The Jew in the Canon: Reading Race and Literary History in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

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FINDING THEMSELVES IN AN AMBIGUOUS PLACE DURING THE CULTURE wars of the 1980s and 1990s, Jewish American writers began to focus on discourses of cosmopolitanism, interracial identity, and transracial masquerade to express the anxieties attendant on their liminal position in American literary history and multicultural discourse. These preoccupations reach their apotheosis in *The Human Stain* (2000), a novel in which the archetypal Jewish author Philip Roth manifests his vexed relation to race and canonicity by articulating the concerns of the endangered Jewish intellectual and proponent of universal humanism through the mouth of an African American passing for a Jew. Although critics such as Michael Rogin and Matthew Frye Jacobson have taken stock of the interconnectedness of race and Jewish identity during the early years of the twentieth century, there has been comparatively little interest in following the ambivalent politics and poetics of Jewish racialization into late-twentieth-century America—the period during which the replacement of culturally pluralistic understandings of the nation by discourses that privileged racial difference and separatism forced Jews to reevaluate their unique relation to Americanness and whiteness at the same time that they tested the limits of America's liberal ethos. More strikingly, there have been few attempts to study the Jew in the canon and in the American culture wars and the responses of Jewish writers to their increasingly canonical status in an American literary scene concerned with providing a venue for the particularity of racial and ethnic voices.[1] This omission has left a hole in critical race theory, an inherently comparative discipline initiated to "uncover the ongoing dynamics of racialized power, and its embeddedness in practices and values which have been shorn of any explicit, formal manifestation of

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racism" (Crenshaw et al. xxix). Although early theorists of critical race studies were interested primarily in the ways in which the "dynamics of racialized power" were inscribed in legal practices and social values, later scholars such as David Palumbo-Liu and Walter Mignolo argued that the formation of literary histories was also crucial to this implicit institutionalization of race.

To acknowledge the interconnectedness of racial and literary genealogies, multicultural critics in the 1980s and 1990s argued against what they saw as the univocality of the Western canon and suggested that the corollary to affirmative action programs that sought to increase the diversity of the university was institutional revisions of the standards used to determine the value of literary works. Challenging the canon with books by writers from across the racial, ethnic, national, and gender map, these critics sought to foster a diversity of viewpoints in the public realm of the university. This challenge to the canon, articulated by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Harold Kolb, and others, posited the impossibility of a neutral literary sphere apart from the discursive shifts in value taking place in the world around the university.[2] Conservative opponents of multiculturalism, meanwhile, contested what they saw as the loss of a shared public discourse, claiming that "multiculturalism's hard-liners, who seem to make up the majority of the movement, damn as racism any attempt to draw the myriad of American groups into a common American culture. For these multiculturalists, differences are absolute, irreducible, intractable" (Siegel 35).

Jewish authors and intellectuals inhabited a vexed place in the culture wars and its debates about whether to privilege sameness or difference, public or private loyalties, the canon or challenges to it. It did not help that Jewish American novelists, in particular, had long experienced anxiety about their hybrid identity, an identity that had its origins in what many saw as the Jew's too successful integration into post–World War II America. Morris Dickstein writes that "as early as the 1960s, influential critics argued that American Jewish writing no longer counted as a distinct or viable literary project, for younger Jews had grown so assimilated, so remote from traditional Jewish life, that only nostalgia kept it going" (3). The 1970s saw a further demise of optimism about the position of the Jewish writer as an intermediary figure, able to speak simultaneously for the marginalized and for the average American. By the 1970s, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, once figures for modern ethnicized alienation *and* quintessentially American writers, were no longer situated in the literary avant-garde. Their realist commitments and eschewal of autobiography appeared outmoded when compared with the immediacy of the ethnically identified authors and experimental postmodernists popular at the time.[3] By the 1980s and 1990s, the situation was even more complex. Jews had become such categorical symbols of successful acculturation into American society that Asian Americans, deemed similarly adept at incorporating themselves into the American body politic, were dubbed the "new Jews," and the Asian American protagonist of Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1997) saw imitating her Jewish acquaintances in Scarsdale as the entryway into white America (Liu 3). Many Jewish American writers feared that Jewish difference was no longer quite different enough to allow their books to be included in the framework of the burgeoning field of multicultural fiction. As Andrew Furman points out, by the dawn of the multicultural era, Jewish American writers formed a loose collective with a shaky hold on their outsider status and no clear criteria for establishing their identity as a discrete group. In this multigenerational group of authors, however, Roth played a particularly telling role. For Roth, who had long advocated for the independence of the authorial voice and for the author stripped of allegiance to eth-

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nic and familial affiliation, multiculturalism proved particularly worrisome.

