'The Jew' in Post-War America: Race, Multiculturalism, and the Desire for Jewish Identity in Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Joshua Cohen

Turner, Nicolas

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‘THE JEW’ IN POST-WAR AMERICA: RACE, MULTICULTURALISM, AND THE DESIRE FOR JEWISH IDENTITY IN PHILIP ROTH, BERNARD MALAMUD, AND JOSHUA COHEN

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Nicolas Turner

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Supervisor: Dr Sara Polak

Second reader: Professor Peter Liebregts

Contents

Introduction	2
Chapter One – Theoretical Framework	10
Chapter Two – the beautiful absurdity: Philip Roth, Ralph Ellison, and the genealogy of multicultural identity	22
Chapter Three – conversion and the construction of Jewishness in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus*	39
Chapter Four – the Jewish Other: race, primitivism, and Zionism in Philip Roth and Joshua Cohen	64
Conclusion	87
Bibliography	90
Acknowledgements	97

Introduction

In his 1988 semi-autobiography, *The Facts*, Philip Roth writes about the criticism he received while appearing on a 1962 panel on 'The Crisis of Conscience in Minority Writers of Fiction' at Yeshiva University. After the panellists delivered their prepared remarks, the chair opened by asking Roth "would you write the same stories you've written if you were living in Nazi Germany?". This was followed, in Roth's words, by the audience's "denunciation" of him. Roth offers few details of what this "denunciation" consisted of, but he is clear that this moment was the start of what he characterises as his "thralldom" to the subject of "the Jews" – concluding his account, and the chapter, by claiming that this "humiliation before the Yeshiva belligerents" left him "branded".[1] I want to pause over the provocative words "thralldom" and "branded". By drawing on a language associated with slavery, Roth implies that his major subject – the Jews – was less a matter of choice than a compulsion; something imposed on him, something towards which he was pushed, almost against his own conscious will.

The central claim of this thesis is that compulsions of this kind towards Jewish subjects can best be understood through the lens of an affective 'desire for Jewish identity', a desire which I argue not only plays a key role in constructing Jewish identity across the texts I analyze, but which also underpins the critical practice of the field of Jewish American studies itself. In this thesis I offer an approach that places the analysis of this 'desire for identity' at its heart, in contrast to an approach that takes Jewish identity for granted as a prior, racialized, and bounded ontological object which can then be located in a canon of texts. This new approach represents a broader critique of the way in which identity functions as definable through race in the contemporary multicultural discourse, and makes the case for

[1] Philip Roth, *The Facts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 125-130. Roth reused the chair's opening question in 1979 in his novel *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 102.

a re-evaluation of the moment in the 1960s when that discourse was given its current shape.[2] I conduct this (re)evaluation through an engagement with a set of texts that simultaneously perform and problematise the key terms of multicultural identity. As well as *The Facts*, these include several stories from Philip Roth's 1959 collection *Goodbye, Columbus;* Bernard Malamud's 1959 novel *The Assistant;* Joshua Cohen's 2021 work *The Netanyahus*; and Roth's 1986 novel *The Counterlife*.[3]

Jewishness, I argue, is a particularly useful framework for unpacking the terms of the multicultural discourse on race because of the uniquely ambiguous foundations of Jewish identity – an ambiguity that troubles the broader ontology underpinning the contemporary concept of identity. This can be briefly illustrated through an analysis of Roth's 1959 short story "Defender of the Faith", the prime cause and target of the audience's anger at Yeshiva University three years later.[4] The story's protagonist – Sergeant Nathan Marx – has been redeployed, following American victory in Europe in 1945, to a training camp in Missouri. Here, one of the camp's trainees – Sheldon Grossbart – attempts to play on Nathan's sympathies as a fellow Jew to secure privileges for himself and his friends. In considering the question of what is owed by one Jew to another, the story problematises the entire category of Jewishness through an exploration of its boundaries and basis. The story's title places "faith" at its centre, and it is on religious grounds that Sheldon begins his appeal to Nathan as a fellow Jew, arguing that "this is a matter of religion, sir".[5] At another moment, however, it

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[2] I discuss that historical moment in my second chapter, but for more on the genesis of that discourse and its reshaping of contemporary understandings of race see Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).
[3] Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959) – I focus on the stories "Defender of the Faith" and "Eli, the Fanatic"; Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957); Joshua Cohen, *The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family* (New York: New York Review Books, 2021); Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986).
[4] While collected in *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959, which went on to win the 1960 National Book Award for Fiction, the story originally appeared in *The New Yorker*. In *The Facts* Roth suggests that this appearance in a magazine with a less deliberately Jewish audience in mind that those which featured his earlier work may have partly accounted for the scale of the reaction – Roth, *The Facts*, 116-117.
[5] Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 125.

seems that Jewishness is less a question of religion than of ancestry – that, as Sheldon suggests, "Blood is blood, Sergeant".[6] This genealogical grounding is quickly undermined, in turn, by the suggestion that Jewishness is a category that can be moved in and out of, a view again voiced by Sheldon: "It's a hard thing to be a Jew […] it's a harder thing *to stay one*."[7] Nathan's own Jewish feelings are most aroused by nostalgia:[8] hearing the sounds of a Shabbat service across the parade ground, Nathan's "memory plunged down through all I had anesthetized, and came to what I suddenly *remembered was myself*".[9] Remembering himself, Nathan finds his true self to be Jewish, a Jewishness that presents itself to him in the form of a nostalgically-framed desire. The story leaves ultimately unresolved, however, the question of what it might mean to 'be Jewish', either in a practical or an ontological sense.

In beginning this study with these ambiguities around Jewishness, I am building on a number of recent works that reopen the question of Jewish identity in relation to multiculturalism and race, in particular Benjamin Schreier's *The Impossible Jew*; Dean Franco's *Race, Rights, and Recognition*; and Jonathan Freedman's *Klezmer America*.[10] These works all push against the assumptions of a prevailing critical approach which has read Jewish American fiction primarily through the lens of Jewish 'assimilation' (and its discontents).[11] Key assumptions of this assimilation approach which I resist are: first, the positioning of Jewishness as an already defined category that can then be tracked against its

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[6] Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 137.
[7] Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 142. My emphasis.
[8] The resonance of "aroused" with desire is a conscious choice on my part.
[9] Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 129. My emphasis.
[10] Benjamin Schreier, *The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); Dean Franco, *Race, Rights, and Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
[11] Examples of this kind of reading can be found in Ethan Goffman, *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 51 and Victoria Aarons, "American-Jewish identity in Roth's short fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9-21. See Schreier, "The Failure of Identity: Toward a New Literary History of Philip Roth's Unrecognizable Jew," *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 108-114 for a critique that connects Aarons' argument to a broader nationalist, essentialist project exemplified by Ruth Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture* (New York: The Free Press, 2000).

relation to a definable American mainstream; second, the alignment of assimilation in recent scholarship with the idea of a Jewish move into 'whiteness',[12] an approach that reifies a Black-white binary and closes off the space for more nuanced and suggestive readings of Jewish racial identity.[13] Instead, I examine the texts I am investigating for their play with Jewish ambiguity and the ways in which this ambiguity destabilises the norms of race and multicultural identity.

Schreier is a particularly important interlocuter in this investigation as the original inspiration for my use of the 'desire for Jewishness' as a conceptual approach, with his argument that we need to move away from "anchoring Jewish literary study […] in a presumptive positive, nationalistic entity identifiable as 'The Jew'"[14] towards "conceptualizing categorical group identity not as a secure, filial given but as a coordination of archives, beliefs, traditions, and attractions actively organized as much as they are presumed to be given".[15] Schreier calls this new approach "semitic literary criticism", which is a way of privileging an "analysis of the way texts render *Jewishness as an attractor or focus,* of how texts deconstruct the givenness of Jewish identity".[16] Despite the centrality of desire to his project, however, Schreier leaves the nature and operation of "Jewishness as an attractor" undertheorized, the concept only really traceable in his work through his analysis of

[12] Key works in the school of 'whiteness studies' include David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Colour: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998); Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Peter Kolchin offers an overview of the field which is now somewhat outdated, but which still picks up on some of the field's key principles and issues, in "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *The Journal of American Studies* 89, no. 1 (June 2002): 154-173.

[13] For a fuller critique of whiteness studies as an approach to Jewishness see Freedman, 28-34. Another alternative approach to Jewish racial positioning with regard to whiteness, in this case examining the Jewish relation to Latino/a culture, can be found in Josh Kun, "Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos, or The Other History of Jews in America," *Shofar* 23, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 50-68. Throughout I capitalise "Black" unless quoting from a source, in which case I follow the original author's approach.

[14] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew,* 56.

[15] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew,* 48.

[16] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew,* 56. My emphasis.

his chosen texts. In contrast, I develop my notion of desire through an engagement with affect theory, bringing to the fore the emotional and bodily aspect of the desire for Jewishness as a way of approaching its racializing operations.

My intervention on the theme of a 'desire for Jewishness' is also intended as a way to enter a broader debate about the conceptualisation of contemporary identity in relation to race, and the nature of the wider discourse of multiculturalism through which identity, race, and culture are all positioned and put to work. This aspect of my project is indebted to the crucial scholarship of Walter Benn Michaels and Michael Kramer,[17] as well as more recent work by Christopher Douglas.[18] In my second chapter I draw on this scholarship to analyze the discourse of identity in the 1950s and 1960s in relation to a wide set of authors, including not only Philip Roth but also Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the loose group of writers, critics, and social scientists known as the New York Intellectuals. Before turning, however, to this historical overview, in my first chapter I lay out the broader theoretical framework for my textual readings, drawing on two key strands of scholarship. First, as already noted, I make use of affect theory, in particular as articulated by Lauren Berlant and Brian Massumi, to provide a grounding for how the 'desire for Jewishness' is expressed and can be analyzed. Second, I draw on a set of ideas developed by a number of post-colonial theorists of identity, in particular Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Paul Gilroy, putting their thinking

[17] Walter Benn Michaels has been engaged in this effort in various forms since the 1990s, in particular in "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," Critical Inquiry 18 (Summer 1992): 655-685; *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); and *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). It is worth noting that Michaels attaches his critique of multiculturalism, particularly in *The Shape of the Signifier*, to a broader critique of the liberal order and the eclipse of class, a critique with which I sympathetic but which does not feature in my argument – see Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 17. Michael Kramer's key contribution to the question of Jewish identity in relation to race comes in Michael P. Kramer, "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish' Question," *Prooftexts* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 287-321.

[18] Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009). Douglas, oddly, explicitly excludes Jews from his account because "the reconceptualization of Jews as racially white meant that such social science concepts of culture had less appeal than they did to their still-racialized contemporaries" – Douglas, 327, endnote 2. Given the careful tracking of culture and race in Douglas' work this justification seems inadequate at best. For a useful corrective, see Jennifer Glaser, "The Jew in the Canon: Reading Race and Literary History in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (Oct 2008): 1465-1478.

into dialogue with the work of Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, as well as the literary critic Bryan Cheyette, in order to make the case for the value of post-colonial theory in reading Jewish American fiction. The suggestion that post-colonial theory be used to approach Jewish American texts is an innovative one and is not without its challenges, but it allows me to both open up a new way to analyze the complicated Jewish racial positioning in my texts and to critique key multiculturalist assumptions around race and identity.

The texts I am considering all engage with the period during the 1950s and 1960s in America when the multicultural discourse was being articulated and developed, an intellectual genesis that both paralleled and was driven by the political upheavals of the period, in particular the rise of Black Power and the racial nationalist movements of Asian Americans, Chicanos, and Native Americans that followed.[19] Jews have tended to stand in a relationship of both antagonism and belatedness with these movements in both society and the academy. Antagonistic, because, as I argue in my second chapter, they have often been seen not as a fellow ethnic or racial minority group, but as representatives and defenders of the white, Eurocentric canon which multiculturalism aims to disrupt. Belated, because this antagonistic relationship has excluded Jewishness from the growth of various schools of racial and ethnic studies within the academy.[20] As Schreier points out, this belatedness helps to explain why the field of Jewish American and Jewish studies has not engaged in the same critical project of self-analysis as these other fields, a gap that is only now being addressed in the critical works I have referenced and towards which this thesis is intended as a further contribution.[21]

[19] Douglas, 184.
[20] The shift between ethnicity and race as the primary framework for analyzing difference is part of precisely the 1960s transition I am discussing, a point I touch on again in my second chapter.
[21] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew,* 6-8. Schreier undertakes a more detailed excavation of the construction of the field itself and its underlying assumptions in Benjamin Schreier, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish American Literature: Ethnic Studies and the Challenge of Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2020). As this introduction suggests I am sympathetic to this project, although this thesis only offers a partially engagement with it.

It is important to state upfront that my goal of tracking desire and its problematising of identity and race across the canon of Jewish American fiction is a larger project than can be encompassed within the bounds of a Master's thesis. This thesis is therefore intended as a pilot study, showcasing how such an undertaking could later be expanded at a doctoral level. Following my opening theoretical chapter, the desire for Jewish identity is therefore analyzed in three areas that are particularly generative for unpacking my themes. In my second chapter identity itself is the primary site of investigation, particularly as expressed in Roth's *The Facts*. This second chapter is also intended as a ground-clearing exercise, historicizing these various concepts of identity through a close examination of the 1962 dispute at Yeshiva University and the broader context in which it took place. This chapter should be read as being in close dialogue with my opening theoretical chapter, as my key theoretical guides themselves engage with, and emerge from, the same set of questions over identity as those animating the debates of the 1960s which I am examining.

This combination of theory and historical context frames the close readings of my third and fourth chapters, which pick up on two fertile sites of investigation that express the 'desire for Jewishness' in relation to race and identity. In my third chapter I focus on the theme of Jewish conversion in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus*, discussing the ways in which the desire for Jewishness is simultaneously reinscribed and problematised in these works, which both play with the key principles underpinning the multicultural approach to identity. In my fourth chapter I focus in more detail on questions of Jewish racial positioning by considering the theme of Otherness within Jewishness. I approach this Otherness through Hasidic Jews in Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic" and Zionist Jews in both *The Netanyahus* and Roth's *The Counterlife*.[22] All of the works I discuss

[22] "Eli, the Fanatic" is collected in Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 185-221. In an upcoming publication in the journal *LEAP* I examine the desire for Jewishness as expressed through nostalgia and primitivism in Roth. Parts of this thesis appear in somewhat different form in that article. See Nicolas Turner, "Making Sense of America's Post-War Racial Landscape: the 'Desire for Jewishness' in Philip Roth," *LEAP* 3 (2023): 203-221.

are involved in a self-conscious engagement with the question of Jewish identity in various ways, and, in the case of Roth and Cohen, are actively playing with many of the same issues that are central to the scholarly debate into which I am intervening. A fuller investigation would build on this opening by including a wider selection of both canonical works from the period as well as more contemporary works that reflect on its key questions. I have consciously chosen works for this thesis, however, which offer unique perspectives on the nature of the desire for Jewishness while being amenable to being put into dialogue with each other on the broader question of the racial inflection of Jewishness in relation to identity and multiculturalism.

As such, the central research question that is guiding this project is: how does a 'desire for Jewish identity' in the works of Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Joshua Cohen complicate discourses of race in relation to the category of Jewishness? Before turning to my key texts, however, I begin with an overview of the theoretical framework which informs my analysis.

Chapter One – Theoretical Framework

Roth's Nathan Marx finds, in "Defender of the Faith", that it is longing for childhood – a longing triggered by his memory of "the shrill sounds of a Bronx playground where, years ago […] I had played on long spring evenings" – that causes him to become "exceedingly tender about myself" and remember his Jewishness, a feeling he experiences as physical, as *bodily*, "as though a hand were reaching down inside me".[23] An attention to the body and its relation to making meaning was also a key feature of the 'affective turn' of the 1990s.[24] Inspired in particular by the work of Deleuze and Guattari and generally traced back to two crucial 1995 essays[25] – Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold'' and Brian Massumi's ''The Autonomy of Affect''[26] – affect theory serves as a key framework for my analysis. By affect theory I mean, in common with the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, the ways in which the emotional is connected to, and organised through, the normative; the ways in which messy personal processes are shaped by history.[27] This use of affect is sanctioned by what the Roth quote above suggests: that desire and longing, and the identifications that flow from them, should be understood as bodily states, experienced not just in the mind but sensorially. The desire for Jewishness that emerges in the works I am considering can be tracked through these sensory expressions, emerging as a form of affect.

Affect theory does more, however, than just return us to the body – as Berlant has suggested, "critical thought about what desire is almost inevitably becomes theoretical

[23] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 129.
[24] Patricia T. Clough, "The Affective Turn," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 206.
[25] See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London, Verso, 1994), 163-199. For an account of the origins of affect theory, see Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.
[26] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no.2 (Winter 1995): 496-522; Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural* Critique 31 (Autumn 1995): 83-109. Massumi's article is updated in Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 23-45 – it is this version I will draw on in what follows.
[27] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 15-16 and 51-53.

thought about thoughts itself: the minute an object comes under analytic scrutiny, it bobs and weaves, becomes unstable, mysterious, and recalcitrant".[28] In Berlant's account, desire and theory cannot be separated, so that theorising though desire helps to reveal the unsteadiness of the theory itself. This points to one of the other useful features of affect theory – its emphasis on the contingency and fundamental messiness of firm categories. As Greg and Seigworth suggest: "affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units, it makes easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs".[29] The desire for Jewishness, in the way I am conceptualising it, works in precisely this way – emerging from, and reinscribing, the generative ambiguities and hybridities of Jewishness.

Affect theory also helps in understanding that this desire for Jewishness is not pointed towards an abstracted and straightforwardly definable idea of Jewish identity as a clearly bounded subject position, but instead "describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it".[30] In other words, the desire for Jewishness captures the interplay between the texts I am investigating and the object of their interest: Jewishness. As Berlant goes on to say, in a summation that could almost be a description of the Roth quote with which I opened this chapter, "[d]esire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you" so that "what seems objective and autonomous in [the objects of your desire] is partly what your desire has created and therefore is a mirage, a shaky anchor".[31]

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[28] Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 17-18.
[29] Greg and Seigworth, 4.
[30] Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 6.
[31] Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 6.

Affect theory also hints at the doubleness in my conception of the desire for Jewishness, the way in which it is "at once intimate and impersonal, [so that] affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness".[32] Jewishness, in all the works with which I am engaged, emerges through personal, domestic, and family life, but also raises larger questions of history, race, and identity, the desire accumulating and pooling around certain nodes of significance. As Berlant points out, desire "is a primary relay to individuated social identity, as in coupling, family, reproduction, and other sites of personal history; yet it is also the impulse that most destabilises people, putting them into plots beyond their control".[33] The flexibility of desire is also helpfully brought to the fore by affect theory, which places an emphasis on the movement around and within categories. Massumi positions this fluidity against a model of positionality in critical theory which "seems to prescript every possible signifying and countersignifying move as a selection from a repertoire of possible permutations". He argues instead for an approach in which subject positions – gender, race, sexual orientation – are in a constant state of becoming, "feed[ing] back into and transform[ing] the reality they describe".[34] Jewishness is operating in the texts I am analyzing, and the critical reception of them, as something read back into the world through a nexus of longing and resistance shaped by desire.

