Bodies Unbound:
Race, Gender, and Embodied Identity Politics in Recent Ethnic American Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Embodied Essentialism in the World of Our Fathers

I. Our Post-Beer Moment:

Despite claims that we have arrived at a post-race era, many signs indicate that Americans are as invested in racial difference as ever. In recent years, this inconsistency has focused largely on the material body. At the same time that we are being told that our first African American president embodies the transcendence of older, divisive categories of race, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s website, AfricanDNA, is selling YDNA and mtDNA tests that purportedly trace African American customers’ roots “back to Africa.” As Catherine Bliss narrates, this turn to genomics, of which Gates’ work is but one example, “has resulted in a dizzying back-and-forth stance on race—first denial of any racial difference at the level of DNA, to later focusing on those differences” (“Racial Taxonomy” 1019).

Bliss defines genomics as “the branch of genetics that studies the entire DNA sequence of organisms” (“Genome Sampling” 322). In “Racial Taxonomy in Genomics” (2011), she elaborates on this definition: “genomics uses patterns of shared ancestry within the human species to redefine human taxonomy and question the limits of prior notions of difference” (1019). By drawing on 732 articles on genomics and race published between 1986 and 2010, in-depth interviews, and participant observation at a “core genotyping facility that specializes in ancestry estimation” (“Racial Taxonomy” 1019), this study offers an exhaustingly comprehensive survey of the resurgence of racial biomedicine. More than simply summarizing this “dizzying” array, however, Bliss is interested in what she calls “reflexive biosociality,” whereby genonomists, who “experience the social reality of race[,] have a vested interest in scientifically ‘getting race right.’ They oscillate between policy frameworks and experiential rationales to fashion inclusion and medical equality” as their researcher-identities “are produced dialectically with the racial knowledge that they produce” (“Racial Taxonomy” 1021). The ironic result is “a science in which researchers simultaneously posit race as real but not real” and “advance social explanations for race, while asserting genomics as a plausible solution to racial dilemmas” (“Racial Taxonomy” 1019).
Obama’s widely discussed “speech on race” during his 2008 presidential candidacy powerfully crystallizes and illuminates these contradictions. In this speech, then-Senator Obama described his family narrative as “a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one.” While Obama also makes mention of his wife’s slave and slave owner “blood,” the primary metaphorical function of genes seems to be carrying and transmitting ideology—in this case, of multiracial unity. Racial difference coded at the level of the body—in the “blood”—becomes subordinate to the blending of relatives “of every race and every hue” into one family; of many “parts” into “one” nation. Ironically, Obama’s take on blood and genetic make-ups also has the support of a branch of genomic science. “Scientists have long suspected that the racial categories recognized by society are not reflected on the genetic level,” reported The New York Times in 2000. “But the more closely that researchers examine the human genome—the complement of genetic material encased in the heart of almost every cell of the body—the more most of them are convinced that the standard labels used to distinguish people by ‘race’ have little or no biological meaning” (Angier).

The distance between Gates’ strategy of genetics-commodification and Obama’s more politic, conciliatory approach to racial strife came to an ironic head in the Rose Garden “beer summit” of July, 2009. After Gates’ arrest in an incident that he called racial profiling, and the public attack on Obama for revealing his opinion that the

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2 In quoting this particular Times article in connection with Obama’s speech, I do not mean to imply that mainstream journalism has ignored the opposite position on racial biologism in recent years; rather, my point is to demonstrate that genomic science is not monolithic, and that outside of the lab, it can be used to support an array of disparate ideological positions.
Cambridge Police “acted stupidly,” Obama invited Gates and the white officer who arrested the professor, Sergeant James Crowley, to the White House for beers. Obama’s description of the event as a “teaching moment”—“three folks having a drink at the end of the day and hopefully giving people an opportunity to listen to each other” (qtd. in Tapper et al)—is as conciliatory and blame-free as one might expect of a president whose electoral victory has often been cast as living proof of the triumph of “the post-racial.” (Obama’s quickness to retract his previous judgment about the Cambridge Police only perpetuated this image of a president who, despite being black, wanted to appear as neutral and disinterested in an issue of “racial conflict” as possible.) And Gates’ repeated demand for an apology from Crowley is fitting not only with his insistence that racial difference, in particular racial difference that is genetically coded within the body, still matters, but with the ethical, anti-racist appeals of projects such as his, including “freeing society from racism” and “addressing Eurocentrism” (Bliss, “Genome Sampling” 324).³

³ In a further ironic twist, Gates’ arrest occurred as he was returning home from a trip to China, where he had been researching the ancestral roots of cellist Yo-Yo Ma for the television program, Faces of America (2010). While the title of the four-part PBS series calls attention to embodied, visible difference—diverse “faces” that signal diverse genetic backgrounds—its coverage also made reference to Gates’ oppositional stance to “post-racial” reconciliation: “Some may wonder whether heritage and ethnicity really matter anymore in a society that fancies itself postracial, but Mr. Gates has his recent ‘beer summit’ experience as evidence to the contrary” (Stanley).

Faces of America is certainly not Gates’ first PBS venture into racial genetics—see, for example African American Lives (2006) and African American Lives 2 (2008)—nor was it the first of its kind. It adds to a recently growing industry of TV specials focused on the genomic science of human ancestry, including Journey of Man (2003) and Motherland: A Genetic Journey (2003). The “message” of these programs varies based on the races of the people they feature. Faces of America and Journey of Man share a multicultural, universalist tone: “The fundamental story that they tell belong to all of us who call ourselves American,” Gates narrates in the first episode of Faces; “Everyone alive today might be related,” speculates Spencer Wells, the geneticist-host of Journey of Man. In contrast, African American Lives and Motherland are about African Americans and Jamaican-British, respectively, and make explicit that the study of African genetics can combat racism. Each episode of African American Lives opens with the words “ONE EPIC JOURNEY,” suggesting that all of Gates’ celebrity guests are united by singular quest to find their shared African roots. Gates claims that “DNA seems to be turning ideas of racial purity upside down”; Motherland shares this sentiment, identifying itself as “an endeavor using the science of genetics to overturn the legacy of slavery.”
While Gates’ *AfricaDNA*, Obama’s speech, and the “beer summit” provide a cursory glimpse onto contemporary perspectives on race and genetics, they also obscure a profound factor in the transmission and perpetuation of these ideologies: gender. Uninterrogated in these examples are Gates’ self-fashioning as the wise, surrogate father who will guide his children of all races to their ancestral roots; Obama’s valorization in that speech on race of the “group of men” who gave voice to “we the people”; or the implied shared sex of “three folks” drinking beer together, with that commonality facilitating their interracial reconciliation. But thinking through gender complicates the genetics vs. post-racial opposition to which incidents like these are often reduced and raises several pertinent questions: Do men and women “inherit” different “genetic make-ups”? Does rethinking race through biological lineage change our concepts of gendered dynamics with the family? What is the political role of the *gendered* body in a so-called “after identity politics” moment?

The foundational argument of this dissertation is that literature offers another perspective onto these historical incongruities that the cultural conversations, largely limited by their allegiance to a black/white racial binary, the experiences of men, the search for identity narrativized and televised as entertainment, or a fetishization of far distant geographies and periods, have often overlooked. This dissertation turns to four contemporary ethnic American novels that respond to the pressures of these contradictions by charting their explorations of race, ethnicity, and gender through earlier, biological discourses of race: Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998), Myla Goldberg’s *Bee Season* (2000), Susan Choi’s *American Woman* (2003), and Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* (2003). In their turn back to genetic questions of difference, these novels recast
corporeal, ethnic “essence” as contemporarily relevant, proving Diana Fuss’s point that essentialisms can constitute more than crude biology, and that essentialism, carefully defined, can be as politically viable for progressives as it can be for conservatives. The different, sometimes opposing stances articulated in these texts are symptomatic of the literature’s contradictory cultural context. Nonetheless, the four novels have in common two strategies that demonstrate the contemporary salience of grappling with and reconfiguring earlier notions of the body as a vessel of genetically transmitted ethnic difference: first, their nuanced accounts of the physiological, day-to-day processes of navigating and articulating identity that are particular to the bodies of female subjects; and second, their depiction of biological father-daughter relationships. In particular, through their father-daughter narratives, these writers illuminate challenges facing both feminist politics and contemporary discourses of race and chart an alternative politics of identity that reconfigures racial and gender essentialism for the twenty-first century.

In this introduction, I aim to explore the connection between these two strategies and the ideological work they do together. One need only look to the previous generation’s women writers of color to notice a contrast with the mother-centered feminism of figures like Alice Walker and Maxine Hong Kingston in the 1970s. This feminism’s representations of female role models as maternal figures required a kind of corporeal essentialism: the predecessor and the contemporary feminist had to have the same-sexed body. As I argue, the contemporary novelists do not do away with that essentialism. Instead, in their switch to the exploration of the *paternal* legacy of identity

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politics, they adapt it as a form that leads to a range of other concerns, including biological discourses of race, representations of the body and political subjectivity.

My approach to representations of the body in my close readings is influenced by a corpus of scholarship on physiologically-based affect studies. Poststructural feminists like Judith Butler have used Foucaultian paradigms to read the disciplined, discursive body created through the performative. By contrast, Brian Massumi attends to those unprivileged activities and affects of the body that cannot be coded by discipline. In *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Massumi critiques cultural theory of the past two decades for failing to theorize the body as “movement/sensation” (1) and understanding the “discursive body” only as it is “thoroughly mediated” by its “signifying gestures” (2); his counter-project aims to “put… what seemed most directly corporeal back into the body” (4). Whereas Massumi is less interested in questions of race, I read “sensing” bodies as the grounds of ethnic subjectivity and essence and of negotiating political subjectivity.

Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (2005) offers potent grounds for investigating the relationship between unidentifiable, unintelligible physiological reactions or representations and the conflicts of identity that might be their cause. In this dissertation, I adopt Ngai’s concept of ugly feelings, “minor affects that are… more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities” (20) to parse out the ideological and emotional

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5 Tim Dean is another contemporary who asks: “Are bodies purely discursive?... The problem with framing the inquiry this way is that such questions are themselves rhetorical…. That is, this form of question is posed strategically in opposition to an essentialism or foundationalism that would ground bodies and sex in nature or biology” (83). He aims to take on Butler’s “radically antifoundationalist position” (84), which suggests that bodies are “so completely rhetoricalized they are devoid of desire” (90).
valences at the root of “unprestigious” depictions of ethnic female embodiment in the fiction. Ngai’s explicit application of “ugly feelings” to race studies in her discussion of “animatedness” offers a particularly helpful case study. She defines “animatedness” as “one of the most basic ways in which affect becomes socially recognizable in the age of mechanical reproducibility: as a kind of ‘innervation’ [or] ‘agitation’” (91). She further analyzes animatedness’s “exaggerated emotional expressiveness… as a marker of racial or ethnic otherness” (94) and claims that cultural representations of ethnic and racial others “visibly harness… affective qualities… to a… racial epistemology,” so that “emotional qualities seem especially prone to sliding into corporeal subjects” (95). The circuits Ngai traces between emotions and affect, racial identity, and corporeality make for a provocative and compelling framework to read the affective, ethnic bodies of the female protagonists in this recent literature. In particular, Ngai’s formulation raises important questions about the vexed role of the visible, or the invisible, in embodied ethnic difference. Does that difference need to be seen on the outside in order to be felt on the inside? And does the literature, by frequently grounding identity within rather than on the body, complicate what Rey Chow calls the “fundamental visualism” (Protestant Ethnic 53) of cross-ethnic representation and encounter?

I begin this introduction with a survey of theories and studies that frame this project—an attempt, in a sense, to trace a kind of cultural genealogy for this literature.

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8 In The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism (2002), Chow makes this point in the context of a discussion on stereotypes: “although stereotypes are not necessarily visual in the physical sense,” she explains, “the act of stereotyping is always implicated in visuality” (66). This line of argument runs through much of her scholarship. For example, in “The Age of the World Target” (1998), Chow argues that the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in the era of a totalizing global ideology: visualizing and understanding the world as target. She applies this theory of the post-bomb age to investigate the ways in which this war-originated epistemological system engulfs us “as part of a global culture in which everything has become virtual representation” (206).
Why, I ask, are ethnic women novelists writing fiction that focuses on the corporeality of ethnic identity and on father-daughter relationships at this particular moment? I attend to the cultural politics context of this literature, including the history of women of color feminism; “mulatto millennium” and so-called “post-race” politics; and Asian American cultural nationalism. I then consider the relationship of this literature to historical, literary representations of ethnic difference—tracing a kind of literary genealogy for these novels. Included in this section are brief readings of representations of the body and of father-daughter narratives in earlier texts: Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945).

Next, I explain the order of my chapters and the division in the dissertation between part one, on Senna’s *Caucasia* and Goldberg’s *Bee Season*, and part two, on Choi’s *American Woman* and Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*. Here, I elaborate on the ways that both of the novels in the first section, particularly when read alongside each other, speak to the historical connection between discourses of black and Jewish identity as immutable, embodied essences. I then discuss why the two Asian American novels that comprise the second half of my dissertation are less concerned with questions of ethnic difference generated by and maintained within the protagonists’ bodies and more with the explicitly political ramifications of the characters’ genetic, paternal inheritance. Finally, I elaborate on the range of ideologies that these novels represent: from the most retrograde, singular concept of racial identity in *Caucasia*, to the most celebratory of the multiracial, utopian future in *All Over Creation*.

The final section of this introduction returns to the question of feminism and gender. What is the “new” identity politics that these novels are proposing through their
return to biological discourses of race and their embrace of the paternal legacy of identity politics? I argue that these politics are complicated, contradictory, and not always consistently progressive; as such, they force us to question our assumptions about literature and our own subject-positions as readers. It is therefore all the more pressing that we take seriously the ways in which the ideological and formal diversity of these novels shed light on the political utility of both embodied racial identity in our allegedly “post-racial” moment and of paternal heroes in twenty-first century feminism of color.

II. In Search of Our Fathers’ Genes: A Cultural Genealogy

Given the obvious influence of mother-centered, women of color feminism from the 1970s on these contemporary father-daughter narratives, another title for my dissertation might have been a play on the title of Alice Walker’s famous essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1974): something along the lines of “In Search of Our Fathers’ Genes.” In her piece, Walker urged black female readers to “fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers knew” (237) and to accept from “our mothers and grandmothers… the creative spark, the seed of the flower they never hoped to see” (240). In “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” published one year later, she narrates how, as a young graduate student, she identifies herself as Hurston’s “niece” in order to find out more about the end of the writer’s life and her burial in Fort Pierce, Florida. Walker is determined to locate her literary aunt’s grave and restore her to her rightful place in African American letters.  

7 This essay was later published under the abbreviated title, “Looking for Zora.”
Walker’s investment in recovering the unsung creativity of her maternal forbearers—some her biological relations, others her literary inspirations—is echoed in the writing of Asian American and Jewish feminists. In an interview with Maxine Hong Kingston in 1990, Bill Moyers says, “With the root, with an antecedent that it is in your mother’s stories, and the stories of your grandmother and the stories of your great-great-grandmother”; to which Kingston responds, “Yeah. It goes back forever.” Like Walker, Kingston also had a literary mother: “I must have read *Fifth Chinese Daughter* when I was in the 6th or 7th grade, and it was really, really important, because, up until that moment, I had not encountered a Chinese character in a book, let alone a writer,” she explains in an interview in 1989. “There were such wonderful illustrations of little kids that looked like me, and most importantly, written by a Chinese American woman. So, she gave me this great welcome and send-off, so I continued writing” (Blauvelt 89).

The embrace of mother-figures, particularly literary foremothers, was also prevalent among Jewish second-wave feminism on a “personal quest for a useable past” (Jacobson, *Roots Too* 275). “If the women’s movement had been energized by an angry rejection of *The World of Our Fathers,*” writes Matthew Frye Jacobson, “so was it finally characterized by a loving devotion to the World of Our Mothers. The lives of the foremothers and foresisters, indeed, supplied both weapons and inspiration for the war against patriarchy” (269). Hurston catapulted Walker’s search for her mothers’ stories, and Wong inspired Kingston to write as a Chinese American woman; for Jewish women writers, the 1975 fiftieth-anniversary reissue of Anzia Yezierska’s novel *Bread Givers* was “a signal intellectual event in the emergence of this world-of-our-mothers feminism” (Jacobson, *Roots Too* 271). Yezierska was a novelist of Russian descent known in the
popular press as the “Sweatshop Cinderella.” The novel’s protagonist and Yezierska herself became symbols of feminist dissent; Alice Kessler-Harris wrote in her introduction to the 1975 re-publication that Yezierska was “a revolutionary” (xxv), and that “In the light of the continuing women’s movement, Bread Givers has become more meaningful than ever” (xxxvi). Like Hurston and Wong, Jewish “mothers” did not have to be biological; Yezierska, Emma Goldman and Emma Lazarus were instead “historical and mythic” (Jacobson, Roots Too 273).