The enfant terrible of American letters, the author of consciously establishment-challenging works such as *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Roth found himself during the 1990s less a figure for millennial alienation than a linchpin of the American canon.[4] To detractors of the old-boys' club of American letters, there was little difference between Philip Roth and John Updike, postwar writers of roughly the same age. Both authors depicted well-heeled white denizens of the intellectual and socioeconomic elite. Both were "past retirement age," far from the "multicultural literary fashions of the day," and "thoroughly trashed by feminists" (Max). According to Sven Birkerts, by the 1990s both Roth's and Updike's work (along with that of their fellow postwar American writers Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer) had become "weak, makeshift and gravely disappointing to all who believed that these novelists had a special line on the truth(s) of late modernity." Whereas Roth, like his literary alter egos, had once gained identity from challenging the standards of WASP America and posing himself as the antidote to the stuffy mores of the white bourgeoisie, he increasingly came, in an era of rising multicultural and feminist literary critique, to embody the status quo he had once sought to undermine. To many of his critics, Roth was just another old, white man.

This de-ethnicizing, this whitening, of Roth was fitting in a number of ways. Roth had long responded ambivalently to being deemed a representative man. Like Bellow, another postwar Jewish American literary heavyweight, Roth often purported to reject religious and national identity in favor of his more universal classification as a writer.[5] In "Writing about Jews," first published in his *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), Roth rails against his appointed role as spokesman for the Jewish tribe. Addressing the many Jews who have criticized him for not giving "a balanced portrayal of Jews as we know them," Roth argues that fiction cannot and should not be concerned with representing a whole people: "what fiction does and what the rabbi would like it to do are two entirely different things. The concerns of fiction are not those of a statistician—or of a public-relations firm. The novelist asks himself, 'What do people think?'; the PR man asks, 'What *will* people think?'" (48, 50). The Jewish writer is expected to ask himself "what will the goyim think?" in a manner never required of the gentile writer in America (50). However, while Roth resents this imperative to write as a Jew with an imagined *goyische* audience and with the possibility of anti-Semitism always in mind, he relishes the possibility that his work can speak to Jews who are unimpressed by the tired pieties of rabbis and other Jewish communal leaders. Roth ends "Writing about Jews" by asking if the question of whether Jewish writers will see fit to present "balanced" portraits of Jewish life can be replaced by the related question "who is going to address men and women like men and women, and who like children?" (63). For a Jewish audience in search of a touchstone for postwar Jewish identity, according to Roth, the "stories the novelists tell" have become more persuasive than "the sermons of some of the rabbis" (63). Jewish writers are becoming the true consciences of their race because "there are regions of feeling and consciousness in [their stories] which cannot be reached by the oratory of self-congratulation and self-pity" (63).

This ambivalence about speaking for the Jews is a central component of Roth's work. In fact, though Roth claimed to reject the coercive pull of the first-person plural, he discomfited his many Jewish critics by persisting in portraying a racialized Jewish difference. In his later "American cycle" books, he manifests a particular preoccupation with race and the whitening of Jewish identity. *American Pastoral* (1997), the novel that heralded the birth of a historically conscious and panoramic Roth, highlights the squalor of the author's beloved Newark after the race riots of the late 1960s

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and the white flight it occasioned. This focus on the shifting racial landscape of the city is significant because, in *American Pastoral*, the reader witnesses a transformation not just in how Roth represents the effects of racial unrest on a city but in how he represents Jewish racial identity. Neil Klugman of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Alexander Portnoy of *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Roth's frequent literary alter ego Nathan Zuckerman are depicted as dark, racially intermediary figures who share the carnality of the stereotypical Negro and occasion miscegenation anxieties in the parents of the white Christian women they date. Roth's portrayal of Jewish identity in *American Pastoral*, however, takes into account the gradual whitening of Jewish identity after the 1960s. Swede Levov, the novel's protagonist, is a WASP masquerading as a Jew.[6] Blond and blue-eyed, a vaunted athlete and cannily diplomatic presence, Swede, whose nickname is a play on his Aryan features, is nothing like the Portnoys and Zuckermans who peopled Roth's fictional landscape in the previous decades. After *American Pastoral*, Roth again turned to the Jewish racial profile in America in *The Plot Against America* (2004). In detailing the attempts of the fictional Roth clan to demonstrate their commitment to the WASP ethos of land and liberty while American fascists bring German racial anti-Semitism to America's shores, Roth uses the ambiguous whiteness of Jews in America as a site from which to critique race and ethnicity in the United States.

In 2000, Roth published *The Human Stain*, the novel most deeply invested in representing the complexities of race in America. Coleman Silk, the tragic hero of *The Human Stain*, is a black man passing for white. At eighteen, Silk leaves his home in New Jersey and, with it, his commitment to the racial and familial affiliations with which he has been raised. In the navy, he learns that his light complexion allows him to pass for Greek American or Arab American. Silk sloughs off the anchor of his race and gets the image of an anchor tattooed on his arm, this "human stain" the only material reminder of the past he has discarded. Returning to a postwar America newly in love with the Jewish people they've just helped to save from total annihilation in Europe, Silk decides to become Jewish himself, employing his intimate knowledge of northern New Jersey's large Jewish population to effectively impersonate the articulate New York Jewish intellectuals who surround him at New York University. While studying classics in graduate school, Silk meets Iris Gittelman, a Jew, and marries her for "that sinuous thicket of hair that was far more Negroid than his own," a shrewd decision that preempts any future doubts about the origin of their offspring's hair texture (136). Silk gets a job, first as a classics professor and later as dean of faculty, at a small liberal arts college in the bastion of white America, New England. When Silk, about to retire after a lengthy and successful career (as both a professor and a white man), returns to the classroom, he is accused of racism, and the tragic tale of *The Human Stain* begins.

