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Making Sense of America's Post-War Racial Landscape: the "Desire for Jewishness" in Philip Roth

Nicolas Turner

"It's a hard thing to be a Jew . . . it's a harder thing to stay one."

Philip Roth, "Defender of the Faith" (1959)

In this article, I explore the moment in the 1950s and 1960s which produced "identity" in the sense we understand it today, and the tensions and ambiguities that trouble that sense. In particular, I use Jewishness to re-examine the assumptions of the multicultural discourse—around race, culture, and memory—that underpins this sense of identity. I undertake this investigation through an exploration of two of Philip Roth's short stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* and a section of his semi-autobiographical *The Facts*, examining how the category of Jewishness functions as an object of "desire" in these works. I argue that an analysis of the "desire for Jewishness" in Roth offers a case study of how this desire operates more broadly in simultaneously constructing Jewish identity and underpinning the field of Jewish American studies. I examine this desire through two lenses which represent ways in which it has been reified: nostalgia and primitivism. Drawing on the conceptual work of Svetlana Boym and Samuel Spinner to provide a theoretical grounding for these lenses,¹ I close read my key texts to

¹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*; Spinner, *Jewish Primitivism*.

understand how this “desire for Jewishness” is embodied and problematized in them.²

Roth's 1959 work “Defender of the Faith” provides a launching-off point to discuss identity in relation to shifting ideas of Jewishness. In this opening section, I place Roth into dialogue with the African American author Ralph Ellison, offering a genealogical overview of their differing conceptions of identity in relation to the development of cultural nationalism in the 1960s and re-examining Roth's ambiguous position with regard to that development. I then examine Roth's short story “Eli, the Fanatic,” demonstrating how a nostalgia expressed as “Jewish primitivism”—Spinner's notion that modernizing European Jews exhibited a unique form of primitivism toward Yiddish-speaking Eastern Jews—complicates ideas of Jewish racial identity.³

While Roth is the key author I investigate in this article, I place him into a broader history of identity and situate him in a wider debate on multiculturalism and race. In doing so, I challenge the ways in which contemporary critical readings of canonical Jewish American works perform the very “desire for Jewishness” dramatized in the texts I analyze. In contrast to this dominant approach, I suggest a shift in focus to how “the Jew” operates as a historicized, unified, and bounded racial subject around which the field of Jewish American studies is constructed.⁴ This suggestion stands behind my broader argument that the field of Jewish American studies move 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 center of its critical project. This article ultimately argues that an approach grounded in the analysis of this desire for identity, rather than in identity itself, offers a new way to unpack the complex relations of race and culture at the center of the

² This is part of a broader project of analyzing various forms of “desire for Jewishness,” of which nostalgia is just one expression and Roth just one example. For another reading of nostalgia in post-war fiction, see Turner, “The Uses and Misuses of Nostalgia,” forthcoming.

³ *Jewish Primitivism*, 1–4.

⁴ As I outline below, I am indebted to Schreier for this framing, particularly his works *The Impossible Jew* and *The Rise and Fall of Jewish American Literature*, the latter of which traces the history of the field of Jewish American studies.

multicultural discourse of identity developed by the movements for racial and ethnic recognition of the 1960s.⁵

Nostalgia, Identity, and the Spectre of Race in Ralph Ellison and Philip Roth

My reading of Philip Roth's 1959 short story "Defender of the Faith" offers an example of how privileging an analysis of "desire" helps uncover the constructed nature of the category of Jewishness, as well as showcasing how nostalgia can offer a route into understanding how that desire is operationalized. The story's protagonist, Sergeant Nathan Marx, has been redeployed, following American victory in Europe in 1945, to a training camp in Missouri, where 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 one Jew owes to another, the story explores various potential grounds for Jewish identity: the story's title places "faith" at its center, and it is on religious grounds that Sheldon begins his appeal to Nathan, arguing that "this is a matter of religion, sir."⁶ The story also suggests, however, that Jewishness is a subjective position that one can move into 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 At another moment, it seems that identity comes down to a question of ancestry, that, as Sheldon claims, "Blood is blood, Sergeant."⁸ Finally, and crucially, Nathan's own Jewish feelings are most aroused by nostalgia:⁹ hearing a Shabbat service across the parade ground, Nathan feels that "memory plunged down through all I had anesthetized, and came to what I suddenly *remembered was myself*."¹⁰ Remembering himself, Nathan finds his true self to be Jewish—an identity that only clearly emerges in the tension over its ontological grounding.

