to white Jews specifically, which will set the stage for us to take Baldwin abroad.

In 1948, Baldwin published in *Commentary* an essay titled “The Harlem Ghetto: Winter 1948” in which he meditates on Black antisemitism and Jewish anti-blackness. He describes the former as a mixture of assumptions and hostilities internalized from white American gentiles and self-hatred, writing, “When the Negro hates the Jew as a Jew he does so partly because the nation does and in much the same painful fashion that he hates himself. It is an aspect of his humiliation whittled down to a manageable size and then transferred; it is the best form the Negro has for tabulating vocally his long record of grievances against his native land” (169). In other words, though these prejudices do not originate within Black culture, once they took root there, they became a shared conduit to express resentments within the Black community both towards the ruling gentile whites and towards themselves. Jewish racism—which Baldwin identifies, for example, in the way Jewish landlords and shopkeepers in Harlem continually gouge their Black tenants and customers—is understood as an inevitable betrayal necessitated by

the white supremacist architecture of US society: “Jews... must use every possible weapon in order to be accepted, and must try to cover their vulnerability by a frenzied adoption of the customs of the country; and the nation's treatment of Negroes is unquestionably a custom. The Jew has been taught—and, too often, accepts—the legend of Negro inferiority” (170).

Essentially, he argues, Blacks resent Jews for the same reason Jews dehumanize and exploit Blacks: because that is what hegemonic whiteness demands of them. “Here the American white Gentile has two legends serving him at once,” Baldwin explains, “he has divided these minorities and he rules... The structure of the American commonwealth has trapped both these minorities into attitudes of perpetual hostility” (170).

And yet, Baldwin claims, “there is a subterranean assumption [among Black people] that the Jew should ‘know better,’ that he has suffered enough himself to know what suffering means” (169). Because of the Jewish experience of suffering, which according to Baldwin Black Christians imbibe deeply in their readings of the Old Testament, “an understanding is expected of the Jew such as none but the most naive and visionary Negro has ever expected of the American Gentile” (169). But Jews, in their striving towards acceptance, assimilation, and prosperity, have “failed to vindicate this faith” (169). This, I would argue, is where the underpinnings of “the Jews of the Israelis,” which in this context I will translate into “the Jews of the Jews,” begin to emerge. In part because they feel connected to the Jews through the Old Testament specifically, Baldwin suggests, the Black community understands victimhood as an essential part of Jewishness. This is compounded by the moment in which Baldwin was writing, in the wake of the Holocaust (though it was not commonly called that yet) and the Nuremberg trials. But in Baldwin’s formulation, the collective experience of suffering also confers an ethical and epistemological burden—the Jew should know better. As I will discuss towards the end of

the chapter, that basic concept of Jewish ennoblement through suffering has been over time deeply written into Jewish politics. For Baldwin, this marks a disjunction, a potential moment of solidarity that fails to materialize. In 1948, however, Baldwin does not necessarily adjudge this as a mark of Jewish hypocrisy, nor does he foreclose the possibility that Jews may eventually “vindicate this faith.”<sup>134</sup>

“The Harlem Ghetto” serves as an illuminating preamble to the more frequently cited 1967 essay, “Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” which has a distinctly sharper and darker tone. As noted earlier, in “Anti-White,” Baldwin excoriates Jews who use Holocaust memory as a mechanism to deflect their implication in US white supremacy, writing, “[M]any Jews use, shamelessly, the slaughter of the 6,000,000 by the Third Reich as proof that they cannot be bigots or in the hope of not being held responsible for their bigotry. It is galling to be told by a Jew whom you know to be exploiting you that he cannot possibly be doing what you know he is doing because he is a Jew” (741). The depth of Baldwin’s disturbance here makes far more sense if one understands that, twenty years earlier, he had hoped that shared experiences of suffering might bond Jews and Blacks together. As Baldwin so poignantly illustrates, the Jewish refusal to engage with their own exploitation of Blacks is based on the imposition of a diachronic moral condition on a synchronic encounter. It is a failure to recognize what Michael Rothberg calls “complex implication,” or, “the experience of occupying positions that align one both to histories of victimization and to histories of perpetration” (91). One of the contexts in which Rothberg specifically situates this concept is the Jewish experience in apartheid South Africa, to which I will soon turn, but for now it is crucial to observe how the denial of complex implication functions in the US. As Baldwin puts it, in the encounter between Blacks and Jews in the context

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<sup>134</sup> Notably, sociological studies of black attitudes towards Jews in apartheid South Africa, few though they were, do seem to reveal a similar mix of attitudes (Shimoni 165-166).

of US racism, “[The Jew] has absolutely no relevance... as a Jew. His only relevance is that he is white and values his color and uses it” (746). What he means, I would argue, overlaps elementally with Levi’s “Jews of the Jews” formulation—when Baldwin says that the Jew has no relevance in this situation as a Jew, he means that the Jew has no relevance in this situation as a victim. His reproduction of this conflation is at once interesting and problematic, because it seems to reproduce the conditions that created the hostility he wants to overcome.

Unsurprisingly, Baldwin reserves his deepest scorn for those American Jews who would wield Jewish victimhood as a moral cudgel, protecting themselves from accusations of complicity in the white supremacist power structure: “[T]he most ironical thing... is that the Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American white man.... The Jew does not realize that the credential he offers, the fact that he has been despised and slaughtered, does not increase the Negro's understanding. It increases the Negro's rage” (744). Importantly, however, one of the reasons that Jewish deflections of their implication are so frustrating is the difference in how Jewish and Black traumas were (and often still are) treated in the postwar West. Indeed, much of Baldwin’s critique of Jewish whiteness points directly to the ways in which Jews are centered—and center themselves—in the moral order produced by post-World War II liberal internationalism; as he puts it, “The Jew's suffering is recognized as part of the moral history of the world” (742). This also conditions how iterations of violent defiance are historicized and memorialized: “The Jew is a white man, and when white men rise up against oppression, they are heroes: when black men rise, they have reverted to their native savagery” (742). Contrasting the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to the 1965 Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles, he writes, “The uprising in the Warsaw ghetto was not described as a riot, nor were the participants maligned as hoodlums: the boys and girls in Watts and Harlem are thoroughly aware

of this, and it certainly contributes to their attitude toward the Jews” (742). Here, Baldwin too demonstrates the problems of mixing up multiple temporal registers: in the moment of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, it was certainly not seen as noble or righteous by the Nazis who crushed it so mercilessly, which calls into question Baldwin’s grounds of comparison. Yet if we take him to be referring not to the events themselves but rather to how they are differentially narrated in white history, it helps us move towards a crucial point, that is, how Jewish memory and white settler anti-memory come to co-exist and at times even complement one another in the US and beyond.