Roth engages race and the interconnectedness of race and literary history in a number of ways in the novel, but most strikingly through the trope of passing. Passing has a lengthy history in American literature. Since at least the nineteenth century, when the "one-drop rule" essentialized racial identity into an entity that transcended the visible and located itself in the imagined interiority of blood, the literature of passing has sought to tell the stories of those who have managed to opt out of their racial legacy. Despite Roth's self-conscious participation in this literary tradition, however, it is important to draw a distinction between Roth's Coleman Silk and the haunted protagonists of earlier American passing narratives such as Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex–Colored Man* (1912). Like Silk, Clare Kendry of *Passing* and the nameless protagonist of Johnson's work are

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trickster figures who play with the notion of the unitary self by donning and doffing multiple identities. Nonetheless, these characters, far more than Roth's Silk, are tormented by the genealogies to which they've lost access. Silk, by contrast, is not entirely at odds with himself. Unlike the protagonists of Larsen's and Johnson's narratives, Silk inhabits the role of white person—specifically, of acerbic Jewish intellectual—with relative ease. While Roth does provide his readers entry into the worried machinations of his secretive protagonist, he does so mostly to indicate the deep pleasure that Silk experiences at the thought of escaping from the shackles of "the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*" into "the raw I with all its agility" (108).

Most important, Roth's use of passing differs from that of earlier authors because, in recent years, passing has been transformed from a highly charged description of a transracial move (usually of an African American person into a white identity) to something vaguer, a trope to describe a host of social and emotional metamorphoses. As Catherine Rottenberg points out in "Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire," the discourse of racial passing has undergone a change in recent times. Rather than seek to place passing in what she calls a "subversive-recuperative binary," one where racial passing disorients or reifies racial categories, recent understandings of passing have concentrated on the question of how passing can be used to complicate our notions of identity, racial or other (435). Rottenberg argues that passing is increasingly understood as one way of viewing identity as composed of process and performance. In fact, the discourse of passing emphasizes that race, like gender as Judith Butler formulates it in her notion of "performativity" (94), does not preexist its performance and the discourses that constitute it.

This concept of passing as performative in a way that de-essentializes subjects and their relation to race is central to Roth's use of the trope in *The Human Stain*. Throughout the novel, he emphasizes that Coleman Silk's passing is performative on multiple levels. Most strikingly, in a novel about education of a number of kinds, Roth suggests that whiteness is a state of being into which his protagonist can be educated by careful ethnographic analysis of white mores and adherence to the cultural standards of white America. In the perverse bildungsroman that is Coleman Silk's life story, childhood in a predominantly Jewish New Jersey town teaches him a particular brand of white (Jewish) identity.[7] Silk's flawless performance of this white identity, coupled with his all-out embrace of Western universal humanism and its masterworks, eventually makes him appear not just white but whiter than many of his colleagues at Athena College. This teasing invocation of whiteness as a fluid state, a state one can perform too well, is not the only way Roth emphasizes the performative nature of passing in *The Human Stain*.

Coleman Silk's choice to pass not simply as a white man but as a Jewish white man who would once have been distinctly out of place in the wealthy white world of Athena College adds another layer of impersonation to his performance of whiteness, as well as giving a comparative cast to Roth's exploration of race in *The Human Stain*. As Daniel Itzkovitz points out in "Passing like Me," an exploration of the Jew in modernist fiction and passing narratives, Jews have often been associated with what he calls "racial chameleonism," a facility for mimicry and adaptation that is seen as characteristic of their wandering race (39).[8] If, as many believed during the early years of the twentieth century, Jews were characterized by their capacity to mask difference beneath a cloak of apparent sameness, if they were "naturals" at passing, so to speak, there were "significant implications for the evolution of a modernist cultural logic that was at once race-conscious and unable to locate the exact nature of racial difference" (37). That Jews in America remained immutably

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different from and supremely adaptable to the ever-shifting tenets of whiteness marked them as uniquely anxiety-inducing cultural entities. Anxieties about difference hiding in the midst of white America couldn't help but seep into the literature of the period. Many modernist writers portrayed Jews as harbingers of the inauthenticity of modernity. At the same time, for similar reasons, Jews functioned as figures for successful passing in many narratives by African American authors. Jews were portrayed as enviable in these narratives; unlike blacks, who were thought to be entirely "lost to [their] people" when they renounced their racial designation (Roth, *Human Stain* 146), Jews managed to move between the roles of outsider and insider in American society with comparative ease.