I advance these overlaps with affect theory cautiously, however, as I do not want to overstate my case. Affect theory provides a useful framework to conceptualise desire, and, as we will see, the desire for Jewishness is bound up with emotional and bodily states of various kinds in the works I will be examining. Equally, I don't want to imply through my use of the term 'affect' that this desire is purely emotional or bodily. As my sketch of key affect theorists suggests, affect can serve a critical and ontological function, and does so in the

[32] Greg and Seigworth, 2. Emphasis in the original.
[33] Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 13.
[34] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1-13. 3 and 12.

highly self-aware authors I am examining. Desire in my discussion is therefore both affective *and* critical; simultaneously revealing the unsteady foundations of the category of Jewishness and shoring up the boundaries of Jewishness as a clearly defined subject position. Crucially, my presentation of desire as affective unsettles existing understandings of Jewishness, freeing me to engage with Jewish identity not as a prior given – an object which I seek to find through my readings of key texts – but as something generated *through* desire's tensions. Jewishness, in my analysis, operates as a category simultaneously exerting a pull, as a desired subject position, and as a subject position itself constructed by this movement towards it – an ongoing relationship of reciprocal formation. It is in understanding the desire for Jewishness as an affective *process* that I make my broader contribution to unpicking the multicultural category of identity.

This interpolation of identity and affective desire is not limited to Jewish American fiction, nor is affect theory the only space in which the senses play a key role in identity formation. The critic Christopher Douglas points out in his work *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, which I return to in the next chapter, that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* gives the light-skinned African American Louis Junior an "almost innate desire for blackness" which is expressed "in sensual and sexual terms, terms tactile, auditory, olfactory".[35] As I argue in my fourth chapter, Roth deploys the senses in similar ways to capture the Otherness of Hasidim in "Eli, the Fanatic". In the case of both Roth and Morrison, this linkage of sensory experience to race can be understood as representing a desire for a *racialized* Black or Jewish identity. Post-colonial theory offers a way to

[35] Douglas, 189. Douglas offers an extensive quotation from the text which serves as evidence for this claim: "Junior used to play with the black boys. More than anything in the world he wanted to play King of the Mountain and have them push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him. He wanted to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild blackness, and say 'Fuck you' with that lovely casualness. He wanted to sit with them on curbstones and compare the sharpness of jackknives, the distance and act of spitting." – Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 68.

understand this relationship between affective desire and broader questions of race-making, and it is to this which I now turn.

The post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha also first approaches his analysis of the relationship between desire and identity in *The Location of Culture* through Toni Morrison, examining "Beloved's naming of her desire for identity". By this "desire for identity" Bhabha means a desire to escape the signification put upon the victims of oppression and racism, the projection onto them of "fears, anxieties and dominations that do not originate within the oppressed".[36] Bhabha's expansion of this insight into a broader conceptual approach to desire in *The Location of Culture* is helpful for my project, offering – in the somewhat different context of identification through colonial relations – a general "analytic of desire". This analytic has three elements: first, that to exist is to be in relation to otherness, specifically to an Other who either – if you are the colonizer – wants to take your position, or whose position you – if you are the colonized – want to take; two, that this two-fold "tension of demand and desire" creates a constant sense of splitting and liminality in identity; third, that identity is always in production, always transforming the 'subject' in the process of assuming the position of difference created by this relation to an Other.[37]

Bhabha's analytic of desire when applied to 'the Jew' is highly generative. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, Jews, like colonial subjects, occupy a crucial position in the history of modernity as "ambivalence incarnate". By this Bauman means that as a group that was urban, mobile, and rising in socio-economic status, Jews became representative of the fluidity of modernity; but at the same time as ghettoised, separated, and marked, they embodied the passing world of social order and caste that modernity was sweeping away. In

[36] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 23.
[37] Bhabha, 63-64.

Bauman's words, Jews "embodied [the] incongruence, artificiality, sham and frailty of the social order *and* the most earnestly drawn boundaries".[38] Divided by this ambiguity, the Jew was caught in similar tensions to those described in Bhabha's analytic of desire, their identity split by their liminal position. When transferred to the American context the picture is even more complicated by the sheer diversity and complexity of racial Othering, not to mention gender and sexual alterity, so that, in Freedman's words, "Jews served and serve as a powerful but ambiguous signifier, one whose meaning is […] up for grabs in the ethnoracial hurly-burly of contemporary America".[39] Freedman's claim builds on an insight I have also taken from affect theory: that the Jewish racial position is not fixed but defined by what desire projects onto it.

Another crucial overlap between affect theory and post-colonial theory can be found in Bhabha's notion of hybridity, which emphasises the production of identity as a process rather than a movement between fixed points.[40] For Bhabha, hybridity emerges from the "move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organisational categories" towards thinking "beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities [in order] to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences".[41] By this, Bhabha means that the collapse of straightforward, singular subject positions on which to base identity means that difference must now be understood as produced through a process,[42] in which subject identities are "formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc)".[43] My own project builds on this idea of identity as formed through a

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[38] Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern," in *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'*, ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 149-150. My emphasis.
[39] Freedman, 12.
[40] A claim similar to Massumi's breakdown of fixed categories in *Parables for the Virtual*.
[41] Bhabha, 2.
[42] Bhabha mentions class and gender as particular areas being problematised in the late twentieth century.
[43] Bhabha, 2.

process of articulating difference: first, by viewing Jewishness not as a fixed position but as something generated through desire; second, by analyzing Jewishness as a category in constant dialogue with other expressions of difference, be they racialised – Blackness, whiteness, and orientalism – or gendered.[44] Said's *Orientalism* similarly emphasises the role of discursive formations saturated with power in the role of identity formation.[45] Said's work is also relevant to my project because of the linkages he makes between his notion of Orientalism and the tropes of semitism and antisemitism, a fertile overlap explored by Freedman in *Klezmer America*, whose analysis I build on in more detail in relation to Cohen's *The Netanyahus* in my fourth chapter.[46]

I am drawing here on Bhabha and Said not only because of the theoretical value of their ideas of desire, hybridity, and Orientalism to my own project, but to make a broader case for the constructive ways in which post-colonial theory and the field of Jewish American studies can be put into dialogue. The cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy made a similar point thirty years ago in *The Black Atlantic,*[47] but his call has rarely been answered by the kind of critical work that would build upon this opening.[48] Gilroy is also the source of my suggestion that post-colonial theory offers a way to break open the multicultural reification of racialised identities, as in his claim that "the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis" can complicate the "nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches" found in some African

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[44] I leave "orientalism" deliberately uncapitalized for now.
[45] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.
[46] See, for example, Said, 26-27, 141-148, 262, 286-287, 293. Jonathan Freedman writes about Jewish orientalism in Freedman, 29-31 and 253-267. He also discusses some of the complex ways in which Jewishness is gendered in Freedman, 94-139.
[47] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 205-223. Gilroy argues for both recognising the Jewish origins of ideas of diaspora that were later picked up by Black and post-colonial theorists and for examining the relationship between slavery, racism, and the Holocaust. The (Jewish) intellectual Hannah Arendt, loosely associated with the New York Intellectuals (who will move into view in my next chapter), makes a similar point linking imperialism and the rise of Nazism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 123-302.
[48] Jonathan Freedman does, however, acknowledge a debt to Gilroy's project in *Klezmer America*. See Freedman, 22-23.

American scholarship.[49] Stuart Hall has similarly argued that a proper understanding of colonial identity must escape the idea of secure identities “eternally fixed in some essentialised past” and instead understand them as “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power”.[50] The experience of the diaspora is key to both these accounts – diaspora, in Hall’s words, creates “a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference”.[51] The reference to hybridity in this Hall quote brings the idea of diaspora into conversation with Bhabha’s thinking. Given the focus of this thesis on the identity of diasporic American Jews, it is worth pausing on the notion of diaspora, as it opens up further theoretical tools that help in theorising Jewish identity and which will be particularly relevant in my fourth chapter, which places Zionist Jewishness into dialogue with diaspora Jewishness.

The anthropologist James Clifford suggests a fertile resonance between Gilroy’s idea of diaspora and Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin’s crucial 1993 essay on diaspora in the Jewish context.[52] In their essay, the Boyarins argue that the cultural particularism that was fostered by Jews in the diaspora represents a form of “resistance […] to being universalised” that “can be a critical force and model for the resistance of all peoples to being Europeanized out of particular bodily existence”.[53] This resistance emerges from the dichotomy between Christian universalism and Jewish particularity, which the Boyarins trace back to Saint Paul. For the Boyarins both (Christian) universalism and (Jewish) particularity have the seeds within them of racist ideologies, but of different kinds: “particularism plus power tends towards fascism,

[49] Gilroy, 15. The way in which multiculturalism imbeds a racial essentialism will become clearer in my next chapter, particularly through my engagement with the work of Walter Benn Michaels.
[50] Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225.
[51] Hall, 235. Emphasis in the original.
[52] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 269-273.
[53] Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 720.

[…] universalism plus power produces imperialism and cultural annihilation".[54] The Boyarins suggest that Jewish particularity can represent one model of resistance to this universalising, imperial discourse.[55] This potential for resistance only exists, however, when Jews are in a diasporic situation as a minority group in a majority culture. If Jews take hold of power themselves, if their particularity becomes embodied in the functions of a state – as it has in Israel – then the practices of particularism that were previously a form of resistance become instead "a moral monster". As the Boyarins argue, it is "[r]ace and space together [that] form a deadly discourse".[56]

It is this dual possibility inherent in cultural particularity, to be either resistance or risk, that leads the Boyarins to argue for "a critical construction of cultural (or racial or gender or sexual) identity" that "purge[s] it of its elements of domination and oppression",[57] allowing for "stubborn hanging-on to ethnic, cultural specificity but in a context of deeply felt and enacted human solidarity".[58] Jewishness, they argue, is particularly well suited to this critical project because in its diasporic form it "is a disaggregated identity", one that disrupts "the very categories of identity because it is not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these in dialectic tension with one another".[59] This returns us to Roth's "Defender of the Faith" and his exploration of the various grounds for Jewish identity which I outlined in my introduction.

This notion of a 'critical identity' is one that Jonathan Boyarin has further developed in his work *Thinking in Jewish*, particularly in his term "*critical post-Judaism*", which captures both a way of thinking about Jewish identity as "marginal to the would-be 'Jewish

[54] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 707.
[55] We might also, cautiously, suggest a discursive overlap between Jewish particularity and Jewish identity.
[56] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 714. Black nationalists and Native American activists might well argue that America is, in fact, an example of this – with whiteness dominating the space. I merely note that potential avenue here without pursuing it.
[57] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 710.
[58] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 720.
[59] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 721.

community' monolith" and of Jewish criticism as being "only within or at the margins of academic culture and academic criticism".[60] This twin marginality opens up a space, particularly visible in Benjamin Schreier's reworking of Boyarin's notion, to critique both Jewish identity *and* the critical apparatus of a field of Jewish American studies that takes identity as prior and already defined.[61] What Schreier and Boyarin leave rather underdeveloped, however, is what an alternative critical apparatus looks like in 'critical post-Judaism'. As I have been suggesting, post-colonial theory offers one possibility to begin answering this question, although I do not want to suggest that its application in the field of Jewish American studies is entirely unproblematic. As I discuss in my next chapter, Roth clearly aligns himself much more with 'Americanness' than post-coloniality,[62] while Benjamin Cohen, author of *The Netanyahus*, explicitly puts himself into a lineage of Jewish American authors rather than a post-colonial context.[63]

The move to link Jewish American studies and post-colonial theory is also controversial because it resists many post-colonial theorists' own presentation of their projects. This tension has been explored in the work of Bryan Cheyette,[64] who, in *Diasporas of the Mind*, argues explicitly for a return of the "the repressed Jewish other within Postcolonial Studies".[65] Cheyette points to the centrality of Israel/Palestine in the framing of Jewishness as one source of the Jewish exclusion from the field of post-colonial studies.[66] For example, the previous Stuart Hall quote on diaspora is immediately preceded by:

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[60] Jonathan Boyarin, *Thinking in Jewish* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 170. Italics in the original.
[61] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 53-54.
[62] As well as often being critiqued for his problematic presentation of Black characters, who regularly lack an inner consciousness of their own and are presented with stereotypically outsized sexual organs and needs – see, for example, Brett Ashley Kaplan and Naomi Taub, "The Black-Jewish Matrix," in *Philip Roth in Context*, ed. Maggie McKinley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 259.
[63] I explore Cohen's framing of himself in more detail in chapter 3.
[64] Who is one notable exception to the lack of attention given to possible overlaps between post-colonial theory and Jewish studies.
[65] Bryan Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 22.
[66] Cheyette, 28-29. As I discuss in my fourth chapter, Israel also troubles the Jewish relation to multiculturism.

> diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'. We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backwards-looking concept of diaspora.[67]

The association of the Jewish diaspora with the nationalising project of Israel made by Hall in this quote is precisely the move resisted by the Boyarins in their argument that diasporic identity allows for the retention of ethnic particularity when stripped of power. Indeed, when ethnic particularity is applied through the apparatus of the state the Boyarins clearly condemn it: "[e]ither Israel must entirely divest itself of the language of race and become truly a state that is equally for all its citizens and collectives or the Jews must divest themselves of their claim to space".[68] In a later work, however, they also criticise the fact that "Hall's hybridity, as it would appear from [the quote above], must be purified – of Jews".[69] The Boyarins' idea of diaspora offers instead a way to retain difference and renounce sovereignty, which, they suggest, "may be the most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world".[70]

Drawing on the ideas of post-colonial theorists, as well as the notion of a critical diasporic Jewishness, provides a way for me to achieve three crucial goals. First, it provides a theoretical framework and guide for the examination of the key texts I will be analyzing in the following two chapters. Second, it offers a way to complicate and cut through the knot of race-culture-identity that my next chapter will uncover as key to the contemporary

[67] Hall, 235.
[68] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 714.
[69] Boyarin and Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 13.
[70] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 723.

multicultural idea of identity. Finally, it integrates the fields of post-colonial studies and Jewish American studies in a way that addresses the exclusion of 'the Jew' from the former field and the lack of critical analysis of the category of Jewishness in the latter. This thesis represents, therefore, not only a showcase of how the affective concept of a 'desire for Jewishness' can provide a generative basis for a rereading of canonical Jewish American texts, but also acts as an intervention that complicates the fundamental assumptions of both Jewish American studies and post-colonial studies. My analysis in the next three chapters demonstrates the potential of this approach by revealing the fertile and transformative ways in which Jewishness can transform our understandings of the contemporary project of multiculturalism when the discourses of race and identity are put into dialogue with ideas of hybridity and affective desire.

Chapter Two – the beautiful absurdity: Philip Roth, Ralph Ellison, and the genealogy of multicultural identity

Roth did not appear alone at Yeshiva University in 1962 – alongside him on the panel were the Italian American proletariat writer Pietro Di Donato and the African American writer Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* had been published in 1952, exactly a decade earlier. In this chapter I use the opening provided by the presence of Ralph Ellison to survey some of the key debates taking place in the 1950s and 1960s among both Black and Jewish intellectuals, laying out a brief genealogical history of the shifting understanding of identity in relation to race during the period. I then set Roth into this broader context and put him into dialogue with the critics Walter Benn Michaels and Michael Kramer as a way to both explore Roth's relationship to the contemporary multicultural understanding of identity and to offer a closer reading of how the 'desire for Jewishness' is expressed in *The Facts*.

Ellison appears primarily as a saviour in the story that Roth wants to tell in *The Facts*: with Roth struggling under the Yeshiva audience's barrage of criticism, Ellison steps to his defence. In Roth's recounting, "[Ellison's] intellectual position was virtually identical to mine, but he was presenting it as a black American, instructing through examples drawn from his *Invisible Man* and the ambiguous relationship that novel had established with some vocal members of his own race".[71] Roth's suggestion that Ellison's "intellectual position was virtually identical to mine" is a claim that I want to resist in my reading of Roth – doing so, however, requires a detour into Ellison's own views, a move that also allows me to historicise the debate over race and identity which offers a crucial backdrop to all the texts I am analyzing.

[71] Roth, *The Facts*, 128.

My starting point is the same as the literary scholar Jonathan Arac's in his crucial piece on the genealogy of the American concept of identity,[72] which begins with a passage from the final part of *Invisible Man*:

> I looked at Ras on his horse and at their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.[73]

In this passage Ellison, through his narrator, is rejecting various models for African American life, broadly represented by characters he has met throughout the novel: Jack represents Communism; Emerson represents Northern capitalism and European empire; Bledsoe represents a (somewhat perverted) version of the accommodationist ideas of Booker T. Washington; Norton represents paternalistic white liberals; and, most crucially of all, Ras the Exhorter represents Marcus Garvey's Black nationalism. The crucial line for Arac's argument comes at the end of the passage, in which the narrator condemns all these different approaches for their "confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of *their American identity and mine*" (my emphasis). Arac argues that "[t]his passage signposts one beginning for a discursive cluster, involving identity, that is still alive, and troubling, today".[74] Explaining this claim, Arac places *Invisible Man* into the context of the

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[72] Jonathan Arac, "Toward a Critical Genealogy of the U.S. Discourse of Identity: Invisible Man after Fifty Years," *boundary 2* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 195-216.
[73] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 422.
[74] Arac, 196.

civil rights movement of the 1950s, which marked a high-point for an approach to racial relations that privileged integration, represented most famously by the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education* against segregation in schools, a decision made just two years after the publication of *Invisible Man*.[75] Given this context, Arac reads Ellison as summoning "the actually existing United States to transform itself in accord with its own stated principles of human equality".[76] The "absurdity of […] American identity" arises from the gap between the ideals of America and the reality.

As Christopher Douglas points out in his own engagement with Arac, however, Ellison's move to privilege American identity does two further things that are not at first apparent: first, by making 'American identity' not a descriptor of reality but a holder of values, it transforms identity from something that describes what a person *does* – i.e., an epistemological description of practices – into a technology that asserts what they should *be* – i.e., an ontological claim about a person's nature – thereby replacing a descriptive category with a normative claim. Second, it attaches universal values, like 'equality', to the abstract national construct of 'America', thereby making the nation not something separate from those values, but the vehicle through which they are realised.[77]

I will return to the first of these moves below, because it has important implications for how identity has evolved since Ellison, but I want to begin by examining the move to attach universal values to America. In this, and here I move beyond Arac's or Douglas's account, Ellison can be viewed as aligned to the broader project of the (mainly Jewish) New

[75] For more on the general dominance during this period of a model based on ethnicity and assimilation over race see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14-15 and Victoria Hattam, "Ethnicity: An American Genealogy," in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 42-46.
[76] Arac, 204-5.
[77] Douglas, 155-156.