⁵ For an overview of that historical shift see Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, 184–219.

⁶ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 125.

⁷ *Id.*, 142, emphasis mine.

⁸ *Id.*, 137.

⁹ The association between arousal and desire in my word choice is a deliberate one.

¹⁰ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 129, emphasis mine.

Nostalgia is crucial for the construction of this meaning because of its affective power, which Nathan experiences “as though a hand were reaching down inside me”¹¹—as something physical, sensual, and external in origin. Nostalgia has been increasingly theorized in recent years,¹² most relevantly for my analysis in the work of Svetlana Boym, who posits two nostalgic modes: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia.¹³ The former “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” through the development of “invented traditions,”¹⁴ while the latter “is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude.”¹⁵ For Boym, reflective nostalgia is also a kind of “creative nostalgia,” which “reveals the fantasies of the age [...so that] one is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been.”¹⁶ Both forms of nostalgia can be related to notions of identity—restorative nostalgia, for example, builds on what Boym calls “cultural intimacy,” the “everyday games of hide-and-seek that only ‘natives’ play, unwritten rules of behavior, jokes understood for half a word, a sense of complicity,” but simplifies this “sense of play . . . to a single plot,” often a nationalist myth of a “return home.”¹⁷ Restorative nostalgia ultimately builds identity by drawing on a straightforward narrative that combines otherwise disparate cultural practices and gives them a single sense of meaning. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, reveals “the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or . . . gentrified beyond recognition.” This gap creates a longing, a feeling closely related to desire, that drives people to “narrate the relationship between past, present and future.”¹⁸ Reflective nostalgia

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² As well as Boym’s work, relevant recent studies include Fritzsche, “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity”; Wilson, *Nostalgia*; Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*; Bonnet, *The Geography of Nostalgia*; and Łaskiewicz, Maszewski, and Partyka (eds.), *Dwelling in Days Foregone*.

¹³ *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 41–2.

¹⁵ *Id.*, 49.

¹⁶ *Id.*, 351.

¹⁷ *Id.*, 42–4.

¹⁸ *Id.*, 50.

highlights identity's paradoxes, as well as the sense of over- and underdetermination, the simultaneous importance and indefinability, accompanying any attempt to make identity make sense.

This kind of reflective nostalgia operates in "Defender of the Faith" through the story's play with temporality and Roth's use of the trope of "home." The story as a whole is narrated retrospectively from an unnamed future, creating a sense of distance that allows the narrator to reflect on the events described. Within this recollection, however, still earlier memories break the narrative distance. The most notable of these breaks occurs when Nathan hears the Shabbat service across the parade ground, a sensory experience which prompts him to remember "the childhood sounds of a Bronx playground where, years ago, beside the Grand Concourse, I played on long spring evenings such as this."¹⁹ A memory that immediately proceeds his feeling of returning to himself. The relationship between a longing for home and identity reoccurs in a section where Sheldon convinces Nathan to give him a pass to leave camp and attend his aunt's Seder meal.²⁰ Sheldon draws again on the lure of his and Nathan's shared Jewish heritage in a dialogue replete with references to traditional Ashkenazi foods like *gefilte fish* and *kugel*. Ultimately, however, Sheldon goes for Chinese food instead of attending the Seder—a failed homecoming, albeit one that plays with the Jewish association with Chinese food.²¹ Nathan's childhood memory similarly does not straightforwardly allow him to connect to a nostalgic Jewishness: it is framed against Nathan's more recent past liberating Europe, overshadowed by the unnamed horror of the Shoah—the ultimate loss of home, and imposition of essentialized identity, for its victims.²² The reflective and complex nature of Nathan's nostalgia means that, as Boym would put it, it "does not signify a recovery of identity."²³ Instead, it raises identity as an issue for Nathan, with Nathan's sympathies switching between association

¹⁹ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 129.