Though many have plumbed “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White” to understand the root concepts of “Baldwin and the Jews,” very few have taken the step demanded by the essay’s title, that is, to look at how Jews fit into Baldwin’s broader theorization of whiteness. If, as he puts it, “the Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American white man,” then it would be unproductive to quarantine Baldwin’s writings about Jews from those about white people in general. As Kevin Bruyneel explains, to Baldwin, “whiteness in America was defined through a hostile relationship to history” (78). As Baldwin sees it, white Americans tell themselves and each other a version of US history that confirms their sense of nobility, superiority, and innocence. This “history” erases as much as possible the deep and ongoing violence of white conquest and control of the land, which requires further violent erasures of Black and Indigenous memory and history. Whichever iterations of white violence cannot be entirely erased must then be reframed in a way that mitigates or excuses their cruelty.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> By, for example, emphasizing that African chiefs sold their people to white slavers, or claiming that some masters were kindly, that slaves were given food and shelter in return for labor and thus many were actually happy in their condition. These contrivances can all be found in various US History textbooks. Unfortunately, I have not



As Baldwin and Bruyneel explain, white people invest deeply in this anti-history, which holds up such a friendly mirror and moreover justifies the continued silencing of non-white voices and rigorous control of non-white bodies. Ultimately their need to believe this about themselves becomes so deeply entrenched and interwoven with their identity that it traps them in unknowing:

[P]eople who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves.... This is the place in which it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting persona incoherence. (“The White Man’s Guilt” 723)

The core issue for Baldwin is that white inversions of history prop up mythologies of white innocence that ultimately not only trap non-white others in cycles of violence but also trap white people in a kind of paralytic moral infancy. This phenomenon is deeply tied into what Kevin Bruyneel terms “settler memory,” which refers to “a process of remembering and disavowing Indigenous political agency, colonialist dispossession, and violence toward Indigenous peoples” (xiii).<sup>136</sup> “The work of settler memory,” Bruyneel later adds, “resonates with and helps to reproduce colonial unknowing.... [In many ways] less an unknowing than a disavowal, an active form of deflection from the implications and obligations to attend to what one knows” (3).

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yet had the time to look at the sociological work that cites them each specifically, so for the time being you’ll have to take my word for it.

<sup>136</sup> I am, to an extent, sidestepping the question of indigeneity in my use of Bruyneel’s concept, which is of course problematic. The primary reason, however, is that in Southern Africa, indigeneity and Blackness are virtually inseparable, to the point where it is difficult to differentiate between them the way Bruyneel does in the US context. However, I do still feel Bruyneel’s ideas have purchase in the apartheid context, so my aim is to further develop my engagement with indigeneity and the politics of comparison therein in later versions.

The phenomenon of colonial unknowing or disavowal speaks back in interesting ways to Baldwin's claim that among Blacks in the US there is, or at one point was, "a subterranean assumption that the Jew should 'know better.'" Certainly, Baldwin regards the use of collective Holocaust trauma as a basis for insisting that Jews are in no way responsible for the exploitation of Black communities one such disavowal. But what, in that case, happened to the subterranean knowledge? I believe it would be, if not incorrect, then at least unproductive to assume that it was never there in the first place. The historical fact of Jewish suffering cannot be denied, nor necessarily the Jews' attachment to those ordeals as part of Jewish identity.<sup>137</sup> How, then, despite knowing better, do Jews wind up reproducing unknowing and disavowal? Baldwin, for his part, is ultimately quite forgiving of this shortfall, writing towards the end of "Anti-White" that, "One can be disappointed in the Jew... for not having learned from his history; but if people did learn from history, history would be very different... If one blames the Jew for not having been ennobled by oppression, one is not indicting the single figure of the Jew but the entire human race" (747). Other Jewish writers were less understanding. For example, in her introduction to *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa*, Claudia Braude claims, "Acceptance of Jews as 'white' required a profound suppression of memory, on the part of both Afrikaans nationalists and Jews.... Jews did not want to remember their fear or to be reminded of their vulnerability, and in a post-Nuremberg world, the NP wanted its links with the Third Reich forgotten" (xliv). Here the disavowal is made unequivocally purposeful: for the sake of whiteness, and the safety it promised, South African Jews proved more than willing to collaborate in a "profound

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<sup>137</sup> Apart from anything else, this calls to mind the joke that every story in the Torah is some version of, "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!" Irreverent as that may be, it's essentially true that many of Torah chapters, Midrashic tales, holidays, and so on are based on the Jewish people having survived yet another attempt at their annihilation. And of course I would point back to the fact that American Jews have consistently cited remembering the Holocaust as an essential part of what it means to be Jewish.

suppression of memory.” At the same time, there *was* a Holocaust memorial culture, and a fairly active one at that, in apartheid South Africa. So clearly this memory was only partially suppressed, perhaps specifically the part that would have contained the “know[ing] better.” Thus, between Baldwin, Braude, and many others, a question persists and re-emerges in all sorts of global contexts, particularly those at issue here, which I would frame thusly: How and when has Jewish hypermnnesia been reconciled with white settler colonial dysmnnesia?

*Dysmnnesia and the posttraumatic bildungsroman*

While Baldwin often framed these forms of whiteness as uniquely American, reading him alongside novels like Tony Eprile’s *The Persistence of Memory* (2004) demonstrates how productively applicable his thinking is to other contexts, specifically apartheid South Africa.<sup>138</sup> Using Baldwin’s work on Jews and whiteness as a lens through which to interpret Eprile’s representation of Jewish South Africa in *The Persistence of Memory* returns us to several of the foundational problems this project sets itself to address. The novel further invites such transnational connections by consciously worlding itself, in particular emphasizing the influence of American media and politics on South African cultural repertoires. To begin with, Paul himself was born on June 6, 1968, the day US politician and presidential hopeful Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. Paul also espouses an ongoing fascination with Kennedy’s historic speech at the University of Cape Town, in which he began describing his affection for a country settled by Europeans, who broke the backs of the indigenous population and remained riven by

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<sup>138</sup> Taking up this mantle, Hugo Canham articulates the applicability of Baldwin’s ideas to the South African context, writing, “The atmospheric similarity between the black South African and African American experience meant that these two worlds became intimately connected. Baldwin’s exemplars of extreme violence therefore became the American South... and South Africa” (45). For Baldwin, then, “South Africa remained an important lens through which to view the world as the ultimate exemplar of the extremes to which whiteness can consolidate itself” (Canham 52-53).

racial conflict to this day, only to reveal, wryly, that he had actually been describing the USA.<sup>139</sup> Paul further notes, for example, South African soldiers' use of "Nam" to refer to the battlegrounds of Namibia (where, as you may recall from Historical Overture I, the Republic of South Africa waged an illegal and ostensibly secret war of occupation for decades) and going "back to the States" to describe their return home, explaining, "We are quick to recognize the affinity we have with young Americans in Vietnam, a generation ago, and our language reflects this" (70).<sup>140</sup> Even Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner get a look in, as Paul mentions in an aside that Eric Taylor, one of the security officers responsible for the assassination of a group of anti-apartheid activists known as the Cradock Four, claimed in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that "watching *Mississippi Burning* [the 1988 American film based on Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman's murders] made him realize the error of his ways and come forth to testify" (161). The novel also extends and deepens the global reach of Baldwin's thinking on whiteness, in particular by applying his theorization of education and popular culture as collaborators in the production and circulation of white antihistory to the dysmensiac culture of apartheid South Africa while questioning the extent to which Jews are able to participate in it.