Insofar as the 1970s “world of our mothers” feminism required a kind of corporeal essentialism, the adaptation of that essentialism in the contemporary literary turn to paternal discourses necessarily changed the role of bodies. Recent literary criticism on the relationship between embodiment and racial identity reflects this shift at the same time that it attests to the cultural climate around race that has brought about the resurgence of the body. For Caroline Rody, the bodies of mixed-race characters are the

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8 Jacobson narrates this feminist history in the context of the white ethnic revival movement, which was deeply invested in rediscovering the ethnic past. “This feminist pursuit of ‘heroines,’” he explains, “was a wellspring for the growing field of immigration history” (276). For more on the history of Jewish American women writers and the feminist transformation of the ethnic canon, see Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers (1997), edited by Jay L. Halo and Ben Siegal, and Connections and Collisions: Identities in Contemporary Jewish-American Women’s Writing (2005), edited by Lois E. Rubin.

The world-of-our-mothers imperative to claim Yezierska as a feminist role model continues in literary criticism to this day. As recently as 2010, Lisa Botshon’s “The New Woman of the Tenements: Anzia Yezierska’s Salome” in Modern Fiction Studies makes the argument that the focus on Yezierska as an immigrant writer has obscured her feminism. “Instead of perceiving [Salome of the Tenements] as a story of the evolution of a New Woman written by a feminist author, contemporary reviewers discussed its value solely as an immigrant narrative,” she laments. “Similarly, many of today’s scholars who analyze Yezierska’s works also read them within a predominantly immigrant sensibility” (235). Perhaps, though, Botshon also perpetuates a kind of reductionism, assuming that reading Yezierska as an immigrant writer precludes reading her as a feminist, and vice versa. Is there not a way to read her feminism as an outgrowth of her immigrant experiences?

9 These discussions come on the heels of declarations of the “end” of identity politics in the early 2000s. On the one hand, by the time Senna published Caucasia in 1998, the unraveling of 1990s categories of identity seemed well under way in mainstream academic discourse. Consider the title, Is There Life After Identity Politics?, a special issue of New Literary History (2000), which takes for granted not only that identity as a coherent basis for activist politics or academic disciplines had already been dismantled, but
site of “America’s undeniably multiracial future” (viii). Although Rody’s primary focus in *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (2009) is Asian American writing, which she designates “the vanguard of the interethnic” (29), she notes that “the ethnic American novel [of the 1990s] is becoming what I term the interethnic novel” (viii).

While Rody is careful to point out that she embraces neither “the facile celebration of hybridity to which we have become accustomed in mass consumer discourse and imaginary” (4) or a notion of multiculturalism as “a triumphant cultural formation that in any way resolves the social and economic inequalities that continue to plague the American present” (vi), she maintains that both speak to “a drive towards

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that it was now necessary to navigate its aftermath. In their introduction, the editors summarize the “new” way that identities are largely understood in 2000: “‘Identities’ are now plural and ‘intersectional,’ produced by complex negotiations among the realities of race, sexuality, class, gender, and nation. Rather than being understood as innate and positive, identities are now thought of as relational and differential” (622). The quotation marks around “identities” and the stress on “now” in their writing suggest both the instability of the concept of identity, as well as the archaism of the identity politics movements of the previous decade.

Other notable identity politics skeptics include Kenneth Warren and Colleen Lye. In “Does African-American Literature Exist?” Warren claims that in fact, it does not—that “African-American literature was the literature of a distinct historical period, namely, the era of constitutionally sanctioned segregation known as Jim Crow.” What we call “racial identity,” he suggests, is a concept that can be applied to human beings, but not to their cultural production. In a special issue of *Representations* on form (2008), Colleen Lye makes a parallel argument for Asian American texts: that there is no such thing as an Asian American aesthetic. She opposes the “new” formalists to the work of Lisa Lowe, whose “conservation of Asian American identity was waged by politicizing its definition” through “a deconstructive reading of literary texts as the reflection of the necessarily anti-essentialist essence of Asian American identity” (94)—her invocation of “strategic essentialism.” Lye’s solution is to “put form to work” in theorizing what is and has been Asian American literature. But “Because there can be no such thing as an Asian American aesthetic form, a formalistic formalism” would be inadequate for locating Asian American identity. What is needed instead is a “historical formalism” (95), “race construed as form rather than as formation” (99), that would “mitigate against the impulse to naturalize an Asian American ‘race’” (96).

In terms of cultural politics, the ramifications of these arguments are profound: if there is no “African American literature” or “Asian American aesthetic form,” there can be no ethnic “canon”—and reconstructing the canon, of course, had been a major project of ethnic American writers and scholars in an earlier period. In 1987, Toni Morrison argued in favor of expanding the so-called “American” canon to include writers of color, pointing out that “There must be some way to enhance canon readings without enshrining them” (5).
encounter with others… and [a] utopian ideal” (17). And in the novels that Rody reads, this is often the case: Asian American characters do frequently interact with characters of other ethnicities and races to create optimistic, unconventional interethnic subjectivities. For example, in Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), conversion to Jewishness offers the Chinese American protagonist a way out of the traditional “U.S. racial/ethnic hierarchy” and makes “available… an alternate social space for self-exploration and transformation” (193). However, none of the novels in this dissertation depict mixed-race identity or multiracial encounter as approaching any kind of “utopian ideal.” As I discuss in my fourth chapter, even the novel that comes the closest, Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*, defers its mixed-race “paradise” to Hawaii, a location that it never shows to the reader.

In opposition to Rody, skeptics of mixed race studies like Michele Elam claim that there is something sinister about this rush to privilege the mixed-race body as the vehicle of multiracial utopia (and that the literature, at least, has not yet abandoned older, singular categories of racial identity). In *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (2011), Elam addresses the “feting” of mixed race as “an up-and-coming legal and experiential category. Not accidentally,” she points out, “the ascension of mixed-race popularity has been enabled in the post-race… era and in concert with the quiet dismantling of affirmative action and the weakening of traditional civil rights lobbies.” Ringing race’s death knell, she continues, “might seen not only premature but suspect: As Toni Morrison asks in ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken,’ how and why now, after three-hundred years of institutionalized racism, are some people claiming by fiat that race is over?” (xiv). To clarify, Elam does not advocate for a return to biological discourses of race; rather, she expresses doubt about fetishizing mixed-race
bodies as a “corporeal resolution” to racial strife. But the stark contrast between her and Rody reflects the range of contradictory views on the relevance of these older categories, particularly in the context of a poststructuralist, late 1990s skepticism about essentialism, however “strategic.”10

In reaction to what they interpret as the disturbing re-emergence of biological discourses of race, African Americanists like Paul Gilroy argue that “the old, modern idea of ‘race’ can have no ethically defensible place” (6) and that we must be alert to “circumstances in which the body is reinvested with the power to arbitrate in the assignment of culture to peoples” (24). Echoing Gilroy, but speaking from a more specifically genetic perspective, are those who are skeptical about embracing or hewing to older versions of race as genetics. For example, Eric Lott worries about what he calls the “recrudescence of racial biologism” in Gates’ “certification of black roots using the latest in genetic science” (“Criticism” 1522). Both Gilroy and Lott fear that this embrace of biological discourses of race spells the re-emergence of essentialism that scholars of African American literary criticism and critical race theory have been dismantling at least for the past three decades.11 As Bliss articulates, the “renewed interest in the biology of

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11 In “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race” (1985), Anthony Appiah argues that in three texts published from 1897-1940, DuBois is unable to ever fully transcend biological notions of race. In Dusk of Dusk, the last of these texts, DuBois’ contradictory relationship to the “fatherland” of Africa demonstrates that “he cannot quite escape the appeal of the earlier conception of race” (34). (The echo of DuBois’ allegiance to the “fatherland” in Gates’ fashioning of himself as the Great Black Father who will lead his people back to Africa is hard to miss.) Appiah asserts that it is now incumbent on us to arrive at the conclusion to which DuBois could only gesture: that “there are no races”; race only works as a metonym for a culture that biologizes “what is culture, or ideology” (35). In Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987), Hazel Carby indicts racial essentialism through her critique a notion of black feminist criticism that is based on “essentialist views of experience…. This book,” she continues, “does not assume the existence of
race” represented by Gates and others “is surprising given that…. [f]or over half a century, international governing bodies and academic organizations elaborated statements, policies, and theories defining race in terms of social and political dynamics only” (“Racial Taxonomy” 1019). And their concerns are certainly not unfounded. Londa Schiebinger points out that throughout much of modern Western history, scientific fascination with the African body and physique perpetuated the idea of Africans as, at best, exotica to be collected and displayed “along with apes, camels, leopards and elephants” (388).

At least three of the novels in my dissertation indicate that Rody’s stress on the utopian potential of mixed-race, or hybrid bodies, is perhaps misplaced. But their focus on racially distinct bodies and their explorations of political subjectivity through paternal, biological relationships also suggest that Gilroy and Lott’s anti-essentialist wariness about the “power of the body” might be somewhat simplistic. For one thing, as Fuss has pointed out, essentialism does not have intrinsically political connotations, and can be used for reactionary as well as progressive purposes. The fact is, “biology will not simply go away” (Fuss 51), no matter how hard we may wish it so. For another, these scholars rarely speak of women’s bodies: Gilroy and Lott both focus almost entirely on representations of the bodies of African American men. But the novels’ attention to

a tradition or traditions of black women writing and, indeed, is critical of traditions of Afro-American intellectual thought that have been constructed as paradigmatic of Afro-American history” (16).

12 In Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (1993), for example, Lott focuses on the roots of black minstrelsy in the “white obsession with black (male) bodies” (3), particularly with the “rampageous black penis” (25). But even African Americanist criticism that purportedly attends to ethnic female embodiment, such as Laura Doyle’s Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture (1994), has used the mother’s body as a narrative metaphor. Her claim that “Modern mother figures give birth to racial plots” (4) textualizes the female body as narrative form at the cost of eclipsing the actual bodies that shape identity in the literature.
women’s bodies suggests not only that these oft-maligned discourses can operate as the site of political agency, but that they can be deployed in the service of a feminist cause.

The first two novels of my dissertation, *Caucasia* and *Bee Season*, most explicitly rewrite the body-based essentialism that is so often routed through the study of male subjects. *Caucasia*’s narrative of a biracial girl forced to pass as white hearkens back to a previous ideal of racial identity, one in which a biracial girl’s blackness is irrefutable because it is located “on the inside” of her uncomfortable body. Through its representation of Jewishness and its discourse of the body as racial symptom, it retrenches older categories of race as an invisible, embodied, and paternal inheritance. *Bee Season*, meanwhile, challenges a cerebral, text-based, masculine notion of religious identity and identifies the ecstatic, flushed female body as the location of religious truth. This positive figuration of Jewishness as embodied difference rewrites long-established tropes of the Jewish female body as a repository for Jewish anxieties about acculturation, assimilation, and emasculation (Glaser).13

Another dimension that these anti-essentialist, anti-genetics critics have frequently overlooked is that of racial diversity. With *AfricaDNA* as the straw man, it is unsurprising that scholars like Gilroy and Lott, and even Elam and Nelson, focus mostly on African American culture and the racialization of African American (male) bodies. But even Gates’ work on genetics and ethnic “roots” acknowledges the existence of, and has relevance for, multiple races and ethnicities: his PBS series, *Faces of America*, is a noteworthy example. One could argue that Gates’ search for the genetic roots of

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13 As Jennifer Glaser points out, this feminist reclamation of the Jewish female body is a central project of Jewish American women comics such as Diane Nooman, Vanessa Davis, and Aline Kominsky-Crumb.
celebrities like Stephen Colbert or Eva Longoria is a self-serving project, designed to win more viewers and consumers to his particular brand of genomics marketing. But even so, the popular interest in these elaborate exercises in genetic navel-gazing reflects a larger, cross-racial investment in identity and roots, rather the cultural proclivities of any one racial group. As Susan Koshy points out in “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” what is still missing in much work on interracial encounter is a “theorization of the racial structure” in which these encounters take place (160).

With the increasing prevalence of comparative approaches in the field, Asian American studies is well positioned to further illuminate and explain contemporary ethnic American literature’s investment in paternal and embodied identity politics. It is important to note that in the wake of 1970s Asian American cultural nationalism and the identity politics movements of the 1980s and 1990s, the field of Asian American studies has undergone serious transformations. For some time after its publication in 1996, Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* represented the definitive paradigm for Asian American identity: that Asian American’s historical marginalization from the category of American citizenship “locates Asian American culture as a site for the emergence of another kind of political subject,” one who exists “in critical apposition to the category of the citizen” (12). But in the years following *Immigrant Acts*, Asian

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15 Through legal exclusions and inclusions, Lowe explains, the state classifies and produces racialized Asian immigrant identities (19); but it is through culture “that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined…. in antagonism to the regulatory locus of the citizen-subject” (22). Lowe
Americanists like David Palumbo-Liu, Koshy, Kandice Chuh, and Viet Thanh Nguyen have pointed out the limits of Lowe’s model of resistance and opposition and have set the stage for more expansive investigations into Asian American political subjectivity. In addition to these scholars, a number of Asian American feminist critics and scholars of gender, such as Leslie Bow, Laura Kang, and Erin Khuê Ninh, are rethinking the connections between the domestic space of the family and the “social” space of culture, often suggesting that these boundaries are far more porous or unstable than previously realized. However, this criticism overlooks something quite central to the two Asian American novels in my dissertation: the paternal roots of current Asian American cultural politics and feminism.

Both American Woman and All Over Creation consider the birth of Asian American political subjectivity through paternal lineage and historical phenomena that have not been widely discussed in Asian American studies: Asian American radicalism identifies Asian American culture and particularity as uniquely suited to critique and resist the universality proposed by the economic and political spheres of the liberal state (28).

16 In Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier (1999), Palumbo-Liu argues for the flexibility of national identities and boundaries: the so-called “great wall” between “‘Asian’ and ‘American’…. has proven to be porous and unevenly constructed. There is no doubt that ‘Asia’ and ‘America’ have merged and continue to merge” (3). In “Morphing Race into Ethnicity” (2001), Koshy discusses how Asian Americans produced and were produced by whiteness frameworks. She takes to task Lowe’s model for failing to account for structures around race that imbricated Asian Americans not just with whites but with other races. In Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique (2003), Chuh, arguing for “subjectless” discourse, critiques Lowe for retaining the Asian American subject, a move that she claims sediments Asian Americanness in a “narrative of otherness” (6). Finally, Nguyen’s Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America (2002) offers perhaps the most searing implicit critique of Lowe in his assessment that the field of Asian American studies recognizes only resistance as a legitimate vehicle for political subjectivity.

17 Bow focuses on Asian American female writers’ acts of “betrayal” within “ideological structures” (25). Kang asks how “Asian American woman” has been constructed through “historical circumstances, ideological superstitions, and methodological tactics” (3). And Ninh attends to intergenerational conflict in the Asian American family.
among white radicals, and the ecological justice movement, respectively. The novels’ focus on the objectification of their female Japanese American protagonists in mostly white environments, as well as on these protagonists’ ultimate reconciliation with their fathers’ authority, make clear why these settings are unlikely contenders for Asian American feminist attention. But just as *Caucasia* and *Bee Season* suggest that seemingly archaic concepts of essence can have contemporary feminist utility, so too do these Asian American novels’ complex father-daughter relationships offer a broader view of Asian American political agency that is tempered by the multiple processes of assimilation, immigration, changing gender norms, and discourses around the body and embodiment. In particular, the positioning of the Asian American female body in *American Woman* as the site of ideological conflicts and the protagonist’s eventual abandonment of her own radicalism to support her father’s more “traditional” Asian American narrative suggest that so-called radicalism and resistance are much more complex than the field of Asian American studies might realize. That is to say, Asian American female political agency is not just a matter of hewing yourself to your mother’s narrative (as women of color feminism might have it), explicitly resisting racism (as Lisa Lowe would have it), or liberal or progressive politics (as Nguyen argues most of Asian American studies would have it), but about identifying with and even subordinating one’s own radical history to the paternal trauma of discrimination.

Furthermore, my fourth chapter, on Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*, suggests a dimension of mixed-race subjectivity that no recent scholar of comparative ethnic studies, women of color feminism, or Asian American literary studies has yet explored: the political legacy of the *white* patriarch. Compared to the other novels, *All Over Creation*
comes closest to valorizing mixed-race identity, but there is a catch: the progressivism of the mixed-race generation needs to reconcile with the conservatism of the white patriarch in order to gain political efficacy. This equilibrium shapes a politics that is more complicated than Rody’s utopian account of interethnic subjects but also less cynical than Elam’s dismissal of celebratory attitudes about mixed-race people.

III. Fictional Roots: A Literary Genealogy

In light of the first novel in my dissertation, *Caucasia*, and the resurgence of interest in the phenomenon of racial passing, I begin this literary genealogy with a question of that has perplexed writers throughout the twentieth century: what it means for the stability of “race” if one’s racial appearance contradicts one’s racial “authenticity.” As scholars of Jewish American identity at the turn of the century have discussed, Jewishness, which was frequently conceived “in conjunction with notions of Blackness… to navigate the uneasy limits of Whiteness” (Itzkovitz 37), serves as a useful litmus test of passing’s power to demarcate or even undermine the boundaries of racial difference. According to David Itzkovitz, as immigration from non-Nordic Europe rose in the early

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18 As Elam puts it, narratives of racial passing “have risen seemingly from the dead not to bear witness to past issues but to testify in some of the fiercest debates about the viability of race in this ‘beyond race’ era” (98). While Walter Benn Michaels argues that the “possibility of passing… locate[s] race deep down inside” (116) and thus perpetuates a kind of racial essentialism, Elam disputes this point, countering that for him, “racial performance means simply an ensemble of actions abstracted from social relations and context…. Michaels’s model … by conflating identity with essence and performance with ‘nonidentity’ (Michaels 133), trap[s] race within a hermetic equation” (104-05). However, she insists, “one most certainly can pass without subscribing to racial essence” (105); it all depends on what one considers passing, since we’re always concealing something.