Although Itzkovitz's "Passing like Me" focuses on the figure of the Jew in early-twentieth-century passing narratives, the article sheds light on Roth's use of chameleonic Jewishness in *The Human Stain*. Roth, like the authors whom Itzkovitz mentions, highlights the complexity of the Jewish racial profile in America through his conflation of passing into whiteness and passing into Jewishness. Roth is not alone in his preoccupation with the role passing plays in Jewish identity. Lori Harrison-Kahan points out in "Passing for White, Passing for Jewish" that contemporary tales of racial passing, compared with early-twentieth-century passing narratives produced before or during the Harlem Renaissance, often adopt the figure of the Jew as a fundamental, rather than a peripheral, component of the narrative. In many such works, but particularly in *The Human Stain*, African American characters don Jewish identities as their means of passing into whiteness.[9] Harrison-Kahan asserts that multicultural passing narratives look to the always ambiguous racial position of Jews in America as a convenient metaphor for the multiplicity attendant on racial identity in a postbinary era. She suggests that Jews are tropologically useful for authors of these narratives, as they were for authors in the first half of the twentieth century, because Jews are simultaneously intermediary figures poised between racial designations and, subsequent to World War II at least, indisputably what Karen Brodkin would call "white folks." Harrison-Kahan argues that the introduction of the category of Jewishness into contemporary narratives of passing adds "a third term to the typically black-and-white schema of US race relations . . . [and] deploy[s] Jewishness to expose the social construction and plurality of whiteness as well as to challenge existing theories of mixed race identity that rely on binary configurations" (22).

In *The Human Stain*, there is often such a slippage between passing and Jewishness as metaphors for racial indeterminacy. Coleman Silk and his Jewish neighbor, Nathan Zuckerman, the writer Silk chooses to tell the story of his trials at Athena College, are spatially and racially adjacent—Roth emphasizes that only an outsider to the New England aristocracy of Athena, such as Zuckerman, is fit to tell the black man's story. Further, Roth makes it clear throughout *The Human Stain* that Silk has chosen to pass as Jewish because it is easier than passing as a non-Jewish white man. Coleman can pass for "one of those crimp-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white" (15–16). Jews, Silk recognizes, are an intermediary race, a way station of sorts on the road from black to white. He explains his choice to become Jewish as stemming from his early years as an African American youth in predominantly Jewish prewar northern New Jersey. There, Jews were viewed as models of assimilation for middle-class blacks, "like Indian scouts, shrewd people showing the outsider his way in, showing the social possibility, showing a colored family how it might be done," much as Jews were seen in early-twentieth-century passing narratives (97). By making Coleman alternately black and Jewish

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in *The Human Stain*, Roth taps into this liminal Jewish racial history in America, long a favored theme for him.

Nonetheless, Roth doesn't write about the indeterminacy of Jewish identity primarily to imagine a utopian, postbinary racial landscape. Instead, he uses Coleman Silk's performance of Jewishness to work out another issue: the vexed place of the Jew and the Jewish writer in the multicultural canon. Passing, its disavowal of visible difference in favor of a willed sameness, undermines the discourse of multiculturalism as it was practiced when Roth was writing *The Human Stain*. More particularly, passing plays with the argument central to multicultural discourse—that recognition by another is the precondition of identity. Passing is predicated on a discourse of invisibility, that one's private (racial or ethnic) identity is not publicly recognizable.[10] As Carole-Anne Tyler points out, passing is visible only if it fails—if the passing individual's repressed difference bubbles up to out a concealed identity (213). Throughout *The Human Stain*, Roth uses the complex valences of passing not only to meditate on questions of race but also to pose potent questions about how racial and ethnic discourses affect the literary sphere. Although it would seem that Roth's use of passing is meant to challenge the prevalent discourse of multiculturalism, his exercise of the trope also emphasizes his own anxieties about his decision to pass as "a writer" rather than "a Jewish writer," the choice he discusses in "Writing about Jews." Particularly, Roth employs Coleman Silk's passing to reflect on the repercussions of a too-successful passing into whiteness. Could ethnic writers or intellectuals pass so successfully into the canon that they no longer retain any hold on their particularities, on the matter of their literary voices? Can passing individuals "be lost" not only to their people but to themselves and their audiences? Does a loss always accompany this passing from difference into sameness?

Throughout *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk is troubled by these questions about authenticity and voice—the consequences of his decision to pass. His reliance on and discomfort with theatricality and mimicry are at the heart of *The Human Stain*. A crow named Prince, a figure for Silk's own mimicry and playful impersonation, resides at the periphery of the town where Athena College is located.[11] Prince haunts the parking lot of the local post office, diving to pick off the barrettes of little girls, until he is saved by the Humane Society. Efforts to reintroduce the orphaned Prince into his natural environment fail, because, as one Humane Society volunteer puts it, "he doesn't know the crow language." His attempts to play at being just another crow are thwarted by the "human stain" left behind in his speech, the result of "being hand-raised." The recognition that Prince is indelibly marked by his time among human beings, his otherness audible to other crows, if not to Prince himself, catalyzes Silk's lover, Faunia Farley, into recognizing that the human stain is the necessary result of congress with another. As she puts it, "Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there's no other way to be here. . . ." While Faunia's rumination on the crow is one of many rejoinders to multiculturalists (as well as anti-Clintonites) who sought an impossible purity during the 1990s, it also links her beloved crow to her lover, Coleman. Prince's plight, the human stain, stamped onto his speech, which locates him between crow and human being, highlights the perils inherent in Coleman Silk's move between races in *The Human Stain*. Silk's passing, like that of the protagonists of Larsen's and Johnson's earlier passing narratives, can never entirely succeed. He is marked in ways he does not realize, ways that leave large swaths of the world and of his own interiority illegible to him. As the narrator, Zuckerman, compiles Silk's story in *The Human Stain*, it becomes increasingly clear, too, that all acts of passing—like all acts of translation—occasion a loss.