York Intellectuals.[78] This loose group coalesced during the 1940s and 1950s around an idea of liberal anticommunism[79] – many of them former Trotskyists, by the 1950s they had moved "past notions of radical utopianism […] to a general acceptance of the broad outlines of American life".[80] This acceptance expressed itself, in part, through a confidence in American liberalism, which in 1969 Irving Howe, a key member of the group, described as "a precious human achievement".[81] By 'American liberalism' the New York Intellectuals broadly meant "humane tolerance, civil freedoms, free and independent critical inquiry, and respect for diversity".[82] Ellison, from the very different perspective of an African American, is also arguing for a version of American liberalism, as when he says that he "rejects all possibilities of escape [for African Americans] that do not involve a basic resuscitation of the original American ideals of social and political justice".[83] In this argument can again be seen the placing of an idealised America against the actually existing circumstances, and an argument for those liberal ideas – and therefore for America – as the path to African American freedom.

It was partly against views like these that a later generation of Black intellectuals, such as James Baldwin, were writing in the 1960s. In a 1967 article in *The New York Times Magazine*, provocatively titled "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White", Baldwin describes "the American state and the American people" as Black "oppressors" and

[78] The "mainly Jewish" in parenthesis here is, of course, repeating the same inscription of Jewishness into the critical reception that I am critiquing in this thesis – I leave it here for now for clarity in the next steps of the argument, but return to problematise it later.
[79] Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 99.
[80] Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 177.
[81] Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," *Dissent*, October 1, 1969, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/irving-howe-voice-still-heard-new-york-intellectuals. As editor of *Dissent* magazine, one of the three key publications of the group, Howe had a key institutional position in the New York Intellectuals' circle – see A. Bloom, 69-80.
[82] Jumonville, 225.
[83] Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 132. Originally published as "The World and the Jug: A Reply to Irving Howe," *The New Leader* (December 9, 1963): 22-26 and "A Rejoinder," *The New Leader* (February 3, 1964): 15-22.

compares Watts and Harlem to the Warsaw Ghetto.[84] Baldwin's argument that "the America of which [most Americans] dream and boast is not the American in which the Negro lives" splits apart the linkage of 'America' and universal values posited by the New York Intellectuals and Ellison.[85] Baldwin argues that that far from being a flawed bearer of the values of liberalism, America *itself* is the problem. For Baldwin, America's values are decidedly *anti*-liberal if you are Black: "America *is* the house of bondage for the Negro […] what happens to the Negro here happens to him *because* he is an American".[86] As the article's title suggests, Baldwin's focus is on Black-Jewish relations, although for him those relations are refracted through his understanding of America's broader racial politics: while for the Jew, "America rescued him from the house of bondage", from the Black perspective Jewishness has "absolutely no relevance", as the "only relevance is that [the Jew] is white". [87] For Baldwin, if Jews – represented by the New York Intellectuals – are on the side of America, in its liberal form or not, then they are almost *definitionally* on the side of whiteness and Black oppression, whatever protestations to racial difference they may make.

Between Ellison and Baldwin we can see the ground crossed between 1952 and 1967: the former wrote as an integrationist, and in the 1960s resisted the project of racial separatism espoused by Black Power; the latter attacked integration and America as not the solution but the source of Black problems.[88] Here, for example, is Ellison in 1963/64, condemning the idea that: "[w]e must express 'black' anger and 'clenched militancy' [and] we should not become too interested in the problems of the art of literature, even though it is through these that we seek our *individual identities*".[89] Ellison's argument in the piece this quote is taken

[84] James Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," in *Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism*, ed. Nat Hentoff (New York: Richard Baron, 1969), 6-8.
[85] Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," 7.
[86] Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," 9. Emphasis in the original.
[87] Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," 10.
[88] Arac, 205.
[89] Ellison, "The World and the Jug," 120. My emphasis.

from was with Irving Howe, but Ellison's quarrel was not with Howe's view of America (as Baldwin's would have been) but with Howe allowing Jewish American authors to speak *as Americans*, while Black authors were only allowed to speak as marginal voices of protest.[90] In contrast, here is Baldwin, also in 1964, speaking in a *Commentary* roundtable alongside more of the New York Intellectuals, arguing precisely *against* African Americans aligning themselves with Americanism in the way Ellison was advocating:[91]

> [W]hen you talk about the Negroes in the next five or ten or fifteen years taking their place as a competing group and getting their share of the pie, I can't answer directly. I can't put it that way to myself. What pie are you talking about? From my own point of view, my personal point of view, *there is much in that American pie that isn't worth eating*[92]

What Baldwin is attacking here is the idea that African Americans can join American culture in the same way as Jewish Americans, because for Baldwin American culture is too deeply corrupted by anti-Black racial bias to be straightforwardly accessible, or even desirable, without major reform. It was from ideas like this that Black separatism arose, with the result that in the ontology of Black Power identity became decoupled from the linkage with 'America' it had in Ellison and the New York Intellectuals.[93] In so doing identity also became

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[90] Emily M. Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33-35.

[91] Alongside Baldwin were the New York Intellectuals Norman Podhoretz, the moderator of the discussion, Malcom Glazer, and Sidney Hook. Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist whose *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944) was influential in the *Brown v Board of Education* case, was also on the panel – Ellison reviewed Myrdal's work on its release, see Douglas, 119-127. *Commentary*, founded in 1945 by the American Jewish Committee, was the successor magazine to the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, and had a more explicitly Jewish focus that the other major magazines associated with the New York Intellectuals, *Partisan Review*, founded in 1934 and refounded in 1937, and *Dissent*, founded in 1954 and more associated with the political left. See A. Bloom, 158-60 and 285-290.

[92] James Baldwin et al., "Liberalism and the Negro: A Round-Table Discussion," *Commentary* 37, no.3 (March 1964): 35. My emphasis.

[93] Douglas, 157 and 184-219.

detached from the universal values that America represented (albeit as values more often honoured in the breach than the observance). This reframing of identity, however, left (and leaves) a problem: on what normative basis is identity constructed if universal values are inherently suspect? Understanding the multicultural answer to this question requires re-examining the fraught relationship between identity, race, and culture underpinning that answer.

I now return to the other move that Douglas identifies as influential in Ellison's attachment of America to universal values: the opening of a gap between what we epistemologically *do* and what we ontologically *are*. As I have been arguing, the concept of identity advanced by Black Power undermined Ellison's attachment of identity to American values, and it would therefore be logical to think it also undermined Ellison's other move. On a superficial level that is precisely what happened, with the new nationalist model of identity seeming to privilege a performative approach over an essentialist one – in other words, to make 'practices' take precedence over ontology. This can be seen, for example, in responses to Gloria Anzaldúa – a theorist of the racially nationalist Chicana/o movement that arose from the shifts of the 1960s – whose work is often held up as an example of precisely this fluid, performative notion of identity.[94] In her major work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa suggests that the people of the US-Mexican borderlands are able "to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. [They learn] to juggle cultures".[95] This passage implies that these different cultures can be performed in different contexts and for

[94] See, for example, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera*: Cultural Studies, 'Difference,' and the Non-Unitary Subject," *Cultural Critique* 28 (Autumn 1994): 5-28. In particular, her claim on page 13 that "[t]he evocation of essentialism in the text is in the service of a constructionist project, the production of a border or *mestiza* consciousness that gives voice and substance to subjects rendered mute and invisible by hegemonic practices and discourses".
[95] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 101.

different audiences, as if there was no essential core to them but simply a series of modes through which a person or group could cycle. In other places, Anzaldúa suggests that the culture of those in the borderlands is entirely constructed: "I will have to stand and claim my own space, making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with my own lumber".[96] This again suggests that culture is malleable rather than fixed, invented rather than inherited.

In reality, as Christopher Douglas points out, this apparent performativity and constructivism in Anzaldúa is deceptive. Anzaldúa ultimately presents culture not as malleable in the way the quotes above might suggest, but as highly dependent on race – so much so that at times it can appear in Anzaldúa's work as if race and culture are simply synonyms of each other.[97] This can be seen when she defines the *mestiza* consciousness in more detail:

> At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly 'crossing over', this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From the racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollenization, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness[98]

Biologically inflected language is central to Anzaldúa's account in this passage: "chromosomes", "gene pool" and "cross-pollenization" all sound like terms more appropriate to a lab or a plant nursery than a cultural history. More than this, "cultural" is added into the list with these biological terms as if it were simply another way of expressing the same thing. The new "*mestiza* consciousness", which initially appeared to be an example of hybrid

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[96] Anzaldúa, 44. Emphasis in original.
[97] Douglas, 300-301.
[98] Anzaldúa, 99.

cultural performativity, in fact turns out to be accessible only through *genetic* mixing, and to therefore be a product of racially-inflected thinking. In this reading of Anzaldúa, culture becomes an expression of blood, even if Anzaldúa privileges mixed blood over any notion of blood 'purity'. The 'performance of identity' that is first detected in Anzaldúa turns out to be quite the opposite: a deeply essentialist vision of race and culture as contingent on each other, if not entirely interchangeable.

This is not just a quirk of Anzaldúa's approach but a key feature of the post-1960s, racial separatist or nationalist account of identity.[99] In a reversal of Ellison's account of identity, the thing you *are* – now shifted from 'American' to 'your race' – becomes determining of what you *should do* – your culture and practices.[100] This revision is possible precisely because of the programmatic hostility of racial nationalists to the other part of Ellison's account, the association of America with universal values, or indeed to the very idea of universal values as explicable apart from the particular white, European history of oppression that gave rise to them.[101] Walter Benn Michaels, across a number of his works, has argued that without universalism, the ability to appeal "to what seems universally good or true" any cultural practice must be "justified instead by appeals to what seems locally good or true, which is to say, it invokes the identity of the group as grounds for the justification of the group's practices".[102] Since the object to which this appeal is made cannot, however, be the same as the practices being justified, a second thing must be inserted into the account, a something that exists *prior* to cultural practices – this extra thing, Michaels suggests, is

[99] Douglas advances a three-part schematic for the shifts over identity across the twentieth century, one which is explicitly indebted to the work of Walter Benn Michaels – see Douglas, 3-6. I am building on the account in this schematic in which the contemporary notion of multicultural identity is developed (the third part of Douglas's three-part account), which Douglas also traces back to the 1960s – Douglas, 42-45.
[100] Douglas makes this same point in relation to the passage from *The Bluest Eye* which I quoted in the last chapter, pointing out that in this passage cultural practices – spitting, comparing jackknives, rolling – are attached to the body, are made authentic expressions because of the boys Blackness – see Douglas, 189.
[101] As we saw in the previous chapter, this idea also arises in post-colonial theory, although it leads to somewhat different conclusions about the nature of identity.
[102] Michaels, *Our America*, 14.

race.[103] As Michaels puts it, "it is only once we know who we are that we will be able to tell what we should do; it is only when we know which race we are that we can tell which culture is ours".[104] The effect is that "[b]iology [race] is an essential but not a sufficient condition of what here emerges as a specifically cultural identity, an identity that can be embraced or rejected".[105] In other words, our identity is no longer defined by the cultural practices we choose to enact,[106] but itself becomes the racially grounded basis for choosing one set of practices over another. Racial identity becomes, in fact, a *necessary* condition for being permitted to choose a certain set of cultural practices.[107]

For Michaels this move is crucially bound up with 'authenticity', because "this [the move to make culture dependent on race] involves the representation of your culture not as the things you *love* to do but as the things you *love* to do *because they are your culture*", so that "[t]he *attractions* of Navajo things thus consist in the fact of their being Navajo; authenticity becomes a crucial aesthetic".[108] I want to argue that 'authenticity', in Michaels' account, is another way in which the desire for identity expresses itself. Michaels himself provides the hint for this in the passage above, a hint I have drawn attention to through my emphasis on 'love' and 'attraction'. These terms are, of course, associated with desire, but more than that they help to demonstrate how culture, refracted through the lens of identity, becomes something more than simply *done*, but an object that holds an appeal *in itself*. As we already saw in *The Facts*, Roth hints at this same idea with his language of "thralldom" and being "branded", as if his Jewishness is something he cannot escape, that he is compelled

[103] Michaels leaves somewhat open the question of whether this extra thing *needs* to be race or could theoretically be something else.
[104] Michaels, *Our America*, 15.
[105] Michaels, "Race into Culture", 673.
[106] The practices we choose to *perform*, would be another way to put it.
[107] Anthony Appiah is a forebear of this argument about the eluding of race and culture – he discusses the dynamic in relation to W. E. B. Du Bois, arguing that Du Bois' construction of pan-Africanism only made sense if founded on some idea of biological race – see Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 34-35.
[108] Michaels, "Race into Culture", 673. My emphases.

towards despite his own resistance, despite, indeed, his own belief that he was "pass[ing] beyond the concerns of my collection of apprentice stories [in *Goodbye, Columbus*] and the subjects [Jewishness and his, Jewish, Newark community] that had fallen so naturally to me".[109] In this quote Roth is replicating exactly the kind of process described by Michaels by suggesting there is something 'natural' about Jewish subjects for a Jew like Roth, something more *authentic* about his engagement with them than his efforts to escape into different, non-Jewish, themes.

Michael Kramer, in an important 2001 piece, has made an argument that aligns with Michaels', arguing that Jewish literature can, in fact, only be defined as literature produced by "a member of the Jewish race", since any other foundation forces us into the "daunting and dubious task of deciding the validity of the various kinds, amounts, and qualities of Jewishness". For Kramer, trying to ground Jewishness on culture is incoherent, because it ends up begging the question of why we search for Jewishness in writers who do not write about Jews, do not write in a Jewish language, and do not draw on Jewish literary traditions.[110] As I have with Michaels, I want to reframe this argument through the lens of desire, an approach which is suggested by Kramer's own argument in three ways. First, he argues that the placement of race at the foundation of Jewishness can be tracked back to a desire to preserve the category of 'the Jew' in the face of Enlightenment projects of assimilation;[111] second, that the academic community *wants* to continue to use the designation of 'Jewish literature' as a meaningful category, a desire which drives them constantly back into the arms of race-thinking to give that category some kind of boundary;[112] finally, that reframing Jewishness as alienation has been used to universalise the Jewish experience, making 'the Jew' a signifier for the modern condition more broadly, and setting

[109] Roth, *The Facts*, 129.
[110] Kramer, 293-4.
[111] Kramer, 287-299.
[112] Kramer, 306-309.

up as the authors who are most Jewish those who are most alienated from their Jewish heritage. In other words, 'the Jew' becomes a synonym for modernity, and the dispute with Jewish tradition the most Jewish attribute of all.[113]

The category of Jewishness is desired, in this reading, because of everything that can be put into it, and therefore precisely because of its generative capacity as a floating signifier. Roth exemplifies, through his dispute with his Jewish critics – most notoriously at Yeshiva University – this sense of 'the Jew' as almost definitionally alienated from Jewish tradition. He is quite explicit about this in *The Facts*, saying that there was something "far more 'Jewish'" in "the clash between the anguished solemnity communicated to us by the bee-buzz of synagogue prayer and the irreverence implicit in the spirit of animated mischievousness that manifested itself" than in biblical stories.[114] Here the "bee-buzz" of prayer suggests Jewishness as something experienced sensorially, bodily, and as therefore arising in affective terms. Similarly, the Jewish spirit is described by Roth in terms that make it into something that enhances everyday life: "despite all our taboos and prohibitions and our vaunted self-denial, a nervous forcefulness decidedly *irrepressible* pulsated through our daily life".[115] That "irrepressible" something is Jewishness, which Roth is both drawn towards and resists.

A close reading of other parts of *The Facts* shows Roth's attempt to align with Ellison and the pre-multicultural view of identity, despite his ultimate distance from it. For example, Roth describes his childhood in a way that puts Jewishness and Americanness together:

> Not only did growing up Jewish in Newark in the thirties and forties, Hebrew school and all, feel like a perfectly legitimate way of growing up American but, what's more,

[113] Kramer, 312.
[114] Roth, *The Facts*, 121.
[115] Roth, *The Facts,* 122. Emphasis in the original.

> growing up Jewish as I did and growing up American seemed to me indistinguishable[116]

The crucial term in this passage is “indistinguishable”, which makes Jewish identity and American identity appear to be the very same thing. Between this presentation of childhood and Roth being “branded” at Yeshiva University, however, there is a brief detour into Roth’s (then) wife’s conversion to Judaism, which once again raises the racial spectre we have been tracking through Michaels and Kramer.

Roth offers two reasons for his wife’s conversion: as a “misguided attempt to manufacture a marital bond where the mismatch was blatant and already catastrophic” and “to camouflage the markings of her own small-town, Middle Western past”.[117] Earlier in *The Facts*, Roth explicitly frames his wife’s conversion to Jewishness as being an effort to undergo a “metamorphosis” into the daughter of a family defined by “solidarity and confidence”, a transformation driven by “envy” and “wishing”.[118] Jewishness, in relation to Roth’s then-wife, is therefore presented as desired in a nexus of affective feelings related to questions of erotic satisfaction and class advancement. This suggests once again the ways in which Jewishness becomes attached to other signifiers and transformed in relation to them. The important point for my current argument, however, is that, for Roth, his wife’s conversion makes her a “sort of simulated Jew” – “simulated” because “being a Jew had to do with a real historical predicament into which you were born and not with some identity you chose to don after reading a dozen books”.[119] Jewish “identity” (the word is Roth’s) functions in this passage in the way we have already seen as defining of multiculturalism: as a culture to which a Jew can (re)turn, but *not* as a set of performed cultural practices that can

[116] Roth, *The Facts*, 122.
[117] Roth, *The Facts*, 126-127.
[118] Roth, *The Facts*, 89.
[119] Roth, *The Facts*, 126.

be accessed by those without a prior racial connection. Roth glosses the importance of "birth" in his argument by making it appear contingent on "a real historical predicament", but the addendum is meaningless without race as its foundation – the predicament is *because* of being born Jewish, it can't itself be made the condition for Jewish identity without begging the entire question.