19 Michael Rogin looks at the more direct relationship between black and Jewish racialization in this period. *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1998) argues that performing blackface allowed Jewish immigrants to enter and succeed in mainstream American culture “by differentiating them from the black Americans through whom they spoke” (56).
twentieth century—and with it, “native” American anxieties about racial purity—Jews were imagined as the ultimate passers, “a ‘chameleonic race’ whose veins course with what one magazine termed ‘strange chameleonic blood’” (38). Ironically, “the most common ‘fixation’ of Jewishness” (39) was accomplished through the notion that the Jew’s essence lay in his shape-shifting. But these concerns about the Jew’s chameleonic nature emerge from a long history of imagining Jewish difference to be visibly apparent and the Jew himself to be inassimilable. In *The Jew’s Body*, for example, Sander Gilman argues that artists and illustrators have long figured Jewish difference as absolute and located in the body. Since the Christian Bible, he explains, “The pathognomic status of the Jew’s body” has been read “as a sign of the Jew’s inherent difference” (49).

The novels in my first two chapters engage with these derogatory representations of Jewishness as embodied difference, visible and invisible, to positively locate the body as the site of racial and ethnic truth. In *Caucasia*, the half-black protagonist, Birdie, pretends to be half-Jewish in order to conceal her black identity. While others cannot see Birdie’s connection to her estranged black father on her light skin, Birdie herself can feel that connection *on the inside* of that body, particularly through the asthma that she and her father share. By imagining her black father as Jewish, therefore, Birdie turns Jewishness into a stand-in for the invisible, paternal, embodied inheritance of blackness. *Bee Season*, on the other hand, borrows from earlier notions of Jewishness as embodied difference to reflect on Jewish essence itself. Ten-year-old Eliza, with “eyes, nose, and mouth [that] could be Any Jew” (123), has a visibly distinct Jewish body; so distinct, in

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20 Like Lott’s *Love and Theft*, which attends to the white obsession with the black penis, *The Jew’s Body* argues that because of circumcision, much of this body-based anti-Semitism has focused on Jewish male genitalia.
fact, that it stands in for “Any Jew.” Her body already visibly marks her ethnic difference. But the processes she undergoes within her body affirm its location as the site of her spiritual independence and agency. In spite of her father’s textual, cerebral attempts to guide her meditative practice, Eliza discovers on her own that “the trick” to achieving transcendence while spelling “is to think about babies…. She is a mere half something waiting to be made whole…. [N]ow she is a growing thing, the letter present in every fledging heartbeat, every newborn drop of blood” (156). Eliza may already look Jewish, but the fact that she is able to feel Jewish separates her from her father and from the rest of her spiritually confused family.

Where do these literary representations come from? Or, to pose this question through the frame of “world of our mothers” feminism, who are these contemporary novelists’ literary foremothers, and why? At first glance, Caucasia has much in common with Nella Larsen’s novella, Quicksand: both feature a biracial black female protagonist who has an uncomfortable relationship with her body and must cope with abandonment by her black father. Larsen’s novella tells the story of Helga Crane, a young woman born of a black American father and a white Danish mother, who, feeling ever dissatisfied with and entrapped by her various black communities, leaves her teaching position at Naxos, a black school in the rural American South, for her hometown of Chicago, then moves to Harlem, across the ocean to her dead white mother’s native Copenhagen, and back to the United States. What seems to motivate Helga’s flight from one black community to another is the claustrophobia brought on by the presence of other black bodies; the allure of Copenhagen, however temporary, lies in the opportunity for singularity, exoticness, and self-commodification it presents Helga’s black body. Eventually, recognizing the
debasement of her status as an art-object, Helga returns to the United States, where she rapidly sets in motion her transition from a whorish commodity in Denmark, to a “pore los’ Jezebel” in a Harlem church (112), to a rural Christian mother. In the impoverished, unnamed Southern town where her story ends, Helga has become almost overtaken—seemingly trapped in the quicksand—of her endlessly reproducing body.21

Although Helga is an orphan, the racial identity that she tries to escape, but that eventually destroys her body from the inside out, is her father’s. In other words, Helga’s blackness is both inescapable and paternal. Caucasia adapts this narrative of a light-skinned, biracial woman trying to navigate the embodied aspects of her paternally inherited blackness. But whereas Helga is visibly black and wants to escape black community, Birdie is light-skinned enough to pass but desperately wants to reconnect with other black people, in particular to be acknowledged by the black father who abandoned her. Helga’s return to black community is also much more tragic, as her story ends in her physical ruin, whereas Birdie’s reunion with her dark-skinned sister, with whom she has a warm, loving relationship, depicts her return to blackness as affirmative and uplifting. Birdie’s story suggests that at the end of the twentieth century, the paternal inheritance of race is still salient. But now, confirmation of one’s blackness by a biological family member can repair the torn psyche of the mixed-race child who is forced to hide that inheritance and pass as white.

21 Quicksand reflects a popular Modernist rhetoric of black female embodiment as pathological, destructive motherhood. In Jean Toomer’s Cane (1923), for example, the black female body is invoked to describe either a pregnant woman who gives birth to a black song that calls “lost,” northern black men back to their rural, Southern origins; or women whose mothering is so overwhelming that it causes normal male-female roles to be reserved in sexual couplings. This reversal leads to a kind of gendered mayhem in which men burst into song and female breasts become the vehicles of stifling sexual aggression.
Given that the two Asian American novels in this dissertation place their protagonists in political situations that have not received much attention in Asian American literary criticism, it is perhaps not surprising that their literary predecessor is a book that holds a rather vexed position in the Asian American canon: Jade Snow Wong’s memoir, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Like Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* focuses on a daughter from a large immigrant family who leaves home as an independent American but ultimately returns to assume her position as her father’s cultural heir. As indicated by the book’s closing, the most meaningful validation of the protagonist’s entrepreneurial success as a Chinese potter is her father’s recognition of her as his “Chinese daughter” and her re-inclusion into her Chinese family. Despite the fact that it is often read (and dismissed) as a classic “model minority” text that panders to white expectations,22 *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, like *American Woman* and *All Over Creation*, offers a complex view of Asian American female agency that locates itself in the paternal line. Furthermore, both *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *All Over Creation* are heavily sentimental, featuring almost infantilizing father-daughter relationships that bring into focus the challenges of reconciling Asian American feminist independence with patriarchal authority. At his insistence, Jade Snow calls her father “Daddy,” which is what Ozeki’s adult protagonist, Yumi Fuller, voluntarily calls her father, Lloyd. Daddy and Lloyd are both devout Christians and skeptics of American youth culture and gender norms. Despite their conflicts with their fathers’ rigidity, which is often a manifestation

22 In 1975, the *Aiieeeee!* editors established this view with their derisive categorization of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as a “Chinatown Book,” whose “essence… was ‘I’m American because I eat spaghetti and Chinese because I eat chow mein” (xiv). Wong herself was an example of a “patriotic” Chinese American (xvii) who absorbed white supremacist attitudes and wrote “anti-Japanese propaganda disguised as autobiography” (xviii).
of misogyny, the protagonists of all three books—*Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *American Woman*, and *All Over Creation*—actively seek paternal approval and acceptance.

The contemporary novels depart from *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in two crucial ways, however. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade’s success as a potter relies on the hypervisibility of her Chinese American difference: she attracts her (white) customers by spinning her pottery in a storefront window, thus transforming her laboring body into an ethnic spectacle.\(^{23}\) But *American Woman* challenges Asian Americanist and white radical conventions that rely on the visibility of the Asian American female body. Furthermore, in *All Over Creation*, “Daddy” has become white. As a result, Ozeki’s novel complicates *Fifth Chinese Daughter*’s capitalist frame for interracial encounter; it can no longer be interpreted as merely the grounds for white consumption of visible, embodied Asian difference. Instead, it operates more broadly as the site through which the Asian American characters explore and recuperate their white, paternal political legacy in the service of creating a political subjectivity that reflects all aspects of their genetic identity.

IV. From Essentialist to Nationalist: Order and Divisions

While all of my chapters feature father-daughter narratives that foreground the role of the body in the navigation of ethnic gendered subjectivity, the chapters of my dissertation are arranged roughly from “most essentialist” to “most post-racial”—

\(^{23}\) In *Asian/America*, Palumbo-Liu offers a rigorous and thoughtful reading of how Jade Snow’s career as a Chinese potter attempts to reconcile her “spirit” of American independence with the “contingencies” of her Chinese American body (140). I would add that like Sara Smolinsky, the protagonist of *Bread Givers* who gets married but returns home to nurse her father instead of having children, Jade Snow doesn’t *biologically* reproduce Chinese identity. (In fact much has been made of her sexually neutered narrative.) But she does *produce* it through her pottery, which her laboring, hypervisible body creates as a Chinese commodity.
coincidentally in chronological order of their publication dates. I begin with *Caucasia* because it relies most explicitly on earlier notions of racial difference as located on the inside of the racial body. Like its literary predecessors, including *Quicksand*, *Caucasia* suggests that blackness cannot be escaped or denied because its physical internality forecloses its immutability. *Caucasia*’s cynicism about the mixed-race body as a “corporeal resolution” (Elam, *Souls* 96) to racial strife is reflected in Senna’s other work, including her essay, “The Mulatto Millennium.” In addition to reading *Caucasia*, this first chapter positions Senna’s other work as an important contribution to mixed race studies and explores her preference for these older, sometimes problematic notions of racial identity.

While Eliza does not share with Birdie a tormented mixed-race identity or anxieties about passing, the two novels have in common their location of ethnic truth within the body. Therefore, my second chapter continues my analysis of this literature’s investment in ethnic essence located within the body (and transmitted through paternal genetics). *Bee Season* does not reproduce early modern formulations of Jewish essence as inassimilable, or *Bread Givers*’s representation of Jewish female identity as a filial burden that can only be escaped or tempered through secularity. But it borrows from these two discourses in its focus on Jewishness as both an ideological and genetic inheritance from the father, which Eliza then transforms into an embodied experience that generates her spiritual and feminist self-sufficiency.

Like *Caucasia* and *Bee Season*, the two Asian American novels that comprise the second half of my dissertation elucidate the interconnectedness of patriarchal authority and ethnic female embodiment. But their protagonists’ direct interactions with political
activism reflect the particular history of Asian American literature as an outgrowth of the cultural nationalist movements of the 1970s. As Elaine Kim writes in 1992, the canonical boundaries that cultural nationalists like the Aiieeee!! group sought to draw around Asian American literature were appealing in that moment because they demonstrated that “there was such a thing as Asian American literature at a time when most Americans were still insisting that all Asians, regardless of ancestry and nativity, were alike, bound together by cultural otherness” (xi). However, as I mentioned above, since the publication of Aiieeee!, Asian American critics and novelists have sought to revisit this period and reconsider the complex foundations of Asian American political identity.

*American Woman* and *All Over Creation* both take on this period and its political legacy through father-daughter narratives that foreground the role of the female body in navigating radical ideologies. In *American Woman*, as the protagonist, Jenny, conflicts and reunites with her father, so too does the paternal legacy of the Japanese American internment clash and eventually reconcile with 1970s antiwar and anti-activism. In *All Over Creation*, the spirit of the 1970s returns to contemporary Iowa in the ecopolitical activism of modern-day hippies. These politics re-ignite the conflict between mixed-race,

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24 Asian American literature began to be codified as a genre with the 1975 publication of *Aiieeee!!*, an Asian American anthology. The four male editors wrote that the body of writing they had assembled represented “fifty years of our whole voice” and “proves the existence of Asian-American sensibilities of cultures” (x). The so-called Aiieeee!! group privileged a “sensibility” of anger, masculinity, and resistance, and dismissed as “inauthentic” those texts that promoted an image of Asians as “good, loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding” (xii). In the 1990s, Asian American scholars, particularly feminists, began questioning the political applicability of the Aiieeee!! group’s ideologies to the cultural experiences and writings of those who did not fit into their narrow confines of cultural authenticity: women, people of mixed-race, queer people, and non-English speakers, for starters. As King-kok Cheung noted in 1997, against the homogenizing original intention of “Asian American” as a buzzword for political solidarity and cultural nationalism, early 1990s critics like Lisa Lowe and Shirley Lim underlined heterogeneity, exile, and diaspora (*Interethnic* 2).
liberal Yumi and her pro-life farmer-father, but eventually bring them together as well. Both novels were published in 2003, but I discuss *American Woman* first because of its commonality with *Caucasia*: the physical discomfort of its protagonist as a result of the misogyny and racism of her cohort of white radicals echoes the recurrence of Birdie’s asthma in *Caucasia* as a result of her peers’ racist comments. Like *Caucasia* and *Bee Season*, *American Woman* is also invested in a distinct ethnic tradition: in this case, the Japanese American history of internment. In fact, Choi’s narrative has an Asian American literary father, too: John Okada, who wrote *No-No Boy*, a novel about the aftermath of the internment on a generation of young Japanese American men. When *No-No Boy* was rediscovered by Jeff Chan, Frank Chin, and other future members of the *Aiiieeeee!* group in 1970, it was immediately embraced as a book that would help “the world begin to change,” as “just one of the many beautiful and courageous stories of the continuing story of what we know as Asian-America” (Inada vi). The inclusion of Jenny’s father’s familiar internment narrative in the novel’s otherwise unconventional focus on the experience of a Japanese American woman among white radicals grounds the story in an Asian American studies framework even as it challenges the limits and expectations of that framework.

Of all the novels in my dissertation, *All Over Creation*, with its multitude of mixed-race characters and its utopian portrayal of Hawaii as a multiracial paradise, comes closest to the post-racial categorization—and is furthest from Senna’s valorization of distinct, monoracial categories of identity. Unlike Choi, Ozeki does not have a clear literary Asian American forefather; moreover, her novel marks a departure from the others’ explicit focus on the ethnic female body. Instead, the novel’s biological discourse
reaches even further back, its parallels between botanical diversity and racial diversity
(and between reproductive plants and the reproductive female body) echoing early
modern notions about kinship and difference. In addition, its sentimentality reflects the
influence of an earlier African American literary tradition that featured mixed-race
characters who triumph over racial discrimination, including novels such as Charles
Chestnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892).
Despite these earlier predecessors, however, Ozeki’s novel seems the most post-racial
because the novel takes seriously the idea that the politics of ecological justice can serve
as a utopian, racially inclusive home for its mixed-race subject. Even though, as I
conclude in the chapter, those politics ultimately prove inadequate for Yumi and her
family, Ozeki’s sympathetic portrayal of its ideologues leaves their dream of multiracial
paradise open for future reclamation.

V. Women of Color Feminism: In the Name of the Father

As Hazel Carby wrote about black feminist criticism, “feminism” is not an
historical, predetermined given, but a “locus of contradictions” (15). Sometimes the
ideologies that emerge from these novels seem hard to square with the progressivism we
tend to take for granted in contemporary feminist or women of color writing. In *Caucasia*
and Senna’s other writings, her vilification of people who identify as mixed or biracial
(or of those who would valorize such people) can feel grossly misplaced. After all, the
real target of her ire seems to be those who equate multiracial with post-racial—who

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25 For an argument that the early moderns were constantly using plants to work through questions of human
difference, see Jean Feerick’s essay, “Botanical Shakespeares: The Racial Logic of Plant Life in *Titus
Andronicus*.”
insist that the more racially diverse we become as a nation, the less our individual racial
differences matter. By that logic, the possibility of embracing a mixed-race identity
hardly seems just rationale for the queasiness it causes Senna in her non-fiction writing or
for that matter, the vomiting it induces in her fictional protagonist.

*Bee Season* also raises questions about the viability and inclusivity of its feminist
model. At the end of the novel, Eliza defies her father, but the fate of her mother is
unknown: will Eliza’s courage free her mother from the mental asylum to which she has
been driven by narrow-minded, patriarchal ideals of spirituality? Or has her mother, and
all women of her generation, missed her opportunity to regain a positive relationship to
her body and liberate herself? Even the novel’s suggestion of the embodied inescapability
of Jewish identity clashes with a pluralistic ideal of religious identity as a *choice*, as well
as with the agency that Eliza asserts in her decision to defy her father.

Although less invested in the theme of embodiment as ethnic difference, neither
of the Asian American novels is immune from internal contradictions. In *American
Woman*, the decision of a former radical and self-identified feminist to “follow” her
father to the site of the internment feels surprisingly retrograde: must Jenny’s narrative
become subsumed by her father’s in order for them to reconcile? Is there no way for him
to follow *her* into the future, or at the very least for them to walk alongside each other,
perhaps through an honest conversation about his experiences? And in *All Over Creation*,
the projection of Hawaii as the novel’s deferred multicultural paradise elides the state’s
brutal history of racial conflict between indigenous people and Asian settlers. While
Yumi’s return to Hawaii with her mixed-race children and her Japanese mother frames
Hawaii as a refuge for Asians and Americans of mixed-race, native Hawaiians are mute
in the novel. Their silence begs the question, are Ozeki’s Japanese American characters perpetuating the very racist exclusions that she assigns to the novels’ white men?