In the novel, Paul's white Jewish subjectivity is framed by two traumas. The first is his father's death, with the method of suicide (poison gas) drawing strong parallels to the Holocaust. Paul's psychic reaction to this trauma is hypermnesia; from that point, he begins to remember

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<sup>139</sup> "I come here this evening because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage. I refer, of course, to the United States of America." (qtd. in Eprile 195)

<sup>140</sup> References to the Vietnam War also abound in *Waltz with Bashir*, for what I suspect is a similar reason, namely, that the Vietnam War and especially the movies made about it are a global *lingua franca* to refer to a war fought by the unwilling, for the sake of no one, with unclear goals and wavering popular support, that begins in dishonesty and ends in disillusionment.

everything. The second, ongoing trauma is Paul's implication in the white supremacist violence of apartheid South Africa, which builds over time, culminating in his murder of two men in a post-ceasefire sortie. Paul's response to this trauma is in some ways the diametrical opposite of his reaction to the first: he disavows and represses it until he is brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Via Baldwin, we begin to appreciate the novel's way of asking not only how the hypermnestic post-Holocaust Jewish subject assimilates into structures built on white dysmnesia but also what a Jewish whiteness might look like were it to recoup some form of ethical self-knowledge. Ultimately, I argue, the form of Jewish whiteness called for by both Baldwin and Eprile is productively post-traumatic in a dual sense: first, in that it draws on the collective traumas of Jewish history to produce empathy that does not rely on identification or translation into the Jewish idiom, and, second, in that it recognizes within itself an absence of something that is continually being disavowed and repressed, that is, white Jewish implication in the suffering of non-white others.

A post-traumatic bildungsroman—that is, a bildungsroman structured like a trauma—that follows the coming of age of Jewish South African Paul Sweetbread between 1968 and 2000, *The Persistence of Memory* also sets up an exploration of trauma, implication, Jewishness, and white South African counterhistories. Because Paul has a photographic memory, he seems unable to participate in what he calls “the national dysmnesia, the art of rose-colored recall” (63). The novel picks up with Paul at the age of eleven, just after his father's suicide. The owner of an extermination company, Paul's father suffocated himself with poison gas in the room once held by a Coloured maid with whom he was caught having an affair. The novel follows Paul first through school and then through his mandatory service in the SADF. At school he learns a bowdlerized and often nonsensical version of South African history designed to reinforce the

naturalization of white supremacy. Despite his intelligence, he struggles with the omnipresence of his memories, which often overwhelm his ability to participate in the present. After he graduates, having no other alternative, Paul is drafted into the army and stationed in Namibia. There, he catches the eye of the charismatic and cruel Major Lyddie. He is eventually transferred to a photography and videography program that trains him to produce army propaganda, only to be transferred back to “Nam” at Lyddie’s request. Then the book lurches forward, catching up with Paul months later. During that gap, as we later learn through Paul’s testimony for the TRC, Lyddie forces him to participate in a massacre of SWAPO soldiers after the official ceasefire.<sup>141</sup> After the testimony, Paul attempts to go on with his life in the “New South Africa,” and the book leaves him as an adult, unsettled but in the process of healing.

Throughout the novel it is clear that Paul is drawn as an avatar of South African Jews. As I mentioned earlier, Paul’s father’s method of suicide draws immediate parallels to the Holocaust, echoed throughout the novel in references to Nazism and its historical connections to Afrikaner nationalism. He also grows up in Houghton, notably the constituency that elected Jewish MP Helen Suzman as the sole representative of the Progressive Party for decades. Paul’s grandfather, we learn, was a *smous*, the paradigmatic Jewish traveling salesman of South Africa in the late nineteenth century. He attends Barney Barnato Primary School, named after a notorious Anglo-Jewish randlord.<sup>142</sup> In other words, Paul’s life is punctuated by densely meaningful signifiers of Jewish South African history. But what marks him out even more as a

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<sup>141</sup> The South West Africa People's Organisation, officially known as the SWAPO Party of Namibia, a former independence movement that is now the governing political party in Namibia. They were apartheid South Africa’s chief military opponents in the region between 1966 and 1990.

<sup>142</sup> Barnato grew up in impoverished obscurity in London before scraping together the money for a steerage ticket to the Cape Colony, where he ended up amassing a tremendous fortune as a cofounder of DeBeers Consolidated Mines and was even elected as an MP before dying mysteriously at sea at the age of 46. His life was also the subject of a miniseries made by the South African Broadcasting Corporation that aired in 1990, which I mention only to reinforce his continued relevance in South African culture.

metonymic Jewish subject are his prodigious powers of memory. As discussed, in *Historical Overture II*, the mid-to-late twentieth-century “memory boom” in popular culture and critical discourse made it so that memory, and Holocaust memory in particular, came to be understood as the defining characteristic of Jewishness, much as hypermnesia is the defining trait of Paul Sweetbread. The novel also emphasizes this in moments scattered throughout. For example, in a fight with his girlfriend a few months after his TRC testimony, she complains, ““You’ve got to stop living in the past, Paul. You’re like an old rabbi endlessly studying the same passage in your Jewish Bible. Now it’s time to *build up* the New South Africa”” (274). But this we know all along Paul cannot do. Whether because of his culture or his trauma, Paul will always have one foot in the past.