²⁰ *Id.*, 140–7.

²¹ For the origins of this association and its meanings see Miller, "Identity Takeout."

²² Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 129.

²³ *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

with and distance from Jewishness. In this dynamic, the lure of Jewishness constantly pulls and repels the protagonist (and the reader) without fully resolving the ambiguities the story opens up.

My reading of Roth, however, does not simply engage with Jewishness as a locus of attraction. Instead, it is intended to problematize the concept of identity itself, revealing Roth's complex relationship with the foundational tenants of multiculturalism. An incident during Roth's appearance on a panel at Yeshiva University to discuss "The Crisis of Conscience in Minority Writers of Fiction" in 1962, shortly after the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, offers a way into this discussion.²⁴ In *The Facts*, Roth recounts how he was heavily criticized by the panel chair and audience on the basis of their view that his work presented Jews in a negative light.²⁵ With Roth wilting under the audience's verbal assault, his fellow panelist Ralph Ellison stepped in and, in Roth's words, advanced a position "virtually identical to mine" but with "examples drawn from *Invisible Man* and the ambiguous relationship that novel had established with some vocal members of his own race."²⁶ Ellison was, in 1962, one of America's foremost writers, having won the 1953 National Book Award for his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, and was a well-known public intellectual on both racial and literary questions.

I want to pause on Roth's claim that he and Ellison shared "virtually identical" positions. *Invisible Man*, published ten years earlier, has been read by the literary scholar Jonathan Arac as marking "the cultural high point of the movement in U.S. life signified by the term *Integration*," an idea central to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s but which, by 1962, was about to come under serious assault from the movement for cultural and racial separatism that would become known as "Black Power." In Arac's formulation, "on behalf of an ideal of integration, Ellison resisted what we have come to call 'identity politics,'" although this "resistance to identity politics did not prevent [Ellison] from

²⁴ The reception of *Goodbye, Columbus* is summarized in Nadel, "The Early Years," 63-5.

²⁵ Roth, *The Facts*, 125-129. In Roth's retelling, the chair opened by asking "would you write the same stories you've written if you were living in Nazi Germany?" (*The Facts*, 127), an incident later reused in Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 102.

²⁶ *The Facts*, 128.

affirming, and exploring, an American identity.”²⁷ This affirmation can be seen in the famous moment toward the end of *Invisible Man* where the protagonist rejects various models for African American life because of their “confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of *their American identity and mine*.”²⁸ As Arac argues, this appeal to “American identity” was founded in Ellison’s deep commitment “to the idea of America. Like Martin Luther King Jr., [Ellison] summoned the actually existing United States to transform itself in accord with its own stated principles of human equality.”²⁹ In this reading, the project with which Roth claims to be aligned in *The Facts*—his “virtually identical” position—privileges an American identity over a separate group identity, grounding itself in a reading of the United States as a source of positive values, even if those values are unrealized. This project can be understood as a version of Boym’s restorative nostalgia—with the master narrative of “American values,” as embodied in the Founders’ ideals, guiding the reconstructive project advocated for by the integrationists.

This project of aligning “America” and “universal values” was similar to that advocated by the group of post-war (Jewish) writers, critics, and social scientists known as the “New York Intellectuals,” with whom Roth was friendly and is still sometimes loosely associated.³⁰ In the 1950s and early 1960s, these intellectuals felt no need to speak “as Jews” and instead aligned themselves with America as the embodiment of universal human values.³¹ For Black intellectuals in the 1960s such as James Baldwin, who critiqued the integrationist position of earlier writers like Ellison, the stance of the New York Intellectuals on universalism made them nothing more

²⁷ “Toward a Critical Genealogy,” 204–5.