I would like to close by reiterating that I believe these texts are exemplary of this moment precisely because of these complications and contradictions mentioned above—because they negotiate similar pressures with vastly different results. These moments of tension within and across the novels, I argue, are precisely what make this corpus of literature such a fertile point of exploration for the ideologies that are animating and driving our current cultural conversations about race, gender, and essentialism. Because women’s bodies serve as vehicles of biological reproduction and have metaphorical significance as harbingers or reproducers of ideologies and cultures, female protagonists offer a unique vantage point to explore the role of gender in the formation of ideologies of family, domesticity, labor, and nation. As a result, these four novels powerfully illuminate the construction of a new politics of female ethnic identity that locates itself in the genetic legacy of fathers and makes possible unconventional definitions of ethnic female agency and the political utility of seemingly retrograde concepts like racial essence and patriarchal authority. It is the very paradoxes of father-centered feminism and of the positive reinvention of earlier, highly charged ideas about embodied difference, that make these novels such an important refutation of claims that we are in a post-race, post-feminist, or post-essence age. These novels demonstrate that these terms still have resonance in our contradictory culture—but that the meaning of that resonance is very much open to constant reinvention and re-imagination.
CHAPTER ONE

Black Like Me:
Transforming Hybridity into Authenticity in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*

I. Introduction: The Promise of the Mulatto Millennium

When characterizing recent prevailing attitudes about race, scholars have tended to periodize: thus we are alternatively in the “genomics era” (Nelson 761), the “mulatto millennium,” or the “post-racial” moment. In the genomics era, the idea of race-as-biology pits “‘race’ pragmatists,” for whom “‘race’ is not a biological fact, but a social invention,” against “contemporary ‘race’ naturalists,” who “contend that humans can be classified into groupings that confirm the biological reality of ‘race’” (Nelson 760.) In contrast to this formulation of race as a classifiable, “biological reality,” in the mulatto millennium, “Pure breeds (at least the black ones) are out” (Senna, “Mulatto Millennium” 13). And in the post-racial moment, race no longer defines or divides us: the election to the highest office in the land of an African American man proves that we don’t need to wring our hands about racial difference anymore.¹ The mulatto millennium ideal has

¹ Scholars have referred to this as the “Obama effect.” Myra Mendible explains: “The election of an African American as president has been credited or blamed for a variety of seismic changes in America’s sociopolitical landscape, giving rise to the term ‘Obama Effect.’ The term has been used disparagingly (as in the Citizens United film, *Hype: The Obama Effect*) or approvingly (as in Ray Friedman’s Vanderbilt University study suggesting that Obama’s election may help reduce the test achievement gap between Blacks and Whites).” Mendible cites a study that shows that in 2009, the year of Obama’s inauguration, almost 61.3 percent of white Americans surveyed said that blacks have now achieved racial equality; 21.5 percent believe that they would soon achieve it.
some commonalities with the post-racial: in both, people believe that “the end of race as we know it” (“Mulatto Millennium” 13) is either imminent or a foregone conclusion.

Given that these three conflicting temporalities share the same contemporary stage of racial discourse, it is worth asking, is it possible that they can co-exist in the same present? What is their relationship to each other? Does one best describe the actual, lived experience of race and racial difference? Published in 1998, Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* pre-dates the so-called “Obama effect,” but in many ways presciently anticipates and is occupied with the anxieties and hopes articulated in all three of these temporal categories. *Caucasia* opens in early 1970s Boston, during the childhood years of Birdie Lee. Birdie is the younger daughter of the white radical Sandy, a descendent of the blueblood, WASP Boston elite, and Sandy’s black intellectual husband, the Black Power advocate Deck. Despite her mixed-race heritage, Birdie appears to everyone—her parents, her schoolmates in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, and herself—white. In contrast, her older sister, Cole, with her darker skin, curlier hair, and fuller lips, is commonly perceived to be black.

Because of Sandy’s illegal radical activities, which are never revealed to either Birdie or the reader, she and Deck decide to separate and go underground in order to protect themselves. Deck takes twelve-year old Cole, the daughter who appears black and represents to him “the proof that his blackness hadn’t been completely blanched… that he had indeed survived the integrationist shuffle” (56), to the “grand Mulatto Nation” (355) of Brazil. Sandy takes nine-year old Birdie through various northeastern locales, finally settling in a rural community in New Hampshire four years later. At the start of their flight, in order to distract the federal authorities, Birdie and Sandy assume new, imagined
identities: Sandy becomes Sheila Goldman, widow of the Jewish scholar, David Goldman, and Birdie becomes Jesse Goldman, David and Sheila’s daughter. Birdie’s performed Jewish heritage is the vehicle by which she passes as white, and by which her racially illegible body becomes, in her mother’s words, “the key to our going incognito” (128). It is also, as Birdie is reminded by Sandy, “the closet I was going to get to black” (140) while still appearing white.

_Caucasia_ was published in the midst of the phenomenon of “the last decade” in which “persons of mixed-race have often been represented as hip testimony to American democracy, the corporeal resolution of racial diversity and national unity” (Elam, “Passing” 749). In Senna’s own words in the same year as _Caucasia_’s publication, “hybridity is in. America loves us in all of our half-caste glory” (“Mulatto Millennium” 12). Senna wryly depicts her ambivalence towards this new fashion throughout her fiction. In the short story “Resemblance” (2007), a husband and wife whom others assume comprise an “interracial” couple are actually both black: “We were supposed to be the next generation, all new-fangled and melting-potted, but instead I felt like a Russian nesting doll” (769). The narrator is unable to embrace her fashionable identity and instead feels awkwardly trapped and immobilized by her racially illegible body.

In the past two decades, American literature has well reflected the cultural shifts behind the “phenomenon” that Elan cites, increasingly featuring plotlines that foreground mixed-race characters and cross-cultural encounters. Unsurprisingly, the literary criticism has followed suit. In my introduction, I mentioned Caroline Rody’s _The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction_ (2009) as a text that exemplifies critical idealization of hybrid and mixed-race identities in American
fiction. Rody describes the characters of “interethnic” literature as “embodiments and spectacles of charged, riddling, potentially liberating multiethnic fusion” (iii) across ethnicities and races. And it is the mixed-race children in these novels, specifically, who emblematize the literature’s “new vision…. [a]nd… image America’s undeniably multiracial future” (viii).

Given her interest in the growing centrality of interethnic encounters in American fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a critic like Rody would seem to offer a useful paradigm through which to understand the depiction of Birdie’s biracial identity generally and her relationship to her adopted ethnicity of Jewishness specifically. As a biracial child who performs Jewishness, Birdie could easily be read as one of Rody’s “fictional personages who creatively, spectacularly master[s] and hybridize[s] multiple cultural codes” (ix). Furthermore, Rody’s figuration of interethnic characters as liberated embodiments of cultural crossings reflects the influence of Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), which presents what is perhaps still the foremost reading of the literary mulatta. According to Carby, the late nineteenth-century mulatta embodied mediation between the races and was able to transcend their socially enforced, inessential, differences: “the mulatta figure allowed for movement between two worlds, white and black, and acted as a literary displacement of the actual increasing separation of the races” (90). Carby’s historical mulatta is thus a symbol of racial fluidity and travel, a figure whose “movement” back and forth between the races signaled a kind of social freedom and agency. Carby’s book, “mulatto millennium” ideology, and Rody’s interethnic paradigm all belong to and shape a cultural and literary discourse of
identitarian “crossing” that would position *Caucasia* as a similar celebration of fluid, mobile mixed-race identity.

However, both Rody and Carby’s approaches preclude a protagonist like Birdie, who not only refuses to accept the mantel of the iconic tragic mulatta—“I didn’t want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else” (321)—she does not want to be a *mulatta* at all. On the contrary, much like Senna, who as a child identified as “a black girl” (“Mulatto Millennium” 15), Birdie wants to be *black*. Through its depiction of this mixed-race child’s desire for one, unambiguous racial identity and nostalgia for the clear-cut categories of racial identity that were prevalent at the time that the book takes place, the novel carefully unravels the contemporary pressure both on that *child* to embody, through “liberating multiethnic fusion,” a “corporeal resolution” to America’s interracial strife, as well as on fiction itself to provide “reparative cross-ethnic dialogue” (Rody 4). *Caucasia*’s relevance in this so-called “post-race” moment, then, is its articulation of the need to expand our critical vocabulary about mixed-race identity so that it can begin to account for a late twentieth-century passing protagonist who, despite all of her experiences performing identity, is never satisfied to remain “incomplete—a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping toward completion—half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked” (137). Instead, Birdie wants, quite simply, to be black.

The manifestation of Birdie’s desire for blackness through performed Jewishness is particularly complicated given that Jews comprise an ethnic group that has also historically “passed” for white. A century after the arrival of a massive wave of Eastern European Jews, however, American Jews today are widely regarded as no longer needing
to “pass.” They have shed their ethnic difference enough, the theory goes, to have become permanently white. While many literary and cultural critics have discussed this cultural transition of Jewish immigrants into American whiteness over and against blackness, recent critical work has largely focused on Jewishness’s destabilization of a black/white binary of racial identity. Like David Itzkovitz, who positions Jews as reforming this binary into a “triangle” of ethnicity (37), Lori Harrison-Kahan designates Jewishness a “third term” that is “integral to contemporary narratives in which characters negotiate…the color line” because it “reinscrib[es] the biracial binary of black and white in forms of more complex categories of identity” (22).

By teasing out the ethnic particularity of Jewishness from other kinds of “whiteness,” such observations can deconstruct racial categories that were previously understood to be monolithic. But ultimately, this way or reading Jewishness turns out to

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3 Itzkovitz compares the overlapping histories of black and Jewish attempts to assimilate, or “pass,” into whiteness: Jews, he writes, were seen at the turn of the century as a “chameleonic race” (38) whose “‘natural place’… is in passing” (42). He considers the ways that modern American writers used Jewishness “in conjunction with notions of Blackness… to navigate the uneasy limits of Whiteness” (37).

4 Rody’s reading of Gish Jen’s novel, *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), gives a similar account of Jewishness: it is a white ethnic identity that offers its Chinese American, Jewish convert protagonist a way out of the traditional “U.S. racial/ethnic hierarchy,” making “available… an alternate social space for self-exploration and transformation” (193). And in the fiction of biracial Jamaican-British Zadie Smith, whose own racial composition more closely resembles Senna’s than it does Jen’s, Jewishness is once again “an available middle term, neither black nor precisely white” (122). While Rody’s discussion of Jewishness in Asian American literature already complicates the aforementioned “black/white binary,” not least because it re-visions that binary as a multiracial “hierarchy,” it should be noted that her conclusions about the meaning of Jewishness as a kind of alternative, or “third” space in this fiction nonetheless echo those critics who do not make reference to Asian Americans or their cultural production.
belong to the same ideology as recent celebrations of racial hybridity. For one thing, the positioning of Jewishness as the ethnicity that straddles distinct racial categories only serves to reify those categorizations in the first place. That is, for Jewishness to be a “middle term” between blackness and whiteness, blackness and whiteness themselves have to be fixed entities. For another, the investment of Jewishness with the power to straddle distinct racial categories is almost always tethered to its alleged ability to fuse racial opposites and embody a complete hybrid subjectivity—what Rody calls “the living nexus of an expanding interethnicity” (6). Put another way, Jewishness, as the ethnicity that functions between the two ends of the racial binary, is supposed to embody the fusion of that binary: Jewishness as not only neither black nor white, but both black and white.\(^5\)

When applied to literature like *Caucasia*, such an investment risks altogether missing Senna’s provocative take on the relationship between black and Jewish identity.\(^6\) As the first section of this chapter will discuss, in *Caucasia*, Birdie’s passing for Jewish becomes not a means to achieve hybridity of black and white, but “a mode of staying black” (Elam, *Souls* 115).\(^7\) This is because Jewishness connects her to her black father,

\(^5\) In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Jacobson usefully probes this formulation as a possible contradiction when he asks “not are they white, nor even how white are they, but how have they been both white and Other?” (176).

\(^6\) For example, according to Itzkovitz, “the most common ‘fixation’ of Jewishness” in the modernist era “was accomplished, paradoxically, through the notion of chameleonism—the idea that Jewish identity could be characterized only in terms of unstable shape-shifting” (39). In “a period in which broad demographic and economic changes opened new possibilities for travel across class, cultural, and national boundaries” and thus new opportunities for the destabilization of the white, upper-class Anglo-American mainstream, Jewish chameleonism represented an especially pointed threat to the “comfort and clarity of absolute difference”: “If the Jew could become White, then anyone could become a ‘Jew’” (40). It is important to stress, however, that this discourse of Jewish chameleonism suggested that any “decent,” “mainstream” white American was at risk for “becoming” Jewish. It did not follow that actually being Jewish represented a “fusion” of whites with non-whites.

\(^7\) I find Elam’s turn of phrase useful, but whereas she focuses on recent adaptations of the passing narrative, I am more interested in the specific function of Jewishness in the articulation of Birdie’s black identity.
Deck. When Birdie and Sandy’s landlady in New Hampshire, Libby Marsh, asks Birdie if she inherited her so-called “dark looks” (140) from her Jewish father, Birdie responds, “My dad had a Jewfro” (196). “Jewfro” not only signals the similar differences of African Americans and Jews from mainstream, Anglo-American whiteness; it facilitates the amalgamation of two bodies, the substitution of her real black father for her imaginary Jewish father, and vice versa. In other words, having an imaginary Jewish father allows Birdie to metaphorically keep her black father.

What is at stake in *Caucasia*, then, is a novel which defies post-racial expectations and instead retrenches older categories of race as an invisible, embodied inheritance. One way the novel does this is through its representation of Jewishness; the other, I argue in the second section of this chapter, is through a discourse of the body as racial symptom: Birdie’s asthma. The ailment, which Birdie inherited from Deck, serves to establish a hidden bond between her body and that of her father, one that he does not

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8 Birdie’s imaginary father’s “Jewfro” has particular historical resonance given the parallels between scientific discourses of Jewish and African American physiognomy in nineteenth-century America. Jacobson writes, “The presumed immutability of the Jews became a staple of American science by mid-[nineteenth] century, even though slavery and the question of Negro citizenship still dominated racial discussion. In *Types of Mankind* (1855) Josiah Nott remarked that the ‘well-marked Israelitish features are never beheld out of that race’; ‘The complexion may be bleached or tanned […] but the Jewish features stand unalterably through all climates.’” (*Whiteness* 180)

The entanglement of Jewish nationalism with Jewish racialism is exemplified in Moses Hess’s 1862 text, *Rome and Jerusalem*: “Jewish noses cannot be reformed, nor black, curly, Jewish hair be turned through baptism or combing into smooth hair” (qtd. in Jacobson, *Whiteness* 184). Like that of the enslaved Negroes, the physical appearance of Jews was thought to be an inerasable, external manifestation of an immutable, internal racial distinctiveness.

9 *Caucasia’s* depiction of asthma as genetic/racial inheritance aligns Senna with the group identified by Nelson as the naturalists. Naturalists “argue that genetic markers can be used to predict an individual’s geographic origins, with… ‘geography’ serving as a proxy for race” (760). These formulations provide an important context for, and underscore the relevance of, Senna’s own epistemology of race; for even if we wish to reject “a reductive understanding of ‘race’ as genetic fact, [it] should not preclude investigations into the ways in which biological discourses contribute to racial formation processes beyond the lab and the clinic” (761).
share with the darker-skinned daughter he prefers: “I had inherited only two things from
my father—asthma and eczema, both of which Cole had been spared” (113). It thus belies
Deck’s insistence on his racial dissimilarity with Birdie and exposes the superficiality of
his concept of blackness that motivates his preference for Cole. At the same time, in its
invisibility, asthma becomes a corporeal metaphor for Birdie’s secret black father. Finally,
by signaling a weak and unhealthy body—which, it should be noted, is different from a
body in physical trauma or pain—her asthma attacks push back against an idealization of
the mixed-race body as a cure for interracial conflict or as the harbinger of a multiracial
utopian future. Instead, through its insistence on her biological relationship to Deck,
asthma becomes a means by which her body reasserts her blackness.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how, by representing blackness as
an irrefutable identity located inside Birdie, the novel ultimately transforms racial
hybridity into a kind of racial authenticity. It will do so by turning to “El Paso,” Birdie’s
novel within a novel; a scene of embodied identification with black teenagers on the steps
of the Metropolitan Museum; the novel’s closing passages; and Senna’s essay, “The
Mulatto Millennium” (1998). It will also place Senna in contention with contemporary
scholars who critique similar recent attempts to re-install an “old, modern idea of ‘race’”
(Gilroy 6). Finally, the chapter will press further on the ramifications of Senna’s rejection
of hybridity as a meaningful identitarian category and her preference for the sense of
belonging that an “earlier” notion of blackness offers her and her fictional protagonist, in
order to determine just how successful Senna’s novel is in reclaiming the so-called
“mulatto millennium” for a “black girl” like her.
II. Dark Looks and Jewfros: How Jewish Becomes Black

In *The Interethnic Imagination*, Rody’s reading of Jewishness in *Mona in the Promised Land* exemplifies her paradigm of the interethnic novel that foregrounds cross-cultural encounters in the service of creating interethnic subjects. She locates *Mona’s* Jewishness in “the spirit of the 1970s,” which she identifies as “American interethnic communalism” (25)—incidentally, the same era in which *Caucasia* takes place. And although these two novels differ greatly in tone and subject matter, they are arguably both pervaded by that “spirit”: as Jen herself puts it, the 1970s were a period “when ethnicity was being invented… on the heels of the civil rights movement, when blacks were turning blacker, and young Jews were becoming more Jewish, partly… following the model of black people” (qtd. in Rody 99). 10 While *Caucasia* does not depict the relationship of Jews to their ethnic identity in this period, Jen’s historical positioning of the black power movements as fashionable models for non-black minorities provides relevant background for Birdie’s desire to identify herself through the pervasive trend of race-pride.