The fact that the novel is written as a bildungsroman, a “novel of development” that follows a single subject from innocence to maturity, creates opportunities to interweave it with other registers of Baldwinian ethics. In his article, “James Baldwin, Simone de Beauvoir, and the ‘New Vocabulary’ of Existentialist Ethics,” Frank Farneth suggests that in their midcentury writings both Baldwin and Beauvoir embrace the “coming of age” metaphor to describe the process of individual and collective ethical development. As Farneth explains, “moral maturity entails the abandonment... of fixed or given identities, values, and authorities” (183). At the same time, “Those who refuse to recognize their own freedom [and] evade the complexities, ambiguities, and responsibilities of freedom.... project a closed future that seeks to silence those who question the givenness of the world. In other words, they contribute to the domination of others” (177). We may, to begin with, connect this back to Sara Ahmed’s phenomenology of whiteness, her description of whiteness as “that which has been received, or become given, over time... an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions,

affecting how they ‘take up’ space” (“Phenomenology” 150). Ahmed also emphasizes the linkage of whiteness and history, writing that, just as whiteness can be understood as an “ongoing and unfinished history,” history itself “is made out of what is given... history is what we receive upon arrival” (154). This may seem to countermand Baldwin’s understanding of whiteness as defined by a “hostile relationship to history,” but it makes more sense once concretized in the context provided by Claudia Braude. In apartheid South Africa, as Braude claims, Jews and Afrikaner nationalists colluded in a “profound suppression of memory.” As part of their becoming-white—their “arrival,” as it were—Jews were given a new history, a white history of South Africa. Over time, like whiteness itself, this history would (or at least was meant to) “become given” in such a way as to “project a closed future that seeks to silence those who question the givenness of the world” that apartheid made.

We can trace Paul’s ethical development through a series of scenes, connecting them throughout to the ethical and mnemonic markers that have already been laid down. The first site of anti/historical indoctrination that the novel explores is the classroom. Paul’s experience there ties well into that described by Claudia Braude, a real-life member of Paul’s generation (if the WorldCat database is to be believed, she is one year older than Paul would be if he existed). In “From the Brotherhood of Man to the World to Come: The Denial of the Political in Rabbinic Writing under Apartheid,” Braude recalls,

My Jewish education was the direct product of the desire of the apartheid state to promote ethnic separatism. In spite of critical distance from the pressures and imperatives of the apartheid state, the South African Jewish establishment... internalized [its] values and ideology.... The terms and discourse of apartheid fast became appropriated within all areas of Jewish life and consciousness. (qtd. in Shimoni 267).



Paul's experience is markedly similar. Because the curriculum is closely monitored and administrated by the National Party and designed to bolster Afrikaner nationalism, even Anglophone Jewish teachers balefully capitulate to a curriculum that consists of a "steady dull reminding of the white man's superiority and the burden of brutality required to civilize the savage" (69). They do not do so uncritically, but they participate in the production and circulation of this antihistorical history nonetheless.

As an example of this "swill," Paul recounts the story of "'Martha,' a former dweller in the slums of Sophiatown," as told by one of his textbooks:

'Martha looked around at her government-issued house. There were no vermin crawling up the clean new walls. The bright morning sun fell upon her sleeping baby and she quickly moved to cover it up. Soon little Thembi would be going to the nice new school the government had built nearby. Tears ran down Martha's face while she thought about how all her dreams had come true.' (57)

Paul's radical instructor, Mr. Brenner, is highly contemptuous of the story (as well he might be), pointing out, for one thing, that the author did not even bother to give "Martha" a last name. What he does not mention, although we may as well note it here, is that the woman's name is in keeping with the Christian National Education system's policy that "the content of education must be interpreted from the Calvinistic point of view... [H]istory reveals God's plan for people and is one of the best means of cultivating 'lief de vir die eie' (love of one's own)" (MacMillan 46). Since Martha is a New Testament figure whose destiny is to labor in the home rather than to hear the gospel, Eprile's use of the name adds a layered verisimilitude to the fictional textbook. Equally important is the extent to which Martha's story echoes the deeply patronizing tone historical US textbooks used to describe the experiences of plantation slaves. In the classroom,

Brenner then challenges his students to recall the last names of the Black maids and nannies who raised them, causing “more conservative kids [to] mutter ominously that he is a Communist” while “The children of liberals and dissidents nod at every word he utters and look around at the rest of us. *You see?*” (57)

But despite the fact that Brenner’s questions hit “closer to home” than the easily dismissible tosh of the textbooks, Paul still admits that, “It was easy enough to believe, having grown up in the Northern Suburbs, that Africans were happy with their lot, that they were being gently raised by the kind paternal hands of their white employers” (70). On the other hand, he observes, “Morose, unsmiling black people were rarely hired as household servants, and it was the wise employee who flattered his master’s and misses’s of elevated sense of benevolence” (71). These references to the “Northern Suburbs” as well as white paternalism can be read as a more subtle way of implicating Jews, who in books like *The Beginners* or Alfred Segal’s *Johannesburg Friday* (1954), often prefer to see themselves as kinder and more tolerant employers of Black people than others, particularly Afrikaners. They were bosses, not *baases*. We see these dynamics dramatized more intensely in a scene when Paul is just out of school, housesitting for a family of fellow Jewish suburbanites. Although he has spent the week developing a rapport with the black staff forced to stay in the house, when he is awoken by loud noises in the night, he falls back on the white supremacist architecture that gives him unquestioned power over them. He attempts to scold them into silence, but, seeing that this has no effect, threatens to call the police. The cook, Alini, responds, “No police, young baas. I will get them to behave. Sorry to disturb.” Then, Paul tells us, “She turns back. . . and I feel ashamed of myself. She has never called me baas before, but in this moment of crisis I reverted to type by invoking the hated apartheid authorities” (88). But what does it mean, ethically, to “revert to

type”? As Frank Farneth explains, in Baldwin’s existentialist ethics, immaturity is marked by fealty to “a ready-made world, in which rules, values, and authorities appeared to be natural and immutable” (175). Having not yet recognized their ability to act in and on the world, the ethically immature “cling to external authorities and inherited norms” (174). Paul’s threat to call the police is his capitulation to the givenness of apartheid South Africa. Although he had, up to this point in the novel, pushed the boundaries of social relations and actively questioned the Afrikaner historical narrative, in this moment he reverts, which is to say, he falls back into a habit, belief, or position that he already held.

The second scene finds Paul in the army, stationed in Namibia. Bookish, spoiled, and overweight, he makes a poor soldier, yet he catches the eye of the charismatic and cruel Captain Lyddie. One morning, Lyddie takes him to interrogate a nearby African chief and his family, who are believed to be aiding Namibian guerilla soldiers. When the chief equivocates, Lyddie reacts viciously:

With the single smooth movement, Lyddie grabs the [the chief’s son] around the waist and hoists him into the air. . . . marches over to the rain barrel and dumps the child headfirst into the water. . . . The chief stamps up and down . . . aghast, not daring to touch this white man who has so suddenly injected terror into this quiet morning. “Please, baas,” he says, “Please. He is my only son” (135).