²⁸ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 422, emphasis mine.

²⁹ “Toward a Critical Genealogy,” 205.

³⁰ Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*, 6. My ‘Jewish’ in parenthesis is exactly the kind of default reading of Jewishness into authors that I am critiquing, but I leave it here to make the sense of my argument clear.

³¹ Budick—in *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation*, 32–41—suggests that being able to speak *as an American* rather than only *as an African American* was precisely what Ellison was arguing for.

than avatars of the dominant white discourse.³² Ellison, in contrast, wanted to characterize mainstream America not as “white” but as being involved in “a two-way process of interpenetration and influence” with African American culture.³³ It was precisely this commitment to a notion of a single, culturally hybrid “*American culture*,” as opposed to a plurality of non-hierarchized but fundamentally different cultures, that was attacked by the cultural nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s who would come to define the principles of multiculturalism.³⁴ A reader might, therefore, expect Roth to emerge from his Yeshiva University encounter with a renewed commitment to American identity, the very position his allies among the New York Intellectuals were advancing and to which Ellison was committed. Here, however, is how he actually ends his account of the Yeshiva incident in *The Facts*: “the most bruising public exchange of my life constituted not the end of my imagination’s involvement with Jews . . . but the real beginning of my thralldom”³⁵—indeed, he goes so far as to say that “I was branded.”³⁶

“Thralldom” and “branded” both provocatively draw on the language of slavery, implying that Roth’s future writings about Jewishness represented not a free choice but a compulsion, something he could not *but* return to. Sweep away the Rothian self-mythologizing for a moment—the idea that it was only because he was attacked *by* Jews that he wrote *about* Jews—and it becomes possible to see the hidden kernel of desire for Jewishness underlying Roth’s choice of words. Desire, after all, is kind of compulsion if not a form of enslavement: a person cannot choose *what* they desire, and, as an affective state, it pushes them to do things they may not otherwise want to do.³⁷ Why, then, does Jewishness end up being the

³² See, for example, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” 3-12.

³³ Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, 124.

³⁴ *Id.*, 184-219.

³⁵ Roth, *The Facts*, 129.

³⁶ *Id.*, 130.

³⁷ For ‘desire’ as an affective state see Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 5-18. Particularly relevant to my analysis is Berlant’s claim, on 6, that “[d]esire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated

object of Roth's desire, a desire powerful enough to sustain not only a career but a wide readership? What is it about Jewishness that compels Roth as a writer and which attracts us as his readers?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to turn to the work of the literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels and his unpacking of the contemporary notion of identity. In a seminal 1992 piece,³⁸ later developed in *Our America* and *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels attacks the multiculturalist claim that identity is grounded in a performative notion of culture, embodied in "what you do." Michaels argues instead that for multiculturalism's claims to make sense, this "culture" must be understood as ultimately reducible to biological race.³⁹ Given "pluralism's programmatic hostility to universalism," he writes, pluralists instead have to justify particular practices "by appeals to what seems locally good or true."⁴⁰ This means that the question of *who* we are must, for the cultural pluralist, remain prior to questions about *what* our cultural practices should be, since "it is only once we know who we are that we will be able to tell what we should do."⁴¹ Yet the source of "who we are" cannot be the cultural practices themselves, as that would create a system of circular logic, so there needs to be something outside culture that creates the basis for a cultural practice to be ours or not—that something is race.⁴² Michael Kramer has advanced a similar argument in the Jewish context, suggesting that Jewish literature be defined as literature produced by "a member of the Jewish race" since any other definition forces us into the "daunting and dubious task of deciding the validity of the various kinds, amounts, and qualities of Jewishness."⁴³ A biological conception of race, therefore, becomes the central paradigm for understanding identity, even if

by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it."

³⁸ "Race into Culture."

³⁹ *Id.*, 680-5.