Conversion, and how it troubles the category of 'the Jew', is the central focus of my third chapter, but for now the important points to note from this passage are: first, how jealously Roth guards the boundaries of Jewishness; second, the way in which Jewishness functions, for Roth's wife, as a desired category wrapped up with broader erotic and class issues. It is even more striking that this emergence of Jewishness as a policed and desired category comes as Roth is in the middle of criticising other Jews for their closed-mindedness, and that his statement of such foundational multicultural principles comes as he is attempting to align himself with Ellison's very different project. Indeed, the title of the chapter in which all this is occurring tips Roth's hand: "All in the Family". The "family" in question is, Roth suggests, a deliberate reference to his transformation of all the public drama precipitated by 'Defender of the Faith' into a family squabble in the Zuckerman series in the 1970s.[120] It is impossible after our detour through Anzaldúa, however, not to also hear the biological resonances in the word 'family', a resonance made more audible still by Roth's attack in the same chapter on the notion of conversion to Judaism as a failure to be properly "born".[121]

Roth's *The Facts* was published in 1988, a long time after the 1962 events it describes and far into the period when multicultural ways of thinking had risen to prominence, and it is therefore important to ask how Roth's position had evolved over that time. Interestingly, the position Roth advanced in 1962, while still showing a clear gap with that of Ralph Ellison,

[120] Roth, *The Facts*, 116-17.
[121] In my third chapter I discuss the important role of circumcision in relation to Jewish Conversion (a topic clearly not relevant in the case of Roth's wife), a discussion which also provides a path into a broader dispute between Michaels and the Boyarins over identity and Jewishness.

did lack some of the genealogical language that was present by 1988. While in *The Facts* Roth is not explicit about what his intellectual position actually was when he spoke on the panel, or how he answered the attacks against him, we can reconstruct his position at the time from his essay "Writing About Jews", which was published in *Commentary* in 1963.[122]

Once again, on an initial reading, Roth's *Commentary* essay places him into alliance with Ellison. Roth explicitly references Ellison as another author, like himself, who wrote about his own race or ethnic group in a way that caused "upset" in pursuit of "the cause of truth and justice", rather than writing (to quote Roth quoting Ellison), as "cogs in the machinery of civil rights legislation".[123] Roth, and by extension Ellison, is arguing that the standard against which fiction should be judged is not its positive presentation of a racial group in pursuit of a political goal, "but the depth with which the writer reveals whatever it may be that he has chosen to represent".[124] Roth's broader argument in the essay is not, however, about writing as such, but about Jews, who he thinks should stop defining themselves through their fear of persecution and stop attempting to "construct an identity" out of the statement "*Jews are people who are not what anti-Semites say they are*". In America in 1963 Jews must adopt "a Jewish self-consciousness that is relevant to this time and place, where neither defamation nor persecution are what they were elsewhere in the

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[122] Philip Roth, "Writing About Jews," *Commentary* 36, no. 6 (December 1963): 446-452. When republished in Roth's *Collected Nonfiction* Roth tells us that the essay was partly reconstructed from remarks at Yeshiva University – Philip Roth, *Why Write? Collected Nonfiction, 1960-2013* (New York: The Library of America, 2017), 50. It is worth noting again the close association of *Commentary* with the New York Intellectuals, which would seem to further suggest an alignment of Roth's project with Ellison's given the sympathies between Ellison's position and that of the New York Intellectuals noted above. In 1963, however, *Commentary*, under the editorship of Norman Podhoretz, was going through a brief flirtation with more left-wing positions, and was actually the original intended venue for part of Baldwin's famous essay *The Fire Next Time* – see A. Bloom, 332-333. As Alexander Bloom notes, the dispute over Baldwin taking the piece to *The New Yorker* was one of the precipitating factors for Podhoretz writing his famously provocative article "My Negro Problem – and Ours," *Commentary* 35, no. 2 (February 1963): 93-101, which almost all discussions of Black-Jewish relations in America end up touching on.

[123] Roth, "Writing About Jews," 452. In an article for which he was interviewed in *The New Yorker* Roth says that Ellison actually said this line at Yeshiva University – David Remnick, "Into the Clear," *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2000, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2000/05/08/into-the-clear.

[124] Roth, "Writing About Jews," 448.

past".[125] In other words, Roth wants Jews to define their identity in more complex ways, to take full account of their position in America as more than just a persecuted Other to the gentile – in this he is anticipating my own argument about the complexities of the Jewish racial position. Yet, and here is where a gap opens with Ellison, this assumes that the category of Jewishness should be understood as a coherent identity that is worth reconstruction outside of 'American identity'; indeed, it positions Roth's work as explicitly part of a conversation about Jewishness – as being not about *American* identity, but about *Jewish* identity.

Roth's positions in 1962/3 and 1988 look, therefore, similar – in both cases he privileges Jewish identity over American identity, and in both cases he tries (consciously or otherwise) to cover over this move through his explicit linkage with Ralph Ellison's own project. When read through the lens of Michaels' and Kramer's work, however, it is possible to see an important shift – while in 1962/3 he is arguing for a new basis on which to found Jewishness, by 1988 his language has taken on the biological overtones of the multicultural discourse then reaching its apotheosis. I do not want to leave Roth stranded in this position, however, because *The Facts* also offers a route out of the multicultural bind (of culture being reduced to race) if read through the lens of the desire for Jewishness. The hints of this desire which I have been tracing in *The Facts* offer us a scalpel from within the multicultural project which can be used to uncover the structures underpinning the apparently stable multicultural concept of identity. In so far as Roth is a multiculturalist, he is a multiculturalist who reveals multiculturalism's unsteady foundations, suggesting an approach to the analysis of Jewishness as an object of desire rather than an acceptance of Jewishness as a prior, racialised category.

[125] Roth, "Writing About Jews," 451.

By putting Michaels and Kramer into dialogue with Roth I have opened up fertile new terrain on both sides. On the one hand, reading Roth through the lens of Michaels' uncovering of the racial grounds of identity aligns Roth with racial nationalist notions of identity, revealing Roth's engagement with a tradition very different from Ellison's – indeed, a tradition that Ellison explicitly repudiated (and which repudiated him). On the other hand, Roth opens up the possibility of reframing the ideas of Michaels and Kramer through the lens of desire, offering a framework for beginning to unpick the multicultural eliding of race and culture which they analyse. It is that opening which I pursue in my next two chapters, tracing this desire for Jewishness across a number of key works of Jewish American fiction which play with the terms of the debate around identity that this chapter has uncovered and began to problematise.

Chapter Three – conversion and the construction of Jewishness in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus*

In this chapter I focus on the theme of conversion in the Jewish context through a close reading of two texts: Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus*. Conversion offers a particularly rewarding route into my analysis of the desire for Jewish identity, raising questions of both the ontology and boundaries of Jewishness and highlighting the ways in which identity can be understood as both hybrid and generated through affect. The unsteadiness of Jewish identity is suggested by some of the ambiguities in the term 'conversion' itself, which tends to be understood in a religious context – as conversion to *Judaism* rather than conversion to *Jewishness* – and which therefore leaves the nature of the Jewish identity that is assumed uncertain. In this chapter I will showcase how an approach that understands conversion as not primarily a religious issue but one which spills over into issues of race and identity is generative for my overall project, in particular as a way to investigate the push and pull of longing and resistance which is so central to the affective notion of desire which I outlined in my first chapter. I argue that by centring this affective desire both Malamud and Cohen can be understood as engaged with key questions underpinning the multiculturalist account of identity. I read both authors as resisting this multiculturalist account, however, by offering a view of Jewish identity as generated from a desire their works both reinscribe and problematise. In the case of Malamud, this means putting him into dialogue with the Boyarins and Michaels around the question of the relation between race and identity. In the case of Cohen, I read his work as ultimately engaged with the fundamental assumptions around identity of the critical apparatus of Jewish American studies itself. Before turning to these close readings, however, I briefly justify putting works from 1957 and 2021 into dialogue with each other by locating each work in a broader historical context and framing them against existing critical readings.

Both *The Assistant* and *The Netanyahus* reflect on the question of conversion as a key dynamic through which to explore broader questions of Jewish identity. *The Assistant* ends with the conversion of the Italian American character Frank Alpine to Judaism – indeed, the novel's very last line is "[a]fter Passover he *became a Jew*".[126] In this chapter I argue that the construction of Jewishness in *The Assistant* through a nexus of suffering and sexual desire are key ways in which Malamud is operationalising the desire for Jewishness which I am tracking throughout this thesis. As a work published in 1957, this novel fits smoothly into my broader argument that an analysis of this desire represents an alternative way to read Jewishness in the post-war period, allowing us to move beyond received narratives of Jewish acculturation and whiteness to a more complicated understanding of Jewishness as, in Schreier's terms, "a kind of infrastructure to house fantasy".[127] Schreier's own brief reading of *The Assistant* in *The Impossible Jew* makes him an important interlocuter in my argument – although I accept Schreier's broader theoretical project, in this chapter I want to challenge his understanding of the dynamic of suffering, Christianity, and universalism in Malamud's novel. In its place, I put forward an analysis that aligns Malamud more closely with Roth's ambiguous relationship to the discourse of multiculturalism.

If *The Assistant's* place in my argument is relatively secure, as a text that is both canonical and contemporaneous with the period I am investigating, then the inclusion of Cohen's *The Netanyahus* is a more ambitious stretching of my analytical frame. The work's conscious play with the tropes of American Jewish fiction, however, as well as its complex engagement with the desire for Jewishness which I am analyzing, makes it an ideal vehicle for critically exploring the ways in which Jewish identity is institutionalized in the

[126] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 246. My emphasis.
[127] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 61.

contemporary field of Jewish American fiction, an institutionalization that itself feeds into readings of Malamud's work. Cohen, in a 2018 interview with Harold Bloom, has been clear about the debt his work as a whole owes to some of the other canonical authors with which this thesis is concerned, saying that "Bellow, Malamud, and Roth are too present in me" and that "Ozick is the queen, for me".[128] The fact Cohen made this point in an interview with Harold Bloom is more than merely incidental, as Cohen appends an authorial note to the end of *The Netanyahus*, titled "Credits & Extra Credits", in which he says that the novel's genesis can be traced back to an incident recounted to him by Bloom himself.[129] Interestingly, Cohen compares himself in the prologue to his 2018 interview to Nathan Zuckerman in Roth's metafictional novel *The Ghost Writer*,[130] which features a character often understood as being partly based on Malamud.[131]

The addendum to *The Netanyahus* therefore marks the novel as an intervention in a tangle of biographical, intellectual, and literary overlaps, reflecting Cohen's own framing of

[128] Joshua Cohen, "Stories as Prayer: A Conversation Between Joshua Cohen and Harold Bloom," *Los Angles Review of Books*, August 16, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/stories-as-prayer-a-conversation-between-joshua-cohen-and-harold-bloom/.
[129] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 242. The 'truthfulness' of this metafictional addendum has been disputed – Leo Robson, "The Netanyahus by Joshua Cohen review – an excess of genius?" *The Guardian*, May 20, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/20/the-netanyahus-by-joshua-cohen-review-an-excess-of-genius.
[130] Cohen notes, in the preface preceding the interview itself, that it has been a month since Philip Roth's death and compares his trip out to Connecticut to see Bloom to Roth's fictional alter ego Nathan Zuckerman's visit to "the great man" E. I. Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*, 3. Bloom was also a friend of Roth, describing him on his death "as the major American novelist since Faulkner" and including six (or arguable nine, given *Zuckerman Bound* is a collection of four novels and a novella) of his works in his famous list in the appendix of *The Western Canon*. See Harold Bloom, et al, "Megan Abbott, Jonathan Lethem, and other writers pay tribute to Philip Roth," *Library of America*, June 11, 2018, https://www.loa.org/news-and-views/1417-megan-abbott-jonathan-lethem-and-other-writers-pay-tribute-to-philip-roth and Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 565. Given the centrality of multicultural identity to my argument, it should be noted that Harold Bloom himself had a negative view on the effort of multiculturalists to broaden the literary canon in pursuit of "their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change", dubbing the proponents of this approach "the School of Resentment" – those who champion "writers who offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity". See H. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 4-7.
[131] See, for example, Michiko Kakutani, "Malamud Still Seeks Balance and Solitude," *The New York Times*, July 15, 1980. In a 2007 review for the *Forward* Cohen himself aligns Lonoff more with Henry Roth than Malamud – Joshua Cohen, "A Life Torn Between Myth and Fact," *Forward*, October 31, 2007, https://forward.com/culture/11915/a-life-torn-between-myth-and-fact-00701/.

his novel within the broader history of twentieth century Jewish American literature.[132] One perceptive review,[133] from Nathan Goldman – the current Managing Editor of the Jewish left-secular magazine *Jewish Currents* – has even read the novel "as an homage to, and loving parody of, the paradigmatic Jewish American novel, as developed in the twentieth century by writers like Malamud, Henry and Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Cynthia Ozick".[134] For Goldman this effort is ultimately a failure, "returning us to tired modes",[135] but I want to argue that in staging this encounter with the ghosts of Jewish American fiction Cohen offers a powerful example of how Jewishness as a stylistic mode continues to operate as a locus of attraction and points a path towards what a critical engagement with that attraction looks like.

The theme of conversion in *The Netanyahus* is represented through the character of Ben-Zion Netanyahu, a fictionalised portrait of the father of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In the novel, which is set during the winter of 1959-60, Ben-Zion is seeking an academic posting at the fictional Corbin College, in upstate New York. This periodisation means that the novel is reconstructing precisely the same historical moment which *The Assistant*, and the Roth debate over Jewish identity that was the focus of the last chapter, emerged from. This is a reconstruction, however, that takes place across a distance heavily fogged with precisely the critical apparatus this thesis has been aiming to cut through – Cohen's awareness of his own positionality with regard to that critical and literary heritage means that the novel becomes not only a reflection on Jewish identity in the 1950s and 1960s, but on that critical apparatus as such.

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[132] Cohen himself frames the novel in relation to Roth's *The Ghost Writer* in Joshua Cohen, interview with John Plotz and Eugene Sheppard, *New Books Network*, podcast audio, April 20, 2023. https://newbooksnetwork.com/the-netanyahus.
[133] Little academic work has so-far been published on *The Netanyahus*, a lacuna that extends to Cohen's corpus as a whole – a search produced only Adelais Mills, "Authorial Enchantments in the Fictions of Henry James, Philip Roth, and Joshua Cohen," *CounterText* 4, no.3 (2018): 382-405. As such, this thesis also represents an early critical engagement with Cohen's work.
[134] Nathan Goldman, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore," *Jewish Currents*, September 29, 2021, https://jewishcurrents.org/that-joke-isnt-funny-anymore.
[135] Goldman, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore."

I begin, however, by returning to the historical moment itself, represented by Malamud's 1957 novel *The Assistant*. The novel tells the story of the arrival of Frank Alpine, an Italian American drifter, in a run-down neighbourhood of Brooklyn, and his experiences becoming the titular assistant in the failing grocery store of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant living with his wife and daughter in an apartment above the store. Jewishness is central to the relationship between Morris and Frank from the novel's beginning, colouring their perception of each other and becoming a key driver of the novel's dramatic action. In almost the first conversation that Morris and Frank have, Frank asks "You people are Jews, aren't you?" and Morris answers in terms that leave no space for doubt: "Yes".[136] Shortly afterwards, as the close third-person narration switches to Frank's perspective, Frank reinforces the clear boundaries reflected in Morris' initial response, seeing Morris as simply "[t]he Jew".[137] When Frank shortly afterwards sees Morris' daughter, Helen, he again engages in racial essentialising, thinking that "she didn't look Jewish".[138] Similarly, for Morris, the world is clearly divided into Jews and 'goyim' (the novel uses the Yiddish term) – for example, he attributes the increased success of the store under Frank's stewardship to the fact that the goyim are "happier with one of their own".[139] As the novel begins, therefore, Jewishness exists as a clear, epistemologically verifiable category in the world, one that creates a clear division between Frank and Morris, and which can be understood as verifiable against an agreed upon, and racialised, set of standards. It is not that these standards *generate* Jewishness – Helen, in Frank's judgement, fails to meet them but is still understood by him as

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[136] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 38.
[137] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 54.
[138] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 63.
[139] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 77. This claim is itself quite revealing of the Jewish bias of Morris' own worldview, as for many Anglo-American gentiles an Italian-# American would not be seen as "one of their own". The evolution from 'off whiteness' of groups like Italian Americans during the early twentieth century is one of the most useful contributions of much of the 'whiteness' scholarship I critiqued in my introduction – see in particular Jacobson, 91-135.

Jewish – but that they can be clearly tracked against a definable object of 'the Jew', which appears to exists independently of any specific embodiment.[140]

As the novel goes on, however, Malamud examines the category of Jewishness more closely, and complicates the initially clear boundaries. The way in which Malamud opens up Jewishness to critical examination is through the notion of 'suffering', which is first connected to Jewishness in a section of the novel in which Frank is reflecting on why Morris lives the hard life he does:

> What kind of a man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an overgrown coffin and never once during the day, so help you, outside of going for your Yiddish newspaper, poke your beak out of the door for a snootful of air? The answer wasn't hard to say – you had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners.[141]

This quote repeats some of the same genealogical tropes that I analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis, twice repeating the assertion that Jewishness is bestowed by birth. It also suggests, however, that to be Jewish *is* to suffer, to be a "prisoner" – Jewishness is becoming more than just a set of external (racial) attributes, it has some inner ontological content. This hint of the association between Jewishness and suffering reaches its apotheosis at almost the exact midpoint of the novel, a moment which represents the hinge around which the novel turns, in a dialogue that begins when Frank asks Morris: "suppose somebody asked you what do the Jews believe in, what would you tell them?" and, before he gets an answer, "what is a Jew anyway?".[142]

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[140] For some of the ways in which Jews have been identified as 'different', see Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
[141] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 86.
[142] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 123.

It is important to draw attention to the fact these questions follow almost immediately from a scene in which Frank has gone on a first date with Helen, where she reminds him, "Don't forget I'm Jewish", to which Frank replies, "So what?". Frank feels, in giving this response, "as if he had crashed head on through a brick wall but hadn't bruised himself".[143] The "wall", I would suggest, represents the boundary between gentiles and Jews, previously represented as a fixed fact of the world, but now becoming understood as something constructed, something that Frank's sexual desire for Helen can therefore allow him to 'break through'. The experience of this ontological breaking is physical and sensual for Frank, related as bodily – and, therefore, potentially bruising – but leaving him "elated".[144] The suggestion of taking Helen's virginity (although she is not, in fact, a virgin) in the image of 'breaking through' a barrier also makes the experience sexual, as if the mixing of gentile and Jew – or the total abandonment of the division – would be a near orgasmic event, something also implied by Frank's "elation". Frank's question to Morris two pages later – "what is a Jew anyway?" – is, therefore, shadowed by this sensual boundary breaking and by Frank's (sexual) desire for Helen. The overspill of Frank's affect, from a person onto an ontological state, helps make Jewishness itself an object of desire for him.

Morris's answer to Frank's question is demonstrative, however, of the shifting nature of Jewishness once the novel brings the formerly positivist category into critical focus. Initially, Morris replies that "[m]y father used to say to be a Jew all you need is a good heart", but he quickly switches tack, saying that "[t]he important thing is the Torah. This is the Law – a Jew must believe in the Law". These are clearly contradictory answers, but neither mention genealogy or race, and both make Jewishness, therefore, into a potentially permeable category. Frank, however, is left unsatisfied by these answers – if boundary

[143] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 121.
[144] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 121.

breaking is to be the orgasmic experience Frank is longing for then there has to be a boundary to break. Frank asks Morris if he considers himself "a real Jew", since he does not go to synagogue, keep kosher, pray, or keep the Jewish holidays.[145] Morris defends himself by attempting to move away from these outward expressions of Jewishness and reduce the Law, which he has already put at the centre of his definition, down to its essence: "to do what is right, to be honest, to be good". Frank is again unsatisfied with this answer, since "other religions have those ideas too". Frank then tries a different approach, reintroducing his earlier idea about suffering as a crucial underpinning to Jewishness and asking "why is it that the Jews suffer so damn much, Morris? It seems to me that they like to suffer, don't they?".[146] A question which Schreier suggests makes Frank "a kind of multiculturalist" in assuming "that it is easiest for one to do what one culturally is".[147] It is useful to quote the entire section of dialogue that follows Frank's question, beginning with Morris's answer, because of its interesting ambiguities:

> "Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews."
>
> "That's what I mean, they suffer more than they have to."
>
> "If you live, you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want. But I think if a Jew doesn't suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing."
>
> "What do you suffer for, Morris?" Frank said.
>
> "I suffer for you," Morris said calmly.
>
> Frank laid his knife down on the table. His mouth ached. "What do you mean?"
>
> "I mean you suffer for me."