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10 Rody expands on this history in an endnote: “This era saw the development of new Jewish American spiritual practices and institutions like the chavurah movement (grassroots, experimental, egalitarian prayer and study communities) and later the movement called Jewish Renewal (which draws upon Jewish mystical traditions; feminist, environmentalist, and pacifist politics; and even non-Western spiritual traditions to reinvigorate Jewish practice)” (168).

For more on the ethnic resurgence of white descendants of immigrants primarily from southern and eastern Europe, see *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Identity* by Marilyn Halter (2000). Halter argues that this movement encompassed “a cultural alternative to assimilation and a political alternative to individualism for both black and white ethnics” (4) and was strongly influenced by the evolution of modern consumer capitalism. Whereas Jen depicts Jews becoming “more Jewish” as the result of their emulation of Black Power, for Halter, the crucial factor for the resurgent Yiddishkeit (Ashkenazi Jewish culture) in this period was timing: “Just as the older generation was dying off, the younger one burst forth with an ethnic revival” (153). See also Jacobson’s *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (2006): “The example of Black Nationalism and the emergence of multiculturalism had provided a new language for an identity that was not simply ‘American’” (2). Jacobson’s focus is premised on the role not only of “ethnic pride and a newfound passion for genealogy,” but of “the culture industries” (4).
In addition, some aspects of Rody’s reading of Mona arguably apply to Birdie:

“American Jewishness operates in such a way as to realize simultaneous senses of difference and of membership in collectivity” (100). But the central difference of the role of Jewishness in these two novels is the nature of the “collectivity” it presents. According to Rody, Jewishness allows Mona to become not Chinese or American, per se, but a Chinese kind of American, and thereby an American: “Jewishness becomes, for Mona, ironically, a route to finding her own minority American identity. That is, turning Jewish is the best way she can find to turn American circa 1970” (102). For Mona, the “interethnic identification” with Jewishness represents an American “total freedom to transform and remake the self” (97) and facilitates her belongingness in “the (scarred) home of the multicultural American dream” (107). As I began to discuss above, Jewishness in Caucasia serves altogether dissimilar purposes. Birdie does not identify with Jewishness in order to remake herself as more “American.” For one thing, the issue of belonging to the American nation-state is irrelevant to her, or at least unmentioned in the novel. For another, she is not “remaking” herself from something else into black; instead, she is asserting her blackness as what she has always been.

Furthermore, when Sandy first comes up with the idea at the start of their fugitive wanderings, Birdie is initially quite reluctant to try to pretend to be Jewish at all: “I don’t know. Italian, maybe? I like spaghetti,” she suggests as an alternative, recoiling from the prospect of having to eat gefilte fish (130). Of the first four years of their lives on the run, before they arrive in New Hampshire Birdie remembers, “We played up my Jewishness only some of the time; other times we nearly forgot about it” (140). It is only in New Hampshire, when Jewishness evolves from a disembodied disguise to a form of black
embodiment, that it develops from a vehicle for Birdie to “stay white” to one that allows her to remain black. And unlike Mona, Birdie is not merely “borrowing others as models of cultural self-positioning” (Rody 124). She is not “borrowing” because she never “returns” these models in their original form. Instead, she is adapting, even reformulating Jewishness as an ethnicity that secretly positions herself as black. Enhanced by Sandy’s insistence that Birdie “wasn’t really passing because Jews weren’t really white, more like an off-white” (140), Jewishness offers Birdie the opportunity to “preserve some of the blackness she is forced to repudiate” (Harrison-Kahan 26) as Jesse Goldman.

Although the racially illegible Birdie has “a lot of choices” for identities that will explain her “dark looks” (140)—among them “Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek” (130)—Sandy chooses Jewishness because she believes it will allow her daughter to pass as white and thereby “throw [the Feds] off our trail” (128). In particular, Sandy’s creation, David Goldman, transforms Birdie’s racially unintelligible features into Jewish ones: “David was funny as hell with a mop of curly black hair, an afro, the way Jews have sometimes” (131). But while Sandy believes that Jewishness’s embodied racial distinctiveness will erase, or at least explain, via a kind of ethnicized whiteness, the “dark looks” that Birdie inherited from her black father, his so-called Jewish features align him with Jews and foreshadow Birdie’s assertion of her (father’s) blackness through her purported Jewishness. The “afro” that Sandy gives David is no doubt a relic from Sandy and Deck’s first meeting, when she was a high school student and Deck was one of her father’s star pupils at Harvard: Deck “was not very dark, and his features were not very African…. His hair wasn’t so wooly, either. It was more like that of some Jews she had seen who had afros” (34). Just as Deck’s hair looks Jewish, David’s “Jewfro” looks
African American, allowing her to confuse the distinction between her imaginary Jewish father, David, and her real black father, Deck, and to begin the process of transforming the one into the other.\textsuperscript{11}

Birdie’s original attitude towards her mother’s claim that Jewish identity will erase her blackness and allow her to pass as white is one of skepticism and anxiety. In their shared childhoods, Birdie and Cole create a language called Elemeno and imagine that the Elemenos are “a shifting people, constantly changing their form… in a quest for invisibility… a fight for the survival of their species” (7).\textsuperscript{12} Birdie and Cole speak Elemeno only to each other; no one else understands it, and as Birdie’s time away from Cole increases, she realizes she is forgetting more and more of the language they invented together. Although Birdie understands from both her parents that the ability to disappear comes with a certain amount of power, early on she wonders whether the Elemenos’, and later her own, chameleonic behavior is worth the high cost of indefinitely eradicating her blackness: “What was the point of surviving if you had to disappear?” (8).

During her younger years as Jesse Goldman, her mandatory performance of Jewish

\textsuperscript{11}Ironically, for the black characters, “Jewish” physical features on a black person indicate, if not whiteness, a kind of comically impure blackness. Deck “tried growing [his hair] big one year and it looked funny. Someone… patted it, giggled, and said, ‘Man, you got a Jewfro!’” (196). It should be noted, however, that Birdie’s transformation of Jewishness from proof of whiteness to a form of blackness, while central to the novel’s larger challenge to a figuration of hybrid bodies as a curative to purist notions of race, does not advocate racial purity as such. That is, Birdie is not “less black” because she is part-white.

\textsuperscript{12}Senna’s skepticism about the viability of a separatist, utopian nation for mixed-race people that would allow them to survive racism appears in both her non-fiction and fiction. In “The Mulatto Millennium,” she writes sardonically that when she wakes up to discover that mulattos “were everywhere…. I thought I’d died and gone to Berkeley” (12). In her second novel, Symptomatic (2004), Greta, the co-worker of the protagonist, Rachel, confides to the latter, “You know what? I think we should start our own nation… And we could fill it with people just like us. And never have to deal with the bullshit again” (50). That Greta turns out to be possessive and deranged to the point of attempting to murder Rachel conveys Senna’s skepticism towards the viability of her ideology.
identity is fraught by her adaptation of this question: What was the point of surviving the Feds if she had to make her blackness disappear?

Birdie’s early experiences of disembodiment while pretending to be the half-Jewish Jesse Goldman suggest that initially, she views Jewishness only as an uncomfortable cover of her blackness. In her sexual experiences as Jesse, she wields little control over her racial identity or her sexual role. She has her first heterosexual encounter as a twelve-year old with the fifteen-year old son of her and Sandy’s landlords. Nicholas Marsh tells her about the one time he had sex, with a prostitute he and his friends bought in Amsterdam: “She was this fat black chick from Africa or something. They had white girls, too, and some Chinese girls, but they cost more than we had. I heard that black girls were supposed to be good anyway…. We all took turns with her” (199). Ignorant that Birdie is actually of the same race as the degraded, anonymous prostitute, Nicholas began “rubbing my flat chest and pressing his groin against me” (203). This physical intimacy disturbs Birdie because it “felt too real, proof that the game had gone too far” and that she was in danger of obliterating her true identity. She thus insists, “It wasn’t Birdie, but Jesse, who lay beneath him” (203). Touching Nicholas would mean that their relationship is not “make-believe,” but that it is the “real” her, the black, formerly “top” Birdie, who is participating. Detaching herself from her own body and positioning Jesse instead as the passive girl who “lay beneath” Nicholas therefore allows Birdie to safeguard her black self with the disguise of the half-Jewish Jesse.13

13 Birdie’s belief that heterosexual embodiment as Jesse Goldman would negate her blackness is a consistent trope throughout the novel. Months later, when Nicholas is away at boarding school, Birdie revisits her hope that one way to protect her blackness is through sexual abstinence. She realizes, “Maybe I would never be able to go all the way with a white boy…. Allowing a white body inside of me would make my transformation complete…. Maybe I would remain a virgin forever, never letting anything penetrate me” (274).
Separating herself from her actions as Jesse Goldman is a form of self-defense against the dubious act of “passing” for Jewish (and thus white) and denying her blackness: it is this other girl, Jesse, who “lived” these scenes in white, racist, working class New Hampshire; Birdie only “witnessed” them (190). Disembodiment allows the real Birdie to stay intact under the performance, particularly when she witnesses the racism and anti-Semitism of her peers, including her best friend, Mona.

And when I heard those inevitable words come out of Mona’s mouth… nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie—I only looked away into the distance…. [T]here was a safety in this pantomime…. [M]y real self—Birdie Lee—was safely hidden beneath my beige flesh… preserved, frozen solid. (233)

In fact, the performance itself is what protects Birdie Lee, trapped beneath the costume of her Jewish whiteness, waiting to emerge.

By the time she leaves New Hampshire and Sandy at age fourteen in search of her father and sister, however, Jewishness has been transformed from a mere performance of whiteness to a signifier of the intractable racial difference she has to protect. Birdie’s experience of anti-Semitism, which reminds her that Jewishness does not obliterate her outsider status after all, causes her to begin to regard Jewishness as a kind of proxy, not just a cover, for the blackness she has to hide. Birdie’s bodily performance of Jewishness is largely enacted by accessorizing: Sandy “had bought me a Star of David somewhere along the way, a cheap one from a pawn shop” (140), which Birdie wears every day. She thus first regards Jewishness as a costume that she can remove from her body at will, in much the same way that she detaches herself from her body during her performances as

“honeymoon” with her female friend Alexis, did not damage the real “Birdie” hidden within her passing body, sexual penetration by a white boy would render her conversion to whiteness final and irreversible. Far from representing a valorized vision of the hybrid body as racially fluid, Birdie’s same-sex desire, or at least her lack of sexual interest in boys, only exacerbates her wish to incubate her blackness in anticipation of the day she can openly embrace it.
Jesse, without tampering with her internal blackness. The anti-Semitic incident causes her to see her necklace differently. As one boy throws pennies at Birdie,

He was looking at my chest, not my face, and for a moment I thought he was admiring my breasts.

I looked down as if to check whether they had grown overnight. But they were as flat as ever….

“Fuckin’ kike. I’m talking to you. Do you want another penny?”

I looked down again, this time noticing my Star of David, thick and gleaming in the sunlight. I only realized then that they were throwing pennies at me because I was Jesse Goldman, daughter of David Goldman. I felt a pang of loyalty toward this imaginary father, and touched the necklace. (246)

Birdie’s confusion and surprise over why she has gained the boys’ attention reveals her assumption that it is her body’s boyishness, not its visible racialized difference, that makes her distinct from the other girls. But when she looks down, her necklace, lying near the undeveloped breasts that she originally thought were the reason for the boys’ interest, is positioned as a kind of prosthetic body part: it causes her body to convey her Jewishness in the same way a racial physical trait—like hair or skin color—would. The “sense of loyalty” toward her imaginary father that seeing (and touching) the necklace evokes for Birdie demonstrates that Jewishness begins to stand in for her other ambiguities that she wants to maintain but has to conceal: her same-sex desire and her race.

Mona’s first question after the incident demonstrates that far from deploring the anti-Semitism she just witnessed, her main priority is figuring out whether Birdie deserved the attack—that is, whether Birdie is in fact an ethnic outsider. “So, are you Jewish, or what? I mean, is that what that necklace is for?” she demands. Birdie, realizing that the other girls “had discussed this before,” responds, “Well, not really Jewish. I mean, only my dad was, and he’s dead. And to be really a Jew, you have to have a mother who
is Jewish” (247). Birdie’s peers’ anti-Semitism makes clear that these characters neither share contemporary critics’ celebration of Jewishness as a “third term” of ethnicity that breaks down racial binaries, nor understand Jews to be privileged with “easy assimilation,” as Rody writes of American Jews in the 1970s (92). Instead, Birdie’s peers regard her purported Jewish heritage as a sign of intractable ethnic difference from their mainstream, indistinctive whiteness, which warrants ostracizing only slightly less potent than would blackness.

Within a week of the incident, “I took off the Star of David and put it at the bottom of my underwear drawer” (247). Thus, whatever interethnic identity Birdie appears to assume in the moment of the anti-Semitic incident, she hastily attempts to remove and abandon. However, the necklace “left a vaguely greenish tint on the skin below my collarbone” (140). Despite being removable, the symbol of Birdie’s Jewishness marks her skin with the visible, dermal remnants of difference, intimating and emphasizing her racial difference as a black girl that the necklace is meant to disguise. The tint that the necklace leaves on Birdie’s skin suggests that it isn’t Jewishness itself that causes her alienation from her peers; Jewishness is only standing in for the difference that others cannot see. The remnant of the Jewish star privately reminds Birdie of her true, invisible racial difference.

Only Samantha, the visibly biracial girl at Birdie’s school, acknowledges that whether or not Birdie is “really Jewish,” or the same kind of white as the other girls, misses the point; because Jewishness triggers Samantha’s verbal recognition of the blackness she and Birdie share, their exchange emphasizes Jewishness’s role as a means for Birdie to protect, and thus keep, her real black identity. When Birdie asks Samantha at
a party, “What color do you think I am?” Samantha’s initial response, “Nora said you were Jewish. I saw you wearing that star thing they all have to wear. Yeah, Jewish,” deeply disappoints Birdie, who, “feeling a weight of resignation in my chest,” wants to be recognized as one “color” only: black. She tries to explain to Samantha, “I’m not Jewish. My mom’s not Jewish. She has to be Jewish for me to be Jewish, really, and she’s not” (285). Although she insists as she did with Mona that she is not “really” Jewish, this time, she is not doing so to appear adequately white; rather, she wants Samantha to understand that if Jewish is not her “color,” something else must be. Samantha takes the bait: when Birdie asks, “What color are you?” she replies, “I’m black. Like you” (286). Talking about Jewishness allows Birdie to raise the question of “color” or blackness; Jewishness therefore operates as the catalyst for Samantha’s recognition of their shared blackness. And while “color” shifts the relevant category of identity from ethnicity or religion to race, it is important to note that Samantha never has to identify Birdie’s “color” as not Jewish in order to identify them both as black. Jewishness has not been abandoned; it has just been subsumed by Birdie’s black identity.

Jewishness might become temporarily irrelevant as a “color,” but its symbolic function has become too embedded in Birdie’s identity as a black girl to ever fully disappear. Despite Birdie’s insistence to these two girls—one white, one “black like” her—that she’s not “really” Jewish, she is never willing to completely shed the bodily “proof” of her Jewish identity, and even mixes it with the trappings of her black identity: when she leaves New Hampshire to find Deck and Cole, she takes only “the essentials—my box of negrobilia” and the Star of David (287). While it is crucial to consider that she never wears the necklace again in its intended form, and admits that she “wasn’t sure
why” she took it (287-88), she includes it with her “negrobilial box,” a collection of “queer useless objects—Black Power junk from the seventies” (381) that her father and Cole had left her just before their departure and to which she had been compulsively adding ever since. Although the one possession in her backpack that has nothing to do with her “real” self, the Star of David is “the only object that seems to make any sense” (381). During her years as Jesse Goldman, the artifact of the necklace, by becoming a part of her body, becomes integral to the lie her body tells about her racial identity. By the end of her time as Jesse, the Star of David, which had been the only legible symbol of ethnic difference during this period, has become a corollary for her “real” racial otherness that she has kept hoarded out of sight among her negrobilia. In other words, her fake Jewish identity has come to stand in for her real black identity to the point that the distinction between them has become not only almost impossible to detect, but irrelevant, because Jewishness has become a kind of blackness. Ultimately, then, Jewish identity hits closer to home for Birdie than even Sandy had predicted: rather than “the closest I was going to get to black and still stay white” (140), performing Jewishness becomes for Birdie the closest she can get to white and still stay black.

III. Asthma: The “Proof” of Invisible Blackness

The previous section of this chapter explored how Birdie’s relationship to her Jewish identity complicates a vision of the mixed-race child who seamlessly blends multiple identities “together… within a single body” (Harrison-Kahan 24) and thereby assumes a subjectivity “beyond race.” Instead of facilitating Birdie’s embodiment of multiracial fusion, Birdie’s adoption of Jewish identity reinforces her blackness. In this
section, I will discuss how Birdie’s asthma attacks perform a similar function, albeit through a very different process: as a physical connection to Deck’s body, asthma links her to a racial essence she shares with her father, and becomes a means by which Birdie asserts her desire to identify, and to be identified, as a black girl.