As he, too, watches in horror, Paul wonders, “Why does [the chief] look at me when he says this? . . . Then I realize that it is because I’m the one holding the rifle, gripped at the ready in both my hands” (135). This monumental revelation *that he is the one holding the rifle* is essentially the beginning of Paul’s ethical adolescence. Crucially, this breakthrough is not the moment in which Lyddie almost drowns an innocent child, but the one in which Paul realizes

that he could be capable of stopping it. According to Farneth's reading of Baldwin, ethical adolescence is experienced as a crisis, during which one becomes aware of their freedom to defy categories that previously appeared immutable and to act in and on the world in a meaningful way. In response, they may either accept their responsibility for shaping the world or reject it and revert to givenness (176).

As they return to camp, Lyddie taunts Paul, "'You're a typical English liberal: you think your silent objection means you have no responsibility. All you had to do was say *Stop it!* and that's what I would have done'" (137). Paul attempts once more to *revert* to his given place in the power structure, retorting, "'Since when is a mere rifleman allowed to tell his senior officer what to do?'" But Lyddie merely scoffs, saying, "'You had a rifle with you too'" (137). He pushes Paul into the dirt and drives away. When Lyddie finally allows Paul back into the jeep, he scoffs: "'I hate that look that says, *I don't like this, but I'm not going to get involved*. You're part of this, old son, like it or not'" (140). Despite the evident malevolence of the messenger, and the fact that Lyddie, too, is oversimplifying the situation, this is precisely the point that both Baldwin and Eprile seek to make. Paul's ethical reversions are not innocent because he is not powerless, and his protestations amount to an ego-defense against the horror of moral responsibility, which, intentionally or not, reinforce the white supremacist architecture that he claims to despise. In "My Dungeon Shook," a letter to his nephew and namesake, Baldwin writes,

[T]his is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it... [I]t is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime. ("Shook" 292)

So long as whites are paralyzed by their need to see themselves as innocent, they will perpetuate the physical, cultural, and epistemological cruelty that that false innocence papers over. The cover up is a crime in and of itself, which remains unforgiveable until it is confessed. The question then becomes how we, and how the characters, balance the need for an affirmative acknowledgement of guilt against the ongoing conflation of Jewishness and memories of victimhood.

A later scene presents a more incisive version of how Jewish memory contorts itself to fit into the apartheid dogma. On leave from the army, Paul goes home to visit his mother and ends up having dinner with her new boyfriend, Claude Moskowitz. His mother expresses relief that he is stationed in Namibia and not in the “horrible, violent townships” (168). Claude then begins to bemoan the brutality of (pardon the tired American idiom) black-on-black crime, expressing sympathy for the older residents who “just want to get on with their lives” but cannot because “the kids” have been driven into a frenzied bloodletting by Communists. Instead of going to school and learning a trade, he confidently asserts, they destroy their own homes, “But that’s your African; no memory of yesterday, and not a thought about tomorrow” (169). Hence, as often happens in racist thinking, Claude implicitly positions the Black subject as the diametrical opposite of the Jew: the former lacking any sense of time, the other almost drowning in it.<sup>143</sup> When Paul mildly objects, Claude confronts him:

“You know what I’m talking about. You think we’re all the same, just the skin is different? I’ve lived long enough to know that the Bantu are not like us—mind you, they’ve got their good qualities. But it’s a mistake to think everybody is just the same as everyone else. I’ll tell you the truth: the African is inferior, and I can prove it.... I want

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<sup>143</sup> There’s a fair amount of critical work on this in the Jewish American context. One excellent place to start with would be Daniel Itzkovitz’s essay, “Passing Like Me.”

you to think about how we've treated the African.... Would any white man let you behave that way toward him? The black man must be inferior, or he would never have allowed us to do the things we've done to him." (169-170)

As he says this, Paul remembers a piece of advice Brenner once gave him, "Just replace the word *African* with *Jew*, then see if you still believe that story," but does not follow through on it (170). It is not difficult, however, to fill in the blank: the galling irony of Claude's reasoning is how easily it could pass for antisemitic rhetoric. The Jews must be inferior, the Nazi version of Claude's argument might run, otherwise they never would have allowed us to pen them up in open air prisons, work them to death in concentration camps, or gas them by the thousands. The potential slippages are clear, what matters is how one tells the story and who is cast as the main character.

*'Those bones have been crying'*

As a bildungsroman, what makes *The Persistence of Memory* interesting is that it is structured like a trauma. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth explains that the pathology of trauma responses inheres in nothing so much as the structure of trauma itself, in which "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (4). Trauma is not, therefore, "a pathology of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself," and those who suffer from it "carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (5-6). As before, there are two foundational traumas in *The Persistence of Memory*. The first is Paul's father's suicide, which, as discussed above, is marked out as a metaphor for the Holocaust and becomes the catalyst for his hypermnesia. The second trauma is treated much differently. For the most part the novel ticks along chronologically, despite Paul's

difficulties with narrative time. At the very end of Part Two, however, we leave Paul waiting to be transferred, on Lyddie's special request, back to Namibia. We see their reunion, but then the novel lurches forwards; Part Three picks up several months later, as Paul recuperates in an army hospital in Oshakati. Clearly, he has suffered some kind of mental breakdown, but the novel gives no insight into the precipitating event. Only after a few years have passed and Paul is called to testify against Lyddie do we learn what happened.

In post-apartheid South Africa, we find Paul tormented, unable to sleep or eat. When he is called before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to testify against Lyddie, we learn what precipitated his collapse. Sobbing, but, of course, with perfect recall, Paul reveals to the court that after the official armistice with Namibia had been signed, Lyddie ordered an illegal sortie, during which Paul shot and killed two men. He recounts the slaughter in present tense:

The band of men, about eighty of them, [are] walking... toward us. They are singing in unison.... After years of hiding in the bush or living in distant villages in Angola, the Owambo fighters are coming home.... [Lyddie] murmurs something into the walkie-talkie, something in Afrikaans about wildebeests coming into the kraal and it being time to shut the gate.... At first it is simply a massacre, the ragtag soldiers falling where they stand like sheafs to a scythe. But these are battle hardened men, who quickly find whatever slate rises and dips in the uneven land will give them protection and begin to... fight back.... Lyddie hands me an R4 rifle and tells me to wait... [T]he camera lens no longer between me and the death that is everywhere below, I am terrified, *kak*-scared, ready to jump up and run away screaming for my mother.... "Let's go," he yells... I stand up, aim carefully at a broad-chested man... and then I squeeze the trigger. His torso jerks backward while his legs keep moving forward, and he topples over. I see with

terrible clarity the figures running up the hill towards me, and I turn, sight on another man, and watch as his right cheek disappears in a spray of blood. (242-245)

A traditional bildungsroman might end with this revelation, or with a conclusive scene in which Paul, finally cleansed of his demons, finds peace. The fact that *The Persistence of Memory* continues, and what follows after, demonstrate both the TRC's inability to bring about Paul's ethical transformation and the role trauma can play in that development. Without necessarily questioning the structure or authority of the TRC, it is clear in the novel that it was not built to recognize the ambiguities and complexities of Paul's position. From the newly reconfigured state's point of view, he is a witness, not a co-defendant. In other words, the state continues to interpellate him as Baldwin's innocent man. Yet because his traumatic symptoms continue and because Paul is able to recognize the persistence of that trauma, thanks to his personal and cultural "inheritance," Paul knows that his moral development is incomplete.