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[145] An interesting resonance here with Michael Kramer's question, discussed in my second chapter, of what defines a book as Jewish if it isn't about Jews, is not written in a Jewish language, and doesn't draw on Jewish literary traditions – Kramer, 293-4.

[146] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 123-4

[147] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 59.

> The clerk [Frank] let it go at that.
>
> "If a Jew forgets the Law," Morris ended, "he is not a good Jew, and not a good man."[148]

If Frank is willing to let it go at that, I am not – unravelling this passage helps to demonstrate not only something critical about Malamud's notion of Jewishness, but also returns us to the tension of the universal and the particular in relation to identity which my last chapter put at the heart of the shift towards multiculturalism in the 1960s. Morris begins with a universalist claim – that "[i]f you live, you suffer" – that resists Frank's assertion of Jewish particularity, but he quickly undercuts it by suggesting that Jews express a particular form of suffering because they suffer for the Law. Pushed by Frank, however, Morris reframes the law once again, this time grounding Jewish particularity on the fact the Jew "suffers for you" – this appears to resurrect the notion of Jewish 'Choseness', the idea that Jews have a unique function through their special relationship with God.[149] When Frank asks for clarification, however, Morris seems to return to the universalism with which he began, bringing Frank into Jewish Choseness by saying that Frank *also* suffers for others.[150] As Schreier points out, in direct opposition to Frank's multiculturalist association of Jewishness with suffering, Morris appears to be universalising Jewish suffering, in the process collapsing almost entirely the boundary between Jew and gentile[151] – in Morris' final line in the passage, "Jew" and "man" have become virtual synonyms.

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[148] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 124-25.

[149] Some critics suggest the notion of choseness means Judaism has a hierarchical separatism in its very foundation – see, for example, Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism form a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, California: HarperOne, 1991), 96-107. This argument is being partially pushed against in Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 710.

[150] Morris' switches can also be read as reflecting his discomfort at his lack of education, raising the interesting dynamic of the way in which intellectual ability has been correlated with Jewish ontology – see Sandor Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) for more on this.

[151] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 60.

Despite ending on this note of universalism, however, the category of Jewishness keeps reasserting itself in the novel, suggesting that Malamud does not want to end on Morris' universalism and would not accept Schreier's reading that "Frank's final conversion to Judaism appears redundant".[152] Explaining why Malamud still thinks the actual conversion is important, and why I think Schreier too easily moves to arguing that Malamud's novel turns Jewishness into "a desire circulating through a Christian metaphorology",[153] helps to demonstrate how a desire for Jewishness complicates the division of the universal and the particular which has so far been accepted as straightforwardly meaningful.

The figure of Helen showcases how Malamud continues to raise Jewishness as an issue in the novel, in particular at the fraught site of marriage and procreation. While falling in love with Frank, she considers that "[a]lthough she had only loosely been brought up as Jewish she felt loyal to the Jews, more for what they had gone through than what she knew of their history or theology – loved them as a people, thought with pride of herself as one of them".[154] It is striking that Malamud characterises Helen's feelings as one of 'love' for the Jewish people, and that this love arises, once again, *because* of their suffering. Just moments later, however, she wants to again collapse the Jewish/non-Jewish border: "[t]he less difference among people, the better". In this statement Helen is advancing the classic assimilationist argument against the multiculturalist belief in the value of cultural plurality, replicating in another key the earlier dispute between Frank and Morris. She reverses course, however, when confronted with the troubling genealogical question, saying in the very next paragraph that "she could not help but *hope* her own children would someday marry Jews".[155] "Hope" and "love" suggest the extent to which Helen's feelings about Jewishness are deeply implicated by desire – Helen, and the novel as a whole, is torn between collapsing boundaries

[152] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 60.
[153] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 61.
[154] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 132.
[155] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 133. My emphasis.

and an attraction to the category of Jewishness, which she, and the novel, keeps (re)constructing as meaningful even while repudiating its importance.

It is Frank Alpine himself who ultimately provides the novel's most compelling example of how Jewishness acts as a category of desire, and whose arc demonstrates the centrality of conversion to Malamud's attempt to resolve the ambiguities the novel has raised. Before the formal conversion on which the novel ends, Frank moves symbolically into Jewishness following Morris' death, a disruption to the novel's previously realist tone. At Morris' funeral Frank literally falls "feet first" into Morris's grave and "scramble[s] out",[156] a moment that Schreier reads as representing a Christ-like rising from the grave.[157] Frank then steps into Morris' place running the store alongside working a second job, attempting to earn enough money to send Helen to college,[158] and thereby taking on the suffering that has been linked throughout the novel with Jewishness: "[Frank] was always tired. His spine ached as if it had been twisted like a cat's tail. On his night off from the Coffee Pot he slept without moving".[159] It is significant that this suffering is expressed physically, in the body, the very same site where earlier in the novel Frank feared his breaking through the boundary of Jewishness would leave him bruised – as, indeed, it now has.[160] In his behaviour, however, he becomes more honest and stops doing things he believes to be wrong.[161] Only in the novel's final paragraph does Frank formally convert and have a circumcision, leading to the line I partially quoted above: "[a]fter Passover he became a Jew".[162]

[156] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 231-2.
[157] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 60-61.
[158] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 233-244.
[159] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 241.
[160] Earlier in the novel Frank also attempts to rape Helen, a moment which ends with her insulting him as an "uncircumcised dog" – Malamud, *The Assistant*, 168. That his move into Jewishness follows this insult further suggests the extent to which it is bound up with his desire for her, as well as the ways in which the move leaves not only Frank but Helen both physically and psychologically bruised.
[161] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 242.
[162] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 246.

The circumcision and conversion, however, is just the confirmation of a transformation that has already symbolically taken place. The Boyarins', in their essay on diaspora, offer a useful way to think about circumcision in relation to identity in this context, as a final "symbolic rebirth […] as a member of the Jewish People", or the "cultural construction of a genealogical differentiation".[163] Interestingly, the Boyarins' present this framing of circumcision explicitly against the argument about the collapse of culture into race made by Walter Benn Michaels which I aligned myself with in the previous chapter. The Boyarins argue, against Michaels, that circumcision represents "a mark that transcends one's actual practices and (at least remembered) experiences", asserting itself "as a demand (almost a compulsion) to reconnect, relearn, reabsorb and reinvent the doing of Jewish things".[164] The idea of compulsion here once again raises the desire for Jewishness, and it also suggests that Jewishness need not be *racially* constructed, which is also what Malamud seems to be implying in the novel's conclusion. This might suggest that *The Assistant* ends by confirming Morris' universalist notion that there really is no difference between the Jew and gentile; that it is the suffering that matters, not the identity. Such a view would seem to both place Malamud firmly in the camp of the pre-multiculturalists – more aligned with Ellison and the New York Intellectuals than Roth – and accept the dichotomy between the Boyarins and Michaels at the level of theory. I argue, however, that Malamud can be read as showcasing how Jewishness can be used to move beyond *both* the assimilationist/integrationist approach *and* the multicultural one.

Significantly, the response of the New York Intellectuals themselves suggests they did not see Malamud as engaged in a project aligned to their own. Alfred Kazin, for example, one of the foremost critics of the post-war period and a key member of the group, criticised the

[163] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 705.
[164] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 705. Michaels briefly responded to this argument in Walter Benn Michaels, "The No-Drop Rule," Critical Inquiry 20, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 760-61.

novel in *Commentary* as “a hymn to a symbolic Jew” that acts as “essentially a glorification of the Jew as Jew” rather than creating fully realised characters.[165] For Kazin, Malamud overdetermines Jewishness rather than sticking to the creation of characters who “clarify and intensify our sense of what [the Jewish experience] *really is*”.[166] The word “hymn” in this critique is astute – Frank’s function in the novel does indeed have a Christian quality, almost Christ-like: he takes on the suffering of others, and the novel’s final paragraph detailing his conversion follows immediately from a dream of St Francis of Assisi, framing his move to Jewishness through Catholicism.[167] The novel could even be read as replicating the broader course of history, with the *particular* suffering of the Jews transformed into the *universal* suffering of Christianity.

This is precisely the shift that the Boyarins identify as central to the Pauline shift of Christianity, pointing out that “[t]rue Jewishness lay, according to Paul, precisely in the renunciation of difference and entry into the one body of Christ. Anyone at all can be Jewish”.[168] It is this kind of reading that leads Schreier to claim that Frank “may become a Jew […] but only by becoming Christ”, leading him to the statement that I have been shadowboxing with, that “Jewishness remains available in *The Assistant*, but only as a desire circulating through a Christian metaphorology, as a ghost lacking its own proper, self-sufficient substance”.[169] This, however, seems to read Malamud’s – admittedly elusive – argument backwards: after all, it is *through Jewishness* that Frank’s transformation into the embodiment of suffering is enacted – if Frank becomes Christ, he becomes Christ *as a Jew*. In a reversal of Schreier’s argument, it is not that Frank may become a Jew only by becoming Christ, but that Frank may become Christ only by becoming a Jew.

[165] Alfred Kazin, “Fantasist of the Ordinary,” *Commentary* 24 (1957): 90.
[166] Alfred Kazin, “Fantasist of the Ordinary,” 92. My emphasis.
[167] Malamud, *The Assistant*, 245.
[168] Boyarin and Boyarin, “Diaspora,” 697.
[169] Schreier, *The Impossible Jew*, 61.

Malamud's novel, in my reading, turns to conversion to Jewishness as a final metaphor for the desire for Jewishness that the novel as a whole dramatizes. Malamud is clear in his wording that Frank changes not just religion but identity – Frank becomes "a Jew" not 'a convert to Judaism'. Morris' attempt to collapse 'Jew' into 'man' is, therefore, repudiated in this final line – Jewishness becomes an excess, more precisely definitional of Frank than his basic humanity. Malamud is closest here to the Boyarins' argument for "a theory and practice of identity" that respects "the irreducibility and the positive value of cultural differences".[170] It is this that Kazin is, in part, objecting to: not just that Jewishness seems to escape the bounds of realism into symbology, but that this move appears to place 'Jew' as a category of identity above 'man'. This is a move that, as we saw in the previous chapter, pushes against the New York Intellectuals' privileging of shared universalism over ethnic and racial particularity.[171]

Malamud is not, however, advancing a multiculturalist notion of racialised identity either. After all, it is through the figure of an Italian American that Malamud makes his argument about Jewishness – race is almost irrelevant, with suffering privileged above it; Jewishness functions, therefore, as a floating signifier, a permeable category, but a real and meaningful category none-the-less. Indeed, Jewishness in *The Assistant* is a category of desire so strong it ultimately transforms Frank's entire life and very being, but it is a category that must be constructed *out* of this desire rather than understood as *prior* to it. Malamud, in this reading, is not a pre- but a post-multiculturalist: understanding identity as a key ontological fact of modernity but not assuming its epistemological reality, recognising how

[170] Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 711.
[171] That Kazin – who broke onto the scene in 1942 with a work titled *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), which examines the golden age literature of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner – titled the third of his autobiographical works *New York Jew* and claims that "[t]he Jews are my unconscious" shows just how far identity had come between 1957 and the latter book's publication in 1978 – Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 9.

we produce it from our own affective desires rather than taking its racial underpinning for granted.[172]

Cohen's approach to conversion comes from the opposite end of the process as Malamud – not conversion *to* Jewishness, but (failed) conversion *from* Jewishness. Told from the perspective of Ruben Blum, a tax historian, the novel is a recounting, in a comic monologue style reminiscent of *Portnoy's Complaint*, of Ben-Zion Netanyahu's visit in January 1960 to the (fictional) Corbin College in search of an academic post.[173] In the novel Blum has recently arrived at Corbin College as the "first Jew ever hired"[174] – the combination of this fact with his academic profession allows Blum to joke, on just the novel's second page, that "I *am* a Jewish historian, but I am *not* an historian of the Jews".[175] As this joke demonstrates, Jewishness is presented as a central concern from the novel's opening. Blum is also, as Cohen tells us in the addendum, the character in the novel based on Harold Bloom, although he boasts a rather less impressive academic career.[176] Blum does, however, share Bloom's biographical origins: born in the Bronx and raised in an Orthodox Jewish family by parents from the region of modern day Ukraine.[177] Revealingly, Cohen adjusts Bloom's story to give Blum a still more stereotypical inter-war Jewish American origin, sending him to CUNY (rather than Bloom's Cornell) and giving him a youthful love of the modernist poets T.S.

[172] This also highlights why Michaels' response to the Boyarins' critique of his argument in Michaels, "The No-Drop Rule" misses a crucial point. It is not that Jewish conversion invalidates Michaels' argument about how multiculturalism collapses culture into race, but that it offers a way to understand how Jewishness, through its generative ambiguities, can disrupt precisely the multicultural concept of identity that is his target.
[173] Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969). The 'real-life' incident took place in New Haven, but Cohen used Ithaca (home of Cornell) as the basis for Corbin as somewhere with a more 'American' feel – see Joshua Cohen, interview with John Plotz and Eugene Sheppard, *New Books Network*. In the same interview Cohen is explicit that the novel is an attempt to write a Roth-style novel, set in the same year as *Goodbye, Columbus*, that addresses the question of Israel.
[174] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 15.
[175] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 12. Italics in the original.
[176] This despite being gifted with Cohen's own writerly talents, talents which led Bloom himself to describe Cohen's Book of Numbers as "shatteringly powerful" – Cohen, "Stories as Prayer."
[177] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 14. Dinitia Smith, "Harold Bloom, 89, Dies; Critic Who Championed Books of Western Canon," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2019.

Elliot and Ezra Pound (Bloom was critical of Elliot in particular).[178] These adjustments make Blum closer to the New York Intellectuals in biography than Bloom himself: many of the New York Intellectuals went to City College (part of CUNY) during the Depression,[179] and an appreciation of modernism was in many ways axiomatic for the group.[180]

This reshaping of Bloom's biography in the novel's opening pages to make Blum a more 'typical' example of post-war assimilation is not the only way in which *The Netanyahus* uses the tropes of post-war Jewishness. Blum's daughter, Judy, wants a nose job to get rid of a nose which seems to her "too long, too big, too bumpy"[181] – Cohen plays with the reader by leaving unsaid what is implied: that Judy's nose is *too Jewish*.[182] Cohen here is weaponizing the desire for Jewishness, the predisposition of the critical readership to read the text a certain way, prompting critics to find (racialized) Jewishness. When Judy finally gets a nose job – by tricking Blum's stereotypically Yiddish father into accidentally opening a door onto her nose – the chapter ends by suggesting that Judy had "gotten what she wanted in the fairest way, through suffering".[183] The symbolism of the Jewish grandfather wiping out the physical signs of Jewishness in the granddaughter represents a kind of perverted version of the classic story of assimilation – of each generation raising children less racially defined than themselves. It is striking, in reading Cohen against Malamud, to also note that Judy's assimilation is achieved *through suffering* – the very feature that Malamud made the basis of Jewishness. This linkage raises the suggestion that Judy is *symbolically* returned to Jewishness even in her escape from its outward, racial signifiers – another example of the way in which the pull of reading Jewishness into any character already understood as genealogically Jewish reflects

[178] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 14.
[179] A. Bloom, 35-42.
[180] A. Bloom, 84-97.
[181] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 45.
[182] For a history of the Jewish nose as a stereotype, see Robert Jütte, *The Jewish Body: A History*, trans. Elizabeth Bredeck (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 18-26.
[183] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 139.

Michael Kramer and Benjamin Schreier's point that the critical apparatus is constantly reinscribing what it purports to be analyzing.

Cohen also restages the Jewish-American (the hyphen is deliberate) debate that I discussed in my second chapter. Blum's childhood is pulled between his education in the American public school system, in which America was presented as the end point of Enlightenment progress, and his Hebrew education, in which "history was closed: it was no history; there was no past, no present, no future", just an endless cycle of Jewish "oppression, violence, and death".[184] This put Blum, as he himself describes it, in a position between "conflicting exceptionalisms, between the American condition of being able to choose and the Jewish condition of being chosen".[185] Like the New York Intellectuals, however, Blum has come, in the 1940s and 1950s, to see America as "the most exceptional exception" for Jews – a place where they could achieve success without fear, and in which they could play a central role correcting America's flaws.[186] Similarly, Blum is an ideal representative of the trope (which I am resisting here) of Jewish post-war assimilation, describing the process as one in which "Jews were busy being deinvented, or uninvented, or assimilated, by democracy and market-forces, intermarriage and miscegenation".[187] Cohen's piling up of terms in this quote to both describe the process and to capture its causes suggests not only the capaciousness of the idea of assimilation – a fact which helps explain its fascination for both novelists and historians – but Cohen's own satire of the somewhat stale academic debate assimilation generates. This satirical impulse is signposted early in the novel by Blum's self-awareness of his reproduction of Jewish American tropes, in a passage worth quoting at length:

[184] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 40-41.
[185] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 42.
[186] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 43.
[187] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 61.

> My Jewish anxieties are hackneyed by now – they might've been hackneyed even then – but that doesn't discount their reality. They were real once. And at one time or another they were interesting. I don't want to fall into the trap of dismissing these anxieties, these inherited neuroses, when what's actually to blame for their present banality is how they've been represented in books, in film, in TV – in "media;" when what's actually to blame is the lack of creativity on the part of those who've channelled them over the past half-century […] I was the bloated, hypertensive, and above all apprehensive and even dread-fueled embodiment of the under-coordinated, overintellectualizing, self-deprecating male Jewish stereotype that Woody Allen, for instance, and so many Jewish-American literary writers found outlandish financial and sexual success lampooning (Roth in a generation younger than mine, Bellow and Malamud in a generation older)[188]

In this passage Cohen is signalling to the reader both his awareness that his novel is reproducing ideas that may now appear "hackneyed", and connecting his work to the literary forebears who embody those ideas. In a novel that Cohen positions in relation to Harold Bloom, it is also impossible to ignore the echo of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" in Cohen's explicit acknowledgement, and subtle critique, of his own influences.[189] Jewishness, in Cohen's presentation of it in this passage, has become a set of signifiers that float free of what they signify, a nexus of ideas towards which critics and authors are drawn but which appear empty and tired as they approach them.