⁴⁰ Michaels, *Our America*, 14.

⁴¹ *Id.*, 15.

⁴² *Id.*, 14-5. Michaels leaves slightly up for debate the question of whether this *needs* to be race or could, at least theoretically, be something else.

⁴³ "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish' Question," 290.

that foundation in race is suppressed by the multiculturalist advocates of identity who must ultimately rely on it.

Benjamin Schreier's *The Impossible Jew*, a starting point for my own project, picks up on this point and expands it to the very construction of the field of Jewish American studies as a whole. In his work, Schreier calls for a move away from "anchoring Jewish literary study . . . in a presumptive positive, nationalistic entity identifiable as 'The Jew'"⁴⁴ and toward "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."⁴⁵ For Schreier, this shift would privilege an "analysis of the way texts render *Jewishness as an attractor or focus*, of how texts deconstruct the givenness of Jewish identity."⁴⁶ In Schreier's approach, Jewishness becomes not a secure category that critics simply seek to identify in a corpus of texts but something which those texts themselves construct, in dialogue with the reader, from the nexus of race and desire at the heart of contemporary identity.

Through this brief genealogy of identity, Roth is readable as engaged in a project that emerges from within a multiculturalist discourse—centered on "the Jew" rather than "the American"—and, therefore, as not at all "identical" to Ellison's. Already in "Defender of the Faith," however, Roth undermines the role of race in that multicultural discourse, suggesting that "blood" is not a sufficient, or even necessary, basis for Jewish identity. Instead, he puts forward various alternative bases for Jewish identity, nostalgia being the most important, without settling on any one. Following the lead of Michaels and Schreier, critics of Jewish American literature must stop seeking a hidden kernel of Jewish identity, an overdetermined racial object at the heart of multiculturalism, and instead analyze the desire *for* such an object. While my argument leads to the conclusion that Roth is a multiculturalist before multiculturalism—more like Baldwin than Ellison—it also suggests that Roth offers his readers the tools to deconstruct the myths of multiculturalism: Roth

⁴⁴ *The Impossible Jew*, 56.

⁴⁵ *Id.*, 48.

⁴⁶ *Id.*, 56, emphasis mine.

emerges as a proto-multiculturalist undermining multiculturalism's foundational tenets at the moment of its birth.

Blackness, Whiteness, and Primitivist Desire in Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic"

While in "Defender of the Faith" the "desire for Jewishness" is expressed through nostalgia, in "Eli, the Fanatic," another of the stories collected in *Goodbye, Columbus*, the desire asserts itself in the more racially ambivalent form of primitivism. 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.⁴⁷ Eli Peck, the central character, is a lawyer tasked by Woodenton's secular leaders with securing this removal, in the course of which he is forced to confront his own Jewishness. As with *Goodbye, Columbus* as a whole, the prevailing critical approach is to read "Eli, the Fanatic" through the lens of Jewish assimilation (and its discomforts), a reading that perpetuates two assumptions I want to push against here.⁴⁸ First, it presumes a positioning of Jewishness as a predefined object that can then be tracked against its relationship to the American mainstream; second, it has increasingly become aligned in recent scholarship with an idea of a Jewish move into "whiteness,"⁴⁹ an approach that has tended to close off the space for more nuanced and suggestive readings of Jewish racial identity.⁵⁰ Instead of relying on this received narrative, therefore, I want to examine "Eli, the Fanatic" for what Dean Franco, one of Roth's most perceptive contemporary critics, has described as the "racialized identities, social race, and the gravity of

⁴⁷ Two recent articles have linked the origins of the story to a real-life incident in Mount Kisco, New York. See Levinson, "Roth in the Archives," and Fink "Fact, Fiction, and History in Philip Roth's 'Eli, the Fanatic'."

⁴⁸ An exemplar of this reading can be found in Aarons, "American-Jewish identity in Roth's short fiction," 14-21. See Schreier, "The Failure of Identity," 110 for this argument's function as part of a broader nationalist project.