After testifying before the Commission, Paul expects his trauma symptoms to dissolve, but they only ebb. His sleep remains troubled by images of his time in the army, unallayed by the Nembutal his doctor prescribed. Like many Jews in the post-apartheid period, Paul's mother leaves with Claude for Australia, warning him that, "You know a country is in trouble when its Jews start leaving... We are like the miner's parakeet" (276). Paul, now a lecturer in anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand, opts to remain in South Africa. Seeking spiritual succor, he hires an inyanga named Mathrebe through a colleague at Wits to help him exorcise his demons. Reading his coffee grounds, she tells him, "There are bones of two men, they are not happy for you. They can forgive you for killing their bodies, because they were warriors. But just to leave their bones out in the bundu, *haaiyi*, that is bad. Those bones have been crying, crying. Even now their spirits are restless, complaining, and that's what you hear



when you try to sleep” (280). When he responds that the Namibian government has already disinterred the bodies and returned them to their families for burial, she replies, accusingly, “yes. But what did you do?... You can't rely on the government to do things for you, my son. You have to make amends yourself” (280). Paul pays her five hundred rand and acquires two live chickens, which Mathrebe uses to perform a ritual in his apartment. She burns herbs, chants, slaughters the chickens, and then, once the ceremony is complete, advises him to make a gift to the families of the men he murdered to further “improve [his] position with the ancestors” (284). Whether or not the ceremony is effective remains unknown, but the book does conclude with a kind of hopeful uncertainty for his and South Africa’s future.

### *Conclusion*

In October 2019, Jewish presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders spoke to the center-left Jewish American organization J Street in Washington, DC, and claimed:

If there is any people on Earth who understands the danger of racism or white nationalism, it is certainly the Jewish people.... And if there is any people on Earth who should do anything humanly possible to fight against Donald Trump’s effort to try to divide us up by the color of our skin, our language, our religion, or where we were born—if there’s any group on Earth that should be trying to bring people together around a common and progressive agenda, it is the Jewish people.

Bernie’s speech returns both to Levi’s “Jews of the Israelis” and to Baldwin’s ‘a Jew should know better’—all three statements speak back to the same basic idea, that is, the positioning of the Jew at the heart of the liberal internationalist moral order of the post-World War II west. Sanders’s comments, though tilted towards leftist solidarity, still exemplify how, on both the left and the right, even those Jewish activists and politicians who explicitly reject liberalism tend to

implicitly draw on liberal internationalist frameworks and a liberal conception of the subject.

Despite Bernie's progressivism, he retains a worldview—especially when it comes to difference, oppression, humanitarianism, etc.—that is rooted in liberal subjectivity and a certain narrative framing of the genealogy of human rights as born at the site of Jewish victimhood. This narrative is unlikely to, and perhaps cannot, account for Jewish responsibility in efforts to “divide us up by the color of our skin, our language, our religion, or where we were born.”

Despite his intentions, what Bernie still fails to do here is hold Jewish memory accountable to history in the way that thinkers like Baldwin and Braude demand. In the novel, Paul's white Jewish subjectivity is framed by two traumas. The first is his father's death, with the method of suicide (poison gas) drawing strong parallels to the Holocaust. Paul's psychic reaction to this trauma is hypermnesia; from that point, he begins to remember everything. The second, ongoing trauma is Paul's implication in the white supremacist violence of apartheid South Africa, which builds over time, culminating in his murder of two men in a post-ceasefire sortie. Paul's response to this trauma is in some ways the diametrical opposite of his reaction to the first: he disavows and represses it until he is brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Via Baldwin, we begin to appreciate the novel's way of asking not only how the hypermnesiac post-Holocaust Jewish subject assimilates into structures built on white dysmnesia but also what a Jewish whiteness might look like were it to recoup some form of ethical self-knowledge. Ultimately, I argue, the form of Jewish whiteness called for by both Baldwin and Eprile is productively post-traumatic in a dual sense: first, in that it draws on the collective traumas of Jewish history to produce empathy that does not rely on identification or translation into the Jewish idiom, and, second, in that it recognizes within itself an absence of

something that is continually being disavowed and repressed, that is, white Jewish implication in the suffering of non-white others.

On the one hand, Paul's hiring Mathrebe to perform a ritual that he does not understand of a religion to which he does not belong could easily be read as appropriative. He could well be categorized as another white man in the New South Africa attempting to paper over his past by embracing the indigenous culture he was raised to ignore, using it as a conduit to assuage his white guilt. To an extent, that would be fair. There's an underlying multicultural optimism to his behavior and to Eprile's choice to end the book in this way of which we should be skeptical. Still, I think there are other messages here that are worth attending to: first, that we cannot rely on the state to perform atonement on our behalf, and second, that atonement must be made in the language of the victim, not the perpetrator. That's part of what's at stake in a *productively* post-traumatic whiteness: the possibility of empathy without identification, of feeling-with the pain of others without translating it into the language of one's own. Paul is able to make progress because he is willing, at least, to confront what he has done, the suffering he has caused, without reverting to his own white, Western, Jewish idiom. This, I think, is its own small but crucial form of worlding.

## **EPILOGUE: WHITE PEOPLE’S WORK, OR, THE PROXIMATE PASTS AND DISTANT FUTURES OF WHITE JEWISH ANTI-RACISM**

In “What Should Blacks Think When Jews Choose Whiteness? An Ode to Baldwin,” Jane Anna Gordon writes plaintively, “[T]his essay turns backward to look forward, aiming to understand what I consider missed opportunities worth lamenting so we might proceed differently” (229). This resonated deeply with me, particularly as it echoed the many paths one takes, in the classroom and elsewhere, to explain the true purpose and affective weight of examining whiteness. Despite what right-wing mouthpieces continually insist, the point is not to name, blame, and shame, to catch white people up in a trap of self-loathing. After all, as Baldwin reminds us, time and again, that would merely reproduce and redirect the affective violence of white supremacy. It is natural to feel guilt and fear once one encounters and understands, perhaps for the first time consciously, the structures of oppression in which one is implicated. But feeling bad is not an end in itself, of course. Reckoning with such feelings is necessary in large part to prepare oneself to make and accept change.