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Written during the heyday of identity politics, *The Human Stain* uses a racially intermediary character to question the possibility of evading the universal human stain, the stain of mixture, by assuming a particular racially or ethnically affiliated "we."[12] Like David Hollinger's *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (1995), written during the same period, Roth's novel asks for a reinvestigation and progressive deconstruction of racial and ethnic categories to strip them of social and epistemological weight. Also like Hollinger, Roth asks, via Coleman Silk, for an embrace of the discourse not of multiculturalism but of cosmopolitanism.[13] For while Coleman's passing is at the heart of *The Human Stain*, it is remarkably unimportant whether Coleman is white or black, Jewish or Christian, in the Rothian universe of the novel. He is defined primarily by his intellectual and generational affinities, from his embrace of classical literature and his love of big-band music to his wholesale embrace of Viagra and his discomfort with what he sees as the feminist posturing of Delphine Roux, the French poststructuralist who serves as a harbinger of the death of humanism and represents the multicultural academy's emasculating power.

This point—that Roth's novel is about not only race but race, literary history, and the "Jewish" academic in the multicultural academy—is often lost in critical accounts of *The Human Stain*. But, when Roth introduces his protagonist, the decision to pass as a white man has long since been made, and Silk is living out his days as a professor, teaching Homer and Sophocles to students at the appropriately named Athena College, a liberal arts institution in a sleepy New England town. A former academic dean of the college, Silk is teaching a few last courses before retiring from the academy altogether. Roth takes the reader inside Silk's classroom, where the professor is preoccupied with the waning standards of the student body at Athena. After many years of fashioning himself as an urbane Jewish intellectual seeking to wake up the musty academic establishment, Silk finds himself struggling to interest his students in what they perceive as the outmoded values of humanism and in the genealogy of Western literature that begins with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the canonical works he teaches, Silk sees himself. He is particularly drawn to Homer's story of Achilles, a hero felled by a secret infirmity. The story of Oedipus, too, resonates with Silk. As much is staked on the purity of the professor's blood as on that of the figure from Greek tragedy, as the epigraph for *The Human Stain* makes clear.[14] Even the name of the college where Silk works becomes a resonant classical metaphor for the professor's life. Athena College functions as an ideal location for Silk because its patron goddess is the product of a motherless birth, having sprung fully formed from the skull of her father Zeus as if she were an idea of perfect male generativity rather than a person. Athena's birth represents for Silk the freedom from his own mother (and her race) that he seeks throughout *The Human Stain*. While they give meaning to his life, these myths and masterworks of Western literature alienate him from those around him. Long a popular teacher, Silk suddenly finds himself in the 1990s unable to communicate with his students or comprehend the changing landscape of the academic world at Athena. Having rejected his own racial genealogy in favor of the Western literary family proffered by Homer and Sophocles, he speaks a language that does not translate for his young students.

The tragedy of *The Human Stain* turns around these issues of language and translation, this ability to mask the private self by passing into the lingua franca of universal humanism: "midway into his second semester back as a full-time professor . . . Coleman spoke the self-incriminating word that would cause him voluntarily to sever all ties to the college." After five weeks in which two students have never deigned to show up for class, Silk "open[s] the session by asking, 'Does

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anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?'" Silk's joke is woefully misinterpreted. The two missing students, "who turned out to be black," hear about Dean Silk's use of the word "spooks," occasionally used as a pejorative for African Americans, and complain to Silk's replacement (6).[15] The new dean of faculty calls the distinguished professor into his office later in the day to face charges of racism. Silk is shocked, later explaining to Nathan Zuckerman, "I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: 'spook' as a specter or a ghost. I had no idea what color these two students might be." While Roth clearly means to mock the Athena administrators and the students for their misconstruction of the aging professor's color-blind use of *spooks*, he makes it apparent that Silk's word is blind and "self-incriminating" in more ways than one (6). Silk leaves the spectral human stain of his racial heritage behind in *spooks*, but, more important, he leaves behind the trace of the refusal of his lineage and the resulting flight into the supposedly transcendent realm of the intellect. His passing is not entirely successful. While Faunia Farley, the professor's inappropriate love interest in *The Human Stain*, is illiterate, Silk manifests an apparent inability to correctly read and respond to the signs in the world around him. Silk has committed himself to what he perceives as the extraideological universe of classical literature and the realm of ideas, where race and the body don't matter, but his students and the newly multicultural academy around him have not made a similar commitment to rejecting bodies in favor of ideas.[16]