⁴⁹ Works in this vein include Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, and Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*.

⁵⁰ For works that start to push toward these more nuanced readings see Freedman, *Klezmer America*, and Kun, "Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos."

public assumptions about race [that] are central to Roth's tales of maturation, acculturation, and postmodern escape (and return)."⁵¹

"Eli, the Fanatic" plays throughout with whiteness and Blackness as key tropes. The opening line of the story has Leo Tzoref, the Yeshiva's principal, step "out from back of a *white* column to welcome Eli Peck"; shortly afterward, Eli is momentarily confused by Leo's skullcap, thinking that the "black circle on the back of his head" means "[t]he crown of his head [is] missing."⁵² As Brett Kaplan has pointed out in her own analysis of "Eli, the Fanatic," Blackness in this opening passage is immediately associated with strangeness, absence, and anxiety.⁵³ The complaints of the secular Jews of Woodenton 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."⁵⁴ The first appearance of this Hasid in the story associates blackness with absence: "Eli saw him. At first it seemed only a deep hollow of blackness—then the figure emerged."⁵⁵

It becomes clear that both Tzoref and this other adult, along with the Yeshiva's eighteen children, are all refugees from Europe and, by extension, victims of the Shoah (although, as in "Defender of the Faith," the term is never explicitly used). The second Hasid, who is unnamed, is most explicitly linked to the genocide during a diatribe from Tzoref, who tells Eli that this second figure 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 Tzoref's Yiddish, "*Gornisht*."⁵⁶ The absence that Eli perceives when first seeing the second figure, as well as the hint of medical brutality in his confusion

⁵¹ "Introduction," 83.

⁵² Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 187, my emphasis.

⁵³ *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth*, 23. Kaplan's focus is more on Jewish anxiety about simultaneously being victims and potential perpetrators of racial violence, but her reading raises intriguing questions which I have picked up in my own analysis.

⁵⁴ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 190.

⁵⁵ *Id.*, 189–90.

⁵⁶ *Id.*, 197, italics in the original.

over Tzoref's skullcap, is therefore eerily accurate—Nazi victimization has indeed left these Jews with *gornisht*. Although as Tzoref 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.⁵⁷

In the American context, unlike under the Nazi regime, it is not Jews but African Americans who serve as the ultimate racialized other.⁵⁸ “Eli, the Fanatic” only briefly features “[a] Negro woman, spreading some strange gospel,”⁵⁹ but the constant association of Hasidim with blackness in the story links the two groups.⁶⁰ 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,”⁶¹ 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 color of blackness,” and wearing them later, he feels “the black clothes as if they were the skin of his skin.”⁶² The deliberate eliding of 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 racialization 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!).”⁶³ Here is the drama of post-war Jewish racial transformation in fast-forward: from a racial Otherness associated with Blackness to a whiteness almost whiter,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land*, 3.

⁵⁹ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 211.

⁶⁰ Kaplan, *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth*, 25–6.

⁶¹ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 193.

⁶² *Id.*, 217.

⁶³ *Id.*, 211–2.

and therefore more suspect, than, in Karen Brodtkin's phrase, the "white folk."⁶⁴

Roth, however, has a more complicated view of Jewish racial identity than that offered by the clichéd story of Jewish assimilation. This complexity can be accessed through the notion of "Jewish primitivism," an idea I take from the work of Samuel Spinner.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ He argues that the unique position of European Jews in this period opened up a space to undermine the traditional dichotomy inherent in primitivism, as expressed in European modernism, between a distinctly "other" primitive object and a civilized European subject.⁶⁷ Jews, as both "plausibly primitive but also plausibly European," troubled this distinction.⁶⁸ 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."⁶⁹ Given this quite specific context to Spinner's notion of "Jewish primitivism," I do not 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.⁷⁰ 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 describes it, "Jewish primitivism was a product of the effort to create and consolidate identity and nationhood through Jewish culture" by secularized Jews focusing on an object, the "savage Jew," which both appeared different and simultaneously

⁶⁴ As per her book, *How Jews Became White Folks*.