But how do we know which moments are worth lamenting? History is full of Gordon’s “missed opportunities,” so how does one decipher which ones most urgently demand our concern? It may be that these questions are even harder to answer in contexts where our identitarian narratives are liable to distort the mirror we hold up to the past—some objects are closer than they appear, some further away. Collectively, global Jewish political discourse in the Anglosphere has demonstrated a tendency to place certain pasts inescapably near and certain futures unreachably far. But then, I would argue (or at least hope) that this is the ethical and political value of the distant proximities framework. Like any heuristic or epistemological schemata, distant proximities is not an end in itself. The reorganizations it seeks out, the narrative, aesthetic, and ethico-political encounters in which layers of meaning are made visible

by the proximate activation of histories, identities, and epistemologies usually characterized in terms of distance and difference, produce a map of missed opportunities. This is often a lamentable geography, yes, but also a promising one.

There are many approaches to mapping world literature, all of them instructive and revelatory in their own ways. But I would argue that ‘distant proximities’ is particularly well suited to the praxis of reparative decolonial and anti-racist praxis. First, by focusing our attention on moments of reorganization, we retrieve glimpses of alternative worlds, how things could have been differently done or felt or dis/believed. It allows us to see the choices beneath what seem like inevitabilities. In Chapter One, Lesser chooses to align himself with and to uncritically elevate an imperial canon rather than a subaltern one, deferring the possibility that he and Willie could write towards one another instead of away. And this decision indexes a much broader ideological realignment in the mid-twentieth century, in which Jews from multiple countries participated, which subverted potential solidarities. If we wish now to construct or reconstruct these solidarities, it is crucial that we better understand the moments in which we refused them. More to the point, it is through such identifications that distant proximities allow us to more effectively interweave the local and the global, to see the lines of suasion that run in both directions between decentered centers and ingathered peripheries. Finally,—and this I believe distant proximities shares with all forms of literary study—the framework helps us home in on the affective and narrative economies that we often miss even in the historical record itself. When it comes to political praxis, affect and narrative are in many cases more important than “the facts.” What we will or will not do frequently boils down not to what we know, but what we are willing or unwilling to feel, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Then what? I'll freely admit that I do not fully know. But I often think of an interview with Black Canadian poet and activist Dionne Brand, in which she states:

I don't think it's up to black people to change white sensibilities. I think it is up to white people to do that. I think that racism is not our problem. I think it's a white problem. I think we can fight against it. I think it's our job to fight for good laws, to fight for equality, but in terms of doing things like changing white attitudes, white people have to do that work. (qtd. in Levine-Rasky 1)

To begin with, this is where the phenomenological turn in the study of whiteness, and particularly Sara Ahmed's framing of it, prove absolutely crucial. Once we understand whiteness not as something we are but as something we do, it is impossible to revert to the exculpatory belief in race as an inevitability. If, instead of being white, we are doing whiteness in a certain way, then we must confront the possibility that there are other ways to do it.

But Ahmed herself is deeply skeptical of such questions. As she recounts towards the end of "A Phenomenology of Whiteness,"

When I give papers on whiteness I am always asked about resistance, as a sign of how things can be otherwise. Some of these questions take the form of 'what can white people do?' The sheer solipsism of this response must be challenged.... To respond to accounts of institutional whiteness with the question 'what can white people do?' is not only to return to the place of the white subject, but it is also to locate agency in this place. It is also to re-position the white subject as somewhere other than implicated in the critique.

For some, she explains, the desire to "do something" can also be a way of refusing to acknowledge one's implication, or even just to get past it. If white people are able to "solve" racism quickly enough, perhaps we will never have to confront our own participation in it. Or

perhaps we think that if we are part of the solution, then we cannot be part of the problem. And as we have seen throughout, Ahmed's skepticism is well-founded. The characters in our texts who style themselves as anti-racist liberals often do so ultimately to avoid having to confront uglier, messier truths about their own privileges. And to be honest, having spent time in progressive Jewish academic and political spaces, I have found that even those white Jews who are committed to doing white people's work are not as committed to doing it *as white people*. Of course, I don't mean we all run around in blackface, but we often find ways of disavowing our own whiteness even as we espouse our willingness to dismantle white supremacy. When, for example, I broach the subject of Jewish whiteness with those who wish to deny it, many cite the persistence of antisemitism in the United States and indeed all over the world. When the subject of Jews' involvement in the slave trade or South African apartheid comes up, the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust are never far behind. And while I will not deny or minimize what we have endured, the fact remains: privilege and prejudice are not mutually exclusive. They do not cancel one another out. And this is where, again, the concept of implication comes in. As Rothberg writes in his conclusion,

If there is a potential 'solution' in positing the existence of an implicated subject and drawing attention to the breadth of implication in a globally connected world, it derives from the impetus to combat and transfigure implication by self-consciously grasping one's position as an implicated subject and joining with others in collective action... Implication derives from one form of acting in concert: the kind we undertake without being conscious of our actions' impact or that we perform while engaging in more active forms of disavowal. Socially constituted ignorance and denial are essential components of implication; as such, they are also potential starting points for those who want to

transform implication and refigure it as the basis of a differentiated, long-distance solidarity. (Rothberg 200)

If we want to do the kind of white people's work that does not fall into Ahmed's trap, we must self-consciously engage with our own implication, which places us in relation to both the distant and the proximate, in space and time. We must allow it to be complicated. We must allow ourselves to be complicated. From that position we can re-evaluate our commitments and decisions, what we are willing to do, to know, and to feel.

While finishing this dissertation, I have often thought back to an essay I wrote in 2020 about Georgetown professor Jessica Krug. A white Jew from Kansas City, Krug had posed as a woman of color for years, shrouding herself in forms of Blackness and Latinidad from North Africa, the Caribbean, and the Bronx, even testifying before the New York City Council as "Jess La Bombalera." Then, on September 30, 2020, only a couple of days after Yom Kippur, she confessed all in a breast-beating *Medium* post, "The Truth, and the Anti-Black Violence of My Lies." Reflecting on Krug's deceptions, I wrote, "As much as her masquerade may have been driven by her own pathologies, it also belongs to a cultural pattern of purposeful self-misrecognition. Krug is an (unusually obvious) avatar of a structural problem, which makes it all the more important to reckon with the issues her duplicity raises, as uncomfortable as that may be."