Cohen makes this satire of Jewish American tropes even more explicit in a later scene revolving around Blum's in-laws and some medicinal cream they have bought Judy to reduce

[188] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 21.
[189] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

the size of her nose. With the family all gathered in one room of the house, Blum wonders: "[a] large house, a large consanguineous cast all massed in the same small room: was this theatre or Judaism?".[190] The novel's play with the tropes of American Jewishness indeed make Jewishness into something like theatre, something ultimately *performative*, a series of potential options around which the novel's characters revolve. Jewishness in this presentation appears emptied of force, the tensions animating the works of Roth and Malamud reduced to farce. Goldman, in his review in *Jewish Currents*, regards this as emblematic of the novel's failure, suggesting that "[l]ike a joke worn to ribbons from overtelling, the laughter it conjures isn't spontaneous and transgressive, but knowing and hollow".[191]

For Goldman, the novel's other major arc – the arrival of the Netanyahu family – is Cohen's effort to stage a "confrontation between American and Israeli Jewishness" in a way that "subsum[es] the Netanyahus into the paradigmatic, phallic folly of American Jewish fiction […] effectively transform[ing] them into diaspora Jews".[192] In this reading, the tropes that Cohen is satirising absorb everything, becoming not the subject but the master of the novel, an echo chamber from which the reader, and Jewishness itself, cannot escape. As I have been suggesting, however, a close reading reveals that the novel is engaged in a more elaborate meta-satire than Goldman gives it credit for, a meta-satire of the very idea of Jewishness in both diasporic *and* Israeli form. Conversion is a central motif in this move, representing the way in which Jewishness comes to haunt the novel in ways that go beyond the knowing commentary that Blum himself provides on his self-aware play with Jewish American tropes.

[190] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 81.
[191] Goldman, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore."
[192] Goldman, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore."

Ben-Zion Netanyahu's academic work is focused on the conversion of the Jews – specifically, the conversion of Iberian Jews in the mediaeval period. Netanyahu's claim is that the late-fifteenth century Spanish Inquisition was, to use Blum's summary, not created to "investigate heresies or convert the Jews or ensure that the Jews who converted remained faithful Catholics" but "to invalidate new conversions and turn as many new Christians back into Jews as possible".[193] The Inquisition did this, in Blum's account of Netanyahu's argument, on behalf of the Spanish monarchy as a proxy way to attack those parts of the Spanish nobility who opposed the monarchy's goal of unifying Spain – the Jews were a target because they managed the nobles' estates and taxes.[194] As many of these managerial Jews had actually converted to Christianity, however, the Inquisition needed a way to turn them *back* into Jews in order to make this proxy attack effective – the technology used to do this was blood, or, in contemporary terms, race. As Blum summarizes Netanyahu's argument:

> Judaism had always been defined, and defined itself, primarily as a religion – as a set of tenants, and a set of practices – but the genius of the Spanish Inquisition was to insist it was a race, with the implication that even a convert to Christianity, even a fervent new Christian, was still a Jew at heart, because Judaism inhered in the blood. Once these new Christians were racialized back into a Jewish identity, they could once again be oppressed[195]

In Netanyahu's argument, biological racism can be traced back to a Spain on the brink of Columbus' voyage to America, and to the Jews who, half a century later, would be living in an America that remains defined by that racial thinking in its contemporary multicultural

[193] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 48. The fullest real-world expression of Netanyahu's views can be found in *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain* (New York: Random House, 1995).
[194] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 215-16.
[195] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 216.

form.[196] Netanyahu's argument shares some key features with the argument of Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that the Jews existed in a special relationship to the modern state. Arendt's argument, in brief, is that European states, needing credit that their own populations could not provide, turned to the Jews as historic moneylenders, in return granting them special protections that kept them unassimilated into the wider society.[197] The effect was that each class in society which came into conflict with the state eventually became antisemitic, "because the only social group which seemed to represent the state were the Jews".[198] Clearly there are important differences here from Netanyahu's argument, but in both cases Jewishness appears as something constructed through a special relationship with the state. Unlike Netanyahu, however, whose argument is used to buttress a strong defence of Zionist nationalism and a critique of diaspora assimilation,[199] Arendt, at least during the period of Cohen's novel, was generally linked with the highly Americanized New York Intellectuals.[200] As we saw above, Blum is quite deliberately framed as a New York Intellectual-type figure himself, but if Arendt and Netanyahu can be placed in sympathetic dialogue, then the apparent dispute between Israel and the Diaspora, represented by Netanyahu and Blum – and which Goldman regards as the novel's driving force[201] – begins to seem on shakier epistemological grounds.[202]

Cohen gives other hints that the gap between Blum and Netanyahu may not be as large as the novel's dramatic surface implies. As Blum understands it, Netanyahu's argument

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[196] Freedman discusses Netanyahu's work and its relevance to contemporary American discourses of race and ethnicity in Freedman, 216-227.
[197] Arendt, 11-14.
[198] Arendt, 25.
[199] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 217-220.
[200] A. Bloom, 219-220. The New York Intellectuals saw Arendt's argument on totalitarianism as a potentially useful tool in their case against Soviet Communism.
[201] Goldman, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore."
[202] It also helps to give some interesting intellectual resonances behind the move of many of the New York Intellectuals towards a more muscular Zionism as neoconservatives in the 1970s and 1980s. For an example of this shift see Irving Kristol's argument linking together Black-led support for the Third World and the Jewish need to reorient themselves towards Israel in Irving Kristol, "The Political Dilemma of American Jews," *Commentary* 78, no. 1 (1984): 23-29. I return to the theme of Israel in my next chapter.

is in sympathy with the Jewish education that Blum received as a child, in particular in its presentation of history not as changing, and changeable, but as constant in certain fundamental ways. Reading Netanyahu, Blum comes away with the idea that he is advocating for a "fixed and enduring 'Jew'", who represents "a Platonic ideal or archetype, a Hegelian absolute, an identity more or less constant and unchanging through the ages".[203] The only difference that Blum sees with the education he received from the Rabbis is that, in Netanyahu's account, it is not God but the gentiles who act to move Jewish history forward: "[gentiles] acted out of hatred, constantly judging the Jews and oppressing them, and effecting change through their oppressions: converting them, unconverting them, massacring and expelling".[204] This argument, on first reading, seems to put Netanyahu's reading of conversion into direct opposition with Malamud's: while the former makes the Christian/gentile resistance to Jewish conversion *from* Judaism into a tool for the essentializing racialization of Jewishness, the latter makes conversion *to* Judaism a showcase for the way in which Jewishness is porous and *not* based on race. A closer reading shows, however, that both approaches have desire at their centre, and that both ultimately suggest Jewishness is something constructed.

This can be seen in how Blum's own reaction to Netanyahu's argument is framed through an affective desire for Jewishness. Here, for example, is Blum's description of preparing for Netanyahu's arrival by reading his work: "I confess I felt ashamed about it, this secret study of mine, this sudden hidden lucubration, my unexpected resurgence of interest in subjects Jewish".[205] This fear of discovery is expressed in highly sensory terms: "I found myself simultaneously attuned to every sound in the house, from the shift and settle of the foundations up through the vibrance of the refrigerator and the ticking of the clock, to the

[203] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 50.
[204] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 51.
[205] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 47.

chestnuts that clattered on the roof".[206] That this fear is expressed through Blum's increased attunement to the sounds of his own home – including the ultimate symbol of post-war consumer affluence, the refrigerator – suggests the extent to which the experience makes him feel alienated from himself and his assimilated position; pulled, against his will, towards "subjects Jewish". Ending the section, Blum explicitly compares himself with one of the failed converts from Judaism that are central to Netanyahu's argument:

> I was a tenure-track historian and an active participant in secular American life sneaking around in the attic-mind of an obscure Israeli academic like I was one of the antique Jews he wrote about, a convert forcibly returned to the faith I'd left and too consumed by turmoil to notice the hour[207]

Once again, as in Roth's *The Facts*, the word choice suggests compulsion: "forcibly returned", as if Jewishness here operates as something that Blum cannot help but keep returning to. The borderline of conversion, however, becomes the space for Cohen to construct the hybridity of Blum's own conflicted position – as American *and* Jewish. A conflict visible in Blum's very appearance: having not shaved for several days, he sees himself in the mirror as "a bedraggled rabbi star[ing] back in disgust".[208] Once again, as in Blum's experience of reading Netanyahu's work, Jewishness reasserts itself despite Blum's effort to suppress it, creating a visceral reaction of "disgust". The disgust here reflects Blum's other form of alienation, this time a self-alienation: seeing himself as racially Jewish, he feels the same physical dislike that Judy feels for her own inescapable conformity to the

[206] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 47.
[207] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 52-3.
[208] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 137.

essentializing signs of Jewishness, signs that Netanyahu's argument suggests are a product of the Inquisition's move to racialize 'the Jew'.

Towards the novel's conclusion, the constant reemergence of Jewishness is confronted head on. Blum's wife, Edith, is reflecting on their youthful earnestness, and Blum responds "I remember. We were good little Jews." To which Edith replies, "What's wrong with you? Who said anything about Jews? I'm sick and tired of hearing about Jews. I'm talking about the two of us."[209] Edith is here articulating a vision of the human, represented in a coupledom that she wants to perceive as prior to, or separate from, Jewishness – an attitude that shares something with Morris' slide between 'Jew' and 'man' in the dialogue I analyzed earlier in this chapter. The novel as a whole, however, suggests the impossibility of such a simple escape from the ambivalent desire for Jewishness which Blum experiences throughout. The novel's own play with the tropes of Jewish American fiction displaces this same desire into the structure of the novel itself, making use of the assumptions of the critical apparatus which the novel is dramatizing. In so doing, Cohen showcases how this desire for Jewishness is itself institutionalized through that critical apparatus, and how totalizing that desire is in a society in which identity functions as such a powerful locus of meaning.

My discussion of Malamud and Cohen has demonstrated how the desire for Jewishness both emerges, and is problematized, at the site of conversion. In *The Assistant*, Jewishness operates as a powerful locus of attraction, but one that Malamud deconstructs as being formed out of precisely the affective desires that the characters' feel towards it. This allows him to offer an understanding of identity as both deeply meaningful and highly contingent, aligning him with Roth's own simultaneous undermining and embodiment of multiculturalism. Cohen, on the other hand, stands at the end of a chain first forged by these

[209] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 224.

canonical post-war authors, a position which allows him to critically reflect on the way in which these authors' works have themselves become reified in a series of tropes that continue to reinscribe Jewish American identity as a locus of desire. In *The Netanyahus*, Cohen draws on Ben-Zion Netanyahu's work on Jewish conversion to raise the spectre of racial thinking that underpins these Jewish American tropes. In the final chapter of this thesis, I turn to this racialization to explore how Jewish Otherness complicates our understanding of Jewish identity in relation to multiculturalism's re-essentializing of racial identity.

Chapter Four – the Jewish Other: race, primitivism, and Zionism in Philip Roth and Joshua Cohen

In the final chapter of this thesis, I return to both Philip Roth – through his short story "Eli, the Fanatic" and his novel *The Counterlife* – and to Joshua Cohen – continuing my analysis of *The Netanyahus* – in order to examine two forms of Jewish Otherness: Hasidism and Zionism. I argue that these symbols of Otherness in Roth and Cohen represent another way in which the desire for Jewishness I have been tracking is expressed, coded in racially ambiguous terms that offer an opening for a deeper engagement with postcolonial theory – including Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said. In addition, I draw on a number of more recent works to analyze this racial ambiguity, including Samuel Spinner's recent work on *Jewish Primitivism*[210] – in which Spinner advances his idea of a unique form of primitivism expressed by modernising Jews in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe towards Yiddish-speaking Eastern Jews – and Jonathan Freedman's *Klezmer America*. I end this chapter where Roth himself ends *The Counterlife*, returning to the theme of circumcision as an expression of the desire for Jewish identity in relation to history.

"Eli, the Fanatic" was originally published in 1959 in *Commentary*, before being collected that same year in *Goodbye, Columbus*, alongside the story "Defender of the Faith" which I discussed in my introduction.[211] As such, it emerges from the same moment as Roth's appearance at Yeshiva University, and, I argue, continues the concerns of that moment through a presentation of Hasidic Jews which raises issues of identity formation in relation to race. My analysis of Cohen builds on this suggestion by putting *The Netanyahus* into a more explicitly racial context to discuss how the Netanyahu family are positioned in relation to a

[210] Samuel Spinner, *Jewish Primitivism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).
[211] Philip Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic," *Commentary* 28 (1959): 292-309. There are minor textual differences between that version and the version in *Goodbye, Columbus* which I am using.

set of discourses of Jewish racial Otherness. More broadly, my readings of both "Eli, the Fanatic" and *The Netanyahus* in this chapter are intended as a showcase for how post-colonial theory can open up the question of the Jewish racial position in America, in contrast to the well-worn narrative of Jewish assimilation and movement into whiteness. As Schreier has argued, this dominant narrative risks reducing the critical practice of Jewish American studies to an expression of historical ethnography, rather than an unpacking of the racial underpinnings of Jewish identity.[212] This critical approach that has been particularly prevalent in the critical reception of "Eli, the Fanatic",[213] making a fresh analysis of this text the ideal vehicle for critiquing that narrative and offering an alternative based on the affective desire for Jewishness. As I already argued in the previous chapter, *The Netanyahus* is also engaged in a self-conscious play with the same tropes of assimilation as those structuring the critical reception of "Eli, the Fanatic". As such, Cohen's novel offers a way to expand on my own critique of those tropes and, through its suggestive play with issues of racial position, to provide alternative readings of Jewish racialization using the lens of post-colonial theory.

The Counterlife acts as a coda on my entire project, offering not only an additional perspective on Zionist Jews – further enriching my analysis of the Netanyahu family in *The Netanyahus* – but returning me to Roth's sense, already seen in *The Facts*, of Jewishness as a category of attraction and compulsion. *The Facts* was published just two years after *The Counterlife*, and, despite ostensibly being an autobiography, includes an opening and closing metatextual frame which re-introduces the character of Nathan Zuckerman and continues the narrative that *The Counterlife* ends on.[214] Given this intertextual overlap, my analysis of *The*

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[212] Schreier, *The Rise and Fall*, 8-10.

[213] For example, in the Aarons' article I pointed to in the introduction, in particular Aarons, 14-21, as well as Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Resisting Allegory, or Reading 'Eli, the Fanatic' in Tel Aviv," *Prooftexts* 21, no. 1 (2001): 103-112. While I am critiquing Wirth-Nesher's broad acceptance of the assimilation reading in the American context, her article is valuable in other ways in pointing out the three-way dynamic of otherness between Hasidic Jews, American Jews, and Israeli Jews. I don't examine the tension within Israel itself between Hasidic Jews and secular Jews which Wirth-Nesher raises, but it offers a productive avenue for further exploration.

[214] Roth, *The Facts*, 3-19 and 161-195. 185-195 most explicitly returns to where *The Counterlife* leaves off in its discussion of the relationship between Zuckerman and his British, gentile wife Maria.

Counterlife ultimately returns this thesis to the issues raised by Roth's Yeshiva University experience with which I began, placing both *The Facts* and *The Counterlife* into their historical moment as works engaged with questions of multiculturalism in relation to Jewishness.

In my introduction I argued that in Roth's "Defender of the Faith" the 'desire for Jewishness' is expressed through nostalgia. In "Eli, the Fanatic" this notion of desire as nostalgically-inflected returns, but now asserting itself in the form of 'Jewish primitivism'. The use of Jewish primitivism to read "Eli, the Fanatic" represents an entirely original approach, allowing me to connect Roth's short story to both my broader framework of post-colonial theory and the affective expression of desire through an analysis of the racial dynamics present in the story, a reading that builds on Franco's insight that "racialized identities, social race, and the gravity of public assumptions about race are central to Roth's tales of maturation, acculturation, and postmodern escape (and return)".[215]

"Eli, the Fanatic" examines this racial dynamic through its play with whiteness and Blackness as key tropes. The story concerns the efforts of a community of secular Jews in the leafy suburb of Woodenton to evict a Hasidic Yeshiva that has been set up on the town's outskirts.[216] Eli Peck, the central character, is a lawyer tasked by Woodenton's secular Jewish community with securing this removal, in the course of which he is forced to confront his own relationship to his Jewishness. The opening line of the story has Leo Tzuref, the Yeshiva's principle, step "out from back of a *white* column to welcome Eli Peck"; shortly afterwards, Eli is momentarily confused by Leo's skullcap, thinking that the "black circle on

[215] Franco, "Introduction: Philip Roth and Race," *Philip Roth Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 83.
[216] I note, but do not put any more emphasis on it than that, the irony of the Yeshiva given Roth's 1962 experience. Two recent articles have linked the origins of the story to a real-life incident at Mount Kisco, New York – see Julian Levinson, "Roth in the Archives: 'Eli, the Fanatic' and the Nitra Yeshiva Controversy of 1948," *American Jewish History* 101, no. 1 (January 2017): 57-79 and Steven Fink "Fact, Fiction, and History in Philip Roth's 'Eli, the Fanatic'," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the US* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 89-111.

the back of his head" means "[t]he crown of his head [is] missing".[217] As Brett Kaplan has pointed out in her analysis of "Eli, the Fanatic", Blackness in this opening passage is immediately associated with strangeness, absence, and anxiety.[218] The complaints of the secular Woodenton Jews are focused in particular on another Hasidic male who goes into the town wearing his traditional, black, dress, including a "Talmudic hat" which is "the very cause of Eli's mission, the source of Woodenton's upset".[219] This Hasid too, makes his first appearance in the story through the association of blackness with absence: "Eli saw him. At first it seemed only a deep hollow of blackness – then the figure emerged".[220]

It becomes clear that both Tzuref and this other adult, along with the Yeshiva's eighteen children, are all refugees from Europe, and, by extension, victims of the Shoah.[221] The second Hasid, who is unnamed, is most explicitly linked to the genocide during a diatribe from Tzuref, who tells Eli that he has been left without his "wife", "ten-month-old baby", "friends", or "synagogue", and was the victim of "a medical experiment". The result is that he has "[a]bsolutely nothing", or, in Tzuref's Yiddish, "*Gornisht"*.[222] The absence that Eli perceives when first seeing the second figure, as well as the hint of medical brutality in his confusion over Tzuref's skullcap, is therefore eerily accurate – Nazi victimization has indeed left these Jews with gornisht. Although as Tzuref points out, they do not quite have nothing, because they still have their culture, "the one thing a man's got," symbolized by their traditional dress.[223] Tzuref wants to link Eli to this culture, saying that "[y]ou are us, we are you" – given that the story nowhere indicates Eli comes from Eastern Europe himself, this