⁶⁵ *Jewish Primitivism*.

⁶⁶ *Id.*, 17-9.

⁶⁷ *Id.*, 1. Spinner's own key interlocuter in this argument is Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*.

⁶⁸ *Id.*, 9-10.

⁶⁹ *Id.*, 2.

⁷⁰ *Id.*, 170-7. 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.

insisted on similitude.⁷¹ 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 “critique the distinction . . . between subject and object,” allowing them “to be both at once—European and foreign, subject and object, savage and civilized.”⁷² 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.”⁷³ Spinner argues that “Kafka’s primitivism and his radical self-alienation exist in relation to one another,” and I would suggest that a similar dynamic can be seen in “Eli, the Fanatic.”⁷⁴ Here, for example, is Eli’s perception of the Yeshiva children when he first sees them playing on the Yeshiva’s lawn: “[t]he dusk made the children’s game look like *a tribal dance*.”⁷⁵ 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.”⁷⁶ “This hocus-pocus” religion can be linked to the “strange gospel” propagated by the Negro woman, another example of the slippage between Blackness and the Hasidim in the story. As in the Jewish primitivism that Spinner finds in Kafka, however, the encounter with the “savage Jew” represented by the Hasid 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.”⁷⁷ Once again, we meet the figure of “the Jew” as desired, although now, through primitivism, 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

⁷¹ *Id.*, 2.

⁷² *Id.*, 2-4.

⁷³ *Id.*, 1.

⁷⁴ *Id.*, 3.

⁷⁵ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 189, emphasis mine.

⁷⁶ *Id.*, 206.

⁷⁷ *Jewish Primitivism*, 44-5.

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.”⁷⁸ In this scene, Jewishness functions in the way I have been exploring throughout this study: 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 destabilizes any clear sense of 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.”⁷⁹ Yet the psychiatrists cannot “touch down where the blackness had reached.”⁸⁰ Eli’s desire for primitive Jewishness is, ultimately, stronger than the imposition of norms that attempt to de-racialize “the Jew.”

Conclusion

The readings of Roth’s work through the lens of a “desire for Jewishness” offered here are intended to provide an opening for a new critical approach to the study of identity, replacing investigations that begin from the concept of “identity” with an approach that makes the “desire for identity” its critical focus. Nostalgia and “Jewish primitivism” offer two ways into this project, showcasing how this desire can be tracked through affective states of longing and resistance that simultaneously dramatize and enact the construction of Jewish identity. By historicizing the multicultural concept of identity, I have uncovered how Roth’s use of nostalgia in “Defender of the Faith” problematizes and reinscribes the principles underpinning multiculturalism. In my section on Jewish primitivism in “Eli, the Fanatic,” I have showcased the complex relation of this

⁷⁸ Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 212-3.

⁷⁹ *Id.*, 220.

⁸⁰ *Id.*, 221.

desire for Jewishness with race, providing a case study for the re-examination of the canonical texts around which the field of Jewish American studies is constructed. To continue building on this opening, further research could consider other key Roth texts that suggest further forms this desire can take in relation to race, particularly *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock*, and *The Human Stain*.

Despite focusing on just a small corpus of texts, this article's reading of Roth through the lens of "desire for Jewishness" troubles two major strains in contemporary Jewish American criticism. First, it demonstrates the ways in which ambiguities in the category of Jewishness can help unpack the complex relations of race, culture, and memory that underpin the contemporary discourse of multiculturalism, opening up multiculturalism's underlying assumptions to critical investigation. Second, this unpacking of multiculturalism's key terms troubles the narrative of Jewish assimilation into the American mainstream and racial whiteness, reopening the question of the Jewish racial position in America. Only by critiquing these dominant critical discourses can Jewish American studies trace a path towards new readings of the post-war racial landscape, offering a critical practice that makes identity not the end but the beginning of its horizon of possibility.

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