If Silk is felled by an instance of tragicomic parapraxia, he is also "undone by a word that no one even speaks anymore" (334). By speaking aloud the word *spooks* and with it, as Roth suggests, his guilt, he speaks of a time when the valences of words were different. Silk is punished for transgressing the boundaries of race and, as Roth makes increasingly clear as the plot of *The Human Stain* reaches high tragedy, for adhering to outmoded standards. He is unable to measure the shifts in the discursive realm that would now reward him for the racial difference he once perceived as a hindrance. Blackness, as Roth portrays it, is a commodity of considerable worth in the multicultural academy. The original conflict, the charge of racism with which Roth begins *The Human Stain*, meant to echo the Trojan conflict that initiates the trajectory of Western literature, manifests the value of blackness in the academic world Silk inhabits. After all, when accused of racism by his two students, Coleman requires the intervention of his hire, Herb Keble, an African American scholar, to speak on his behalf. Keble, in contrast to Silk, is able to speak in oracular tones with the authority of his epistemic location as an African American man in the multicultural academy.[17] The private has become instrumental in the public world of Athena College. Having refused identification with his racial heritage in order, in part, to achieve success as a professor, Coleman finds himself smack in the middle of an era when ethnic is in.

It is significant that Roth opens his 2000 novel with these intertwined themes of teaching and speaking, both of which will come to play a central role in *The Human Stain*. The catalyst for Silk's fall begins in the classroom, and the pages of the novel are filled with educators. As Ernestine Silk, Coleman's sister and the character who first lets Nathan Zuckerman into the secret of her brother's race, points out near the end of *The Human Stain*, the Silk family was composed of teachers, from the award-winning educator and civil rights leader, Walter, to the renegade intellectual Coleman and the pious and dedicated schoolteacher Ernestine. The Silk paterfamilias, too, was an educator of sorts. Walter, Ernestine, and Coleman attribute their interest in education to the stentorian tones of their father, who sang the praises of Shakespeare even as he served food to white diners on a Pullman train. This focus on teachers, not

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to mention middle-class blacks' allegiance at mid-century to the ideals of Western civilization, makes it clear that Roth's novel is not just about race but about the epistemology and institutionalization of race, how we organize and know ourselves racially through the teachers and texts that instruct us.

The critics Eric Sundquist and Ross Posnock provide cogent analyses of *The Human Stain*, but they both focus on the racial component of Roth's tale over and above the academic narrative woven through it. Sundquist even places the two storylines, the racial and the academic, in an Aristotelian hierarchy of sorts in which the racial passing narrative is read as a "tragedy" and the academic storyline as merely "comic" (513). Instead, the two narrative threads are inextricably linked, which accounts for much of the historical potency of Roth's marriage of race and the academy in *The Human Stain*. As Pamela Caughie argues in *Passing and Pedagogy*, the ethics of passing outside one's subject position was a pressing concern for academics when multiculturalism ruled the classroom and anxiety "led just about everyone, it seems, to question who has the right to engage in certain practices, who can cross over and for what purposes, or who can speak as, for, and from what positions" (15).

In *The Human Stain,* Roth often inscribes these skirmishes over race and the academy onto individual narratives, like that of Delphine Roux, who plays a critical role in the novel. Professors Roux and Silk are set up as contrasting, if similarly self-destructive, characters with differing literary and racial allegiances. Silk stands for hybridity and mess while Roux represents the "ecstasy of sanctimony" that characterized the late 1990s, a period of "calculated frenzy" when "a president's penis was on everyone's mind" (2, 3). The polemical force and genuine mean-spiritedness behind Roth's depiction of Roux indicates his contempt for the shifting intellectual landscape she portends.[18] The poststructuralist French feminist is as theatrical in her allegiances as Silk. She performs feminism and racial sensitivity while concealing her own prejudices and desires for sexual submission. Near the end of *The Human Stain*, she constructs a personal ad and worries over how to phrase it to avoid getting responses from black men. When her ad is accidentally sent out to her colleagues in the department (a moment of subconscious self-sabotage not unlike Silk's use of the term *spooks*), she stages a break-in at her office and claims that Silk had written and sent the incriminating text.

By speaking through a character who moves supplely between the subject positions of black and Jew, Roth harshly critiques political correctness and the American puritan impulse while outwitting critics who might argue that his portrayal of Delphine Roux and the university harassment campaign she initiates against Silk are merely the cranky mutterings of an aging Jewish writer, another "sadly out of touch" "old goat" of the literary establishment (Max). The most vociferous critiques of the multicultural university emanate from Silk's mouth. While Nathan Zuckerman clearly blames the administration of Athena College for his friend's downfall, he defers responsibility for his critique by posing himself as a mere medium, a dummy through which the voice of the persecuted Silk can be heard.