As part of the essay, I engaged at length with Hannah Arendt's "Collective Responsibility," in particular with two claims Arendt makes on the nature of guilt and conscience. Ultimately, I agree with her conclusion that,

[N]o moral, individual and personal, standards of conduct will ever be able to excuse us from collective responsibility. This vicarious responsibility for things we have not



done... is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellowmen, and that the faculty of action... can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community. (50)

As important as this fact is, I did take issue with some of the stances Arendt takes along the way, particularly in what I see as her disregard for the power of affect. To begin with, in the first paragraph, Arendt writes that “[T]here is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done.... But there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them” (43). Arendt then ties this argument specifically to whiteness and liberalism in the US, claiming, “This is an important point, worth making loudly and clearly at a moment when so many good white liberals confess to guilt feelings with respect to the Negro question” (43). Later, in a discussion of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, she explains that the trouble with the Kantian argument is that it is “applicable only to people who are used to live [sic] explicitly also with themselves, which is only another way of saying that its validity will be plausible only to men who have a conscience” (49). For starters, I responded, there clearly *is* such a thing as feeling guilty for that which we have not done; I have felt it, therefore it can be felt. And although I did not point this out in the original essay, it seems much more relevant here to point out that, were it not possible for us to feel things about events we did not witness, experiences we did not have, and choices we did not make, that would proactively moot almost all human artistic endeavor. What would art be if it could not make us feel things, including guilt, about the world that stretches backwards and forwards across space and time well past the boundaries of what we can witness firsthand?

But what Arendt really means, of course, is that there *ought not* to be such a thing as feeling guilty about acts in which we did not participate, that it is silly and self-indulgent for

white liberals to feel guilty about forms and effects of anti-Black racism in which they had no hand. But still, I disagree. Not only *is* there such a thing, there *should* be. There *must* be. And this brings us to Arendt's definition of conscience as the ability to "live explicitly also with [oneself]." In what follows, she further roots her idea of conscience in reason and thought—though pointedly not on education or social standing. Still, I think this understanding of conscience reproduces the same elision of affect. Clearly, while teaching and publishing in black- and brownface, Jessica Krug failed to demonstrate an Arendtian conscience, she was unable or unwilling to live explicitly with herself. Yet I believe, ultimately, that the issue lay not in an inability to reason or think but rather in an unwillingness to feel. She did not want to feel white specifically because she knew what that would mean. And in a desperate effort to avoid feeling that which we should, we often behave unconscionably. The disavowal of these affects leads, on a broad scale, to hypocrisy at best and atrocity at worst.

Just as importantly is the extent to which both Arendt's definition of conscience and the disavowal of privilege intersect with Alfred López's idea of "postcolonial *mitsein*." Whereas Arendt understands conscience as measuring the capacity of an individual to "live explicitly also with themselves," López defines postcolonial *Mitsein* as "being-with others after the fact of domination, abuse, and outright murder of them" (6). Thus, "the white subject wishing to... distinguish the new antiracist white subject from its erstwhile racist 'self'... [must] work through the relation to nonwhiteness phenomenologically, as an intersubjective relation" (6). López's postcolonial *mitsein* thus requires a redoubled Arendtian conscience. To be-with the other in the way López describes, one must be able to live explicitly with two selves, the "erstwhile racist self" and the anti-racist self one hopes to become. Yet I would add, remembering Brand, Rothberg, and Ahmed, that we must also be willing to live explicitly with the fact that these two

selves bear an asymptotic relationship to one another. Try as we might, we may never be able to fully transcend the self that we wish to disavow, nor accomplish the full commitment to justice towards which we set ourselves.

Both Arendtian conscience and postcolonial *mitsein*, to the extent that they can be accomplished, demand certain affective affordances. We must be willing to feel certain ways about ourselves. But this leads me back to López's description of a "being-with others after the fact of domination, abuse, and outright murder of them." As I ponder these words, feeling all kinds of unpleasant sensations, I think of a saying that has become popular, ironically, among US conservatives and libertarians over the past few years: "Facts don't care about your feelings." It's ironic, of course, because the American right wing cares as little for facts as any political movement one can think of. But then again, this is at least a little true of any political conviction or decision. As plenty of social scientists have made clear, we all make political decisions based on emotion rather than reason and correcting the record will not interrupt what people believe if they are determined not to let it. A more accurate version of the adage might thus read, feelings don't care about your facts. Hence even those who engage with the topic most rationally or knowledgeably may not be able to transform themselves on the basis of the *fact* of "domination, abuse, and outright murder."

So, at the risk of sentimentality, I would argue that this is where art, and the study of art, come in. Among its many uses and abuses, what art does is create a liminal affective space in which to feel things one is not yet ready or willing to feel in what my students are pleased to call the "real world." Indeed, I often think of a minute exchange with one of my students during a session of "Jewish American and US Minority Literatures in Dialogue" that taught me a great deal about what I'm actually doing here. We were reading Arthur Miller's *Focus*, and I had

placed them in small groups, each of which I asked to develop some discussion questions on an aspect of the text: voice, character, plot, theme, setting, and context. I was listening in on a conversation between members of the “character” group, who were comparing *Focus* to some of our other texts and remarking on how strange it felt to read something that puts one inside the mind of a racist as opposed to a victim of racism. Suddenly, a student turned to me and asked what I would do if I was confronted by a fascist and wanted, in his words “to teach him a lesson.” I replied, almost without thinking, that I would make him read a book and then I would talk to him about it. The students began to laugh—they thought I was teasing the questioner—but I realized the moment I said it that it’s something I actually believe. Books, I told them, are one of the truest and most beautiful, and indeed one of the only, methods we have available for experiencing the world through someone else’s eyes. Those perspectives are not always themselves beautiful, of course, but the chance those texts give us to inhabit and, in so doing, reject them, still is. Literature is, to me, an emotional history of the world. It proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that all that we feel, from our deepest passions to our pettiest of peeves, has been felt since the first person told the first story. And if that’s not an antidote to fascism, to dehumanization, alienation, and oppression, I don’t know what is. To decolonize the mind, to make conscious those interpretive processes that we do constantly and without thinking, to create a space for a clearer and more penetrating feeling-with others — that’s the whole point.

Yet in order to accomplish this, we have to engage with literature in certain ways. This is where I see distant proximities coming back into play. It is difficult to see things as connected that we want to believe are separate. (I’m reminded, for example, of the term applied to certain Jews on the left: “PEP,” or, “progressive except for Palestine.”) But when we read seemingly disparate texts together and explore how not only their consciously built worlds but also their

ideological unconscious overlap, it creates, if you will, a “safe space” in which to appreciate those connections, to really feel the weight of Martin Luther King Jr.’s phrase, often repeated: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” As I see it, the underlying political goal of the study of world literature is to build archives that reflect this mutuality. As we commit ourselves affectively to anti-racist futures, what should also figure out how to use literary analysis to create the conditions for forms of conscience and being-with the other that make those futures possible. Whiteness is, and always has been, a global project. Repairing the damage it has done must be one as well.

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