[217] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 187. My emphasis.
[218] Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 23. Kaplan's focus is more on Jewish anxiety about simultaneously being victims and becoming potential perpetrators of racial violence, although her reading raising intriguing questions which I have picked up here.
[219] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 190.
[220] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 189-190.
[221] Although, as in 'Defender of the Faith', the terms Shoah or Holocaust are never explicitly used.
[222] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 197. Italics in the original.
[223] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 197.

suggests that culture is once again being framed in the multicultural way I outlined in my second chapter, as something that lines up with a prior, racially-grounded, identity.[224]

In the American context, unlike under the Nazi regime, it is not Jews but African Americans who serve as the ultimate racialised other.[225] 'Eli, The Fanatic' only briefly features "[a] Negro woman, spreading some strange gospel",[226] but the constant association of Hasidim with blackness in the story links the two groups.[227] For example, in a conversation with one of the other Woodenton residents, Eli jokes somewhat sarcastically that "[n]ext thing they'll be after our daughters",[228] recycling a classic racist trope used against African Americans. The linkage between Blackness and the ambiguous Jewish racial status is made particularly clear when, moments after the Black woman has knocked on Eli's door, the unnamed Hasid deposits his black clothes with Eli in (both real and symbolic) exchange for one of Eli's Western suits. Examining the clothes, Eli "smelled the colour of blackness", and wearing them later he feels "the black clothes as if they were the skin or his skin".[229] The deliberate eliding between the blackness of the clothes and the Blackness of skin reveals the racial shifting available to 'the Jew', as well as the way in which this racialisation can be experienced sensorially, as a smell or a change in the feel of the skin. The Hasid makes the reverse move – without the outward signifiers of his difference he is integrated, in Eli's imagination, into whiteness, but a whiteness that retains a kernel of something uncanny: "white, white, terribly white skin (how white must be the skin of his body!)".[230] Here is the drama of post-war Jewish racial transformation in fast-forward: from a

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[224] Michaels, "Race into Culture," 677-685.
[225] Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post Holocaust America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.
[226] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus,* 211.
[227] Kaplan, 25-26.
[228] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 193.
[229] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 217.
[230] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 211-212.

racial Otherness associated with Blackness to a whiteness almost whiter, and therefore more suspect, than, in Karen Brodkin's phrase, the "white folk".[231]

Roth, however, has a more complicated view on Jewish racial identity than that offered by the clichéd story of Jewish assimilation. This complexity can be accessed through the idea of 'Jewish primitivism', an idea I take from the work of Samuel Spinner. Spinner has developed his concept by analyzing a range of German, Yiddish, and Hebrew writers and artists in nineteenth and twentieth century Central and Eastern Europe.[232] He argues that the unique position of European Jews in this period opened up a space to undermine traditional dichotomy inherent in primitivism, as expressed in European modernism, between a distinctly 'other' primitive object and a civilized European subject.[233] Jews, as both "plausibly primitive but also plausibly European" troubled this distinction.[234] This subversive possibility allowed Jewish writers and artists to advance a broader critique of "European modernity and its claims regarding collective identity and individual subjectivity".[235] Given this quite specific context to Spinner's notion of 'Jewish primitivism' I don't want to imply here that his ideas can be simply applied to 1950s America wholesale, and indeed Spinner himself suggests that 'Jewish primitivism' in his precise formulation comes to an end with the Shoah.[236] The term is, however, a useful one to think with as it captures something of the racial ambiguity and tension between desire and resistance that I am tracking here. As Spinner himself points out, primitivism has also generally been used in the context of

[231] Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*.
[232] Spinner, 17-19.
[233] Spinner, 1. Spinner's own key interlocuter in this argument is Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017).
[234] Spinner, 9-10.
[235] Spinner, 2.
[236] Spinner, 170-77. In my own argument I am (softly) pushing against this claim, suggesting that at least certain key features of 'Jewish primitivism' have a longer afterlife than Spinner acknowledges.

colonial relations, and so his – and my – usage of the term once again suggests fertile connections between post-colonial theory and Jewish studies.[237]

As Spinner describes it, "Jewish primitivism was a product of the effort to create and consolidate identity and nationhood through Jewish culture" by secularised Jews focusing on an object, the 'savage Jew', which both appeared different and simultaneously insisted on similitude.[238] Turning the "ethnographic lens on themselves" Jewish writers and artists were able to "undermine the [modernist] idea of ineradicable difference by blurring the border between savage and civilized" and to "critique the distinction…between subject and object", allowing them "to be both at once – European and foreign, subject and object, savage and civilized".[239] The example with which Spinner begins his account comes from Kafka, who described the participants in a 1915 Hasidic gathering he had visited in Prague as "something like a savage African tribe".[240] Spinner argues that "Kafka's primitivism and his radical self-alienation exist in relation to one another",[241] and I would suggest a similar dynamic can be seen in "Eli, the Fanatic". Here, for example, is Eli's perception of the Yeshiva children when he first sees them playing on the lawn: "[t]he dusk made the children's game look like *a tribal dance*".[242] Another Woodenton resident attacks the Hasidim for their lack of modernity, for being "religious fanatics", "[t]alking a dead language", and indulging in "hocus-pocus abracadabra stuff" that is redundant in an "age of science".[243] "This hocus-pocus" religion can be linked to the "strange gospel" propagated by the Negro woman, as another example of the slippage between Blackness and the Hasidim in the story. As in the

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[237] Spinner, 7-9. The field of Yiddish studies has tended to be more accommodating in general to making linkages between Jews and (post-)colonial history and theory – see, for further examples, Marc Caplan, *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality, and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) and Merle L. Bachman, *Recovering "Yiddishland": Threshold Moments in American Literature* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008).
[238] Spinner, 2.
[239] Spinner, 2-4.
[240] Spinner, 1.
[241] Spinner, 3.
[242] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus,* 189. My emphasis.
[243] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus,* 206.

Jewish primitivism that Spinner finds in Kafka, however, the encounter with the 'savage Jew' becomes, for Eli, "about the primitivist desire for difference", a "desire for one's own Western identity to be replaced by a Jewish, primitive identity".[244] Once again, we meet the figure of 'the Jew' as desired, reconceptualized in the story as an object of difference through which the ambiguities of Jewish identity can be explored.

A scene in which Eli puts on Hasidic dress most clearly demonstrates this desire for difference. Smelling the clothes, Eli finds "something special, some Jewish thing" and wonders if the Hasidic man left them to him to avoid being "tempted back into wearing his traditional clothes". Beginning to dress, however, Eli wonders "who was tempting who into what", and soon the narrator tells us that "[r]egardless of who was the source of the temptation, what was its end, not to mention its beginning, Eli, some moments later, stood draped in black".[245] Jewishness is functioning in this scene in the way I have been exploring throughout, as something ambiguous, readable in different ways, but nonetheless compelling. In much the same way critics have sought to read an identifiable Jewish identity into the text itself, for example through the assimilation narrative, even as the text destabilises any clear sense of racial identity. The response of the secular Jews of Woodenton to Eli's new clothes is to pathologize him, so that by the story's end he is being led away by psychiatrists, "[t]heir white suits" smelling, "but not like Eli's".[246] Yet, even at the story's conclusion, the psychiatrists cannot "touch down where the blackness had reached".[247] Eli's desire for Jewishness is, ultimately, stronger than the imposition of social norms that attempt to de-racialize 'the Jew'.

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[244] Spinner, 44-45.
[245] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 212-213.
[246] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 220.
[247] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, 221.

Where "Eli, the Fanatic" uses the Hasidim as a vehicle to explore the racializing and primitivizing of the Jewish Other, in Cohen's *The Netanyahus* it is the Zionist Netanyahu family who serve this function. As shown in the previous chapter, Cohen's novel puts the history of Jewish racialization at its centre through an exploration of the work of Ben-Zion Netanyahu. The novel also, with a self-conscious irony, perpetuates this same essentialising racialization on Ben-Zion himself. For example, when Ben-Zion arrives with his family they appear as a mass, crammed into their car so tightly that "it wasn't clear to me [Blum] how many passengers there were or what they were doing: fighting or getting dressed".[248] As they tumble out onto the sidewalk, Blum reflects that "[t]heir identical sheepskin coats, and, especially, their suddenly unconfined energy, made them seem more numerous", while the "two adults at first seemed indistinguishable and completely androgynous".[249] Blum is here repeating classic racist tropes often applied to non-Europeans – of the Other as an indistinguishable mass, filled with a more 'elemental', 'primitive' energy than the refined European.[250]

Given that the novel is told from Blum's point-of-view, readers themselves become participants in this gaze, which, as in Frantz Fanon, can be seen as fixing an identity, producing an ontology in the act of looking.[251] It is in relation to Fanon's idea of the white gaze that Bhabha articulates the "analytic of desire" which I outlined in my first chapter, in which identity is produced in relation to an Other who either wants to take your position or whose position you want to take.[252] In *The Netanyahus,* Cohen plays with precisely this tension in the relation of Blum and Ben-Zion. On one level, Ben-Zion wants an academic

[248] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 143.
[249] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 144.
[250] Said, *Orientalism*. I make the case less explicitly with regard to *The Netanyahus*, but the idea of Jewish primitivism is again relevant here.
[251] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89-95. In this passage Fanon explicitly suggests Jews aren't subject to the white gaze in the same way as the Black man, but I am here suggesting that the intra-Jewish gaze functions in a racializing way towards the Jewish Other.
[252] Bhabha, 62-64.

position like Blum's – that, after all, is the entire purpose of his visit – and can be read as therefore wanting to take Blum's place. Similarly, the Netanyahu family feels desire for the modern household conveniences of America, with Ben-Zion's wife saying that "[i]n Israel, these are luxurious goods and no one has them. But here in the States, you have it so easy".[253] Blum himself, however, feels a clear sense of ambivalence about these signs of outward success – as discussed in the previous chapter, this is expressed through his unsteady relation to, and desire for, Jewishness.

Blum's ambivalence at the site of the production of Jewish identity is clearly expressed at the end of Ben-Zion's lecture on the (un)conversion of Iberian Jews. Blum reads behind this lecture what he calls "the text behind the text",[254] in which he understands Ben-Zion as condemning the assimilation of American Jews, because "America won't give your unrecognisable descendants anything real with which to replace the sense of peoplehood it took from them".[255] Identity, in Blum's interpretation of what Netanyahu is implying, becomes more valuable than material goods, becomes perhaps the most valuable thing of all – the last thing that can be taken, as the Hasidic Jews in "Eli, the Fanatic" know all too well. That Ben-Zion Netanyahu does not himself explicitly say this (or perhaps even implicitly say it, Cohen leaves Netanyahu's exact words somewhat hazy) but is understood this way by Blum suggests the extent to which fears about the authenticity of Blum's own identity – and his concomitant desire for a more authentic identity – are close to the surface of Blum's thoughts. This concern about authenticity is a hallmark of the multicultural discourse, as we saw through Michaels in my second chapter,[256] suggesting that Cohen is partially reading that discourse back into 1960. The essentialising inherent in Netanyahu's apparent condemnation

[253] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 155. Although the novel also suggests that from the point of view of the Netanyahus this 'ease' is corrupting.
[254] This reference to textuality also raises the interesting linkage between post-structuralist theory and contemporary identity, a link explored in detail in Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier.*
[255] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 220.
[256] Michaels, "Race into Culture", 673.

of Jewish Americans suggests, ironically, a Zionist reinscription of a white, European gaze towards the Jewish racial position – one that makes their Jewish "birthright" the most important thing about any individual Jew.[257] A racial essentalizating that Blum's more nuanced position as both Jewish *and* American could allow him to escape through Bhabhaian hybridity – which reveals the ways in which identity is not fixed but in a constant process of production – if he could avoid the totalising effects of a multicultural discourse which, in Cohen's hands, has now reframed the past itself.

A counter-reading of Cohen's text through the lens of Bhabha and post-colonial theory is made still more compelling when considering Blum's first impressions of Ben-Zion: "his face a tough nut of vaguely Mongol features, tiny olive pit eyes and absolutely enormous and fleshy oyster-shell ears".[258] As Freedman has argued, there was a "widespread notion of the essentially Oriental quality of Jewish difference", particularly in the pre-Second World War period, one which aligned the Jewish racial character with Edward Said's notion of the Orient as a site of "exoticism, feminization, [and] the multiple pleasures of ambigious sexuality".[259] By drawing on a Orientalising metaphor in *The Netanyahus*, Cohen associates the Zionist Other with this same discourse, creating a racialised division *within* Jewish self-understanding between Israeli Jews and American Jews. This is despite the fact that Blum has earlier been given the Netanyahus' backstory in a letter, which makes clear that they come from the very same Eastern European background as Blum himself.[260] This reading suggests the extent to which Blum himself can be understood as occupying a quasi-colonial position in the production of the racial identity of the Netanyahus, one in which the Netanyahus are once again subject to a fixing gaze. This is a shift that reverses the alignment of Blum with post-

[257] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 220. Note once again the genealogical implications in 'birth'.
[258] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 145.
[259] Freedman, 29-31. Freedman also tracks the etymological framing of "Mongolian" in relation to Jews and Asians in the late nineteenth-century – see Freedman, 262-3. For Said's presentation of Orientalism and sex, see Said, 166-167, 181-197, 311-316.
[260] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 91.

colonial hybridity which I made in my last paragraph, reinforcing once again the shifting position of 'the Jew' in discourses of race and power when read through a post-colonial lens.

The description of the Netanyahu family takes on even more racialised overtones once the Netanyahus are inside Blum's house, where the contrast between the disorder of the Netanyahus and the clean, orderly American home is starkly drawn. The crossing of a literal boundary into the home is associated with the arrival of dirt: "the parents had already passed over the interior mat without even wiping" and the youngest son quickly starts "digging in the hearth, and then rubbing at his face and smearing it with ashes". This contrast extends to the very language spoken: Blum's wife's voice is described as "a muffled chirping" while the three Netanyahu sons "burst out into screeching" – a contrast between control and disorder as well as between female restraint and masculine freedom – and their Hebrew is "spat". Given all of this, Blum renames the family the "Yahus", who had "charged into our home and snowed up our floors and were now upright again and wandering the den like they were casing it for a burglary".[261] In this description Blum manages to both characterise the family as animalistic – "upright again" – and as potentially criminal – "casing it for a burglary". In doing so, Blum is replicating in his attitude to the Jewish Other, in the way also seen in "Eli, the Fanatic", tropes often used against African Americans. To make the point still clearer, the ash on the youngest son's face is shortly afterwards characterised as "wet blackface".[262] Blum and his wife also draw on a repertoire of antisemitic tropes when describing the Netanyahus. For example, Edith describes them as "so horrible, so pushy", in response to which Blum, showcasing his awareness of the irony, says "I bet you say that about all the Jews".[263]

In another example of the overlap with "Eli, the Fanatic", there are also several moments – in addition to the "wet blackface" – where the Netanyahus are explicitly framed

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[261] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 146-147.
[262] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 148. For an argument that suggests Blackface was historically used as a way to smooth the Jewish passage into whiteness, see Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*.
[263] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 164.

through another racial group. For example, Blum describes the youngest Netanyahu child as being sat in front of the TV "like an Indian, hunkering close to the campfire, hypnotized by sparks".[264] As in Roth, there is a primitivizing element to this description, one which associates the Netanyahu family with a second major Other in American history: the native Americans. Cohen makes this linkage quite explicit by having the Netanyahu children watch a Western on TV, with Blum speculating about the influence of the Western's association of violence and borders on "the future direction of the Netanyahu boys",[265] one of whom would become a war hero and one a Prime Minister presiding over a contested borderland in Gaza and the West Bank. Ironically, a sample of Ben-Zion's writings from the 1920s, quoted in a letter to Blum earlier in the novel, suggests that Ben-Zion himself saw the world through the lens of the Western, but with the Zionist Jews as the "Anglo-Saxons" and the Arabs as "the Indians".[266] The complexity of the racial position of the Zionist Other in dialogue with the Western framework is, therefore, one of constant flux and malleability, a parallel to the broader nature of Jewishness itself as an ambiguous signifier.

More strikingly still, in the novel's very last lines (excluding the meta postscript), Blum and the town's sheriff talk about the chaos caused by the Netanyahu family in a way that raises a further set of intriguing ambiguities:

> "What a gooddamned night," the Sheriff said. "Those fucking people. Excuse me, professor Blum. But those fucking people"
>
> Then [the Sheriff] sighed and got himself out of the car and freed me and I clambered out to the sidewalk with my shepherd crook's shovel.

[264] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 165.
[265] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 166.
[266] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 95.

> "Thank you, Sheriff, and I agree with you about those people. The parents of those boys. They're Turkish, you know," and I headed up the path.
>
> But my front door was locked and I didn't have the key, so I knocked, and as I waited for Edith to let me in, I kept waving the shovel back at the Sheriff and mumbling. "Turks…what did you expect?...just a bunch of crazy Turks..."[267]

The mention of a Sheriff, of course, once again summons up the idea of the Western, but the dialogue has another intriguing uncertainty at its core. At its opening, the Sheriff describes the Netanyahu family as "those fucking people" – there are two interpretations of his words: he could simply be using "people" as a collective noun for the family, but he could also be hinting at the Netanyahus' Jewishness, at a collective 'peoplehood' that also includes Blum himself.[268] His apology to Blum – "[e]xcuse me, professor" – also raises this uncertainty: is he apologising for his use of "fucking" or because of his insulting of Blum's own ethnic group? Blum himself then replicates the ambiguity in his response, reusing the Sheriff's phrase, "those people", and then explicitly acknowledging the racial spectre raised by the phrase by categorising the Netanyahus as "Turkish". This answer leads us to suspect that Blum himself hears the echo of the Sheriff's association of himself with the Netanyahus, and makes this counter-association with Turkishness in order to repudiate it. This repudiation, however, goes deeper than a desire to disassociate himself from the Netanyahus in the Sheriff's mind – his mumbling of the claim to himself at the door takes on an almost incantatory quality, as if he is attempting to convince himself of the fundamental Otherness of the Netanyahus. Once again, as in the earlier description of Ben-Zion's "vaguely Mongol

[267] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 233.
[268] For some of the different ways Jews in America conceptualized 'peoplehood' in relation to race, see Goldstein.

features" there is an Orientalising of the Jewish Other, an attempt by Blum to make the Netanyahus not just a product of a different history, but of a different race entirely.

Intriguingly, Edward Said points out that this same sliding between Jews and Turks is also present in Proust,[269] a point which he makes in connection to a larger claim about the slippage of antisemitic tropes onto Islam, particularly following the 1973 Oil Crisis.[270] This builds on Said's much broader framing of Orientalism as a "strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism",[271] reflecting the way in which the semitic was linked with the Oriental in the European construction of the Aryan.[272] Said himself, of course, was an advocate for the Palestinian cause, and in *Orientalism* he critiques *Commentary* in particular for its continuation of a discourse that critiques Islam and Arabs for their anti-Jewish ideology and refusal to "settle down and accept Israeli hegemony over the Near East".[273] Blum's connection of the ultra-Zionist Ben-Zion with Turkishness is particularly provocative in this context, drawing as it does on an Oriental discourse to connect two groups – Zionists and Muslims – who were being split apart by 1960, and doing so by drawing on the much older elision of antisemitism and Orientalism which Said points to.