Roth has long been interested in these complexities of the authorial voice. *The Human Stain*, however, is the fully realized posture toward authorship with which Roth began to experiment only in his later novels: the author/narrator as ventriloquist, as one who can pass fluidly between subject positions. The first time Silk and Zuckerman meet, the professor demands that the aging author "write something for him," act as his literary proxy by transcribing the tale of his firing from Athena College and the puritanical racial politics that felled him and his wife Iris in turn (11). Zuckerman's role as ghostwriter is complicated. After Silk's ignominious death, he accedes to his friend's demand

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to write his story and takes it upon himself to complete the professor's unfinished manuscript, *Spooks*. Zuckerman is well acquainted with Silk's failed attempts to write about Athena. Horrified by his treatment at the hands of colleagues whom, as academic dean of Athena College, he had been responsible for hiring, Silk had begun his "tell-all" book about the events surrounding his dismissal. As Zuckerman soon recognizes, however, Silk could never have completed *Spooks*, because the specter at the heart of his narrative was neither political correctness nor his absent students but himself. Silk's adherence to the rhetoric of radical individualism, the ideology behind his successful passing, ultimately disallows him from telling his story.

That Roth took the blueprint for Coleman Silk's story from Anatole Broyard further emphasizes the way in which "accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard" can affect an individual's ability to write (Roth, *Human Stain* 334). Broyard, a longtime literary critic for the *New York Times*, died in 1998. Like Silk, Broyard began experimenting with using his light complexion to pass for white during a stint in the military in World War II. The most significant characteristics that Silk and Broyard share, however, involve writing. An immensely talented writer, Broyard was expected during the postwar era to become a great American novelist. However, he was never able to deliver on the promise of his first published fiction, though all literary New York eagerly awaited follow-up work. In "The Passing of Anatole Broyard," Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests that Broyard failed to live up to his early promise because he decided to conceal his race and was subsequently unable to establish a convincing narrative voice. To write effectively, Gates argues, Broyard

> would have had to be a Negro writer, which was something he did not want to be. In his terms, he did not want to write about black love, black passion, black suffering, black joy; he wanted to write about love and passion and suffering and joy. We give lip service to the idea of the writer who happens to be black, but had anyone, in the postwar era, ever seen such a thing? (207)

By refusing the particularity of "black love, black passion, black suffering, black joy" in favor of access to the universal, Broyard silenced himself at an early age. Gates contends that Broyard became a character in novels rather than a writer of them, a thinly veiled figure in works by a number of well-known postwar authors. Through his representation of this aspect of Broyard's story in Coleman Silk's plight in *The Human Stain*, Roth transforms his novel from a mere critique of the imperative to write as a black or a Jew into a more characteristically ambivalent document about the inextricability of racial and literary genealogies. Despite Roth's sympathy with Silk's universal humanist aspirations, he does not fail to provide an account of how his protagonist's choice, like Broyard's, converts Silk from writer to character.

The Human Stain takes aim at the inextricability of racial and literary genealogies by poking holes in the puritan ethos of late-twentieth-century American society that simultaneously sought to prevent inappropriate sexual liaisons, such as those between Faunia and Coleman or Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, and to trap writers and intellectuals in what Werner Sollors would call their "descent relations" (*Beyond Ethnicity*). *The Human Stain*, its pretensions to being one of Roth's least Jewish novels aside, indexes a fraught moment in the histories of comparative racialization, American Jewish literature, and Roth as an American Jewish author. The novel asks potent questions about the position of the Jew in the canon and in the ethnic landscape of multicultural America. In a rare interview with the *New York Times* to celebrate the publication of *The Human Stain*,

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Roth bristles at his interviewer's intimation that his 2000 novel is "about issues of race and of Judaism and of where the two intersect" (McGrath). Instead, he argues, his protagonist's decision to pass for white by passing for a Jew is merely "a cunning choice that successfully furnishes him with a disguise in the flight from his own 'we.'" This statement is meant to deflect the assertion that *The Human Stain* is yet another instance of Roth's "writing about Jews." At the same time, however, his protestations mark another step in the process of the deracialization of the Jew in the United States. If, as Roth contends, Coleman Silk's "choice has nothing to do with the ethical, spiritual, theological or historical aspects of Judaism . . . has nothing to do with wanting to belong to another 'we,'" Jewish identity, long pilloried by Roth for being an inescapable "we," has been transformed into an archetypal white identity, a release from the collective, rather than the tin-can tail of recriminations and immutable affiliation that Jewishness had once been for the self-consciously American writer Roth.[19]

Silk's choice to pass into Jewishness to escape "his own 'we'" emphasizes not only the postwar shift in Jewish racialization but also the paradoxical nature of race in the United States, the collision of America's reliance on racial essentialism with its belief, made visible by passing, in self-fashioning. This collision undergirds the tragedy of Coleman Silk and animates Roth's attempts to understand the position of the Jew, an established figure for the ideal of American self-fashioning, in a literary sphere that no longer prizes individuals stripped of allegiance to their pasts.