Because there is nothing specifically African American about asthma, it would be tempting to read it as a universal ailment that marks the body outside of race. However, to do so would miss the highly unconventional way in which Caucasia re-signifies asthma as “proof” of irrefutable race on the inside. Implicit in Birdie’s longing for a more inclusive, less visual, but nonetheless clear-cut, embodied category of black identity is a challenge to the idealism that privileges racially mixed and illegible bodies as the solution to the race-based conflicts that divided the previous generation.  

Asthma’s primary function is to reinforce the embodied connection between Deck and Birdie, to whom he is often blind. Deck’s preference for Cole seems to result from his projection onto his daughters of his own desire to appear “black.” While Cole was Deck’s “special one” and “prodigy” (55), he never seemed to see me at all. Cole was my father’s special one…. She was the proof that his blackness hadn’t completely blanched…. that he had indeed survived the integrationist shuffle…. the small dusky body, the burst of mischievous curls (nappier than his own), the full pouting lips (fuller than his own). Her existence told him… that his body still held the power to leave its mark. (55-56)

Birdie suspects that the fact that Cole’s “hair was curly and mine was straight... must have had something to do with the fighting” (29) between her parents; in other words, that the visual ambiguity of her racial identity is to blame for the dissolution of Sandy and Deck’s marriage. The destruction of an interracial relationship at least in part because of its offspring’s troublingly “non-black” appearance further challenges the hopeful vision, asserted in one text to which Caucasia has been compared, Rebecca Walker’s Black, White, and Jewish (2002), of an interracial union producing a “Movement Child” (Walker 24) whose “mixed-race integrated body might help create” a world in which the racial differences of the previous generation are reconciled (289).
Deck can see only Cole because unlike Birdie, she validates his racial virility: *her* body attests to the “power” of *his* body to pass on black features that are even “blacker” than his own. In contrast, Birdie’s light skin and straight hair embody for him a capitulation to the “blanching” force of his mixed-race marriage; her body offers him no “proof” that she is his racial offspring, the recipient of his blackness. In Birdie, Deck witnesses the dilution of his black masculinity, and thus she becomes invisible as a potential inheritor of his race-theories. While when they are still all living in Boston, Deck lectures Cole on racist conspiracies every chance he can get, Birdie reports that “He usually treated me with a cheerful disinterest” (56).

In opposition to this neglect, the mutual ailment of asthma, from which the preferred, darker Cole was “spared,” reinforces the invisible connection between her body and that of her father: “I felt my breathing shorten, and I felt comforted by that shortness, invisible proof that I was his daughter. I had a brief strange fantasy that he would take me to Egypt that summer to do research, just the two of us” (113). Here at last is the “proof” for which Birdie envies Cole, and it is explicitly connected to her father’s race-pride and black nationalist research: if Cole’s dark body is “proof” of her father’s racial virility, Birdie’s asthma, while far less inspiring, is also “proof,” *genetic* proof that she is Deck’s offspring. Asthma thus exposes the superficiality of his concept of blackness that motivates his indifference to Birdie and his preference for Cole.15

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15 The role of asthma as “proof” of an invisible and unacknowledged connection between a black father and his light-skinned daughter, and thus as proof of the daughter’s blackness, figures largely in Senna’s own memoir, *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009). She writes, “He passed [his racial obsessions] down to me just the way he passed down his eczema and asthma. In lieu of an inheritance, I have his diseases as proof that I am his daughter” (166).
The asthma attack that occurs in the presence of Nicholas immediately after their short-lived sexual encounter exemplifies the disease’s role in reasserting her genetic connection to her black father, and hence her black identity, when she is most anxious about denying them. Lying on his bed, Nicholas and Birdie look at his comic book, *Tintin in the Congo*. High on marijuana, the two laugh at the “horrible” renditions of the Congolese until Birdie blurts out, “They made us look like animals.” Although she immediately realizes her mistake, Nicholas takes her comment as a joke: “You said they made *us* look like animals.” The hilarity of my statement sent him into hysterics. Finally he looked at me sideways through slittish red eyes. ‘Shit, maybe you could be colored in the right light. Better stay out of the sun.” At the threat of her exposure as a black girl, Birdie “felt a constriction in my chest.” But of course Nicholas cannot see Birdie’s internal reaction and goes on: “Get this one…. When they’re born, what’s printed on the inside of every black baby’s lip?... ‘Inflate to five thousand’” (204). In response to Nicholas’s racist comments,

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think I could talk....

My breathing was coming out funny, in irregular wheezes, like my father’s when he had an asthma attack. He used to make me walk on his back at moments like that.... Cole was too big.... I was the perfect weight.... I felt useful then, listening to the air come out of his chest, the relief in his voice when he hugged me afterward, saying “You saved my life again, Doctor Birdie.” It was a little routine with us. And I would answer, “Anytime, Professor Lee.” I felt important, as if only my body could give him air at those moments. (204-05)

Birdie’s asthmatic reaction is two-fold here. First, it reveals her panic and discomfort over being hailed by Nicholas as a white girl who would share his racist sense of “humor.” At the same time, her recollection of her father’s asthma attacks explicitly underscores both her physical connection to his black body and her nostalgia for a
moment in which he acknowledged that connection. Not only does her own asthma make her think of Deck’s, but she recalls an instance when it is *her* body, rather than the often privileged Cole’s, that was “perfect” for the task of rescuing him. Deck’s asthma provided Birdie with a “little routine” (205), an opportunity for them to exercise their bond. Being witness to and culpable in racism triggers Birdie’s asthma, which in turn causes her to unite herself in her memories with Deck, an expression of continued desire for that now-lost bond with and validation by her father.

Birdie’s asthma also acts up in response to her female friends’ racist speech and again makes her nostalgic for a time when she could acknowledge the black family members whom she is now forced to hide inside her body—and when they could acknowledge *her*. Mona muses aloud,

> “I’ve never known any black guys, just Samantha. Wonder if they’ve got big dicks, like everybody says….”

Dawn pitched in: “Shit. We’re gonna look like little niggers if we stay out in the sun any longer. Especially you, Jesse.”

Mona looked me up and down, then said with a laugh, “Shit, Jess. You never burn. What’s your secret?” (248)

In response to Mona’s speculation and Dawn’s slur, Birdie began “breathing in little asthmatic wheezes” (248). But it is not just asthma that results from the very real threat of her discovery. In addition, Birdie remembers Nkrumah, the all-black school that she and Cole attended for less than a year before their parents pulled them out, split them up, and left Boston. “I closed my eyes and thought of my father’s face and Cole’s hand holding mine on the first day at the school in Roxbury. I thought of her sticking up for me: *She’s black. So don’t be messing with her.* I thought of a game… the four of us, still one family unit, used to play” (248-49). Mona’s objectification of black male sexuality and Dawn’s nasty reference to “little niggers” are the explicit cause of Birdie’s contracting lungs. At
the same time, they raise an evocative memory of a time when she willingly claimed her family’s blackness as her own, and, even more significant, when Cole defended her as black. Although as Jesse, she is forced to deny her relation to Deck and Cole and erase them from her identity, her asthma conjures nostalgia for an era when the four of them comprised a cohesive, undivided “family unit.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Birdie’s eventual reunion with her father is preceded by a reminder of their shared asthma. After a long journey from New Hampshire in search of Cole and Deck, Birdie reaches California. When she breaks into Deck’s apartment in San Francisco towards the end of the novel, she discovers “an asthma inhaler, the kind both my father and I used. I took out the inhaler and turned it over in my hands, then looked at myself in the mirror as I inhaled from it, sucking in three times until my chest expanded and my head lightened” (386). Birdie’s reflection in the mirror as she sucks on her father’s inhaler confirms externally the relationship and identity that her body is asserting internally with its asthma. The “familiar jittery excitement” from the inhaler leads her to conclude, “I think we’ve got our man” (386)—that this is in fact her long-lost father. Asthma thus substantiates the genetic connection between father and daughter for which Deck’s physical presence is not required. Upon finding his daughter in his home, Deck, who has rarely acknowledged that Birdie belongs to his family in any way, finally recognizes a physical resemblance. He tells her, “you look a little like my mother. I never noticed that before” (395).

By the end of the novel, after her difficult reunion with Deck and her affirmative reunion with Cole, Birdie comes to regard asthma as more than just proof of her invisible, genetic link to her father and hence of the blackness that has been validated by her sister;
it is also a metaphor for the never-ending, unglamorous struggles all mixed-race children.

In light of Deck’s lecture to Birdie upon their reunion that “the mulatto in America functions as a canary in the coal mine…. the gauge of how poisonous American race relations were” (393), his two daughters’ names, Birdie and Cole (a homophone of “coal”), seem to particularly emphasize their position as perpetually suffering mulatto-canaries. After she finds Cole, Birdie imagines herself at a Berkeley high school among “a medley of mulatto children, canaries who had… survived the coal mine, singed and asthmatic, but still alive. Then I thought of Samantha and felt a wave of sadness” (412). Birdie imagines that while some mixed-race children might live through American racism, their asthmatic symptoms testify to their continuing struggle and pathologization. Notably, Birdie predicts that she will survive the “coal mine” not because she equates the racial fusion of her body with fortitude, but because of numbers—protected as “a dime a dozen out here” (412). Clearly, there are many canaries, such as Samantha, who, all alone in the noxious coal mine of racially homogeneous, rural America, have a far smaller chance of making it out alive.

The representation of Birdie’s body as asthmatic and therefore pathologized is echoed in depictions of her other sicknesses. One rather striking instance of non-asthmatic illness occurs when she visits her grandmother in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the hopes of obtaining money to travel to California and find Deck and Cole. At some point during her escape from New Hampshire, Birdie has picked up a case of the flu: “I shivered in front of the house, my teeth chattering” (359). Although throughout her childhood, Birdie had overheard Deck telling Cole about her racist grandmother, “Baby, don’t pay that old lady any mind…. She’s a dying breed. You’re the future” (365), it is
the racially illegible Birdie, not her unambiguously white grandmother, whose body is falling apart. When she angrily tells her grandmother, “‘This whole world—it’s based on lies’…. I was breathing hard and put my face in my hands. My head was throbbing, something banging around inside it, and I was shaking and sweating” (365). Despite her satisfaction with this declaration, the older woman’s pity “made me nauseous” (366). When Birdie tries to stand up to her grandmother’s racist preference for her, her lighter-skinned granddaughter, she only becomes more ill. This weakness emphasizes the association of her mulatta body with physical struggle and suggests skepticism about its ideological positioning as the robust embodiment of the multiracial American future.

Furthermore, Birdie’s asthma similarly foregrounds the novel’s backwards gaze in terms of the novel’s plot: Birdie’s narrative is not a fashionable, post-race pursuit of hybridity, but the older, more familiar, more “traditional” story of a young person seeking a connection to the parent who denies her, a girl in search of her father.

IV. Conclusion: “Black Like Me”: The Cure for Mulatto Fever

I would like to conclude with a discussion of the novel’s transformation of hybridity—both Jewishness, which many literary and cultural critics tend to read as a “fusion” of black and white, and asthma, which would seem a universal experience of discomfort—into blackness. In other words, how is it possible that Birdie retains her primarily black racial identity while still acknowledging that she is “mixed” (413)? First, 

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16 Birdie’s nausea recurs throughout the novel, particularly with regards to her same-sex desire. She feels “a little bit nauseous” after playing “honeymoon” with Alexis (199); and she throws up when she hears about the cruel reaction of her father to the discovery that his best friend from her Black Power days, Ronnie, is homosexual (351). No doubt Deck’s response resulted from his linking of “racial inauthenticity with an inadequately virile masculinity” (Daniel Kim xxii). These physiological responses to sexual deviance expose Birdie’s body as weak and vulnerable rather than empowered and inspiring.
it is important to specify that in *Caucasia* and in her other writing, what Senna resists is not hybridity *per se*, but rather, the celebration of a hybrid body whose hybridity makes it “beyond race,” no longer identifiable or self-identifying as authentically black. In fact, Senna acknowledges her early contention with self-identifying as mixed or hybrid. As a girl in the 1970s, she “sneered at those byproducts of miscegenation who chose to identify as mixed, not black. I thought it wishy-washy, an act of flagrant assimilation, treason, passing even” (“Mulatto Millennium” 15). The nature of this confession clearly echoes the ideology of those “nationalist writers” for whom “the condition of hybridity is often given the pejorative label *assimilationist* or *integrationist*” (Daniel Kim 29).

*Caucasia*, therefore, marks the development of a writer’s thinking, from a girlhood disdain for the very identitarian category of “mixed-race” to a more nuanced critique of an identity that calls itself “mixed” *at the expense of* acknowledging itself as black.

The most extreme and perhaps troubling version of Birdie’s blackness as a form of appropriation, even more so than Jewishness, occurs during *Caucasia’s* most formally surprising moment: her novel within the novel. Birdie originally writes “*El Paso,*” her novel about a Mexican American family, to remedy her boredom in New Hampshire before her first school year as Jesse begins. Having never met any Mexicans, Birdie gleans her stereotypical images of Mexican American life from her television set: “I had seen such a family on a news show about alien abductions, and had decided, watching the rowdy, exotic lot, that I wanted to be Mexican.” Her novel “featured a religious, perpetually pregnant mother; a banjo-playing, sombrero-donning papa; and their teenage son, the main character, Richie Rodriguez, who is a bad seed looking for a way out” (171-72). Unlike white, black, or even Jewish, Mexican is an identity in which
she has no personal investment and one with which she has no familiarity other than pop
culture. The superficiality of her understanding of Mexican life gives her the freedom to
choose the stereotypical aspects with which she will identify and re-make Mexicanness
into an ideal ethnic identity—a more perfect, accessible form of blackness. Birdie is not
creating stereotypes of Mexicans—she is adapting them in the service of fantasizing
about a coherent racial identity. Mexicanness thus operates similarly to the blackness
represented by her negrobilia box—a loose collection of odd objects and attributes that
taken separately are but a scattershot of cultural artifacts, but together form the core of a
racial identity with which Birdie can identify.

Birdie’s desire to “be Mexican” is mainly enacted through fantasies about Richie,
who throughout the course of the novel, gets in knife fights, beats and impregnates his
girlfriend, and fails out of high school. “I was in love with Richie and dreamed of him
each night, his shining black pompadour hair, his bronze skin” (172). The eroticism of
her desire to “be Mexican” brings Mexicanness back into her body in the same way that
her asthma asserts the location of blackness within her body. For if Birdie eroticizes

Richie’s crudely stereotypical “Mexicanness”—his rebellion and his exotic sex appeal—
he also embodies the kind of “Mexican” she wants to be.

I also dreamed about his sexy, abused girlfriend…. I touched myself while
thinking about Richie and his girlfriend intertwined in a lovemaking ritual.
I was never a part of these fantasies, and it wasn’t clear to me which one
of them I was supposed to be identifying with—the burly, macho Richie,
who lay on top, or his soft, ultrafeminine girlfriend with the pink lipstick
and matching toenails, who lay on the bottom. But I would press the spot
between my legs while I thought about them, and feel a pulsing warmth.
(172)

Both Richie and his unnamed girlfriend are sexually desirable to Birdie because they
perfectly embody received cultural and gender clichés. This overload of stereotypes
causes her confusion over whether she is “supposed” to identify with “the top,” Richie, or “the bottom,” Richie’s “ultrafeminine girlfriend”; uncertainty and the choice it enables are crucial to the fantasy. Even so, the hypermasculine Richie’s status as the novel’s protagonist, and his girlfriend’s position as a nameless, passive sex object, imply that Birdie’s cross-sex identification with him is at least one vehicle by which her sexual fantasy of “being Mexican” is sublimated.\textsuperscript{17} While masturbating to her literary creations, Birdie’s distance from her own biracial body—“never a part”—facilitates her experimentation with embodying an unachievable ethnicity (Mexican) and gender role (aggressive, abusive, sexy man).\textsuperscript{18} Thus, through this erotic detour through Mexicanness, she is able to turn her stereotypical vision of Mexican masculinity into a clear-cut, racial identity she cannot claim in real life but can appropriate and embody through sexual fantasy.

The passage about “El Paso” is shocking to the reader for a number of reasons, not least because of Birdie’s blatant, unconsidered absorption and perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes. But Sandy’s reaction is also troubling: not only does her mother seem unfazed that her daughter’s novel is not “about the revolutionary heroine she had

\textsuperscript{17} As it turns out, Mexicanness is only one of many identities Birdie fantasizes about incorporating into her own African Americanness. She imagines that she is Cape Verdean (69) and tells a group of children on a beach that she’s an Indian princess named Tanzania (185). Along with the Mexicanness of “El Paso,” these identities are based on superficial encounters or stereotypes, but they are also, for Birdie, unambiguous and straightforward, and thus both appealing and ripe for appropriation.