This desire to construct a racial boundary between Blum's family and the Netanyahu family suggests an attempt to reconstruct the kinds of boundaries around Jewishness that the last chapter saw broken down in Malamud's *The Assistant*, although this time the boundary is constructed within Jewishness itself.[274] A parallel with *The Assistant* can also be seen in the way sex is implicated in both boundary making and breaking. Arriving back at the house

[269] Said, 293. The quote Said uses is: "The Rumanians, the Egyptians, the Turks may hate the Jews. But in a French drawing-room the differences between those people are not so apparent, and an Israelite making his entry as though he were emerging from the heart of the desert, his body crouching like a hyaena's, his neck thrust obliquely forward, spreading himself in 'salaams,' completely satisfies a certain taste for the oriental" – Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 135.
[270] Said, 285-86.
[271] Said, 27.
[272] Said, 139-140 and 262.
[273] Said, 316. See also 26-27 and 307.
[274] There is a further irony here, as in Said the Oriental discourse itself emerged from a deep fear of "the destruction of the barriers that kept East and West from each other" – Said, 263.

following Ben-Zion's lecture, Blum and his wife find their daughter Judy having sex with the eldest Netanyahu son.[275] Blum's incantation of difference at the end can, therefore, be read as an attempt to escape the blending that this sexual act has implied, a moment which keeps returning to Blum in the physical architecture of the city: "[a] tangle of tinsel was blown through the air and into a full black holly shrub where it glittered like my daughter's bush, and there, above the steering wheel, the Stop sign was a breast".[276] On being discovered the Netanyahu son escapes out the house, with his pubic hair described as being a "dense coiled nest of jet-black hair".[277] That this is particularly noted by Blum in the rapid escape is significant, given that the description replicates a classic Jewish racial stereotype – dense, curly hair – which is also associated with African Americans (particularly once the adjective "jet-black" is included), while using a noun – "nest" – which suggests something both animalistic and faintly threatening.[278]

That this association occurs in the context of a sex scene that borders on an orgy – the middle Netanya son, Benjamin, appears to be watching his older brother – also raises another faint Black-Jewish overlap too easily obscured in the notion of Jewish 'whiteness': that of hyper, and even abnormal, levels of sexuality.[279] This same discourse of deviant sexuality is also present in the Orientalising of Jews,[280] and re-emerges in the reception of texts such as Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*.[281] The Zionist Other in *The Netanyahus* is, therefore, moving

[275] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 225-226.
[276] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 229.
[277] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 226.
[278] The cultural study of Black hair has become a key field in its own right in recent years. Recent works include Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *New Growth: The Art and Texture of Black Hair* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022) and Emma Dabiri, *Twisted: The Tangled History of Black Hair Culture* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2020).
[279] Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, 119-127. In this passage Gilman intriguingly raises the way in which Jewish circumcision has been linked to sexual deviance, a very different reading from the Boyarins' of the way in which circumcision interacts with the construction of difference.
[280] Freedman, 260. In contrast to stereotypes of Black hyper masculinity, the framing of Oriental and Jewish sexual deviance can at times shade into a near queerness – see Freedman, 118-125. The most notable example of Jewish stereotyping of Black sexuality and hyper-masculinity in the context of this thesis can be seen in Podhoretz, "My Negro Problem – and Ours," 97-98.
[281] Irving Howe's 1972 repudiation of Roth is on precisely the grounds that he felt *Portnoy's Complaint* confirmed "what had always been suspected about those immigrant Jews but had recently not been tactful to

here between Jewishness, Blackness, and Orientalism, suggesting once more the ambiguity of Jewishness in the American context. Equally significantly, it raises the dynamic of Zionist Jews themselves being used as a racialized Other by American Jews attempting to shore up their racial position and draw boundaries on their vulnerable flanks. This is a reversal of the usual understanding, in which Israel is seen as playing a key role in a more assertive Jewish identity after the 1967 war,[282] and suggests provocative alternative ways to examine the relationship of Zionism and American Jewry in this period.

The linkage with African Americans is made more explicit when the two eldest Netanyahu boys, having fled the house and wandered the streets, are found in the town's African American area, described by Blum as "a miniature version of the inmost Bronx" with "black faces look[ing] down in fright".[283] It is left unsaid by Cohen that the Bronx was the site in the 1960s of a transition from having a large Jewish population to becoming a predominantly African American neighbourhood,[284] although much earlier in the novel he does allude to this shift.[285] The fact the Netanyahus are ultimately left by the novel in this miniature Bronx can be understood as a symbolic alignment of the family with Blackness: the scene is a replication of the flight of assimilated Jews to the suburbs, a flight which left the city to the ultimate American Other – the African American – who the unassimilated, and therefore also Other, Netanyahu family are now a symbolic part of.

This final alignment is ironic given the very different status of Zionist Jews as the racially dominant group in Israel, and suggests the novel is playing not only with the well-worn trope of Jewish assimilation, but also with the complex relationship of African

say" in Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," *Commentary* 54, no. 6 (December 1972): 76. Also see Franco, *Race, Rights, and Recognition*, 39-46 for the complex Black-white racial politics underpinning the sex in *Portnoy's Complaint* – exploring this further, particularly beyond the Black-white binary, and putting it into conversation with Cohen's *The Netanyahus* would be a rewarding avenue of study.

[282] For a recent restatement of that theory see Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 150-172.

[283] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 231.

[284] Evelyn Gonzalez, *The Bronx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 109-117.

[285] Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 37-40.

Americans with Zionism. As Sundquist argued in his 2005 study of the Black-Jewish relationship in America, *Strangers in the Land*, Israel served for African Americans as both a source of inspiration in their own struggle for a national homeland and as an apparent continuation of a European colonial project that was oppressing Arabs and Palestinians in ways similar to the ongoing oppression of Black Africans.[286] Particularly after the Six Day War in 1967, the Palestinian struggle became reframed as an anti-colonial project at the same moment that a discourse of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism was reshaping African American understandings of their own quasi-colonial position.[287] It is this that forms the background to the Jewish exclusion from the framework of post-colonial theory that I outlined in my first chapter. My reading of Cohen using the tools of post-colonial theory reflects my resistance to this exclusion, and builds on the Boyarins' suggestion that Jewish diasporic identity offers the space for a different conception of Jewishness. As I argued in my previous chapter, however, Cohen's novel also disrupts the division between the diaspora and Israel that is critical to the Boyarins' argument. In my final section I offer a reading of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* that suggests he too resists any clear sense that Jewish diasporic identity can be straightforwardly separated from the broader streams of Jewish history.

In *The Counterlife*, his 1987 novel, Roth offers a compelling engagement with the question of Jewish Otherness. *The Counterlife* marks a turning point in Roth's career, away from the character of Zuckerman towards the self, a shift that also underpins *The Facts*.[288] That *The Facts* and *The Counterlife* were published only two years apart suggests that Roth's concerns

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[286] Sundquist, 7-8. Beyond Sundquist's study, and works by Goffman, Budick, and Dollinger already mentioned, there is a wide literature on Black-Jewish relations in America. Other key texts worth drawing attention to are Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977) and Adam Newton, *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[287] Sundquist, 319-342.
[288] *The Facts* includes an opening letter to Zuckerman and a closing epilogue by Zuckerman, complicating any straightforward reading of the text as autobiographical – Roth, *The Facts*, 3-10 and 161-195.

in his autobiography were also present in his earlier novel, making this another useful way to touch on issues raised in my opening chapter. The novel also reflects a renewed attention to issues of formal postmodernism – the novel plays with the text as construct, with each section of the novel presenting a different version of a set of overlapping stories – and to issues of Jewishness, always present in Roth's work but now given a central position as the object of inquiry.[289] I want to open here by focusing on the character of Nathan Zuckerman's brother Henry, who, in the sections of the novel titled "Judea" and "Aloft",[290] has travelled to Israel to join a community led by the ultra-Zionist Settler Mordecai Lippman. Desire for Jewishness plays a crucial and explicit role in Henry's decision, a decision that Nathan – strikingly, given the argument of my previous chapter – describes as a "conversion".[291]

This desire is generated when, following an operation, Henry, a dentist in Newark, goes to Israel for a holiday, and while there hears children in an Orthodox cheder reciting their lessons. This experience is related by Henry in terms reminiscent of falling in love: he recalls that he was "sitting on the stone sill of this broken-down old cheder" and on hearing the children's Hebrew feels "as though something I didn't even know I was searching for was suddenly reaching out for me". As in Roth's much earlier "Defender of the Faith", desire operates as a physical feeling, something that 'reaches out'. Henry is explicit that there is nothing *sexual* about this love, that in the area near the school "I looked for a pretty woman and I couldn't find *one*",[292] but that what draws him in are the simple signs of Jewishness, the "Orthodox men in those hats and coats going in to get their hair cut […] [o]nly a barbershop, yet I couldn't move". Driven by this feeling, Henry purchases a "challah", which becomes an

[289] For all of these turns see Derek Parker Royal, "Postmodern Jewish Identity in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 2 (2002): 422-424.
[290] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 54-185. Roth leaves the precise relation between "Judea" and "Aloft" murky – I read them here as linked, as Henry's story is integrated across them, but see Royal, 425-436 for a reading of the textual complexities.
[291] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 66.
[292] Sexual incontinence was the original cause of the operation that ultimately sends Henry to Israel, suggesting again the way in which the desire for Jewishness is wrapped up with sexual desire in interesting formations.

object imbued with special resonance for him, "as though it were a piece of sculpture, something precious I'd stolen from a museum". Ultimately, he comes to the realisation that "I am not *just* a Jew, I'm not *also* a Jew – *I'm a Jew as deep as those Jews*. Everything else *is* nothing".[293] Just as in "Defender of the Faith", Roth here has Henry confront his Jewishness through a near-sensual encounter with the signifiers of Jewishness: Hebrew, traditional Orthodox dress, and a challah.[294] As in "Defender of the Faith", however, the realisation of an inner Jewish essence is used to launch a more challenging question: what does Jewishness mean beyond these external signifiers?

In a letter written to Henry, on his way out of visiting him in Israel, Nathan makes the paradoxical case that the Zionist project is actually concerned with the negation of Jewishness as articulated for much of Jewish history, that it is the ultra-Zionists following Lippman "who are really ashamed of Jewish history, who cannot abide what Jews have been, are embarrassed by what they've become".[295] In Nathan's argument the Zionist project becomes "a species of fabulous utopianism, a manifesto for human transformation as extreme – and, at the outside, as implausible – as any ever conceived. A Jew could be a new person if he wanted to". This leads Nathan to suggest that the initial popularity of Zionism was because "[a]ll over the world people were rooting for Jews to go ahead and un-Jew themselves in their own little homeland […] no more Jewy Jews, great!".[296] This idea also lies behind a half-serious, half-satiric proposal made by one of Nathan's fellow passengers, that Jews must stop remembering the Holocaust, must "Forget Remembering!", because the "[t]he key to Israel's survival is" to stop remembrance in order to become a country like any other. The core of this proposal is that Jews must suffer "*the loss of our suffering*", that they must shout "No more

[293] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 64-65. Italics are all in the original.
[294] The text offers more Jewish signifiers in a densely packed two pages.
[295] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 149-150.
[296] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 151.

Jewish suffering! An end to Jewish victims!".[297] This formulation is placed into the mouth of a character the reader does not take seriously, but it points to something crucial that Roth sees in the Zionist project – the repudiation of the very thing that Malamud offers as the core of Jewishness: suffering.

In contrast to this repudiation of the history of Jewish suffering, Nathan offers, in the novel's final section, a vision of Jewishness as neither a negation of diasporic history, in the Zionist mould, or a pull towards empty signifiers, as in Henry's Jewish infatuation, but instead: "[a] Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple".[298] An apple, we might reflect, can be an entirely meaningless daily object or one loaded with such meaning that it becomes the source of sin itself – in short, it carries the meanings we give it. Contrary to many readings of Roth's view of identity in *The Counterlife* as being purely performative,[299] however, it is not that Roth is here suggesting that *anyone* or *anything* can be Jewish. After all, as Nathan reflects a few pages earlier, "she [his wife] came from somewhere and so did I" and "[w]e couldn't just be 'us' and say the hell with 'them' any more than we could say to hell with the twentieth century".[300] History is real, and it is history that structures our desires, that shapes the *way* in which an identity will attract or repel us. That is why Nathan is upset when his wife accuses him of tribalism in clinging to Jewishness, ignoring the fact that she herself is drawn to an English identity no less a product of her historical circumstance.[301] It is also why he can acknowledge that in their dispute they are simply:

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[297] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 169-171. Italics in the original.
[298] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 328.
[299] See, for example, Josh Cohen, "Roth's Doubles," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 87-91.
[300] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 312.
[301] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 305.

> surrogates for real antagonists whose conflict is never rooted in the here and now but sometimes originates so far back that all that remains of the grandparents' values are the newlyweds' ugly words. Virginal they may wish to be, but the worm in the dream is always the past, that impediment to all renewal.[302]

The worm of history, we can surmise, is also in Roth's Jewish "apple".

In the novel's final section, Nathan's desire for Jewishness is stimulated by his move to England to be with his wife, a situation in which he is "[a] Jew among gentiles", "reactivat[ing] the strong sense of difference that had all but atrophied in New York".[303] The form in which this desire takes is for his unborn son to be circumcised, a desire to make clear which history his son will be part of: "[c]ircumcision makes it clear as can be that you are here and not there, that you are out and not in – also that you're mine and not theirs. There is no way around it: you enter history through my history and me".[304] In a reversal of Malamud's formulation in *The Assistant*, circumcision becomes not the symbol of a Jewish transformation that has already happened, but the very means of entry into a Jewish identity that emerges from a historically-contingent desire. Like Malamud, however, Roth recognises that 'the Jew' is made rather than discovered, that it is only from our desires that we generate our identity. In Roth's final formulation in *The Counterlife*, our fantasies construct 'the Jew', but our fantasies emerge from a history in which 'the Jew' has already been constructed for us – identity is inescapable and entirely invented at the same time.

Across the three works surveyed in this chapter Jewishness has emerged as caught up in a series of histories: Zionist, assimilating, Black, Oriental, antisemitic. These histories emerge

[302] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 314.
[303] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 328.
[304] Roth, *The Counterlife*, 327.

through a set of Jewish Others who place Jewishness into dialogue with the broader questions of race and identity that I have been investigating throughout. That Jewishness can appear as both Black *and* white, diasporic *and* nationalistic, Oriental *and* Western, helps to explain why it operates as such a powerful locus of desire not only in the texts which investigate those ambiguities, but in the critical reception of them that structures the field of Jewish American studies. Jewish Otherness is a particularly fertile way of exploring these complexities because of the way in which it simultaneously troubles the boundaries of Jewishness and reinscribes the desire that gives Jewishness its ontological force, pointing to the racial ambiguities at the heart of not just Jewishness but multiculturalism itself.

Conclusion

I have been arguing throughout this thesis for the value of a focus on a 'desire for Jewish identity' as a way to move away from two pervading critical trends in the study of post-war Jewish American fiction. The first of these trends reads Jewishness through the lens of a Jewish move into whiteness, an approach that both reifies a Black-white binary as the key framework for race in America and closes off alternative readings of the racial inflection of Jewishness, such as Jewish orientalism or Hasidic Otherness. The second trend emerges from the underpinning of the field of Jewish American studies itself, which takes Jewishness for granted as a unified and coherent category which can be located through the study of a corpus of canonical texts already identified as Jewish. Against this dominant approach I argue for moving away from a critical practice that begins with the prior category of 'identity' to one that places an analysis of the 'desire for identity' at the centre of its critical project. Doing so has allowed me to offer new ways of reading identity as conceptualized in multiculturalism, as well as uncovered innovative approaches for thinking about the operation of Jewish racial identity in the work of Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Joshua Cohen.

These innovations arise from, and contribute to, the broader argument of this thesis for problematising the multicultural notion of identity in relation to race. Drawing on the work of Walter Benn Michaels, Michael Kramer, and Christopher Douglas, I have argued that multiculturalism involves an essentialising discourse on race that Jewishness can help to open up to critical analysis. My second chapter laid the groundwork for this project by providing a brief genealogy of identity in relation to a number of works by African American and Jewish American intellectuals and writers during the 1950s and 1960s, in particular Ralph Ellison and Philip Roth. My opening chapter acted in concert with this historical overview by providing a theoretical grounding to my concept of 'desire for Jewishness', drawing on both affect theory, in particular the work of Lauren Berlant and Brian Massumi,

and the ideas of post-colonial theorists, including Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Edward Said.

In my third and fourth chapters I have put this critical framework to work by exploring how the affective desire for Jewishness operates in my chosen texts. I organised these readings around the twin themes of Jewish conversion and Jewish Otherness as a way to showcase how examining these works through the lens of desire offers new ways of understanding the relations between identity and race. In doing so, I have delivered on my central goal of displacing the focus of critical inquiry onto the desire *for* identity, rather than identity itself, as well as offered a critique of the way in which the field of Jewish American studies reinscribes racialised Jewish identity into its objects of inquiry.

This thesis represents only the beginning, however, of a much larger project. The two key themes of conversion and Jewish Otherness around which I have organised my close readings are just two ways into the possibilities of an approach grounded in the desire for Jewish identity. Additional areas that would benefit from further study include more detailed attention to questions of gender and sexuality, a fuller drawing out of the fraught relationship of Jewishness with modernity and the Shoah, and a deeper consideration of the crossings of Jewish racial Otherness with that of racial groups beyond African Americans, in particular Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans.[305] In addition, a wider selection of texts would allow me to more comprehensively unpack the discourse of multiculturalism which is the focus of my second chapter and which stands in the background of much of my critique. This could be usefully approached both through an examination of further texts from the 1950s and 1960s, as well as by bringing in additional fictional works which critically reflect on the period and the major questions raised by the development of multiculturalism, continuing the

[305] Jonathan Freedman has begun to think about these interesting racial and sexual overlaps in *Klezmer America*, but much more work remains to be done to bring out the ambiguities.

approach of analyzing the representation of key tropes which I began through my reading of Cohen's *The Netanyahus*. Considering a broader range of work from the authors I have covered would also allow me to expand my argument in relation to their thinking, as well as introducing interesting new dynamics, for example through the notion of passing in Roth's *The Human Stain*.[306]

The analysis I have already conducted, however, provides a firm foundation for this further work and offers a case study of how such a project could contribute to a much wider debate about race and identity when examined through the generative category of Jewishness. Particularly in the American context, these questions of race and identity continue to be central not only to literary production and scholarly reception, but shape contemporary institutional arrangements, the framework of political debates, and the possibilities of personal life. It is the essential role of the critic to investigate such structuring discourses and to examine their key terms, and this thesis is therefore offered as an intervention that points beyond identity as the horizon of discursive possibility in the twenty-first century.

[306] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

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