How much does literary history intersect with racial history? In *The Human Stain*, this question is posed through the marriage of writing and race. The novel explores the ethical interpenetration of writing and race—who has the right to write another's story? do we each have a right to write our own story, apart from the original myths of our families and races?—during an era in which the understanding of both is changing. Sollors argues in *Beyond Ethnicity* that all American literature is ethnic literature, formed around the dialectic of consent and descent he discerns at the heart of the nation's symbolic imaginary. In a Sollorsian sense, *The Human Stain* is a prototypically American narrative, situated at the crossroads of consent and descent, at the limits of self-fashioning and of the inescapability of the past. It is also what Sollors elsewhere calls an "interracial narrative," one that troubles essential notions of race by refusing the black-white binary system (*Neither Black nor White*). Roth's "interracial" narrator speaks to the author's sense of irony: a black man performing Jewishness is accused of racism and becomes a spokesman for the vexed position of the Jewish intellectual and author in the multicultural age, "the man who decides to forge a distinct historical destiny, who sets out to spring the historical lock, and who does so . . . only to be ensnared by the history he hadn't quite counted on" (335–36).

In the 1990s, Roth, like Coleman Silk, faced the perils of his lifetime commitment to self-authorship, of his eschewal of the past and the racial obligations that come with it. This crisis leads him to offer a tragic vision in *The Human Stain*, but a vision, as well, of a new kind of multicultural literature, a literature situated at the intersection of races rather than in a system of racial binaries. For while the novel is a critique of multicultural politics, it is also Roth's attempt to write himself into the newly identified multicultural canon. Roth has long been a devotee of teasing out the connections between American and Jewish history, not to mention the bonds between national and personal myths, and *The Human Stain* is the most felicitous example of his exploring the way in which private narratives shape public life and vice versa, a concern central to multicultural discourse.

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Notes

1. Furman's *Contemporary Jewish Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma* is a notable exception.

2. Smith's *Contingencies of Value* (1988) and Kolb's essay "Defining the Canon" (1990) are two key texts in the canon debates.

3. Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and Malamud's *The Tenants*, published as the 1970s began, depict racial dystopias and elegize the privileged roles of the Jewish writer and intellectual in an increasingly racialized literary landscape. They also critique the increasing commercialization of American culture, as well as the postmodern cultural landscape to which this commercialization gave rise.

4. Roth drew criticism at the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus* less for the novella at the center of the volume than for a number of the short stories included in it, particularly "Epstein" and "Eli, the Fanatic."

5. When Bellow was asked if he thought he was awarded the Nobel Prize as a "Jewish writer" or an "American writer," he replied that he thought he had been given the prize simply for being "a writer" (Atlas 112). This discomfort with being defined as a Jewish writer (particularly as it pertained to his response to the Holocaust) is a theme that runs throughout Bellow's work. Bellow's ambivalent response to his Jewishness occasioned, among other things, a lengthy correspondence between the author and Cynthia Ozick. Contained in the Saul Bellow archives at the University of Chicago, the correspondence is quoted liberally by Atlas in his biography of Bellow (2002).

6. Arguably, *American Pastoral*, like *The Human Stain*, is a novel about passing, in this case between Jewishness and whiteness.

7. In fact, Silk's first experiment with passing for white occurs at the behest of his Jewish childhood boxing coach, who tutors him not just in how to punch and feint but also in how to appear to belong to a race other than his own.

8. Itzkovitz's title invokes *Black like Me* (1961), the journalist John Howard Griffin's famous account of passing for a black man during an extended trip through the segregated South.

9. Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* is another example of this trend, according to Harrison-Kahan.

10. This aspect of the discourse of passing—its mobilization of metaphors of difference and sameness—is resonant in tales of passing for another gender or sexuality, as well as for another race.

11. Coleman Silk and Nathan Zuckerman similarly hang on the edges of town. Roth often plays with this split between center and periphery in *The Human Stain*.

12. By doing so, Roth also distances himself from some of the more conservative opponents of multiculturalism, who long for a similar purity in discourse.

13. This move is particularly interesting given the longtime (and often negative) association of Jews with cosmopolitanism.

14. The epigraph comes from Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* and marks the moment when Oedipus is seeking a means to cleanse himself, asking Creon, "What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?" Creon replies, "By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood . . ." (1).

15. An interesting intertext for Roth's use of *spooks* comes from *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973), Sam Greenlee's novel about an African American CIA operative who leaves the covert agency to join a black-separatist group. The title plays on the pejorative use of *spooks* to describe African Americans and spies and suggests that the black operative sits by the door of the CIA office, functioning as a token minority rather than a real player in the agency.

16. As Sundquist points out in *Strangers in the Land*, there is a lengthy tradition of posing Jews and blacks against each other as representatives of mind and body, respectively.

17. This role is emphasized when Keble is deemed the only one appropriate to eulogize Silk at his funeral and to relegitimize him in the eyes of his former colleagues.

18. Roux also represents a castrating contrast to the earth mother, Faunia.

19. Brodkin analyzes these shifts in the spheres of private and public racial identification in *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*.

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