\textsuperscript{18} “El Paso” is one of many examples in which Birdie’s ambivalence towards female heterosexuality and her consequent identification with masculine subjectivity converge with her attempts (or desire) to assume a series of racially monolithic subject positions. In contrast to Harrison-Kahan’s assertion that texts like \textit{Caucasia} and Walker’s \textit{Black, White, and Jewish} demonstrate “how racial fluidity can serve as an analogue for sexual fluidity” (40), the many representations of Birdie’s sexual desire and anxiety suggest quite the opposite: just as Birdie lacks the fluidity of movement between racial identities that Carby affords to her literary mulattas, her sexuality is better described as fraught and frantic than easily fluid. Her dearth of choice or mobility with regards to both her racial identity and her sexuality thus resists a “post-race” reading of the mixed-race child as a mobile, curative fusion of racial and sexual difference.
imagined…. [s]he said ‘El Paso was brilliant, absolutely brilliant” (172). If Senna does not explicitly condemn Birdie’s foray into cultural clichés, it is perhaps because Birdie is fantasizing about being a Mexican man, or at least both a Mexican man and woman. That is, Birdie may be embracing ethnic stereotypes, but she is doing so in the service of exploring her sexuality, and in the process subverting her prescribed gender role. By virtue of her age as a twelve-year old, Birdie is able to experiment with her sexuality in bolder and more extreme ways than she has the freedom to do with her racial identity. As an extreme form of blackness, “El Paso” contextualizes the novel’s insistence that blackness is always a blend of other cultural idioms—Jewish, Mexican, etc—at the level of the body.  

The message of “El Paso” in particular and Caucasia more broadly seems to be that whether or not a black person looks black is irrelevant, so long as, over the course of transforming other cultural forms into black embodiment, she still identifies as black and feels connected to other blacks. But does Senna mean for us to take that identification, which becomes predicated on an idealized representation of blackness as internal, embodied essence, at face value? One moment in the novel that underscores some of the elisions of this ideology occurs during Birdie’s trip from New Hampshire to New York with Mona, Sandy, and Sandy’s boyfriend, Jim. While waiting on the steps of the

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19 Birdie’s romanticization of Mexican machismo and her transformation of it into a form of black identity in the novel are echoed in Senna’s own autobiography. Throughout her childhood, Senna was told that her black father’s father was an aloof, violent Mexican boxer named Francisco Senna. Her only knowledge of her alleged paternal grandfather came from one article, which contained “sparse—and I suspect inflated—details of Francisco’s life… so he became over the years a character out of a novel for each of [her siblings]…. [I]t was this very lack of information that allowed Francisco to become a man of myth—a GI Joe character come to life, a masculine romantic archetype with exotic heritage” (Where Did You Sleep Last Night? 33). This fantasy of enigmatic and macho hero also fits Birdie’s creation, Richie Rodriguez. In fact, Senna’s father, fueled by his “racial obsessions” (166), maintains that it is the Mexican boxer Francisco, and not a white priest named Father Ryan, who fathered him. For Carl Senna, Mexican masculinity acts as a proxy for black virility in a way that white masculinity cannot.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, the two girls see a group of black and Puerto Rican teenagers, playing “some kind of talking music, the first I had ever heard of its kind, and I strained to listen, as if it held some secret.” One girl in particular catches Birdie’s eye: “A chubby girl with straightened and dyed blond hair stood and clapped her hands, moving her hips. Her sweatshirt had her name, ‘Chevell,’ printed on it…. [T]his music wasn’t disco, though the underlying tune was somehow familiar, something I had known once, long ago. The kids were grooving now” (260). Entranced by the strangely familiar music, Birdie finds her body moving as well, following the lead of Chevell and the other teenagers: “I clapped my hands, laughing at their expertise, and began to move to the music” (261). When Sandy and Jim find Birdie and Mona, Jim observes of Chevell and her friends, “Jesus, it’s like some ancient African instinct that gets these kids dancing. Unbelievable” (261). Even if “ancient African instinct” is not exactly the reason that the teenagers, and Birdie as well, start dancing, Birdie’s recognition of the sounds as “somehow familiar” to her from “long ago” suggests a kind of instinctual, timeless relationship to this music that she shares with the other teenagers of color. Birdie may look as white as Jim, Mona and Sandy, but, “fantasizing for a brief moment that I didn’t know them, that they were strangers to me… and that my name was Chevell” (262), she feels just as black as the teenagers with whom she shares a secret dance.

Birdie’s experience of self-recognition as a result of hearing the music of her black peers highlights the difficulty that Caucasia’s racial essentialism presents to our “post-race” moment, not just to “mulatto millennium” celebrants but to those cultural critics who, by the end of the twentieth century, were insisting that the era of identity as a coherent basis for activist politics or academic disciplines was over. While these critics
share a desire to destabilize rigid notions of racial categorization, they tend to fall into roughly two groups: those who are optimistic about “new,” “hybrid” identities, like Rody, and those who are skeptical of “the old, modern idea of ‘race’” and of “quick ethnic fixes and cheap pseudo-solidarities” (6) like Paul Gilroy in Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line (2000). This moment in the novel particularly echoes Gilroy’s critique of the late-90s ideologues whom he identifies as “melanists.” According to Gilroy, melanists believe that through sound sources like music, black people can “recover and remember the potency of melanin in their organs and... listen once again for the ways in which their bodies... call out to them... the siren song of collective... racial identity” (258). Certainly this seems to be the case for Birdie, who senses that the music she hears on the steps of the Met is something that she “had known once, long ago.” The melanist stance is extremely problematic for Gilroy, because by investing the body “with the power to arbitrate in the assignment of culture to peoples” (24), it relies on a history of scientific writing about “race,” which “produced the truth of ‘race’ and repeatedly discovered it in and on the body” (35). At the same time, “Even under this iron law of racial ideology, people have to be induced into the approved identity” (258); likewise,

20 We could add to Gilroy’s critique the perspective that “race resides not in nature” or biology “but in politics and culture” (Jacobson, Whiteness 9). For a more thorough discussion on race as a construction of visual perception, see Whiteness of a Different Color. For more on race as a legal, governmental construction, see Ian Haney López.

21 Gilroy recognizes that his larger insistence on “liberation... from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking about thinking” (40) is made problematic not just because “the beneficiaries of racial hierarchy do not want to give up their privileges,” but because even for “oppressed people,” ideas of racial particularity have become “sources of pride rather than shame” (12). Despite this empathy with “people who have been subordinated by race-thinking” (12), however, he nonetheless remains highly critical of conceptions of race that ground themselves in eighteenth-century “varieties of knowledge and power centered on the body” (31).
Birdie begins to move, unable to resist appeal of the “ancient African instinct” that this music awakens.

Although Birdie’s “rap moment” seems entirely complicit with the body-based racial essentialism and the “call” of “racial memory” for which Gilroy lambastes the melanists, Caucasia also offers a version of black authenticity that is more complex than Gilroy’s characterizations and thus manages to circumvent some of its force. This is because of slipperiness in Gilroy’s argument between the body on the one hand and the “truth” of racial essence as indicated by its appearance on the other. He writes that “The compelling idea of common, racially indicative bodily characteristics offers a welcome short-cut into the favored forms of solidarity and connection” (25) because “cognition of ‘race’ was never an exclusively linguistic process and involved from its inception a distinctive visual and optical imaginary” (35). While Gilroy recognizes that “the distinguishing marks, organs and features” that have been “imagined to regulate social and cultural manifestations” can “be discovered on the external surface of the body” or can be thought to “dwell somewhere inside it” (36), he fails to make much of what is in fact a crucial distinction; for in Caucasia, blackness evades the visual logic that Gilroy contends anchors this reinstallation of the body as the site of racial essence—in particular the muscular, black male body—but is no less grounded within Birdie’s asthmatic, sickly, female body. Although Caucasia was published two years before Against Race, Senna’s certain awareness of the critiques that led up to Gilroy’s allows her to anticipate and even evade his: by constructing a unique conception of black authenticity as personally felt within the body but not visibly proven on its surface.
This unique formulation of embodied but invisible black authenticity re-emerges during Birdie’s reunion with Cole. The moment demonstrates that the body that had long hidden Birdie’s blackness becomes the vehicle by which she is reunited with her black sister. Like Gilroy, then, it rejects a purely visual definition of race that determines Cole to be black and Birdie to be otherwise. When she first sees Cole in a coffee shop, Birdie notices her sister’s “more womanly body” across “the steamy clutter of bodies” (401). At first, Birdie narrates, “She had seen me and not known me from the foreign bodies that surrounded her” (402). But then when they recognize each other, “the whole restaurant seemed to grow quiet… the bodies around us melting into one another,” as the two girls “pressed our bodies together for a long time” (402). As it is Cole who had long been recognized by their father and by Birdie herself as the “black one,” the press together of their physically disparate bodies blurs their visible differences, uniting them in a shared blackness. Even if neither Birdie’s blackness nor her relationship to Cole is apparent in the features of her lighter-skinned body, the sisters are still both black because they are black on the inside: “She had something of me in her, though it wasn’t as visible as a bend in the nose, a curve of a lip, a slant of the eyes. It was something hidden, untouchable” (407).

In addition to the idea of blackness as something that is felt “on the inside,” their embrace also physicalizes the “black like” idea of racial identity as a matter of identifying with, and being validated by, another: Birdie and Cole are black like each other, just as Birdie is “black like” Samantha (286). At the end of the novel, Birdie, who had for so many years used her racially ambiguous body to conceal her blackness, finally succeeds in having that blackness affirmed by the clasp of Cole’s legibly black body.
Birdie’s desire to be acknowledged by her father as his black daughter (and to be identified as black throughout the novel) is framed both by a similar impulse in Senna’s own life and by her nostalgia in her non-fiction writing for the 1970’s notion of blackness with which she was raised. In her essay “The Mulatto Millennium,” she characterizes this period as a time “when ‘black’ described a people bonded not by shared complexion or hair texture but by shared history” (15). That nostalgia also explains why, writing in the late 1990s, she chose to set Caucasia more than twenty years in the past. Reflecting its author’s ambivalence toward the post-race celebration of racially hybrid bodies or embodied “fusion” as curatives to earlier racism or purist notions of racial identity, Caucasia’s setting predates that celebration: it returns to the years of Senna’s own childhood, when she was still “a black girl” (“Mulatto Millennium” 15), not yet trying to fit into any of the categories of mixed-race identity that fail to “feel right” (27). It also parallels her desire for a pre-“mulatto millennium” notion of blackness that is not always visible on the surface of the body but nonetheless persists *within* that body.

Birdie’s appropriation of Jewishness and even Mexicanness into forms of blackness, as

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22 Senna’s memoir, *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009) depicts her obsessive quest to unearth her black father’s genealogy as a way of finding her own black self: “it was the absent story that I hungered to find—that is, my father’s story, and through it to find my father himself” (16); blackness remains for Senna, as for Birdie, the primary familial and self-identity. Towards the end of this text, she reiterates the paternal motivations of her search: “Because I am his black creation at the end of the day: without him I would be nothing—a Wasp with a permanent tan” (181).

23 Senna’s nostalgia, while specific to the black community, reflects an attitude that was extremely pervasive in the white ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s. See Jacobson’s *Roots Too*: “I wish we could return to an earlier America when society surrounded its members with a tight sense of belonging” (25), he quotes the Jewish writer Anne Roiphe.

24 Senna’s skepticism seems particularly directed at idealizations of the mixed-race child as a symbol of anything, including of the potentially utopian multiracial future. She writes of her own son, about whom “people seem surprised by his pale (‘fair’) complexion and his light-colored hair” (*Where Did You Sleep Last Night*? 163), “People see my baby, and in the face of his racial ambiguity their own past hurts, desires, fears, and fantasies rise to the surface. He—the baby—becomes the Rorschach inkblot upon which all of their own projections come to the surface” (165). Senna notes with mystified frustration how her son becomes the scrutinized object of these people— and her own— “racial obsessions” (165).
well as her asthma attacks that assert her relationship to her black father, all comprise the corporeal experiences of a biracial girl who, like her author, wishes to be regarded not as mixed, but as black.

These similarities between Senna and her protagonist are emphasized in “The Mulatto Millennium” through the author’s narratives of her own physical discomfort during celebrations of mixed-race identity. Just as Birdie’s asthma and other illnesses portend her sickliness, Senna feels physically ill when interpellated as mixed-race, rather than as black. She narrates being dragged into a parade of “mulatto-pride folks” in which “extremists” are handing out “dense and incomprehensible” (14) flyers. When she sees in a newspaper that the three best-sellers were all about cross-cultural encounters, Senna, “In a fit of nausea… took off running for home” (14-15). Senna’s nausea reflects her ambivalence toward this “militant” (14) idealization of mixed-race bodies, and suggests that the biracial body’s ailments today result at least in part from its denial of authentic, internal blackness and from its corresponding aspirations to shallow, unconsidered notions of hybridity.

In particular, Senna’s skepticism in the same essay about Jewishness as a forward-thinking version of interracial fusion helps contextualize Caucasia’s representation of Jewishness as an embodied form of blackness. She is especially cynical about the notion that Jews offer a progressive, alternative option for blacks who harbor miscegenationist desire. At the front of what she deridingly describes as “a mass of bedraggled activists” whose placards are difficult to read “through the tangle of dreadlocks and loose Afros” are “two brown-skinned women in Birkenstocks [who] carried a banner that read FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED JEW
BOYS WHEN THE NEGROES AIN’T ENOUGH” (13). Later in the essay, she disparagingly refers to the offspring of such unions as “Jewlattos.” “Jewlattos,” whose hybrid name indicates an assertion of a new, millennial identity, “often feel that their dual cultures are not so dual at all, considering the shared history of oppression” (24). Contrary to the popular reading of Jewishness “as an empty signifier that can be objectified into a figure for suffering, alienation and victimhood” (Vincent J. Cheng qtd. in Rody 115), Senna means to maintain that Jewish suffering is not synonymous with and should not be used as a metaphor for black oppression, and that Jews and blacks do not share a history, as Sandy intimates when she tries to convince Birdie that Jewish is the ideal fake identity for her: “‘Tragic history, kinky hair, good politics,’ she explained. ‘It’s all there’” (Caucasia 140).\(^{25}\) Blackness and Jewishness are not interchangeable in and of themselves: a Jew cannot simply claim blackness vis-à-vis his or her Jewishness.

However, Birdie can use Jewishness to claim her blackness because she is already black to begin with. And what makes her black is a history shared with other blacks—for example, her childhood intimacy with Cole, or even her moment of complicity with Samantha. Senna’s representation of Jewishness in Caucasia thus performs the most extreme reversal possible to the self-idealizing Jewatto’s claim to a new “post-” or

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\(^{25}\) Senna’s critique is not without basis. As Jacobson writes in Roots Too, “Those who presume that African-American identity is just like Irish or Italian [or Jewish] in its cultural basis and its sentimentality are not likely to grasp the structural, juridical features of race that come into play around questions of blackness” (36). In fact, Jacobson points out, even those Jewish radicals who have since been written back into the historical record of “black-Jewish relations” are remembered as the Jews they never identified themselves as to begin with (209). Furthermore, the heightened fragmentation of the New Left in the late 1960s meant a growing rift between once politically aligned black and Jewish radicals (222).

In Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America (1999), Adam Zachary Newton focuses in part on “the story of competitive scar and wound [that] is such a commonly exploited narrative slot for Black Jewish Relations” (Newton 6). Whereas Senna critiques Jewish and “Jewatto” representations of Jews as proxies for all narratives of suffering because, she believes, this formulation elides the specificity of the black historical experience, Newton’s analysis of “scar-rivalry” (22) as “the increasingly favored” (6) discourse among both blacks and Jews offers an alternative perspective on this comparative representation.
“beyond race” identity: reading the figure of the Jewlatto alongside Caucasia’s representation of Jewishness as a kind of appropriated blackness means that the Jewlatto’s Jewishness, and hence the Jewlatto himself, is in fact articulating a black identity, rather than a mixed, -latto identity at all.

The final image in the novel concludes Birdie’s narrative with a reiteration of her identity as first and foremost a black girl. On the last page she sees a school bus:

I peered up at the faces just settling behind the window. They were black and Mexican and Asian and white, on the verge of puberty…. They were utterly ordinary…. One face toward the back of the bus caught my eye…. It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl…. Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion. (413)

Although Birdie adds “mixed” to the identity of the “cinnamon-skinned” girl she notices, she describes her first as “black.” This girl physically resembles Cole, who is “cinnamon-skinned” (5), and Samantha, who is the “color of cinnamon” (226). But the girl is also “black like me,” a designation that reinforces Birdie’s connection to Samantha, whom she identified immediately as “black like me” (223), and who in turn identifies herself as “black. Like you” (286). Thus, this girl’s cinnamon-skinned body unites Birdie, Cole and Samantha across their physical differences, as three girls who are all “like” each other in that they are all black in the same way. Reiterating this return to clear-cut racial categories is the “blur” of the yellow and black bus—or is it of the yellow and black faces? —which contrasts with Birdie’s references to herself as a blur—“my face appear blurred, like a photograph of someone caught in motion” (297), and “a gray blur” (137). The blur she sees now is not a gray blend of black and white, but “yellow and black”— a collection of colors that are diverse but remain distinct. The children on the bus are “on the verge of puberty,” younger than Birdie, and the school bus, whose distinctive yellow
and black exterior echoes the colors of the faces within, is “in motion,” leaving Birdie “caught” behind. By implicitly contrasting the future motion of this next generation with Birdie’s nostalgic longing for a return to a pre-“post-race” notion of blackness, the novel’s ending suggests that if anyone in this scene serves as “emblems of a new vision… ‘of who we are’” (Rody viii), it is these younger children with their distinct racial categories, “black” and “yellow,” rather than the adolescent, mixed-race Birdie or Cole.

So in Caucasia, “The Mulatto Millennium”—where she jokingly calls herself “Postlatto” (27)—and her other writings, is Senna merely poking fun of the fad of “millennial” ideology, or is she in fact seriously advocating a return to pre-Civil Rights, conceptions of racial identity? Is she embracing what Walter Benn Michaels terms a kind of racial essentialism, whereby the “possibility of passing… locate[s] race deep down inside” (116)? And is that politically viable at a moment when “Multiracial and multiethnic Americans (usually grouped together as ‘mixed-race’) are one of the country’s fastest growing groups,” and “Many young adults of mixed backgrounds are

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26 Michaels contends that historically, African American passing for white relied on racial essentialism because it demonstrated that blackness was “interiorized [and] immutable” (Itzkovitz 45). Far from demonstrating the construction of race as performative, passing “requires the enforcement” of the difference between “racial legibility” and “racial identity.” After all, “if being legible as black counted as being black, if the race you appeared to belong to determined the race you in fact belonged to, then there would be no such thing as passing—what you passed for would be what you were” (Michaels 174).

In citing Michaels, I do not mean to imply an endorsement of his contentious position. Rather, I wish to place Senna in dialogue with a different group of literary critics than that which she is usually associated. In addition, while Senna’s narrative bears a resemblance to the historical problem of nativist conceptions of race and passing, it is not identical. Michaels discusses the 1920s; Senna wrote this novel about the 1970s in the late 1990s.
rejecting the color lines that have defined Americans for generations in favor of a much more fluid sense of identity” (Saulny)?

Senna’s containment of the novel within a period long before “all this radical ambiguity” (“Mulatto Millennium” 15) came into vogue, it turns out, allows her to deploy a strategy particular to the historical fiction writer. By transforming ethnic and racial hybridity into forms of blackness and ending with the image of distinctly “black” and “yellow” children who speed off into the future and leave Birdie behind, Senna identifies the racially distinct younger children, rather than Birdie, as the avatars of the future in the 1970s. This in turn preemptively undermines both the events that actually followed the 70s and 80s, such as the changes to the Census in 2000, as well as our current celebration of the mixed-race child as the reconciliation of all the interracial strife that came before her. She thus creates a present to which her telling of history, rather than that of the “mulatto millennium” ideologues, is the logical successor. In other words, by taking advantage of a sleight of hand that is the exclusive purview of the fiction writer, Senna is able to rewrite our interracial history in order to re-present our racial present.

Ultimately, Caucasia’s case for blackness located “on the inside” seems to articulate Senna’s response to the what she sees as the real problem with our current popular and intellectual impetus to move “beyond race”: the insidious pathology of

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27 Saulny’s article was part of a series in The New York Times in the winter of 2011 called “Race Remixed,” which explored “the growth of mixed-race America” and welcomed readers’ responses. That a journalistic establishment like the Times devoted an entire series to a topic that it assumed would have resonance for many of its readers emphasizes the mainstream acceptance, certainly since Caucasia was published, of the idea that racial identity is in need of “remixing.” It therefore also highlights how Senna’s ideology appears increasingly contentious, rather than less so, in the “mulatto millennium’s” evolving definitions of race and identity. As far back as 1991, however, the Times was already covering stories on the increasing destabilization of blackness as a coherent, consistent category of identity. In a story titled “In a 90s Quest for Black Identity, Intense Doubts and Disagreements,” African Americans wondered aloud whether blackness is a function of skin color, ancestry, culture, class, politics—or a combination thereof.
“mulatto fever” (“Mulatto Millennium” 13). The danger of this epidemic, she warns, is its ability to blind those infected from the reality that “with or without miscegenation” (“Mulatto Millennium” 21), racism has continued, and will continue, undeterred into this millennium. And she is not an outlier in this anxiety; she shares it with “Pessimists [who] say that a more powerful multiracial movement will lead to more stratification and come at the expense of the number and influence of other minority groups, particularly African-Americans” (Saulny). Thus, not only is “mulatto fever” a woefully inadequate solution; it perpetuates the very problem for whose alleged demise it boasts responsibility. But Birdie’s quest to locate her black father, be reunited with her black sister, and to be identified and to identify as black, regardless of her “complexion or hair texture” (“Mulatto Millennium” 15), is Senna’s counter to this “fever” and the further marginalization of African Americans that it bodes: an insistence that being “black like” someone else is a matter of acknowledging, embracing, and constantly reinventing one’s own authentic, indisputable blackness on the inside.
CHAPTER TWO

The Trick is to Think About Babies: Embodied Spirituality and the Birth of Jewish Identity in Myla Goldberg’s Bee Season

I. Introduction: Kabbalah and the Jewish American Women Writer

If at least initially, Caucasia’s focus on biracial identity appears to reflect a “mulatto millennium” celebration of racial hybridity and ambiguity, Myla Goldberg’s Bee Season (2000) similarly invites the assumption that it will echo the universalist connotations of its cultural context: the Jewish mystical tradition called Kabbalah. Published in the height of what cultural critics have called the “Kabbalah Craze,” Bee Season narrates the meteoritic rise of a ten-year-old Jewish American girl, Eliza Naumann, from a mediocre student to a spelling prodigy. Under the guidance of her father, Saul, a cantor at the family’s synagogue, Eliza becomes engrossed in the meditative practices of the medieval Jewish Kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia.¹ For Eliza, Abulafia’s teachings, translated by Saul’s spidery hand, entail meditating on the rearranged letters of English and then Hebrew words in order to reach a spiritually transcendent, corporeal process called shefa.

The “ancient, sacred, body of theoretical and practical knowledge called ‘Kabbalah’” to which Abulafia’s mystical texts belong has existed in various cultural

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¹ The real Abulafia, who was active in the second half of the thirteenth century, “developed an exegetical method of combining letters from the Torah that, he believed, gave one access to the Torah’s most secret meanings—including the so-called genuine name of God” (Eisenstein 25).
forms since the early thirteenth century (Huss, “New Age” 197). Originally preoccupied with “understanding and ending humanity’s exile from God” (Halevi 19), Kabbalah was a response to the specifically Jewish experience of diaspora (Eisenstein 24). 2 These days, however, Kabbalah’s most inescapable pop cultural association is with Madonna, its most famous, ardent, and—it cannot escape notice—non-Jewish advocate, who has donated millions of dollars to the Kabbalah Centre, founded in Los Angeles in 1993. 3 Promoting a version of Kabbalah that its critics deride as “McMysticism,” 4 contemporary Kabbalistic groups like the Kabbalah Centre “are hybrid in their social composition, and include members from various ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds” (Huss, “New Age” 110)—in other words, not Torah-reading Jews. In fact, the Centre credits its popularity precisely to its marketing of Kabbalah as “a universal experience separate from its religious context” (Gilman, “We’re Not Jews” 140). By avoiding the “‘stigma’ of Judaism” and refashioning “highly ritualized religious tradition” into an inclusive philosophy (Merkin 52) that anyone can buy, or buy into, the Kabbalah Centre has repackaged the Jewishness that was once understood as a sign of inassimilable, abhorrent

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2 It was not, however, widely accepted in many Jewish communities. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was looked on with suspicion, even hostility, by mainstream Jewish leaders, who portrayed Kabbalah and Hasidism as “backward, irrational, and Oriental traditions that impede[d] the integration and acculturation of the Jews to modern European society” (Huss, “New Age” 108).

3 To date, Madonna has featured Jewish and Kabbalistic images in her music videos, albums and her first children’s book, has taken on the Hebrew name, Esther, and has successfully proselytized the Kabbalah Centre to the “glamorous and would-be glamorous” (Halevi 20) of Hollywood, both Jews and non-Jews. For a reading of Madonna’s employment of Kabbalistic and Jewish signifiers in her various cultural productions since the late 1990s, see Boaz Huss’s “All You Need is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah,” pp. 611-12 and 617-20.

4 The gist of the criticism focuses on the Centre’s commodification and alleged cheapening of an ancient, mystical practice. See for example Debra Cohen and Yossi Halevi. But others question the assumption that these accusations, regardless of their veracity, ought to bar the Centre’s astonishing popularity from further analysis. “Could it be that the very obsession with ‘authenticity,’ which is where the center clearly came up short, was itself an outdated obsession?” asks The New York Times Magazine in 2005 (Merkin 54). Boaz Huss defends the Kabbalah Centre for reinventing Kabbalah “in a postmodern fashion” that blurs “the traditional boundaries between elite and mass culture” (“All You Need” 619).
difference—representations I touched on in my introduction and in the previous chapter—to mean “being hybrid—being ‘in’” (Gilman, “We’re Not Jews” 140).

Notably, Goldberg’s novel makes no reference to Madonna, the “Hollywood glitterati” (Merkin 52), or the Kabbalah Centre. However, the absence of “McMysticism” in Bee Season does not render it irrelevant in understanding Goldberg’s representation of the Kabbalistic practice and spiritual development of a ten-year old Jewish girl. Rather, it subtly points to the contrast between Kabbalah’s Jewish meanings and roots and its popular representation. That is, based on the association of Kabbalah with the “stridently non-Jewish” Madonna (Merkin 52) and its marketing as a “universal” means to spiritual transcendence, readers might expect it to function in the novel as an agent of Eliza’s de-ethnicization. Instead, Bee Season focuses on the ways in which the discovery of Eliza’s spelling talent and her skill as a Kabbalah practitioner, through a positive, mystical relationship to her body, set in motion a dramatic reordering of her family’s structure. Far from assimilating her into the multicultural “melting pot” of the spelling bee by watering down her Jewishness, Eliza’s embodied practice of Kabbalistic meditation works to reassert her ethnic difference by means of her spiritual identity as a Jew, an identity that is vastly different from her father’s patriarchal, literary, scholastic version of Jewishness.

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5 As a member of the musical group, Klezmatics, puts it, Jewishness is even “kind of chic” (qtd. in Halter 79). Klezmer refers to the early twentieth-century music of Jewish Eastern European immigrants in the United States. The proliferation over the past decade or so of neo-Klezmer groups like the Klezmatics represents a recent incarnation of the white ethnic revival movement of the 1970s. For more on this movement, see Marilyn Halter.

6 The alignment of Saul with religious literacy speaks to a popular narrative of Jews in the United States that emphasizes the literariness of the spiritual practices they brought from the “Old Country.” Editors Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegal take up such a position in Daughters of Valor (1997) when they characterize American Judaism as the product of “a heritage that contained always a literary component. Through many centuries and locales… the Jewish devotion to words… had proved unwavering” (31). While Halio and Siegal attend to the obstacles American women writers have faced historically, both they and the narrative of a Jewish literariness on which they rely neglect to consider either the patriarchal exclusivity of this
The other cultural context into which Goldberg no doubt consciously writes is that of Jewish American novels, particularly those by women writers. In particular, Jewish feminist literary scholars have called attention to women’s exclusion from the so-called “golden age” of Jewish American writing that followed the Second World War. With the unprecedented movement of acculturated Jewish Americans into professions, material success, and suburban life, writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth were able to transcend their “alien” status and achieve mainstream success as American writers (Aarons 379). In the “world of our mothers” feminism of the 1970s, the critical acclaim that eluded most women writers led to revived interest in figures like Anzia Yezierska and Grace Paley. Yezierska became embraced as a “nascent feminist” for portraying through her characters her attempt to live “on her own terms, despite the patriarchal and repressive norms of her immigrant community” (Botshon 233). Her protagonists, who struggle to assert their independence from patriarchal authority, served as prototypes for Jewish female characters throughout the century.

Despite these feminists’ efforts, change was slow to come to Jewish intellectual circles, and into the mid-1980s, many Jewish American women novelists still felt like “the outsider within” (Aarons). But over the next decade, that began to change. The late devotion to textual learning, or the alternative that *Bee Season* offers: a corporeal experience of Jewish spirituality that is no less devoted to language, and thus no less Jewish, for being articulated through the body.

In “Orphans of Culture and History: Gender and Spirituality in Contemporary Jewish-American novels” (1994), Miriyam Glazer elaborates on the response of Jewish American women fiction to this exclusion from sacred study. She argues that “the familiar terrain of the rationalistic... modern Judaism that dominates the American Jewish religious terrain” often cannot realize the spiritual searches portrayed by these writers. Rather, Jewish women’s “outsider status is inscribed in their exploration of outback territories of the eccentric, the errant, the marginal, and the mystical” (129) that become “vehicles for feminist protest” (131).

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7 See Andrew Hoberek.
1990s saw “a spate of remarkable first novels by Jewish women” (Lewin 48). What make them so remarkable, observes Judith Lewin, is the reclamation of a tradition from which they had been outsiders, “the return of contemporary Jewish women to religious practice, to a Jewish sense of self and community, and to a Jewish spirituality and family.” Lewin contrasts these women writers to their (male) mid-century, “golden age” predecessors who “portrayed a more secular and rootless world as a result of a more anxious relation to their status as Jews.” Instead, many contemporary Jewish women novelists “embrace—even celebrate—religion; they unabashedly seek and revere spirituality and convey the importance of women’s learning and intellect” (49). Likewise, Goldberg’s focus on the ancient mystical practice of Kabbalah marks a kind of “return” to Jewish tradition, but with a twist: the heroine of this story of spiritual transcendence is not the erudite clergyman-father, but a young girl remarkable only for her ordinariness.

*Bee Season* foregrounds its central father-daughter by opening with the beginning of its tremendous change, the first day of Eliza’s fifth grade spelling bee. Before this moment, her father had focused his attention on his sixteen-year-old son, Aaron, who “used to enter the synagogue at his father’s side feeling like a prince beholding the kingdom he stood to inherit” (82). Saul’s newfound devotion to his daughter is clearly motivated by his own spiritual agenda: he believes he has found in his daughter a mystical talent who, under his guidance, is capable of achieving shefa. While Eliza is initially flattered, she eventually recognizes the validity of her rejected brother’s warning: “I know you’re into this spelling stuff, but be careful. Make sure it’s what you want and not what Dad wants” (246). After nearly a year of being coached by Saul in spelling bee preparation that evolves into daily lessons in Abulafia’s meditative practices, Eliza’s
narrative culminates the evening before the first spelling bee of the following year, when she achieves something very much like the corporeal shefa that Abulafia describes. This experience leads her to intentionally misspell a word whose spelling she knows, in direct defiance of father.

The novel intersperses the narrative of Eliza’s spelling pursuits and Saul’s absorption in them with “the double lives of the other Naumanns” (Eisenstein 26), Aaron and his and Eliza’s mother, Miriam. While Miriam initially appears to be a working mother too absorbed in her career to notice her children’s achievements or struggles, the novel slowly reveals that she has spent her hours away from home not ardently pursuing her law practice, as her family believes, but striving for “Perfectimundo,” a condition obtained by finding and “reclaiming” objects that she senses to be “a part of her from which she was senselessly separated” (72). Like Eliza’s sense of physical completion from spelling, when Miriam pockets the lost item, “she experiences the ideal pregnancy” (79). After Miriam is arrested for breaking into a middle class home, the reader and Saul discover that she has devoted at least the past eighteen years to her “kaleidoscope,” a collection of “found” pieces that together, comprise Perfectimundo.

At the same time that her secret quest for fulfillment through Perfectimundo allows Miriam to evade the script of domestic Jewish femininity that Saul provides for his wife, Aaron, in reaction to his rejection by his father, decides to abandon his Jewish upbringing and teachings and pursue disembodiment through the Hare Krishna movement, called ISKCON (the International Society of Krishna Consciousness). Despite his effort to abandon his body, however, Aaron experiences “entirely pure” pleasure while “filled with visions of dark babies” (164) among the Hare Krishnas.
Initially keeping his decision a secret from his family, when he finally reveals the truth to his father, it causes such extreme conflict between Saul and his once-favored child that Aaron, still a minor, moves out.

Eliza defies her father not just for her own sake, therefore, but for her mother and her brother who have also struggled under his religious, patriarchal authority. This chapter argues that in spite of Saul’s attempts to guide Eliza’s meditative practice in pursuit of “his plans… his ambitions” (69), Eliza evades his literary, scholarly course for her “enormous potential” (69) and develops spiritual maturity on her own terms through a feminist narrative that instead identifies the ecstatic, flushed body as the location of religious truth. Furthermore, through imagery of physical completion, impregnation, and flushing, as well as the context of the Americanizing, multicultural space of the spelling bee, the novel complicates a resistance/accommodation binary that would offer Eliza only two choices: either reject her father’s authority by rejecting her religious upbringing—and therefore, her Jewish identity—or accept the troubling status quo in her family by obeying her father’s meditative instructions. Instead, although young Eliza openly defies Saul on behalf of the rest of her family at the end of the novel, it is her Kabbalistic experience of shefa, to which Saul initially led her, that gives her the emotional confidence to do so.

The spiritual narratives of corporeal fulfillment that unite Eliza’s meditative spelling, Miriam’s Perfectimundo, and Aaron’s ecstatic worship with ISKCON have the cumulative effect of defying and overthrowing Saul’s domination of his family, replacing his idea of Jewish identity articulated through adherence to patriarchal tradition and study with the concept of Jewish authenticity located within the Jewish body. These three
narratives demonstrate that there are as many paths to embodied spiritual fulfillment as there are Jews who create them. This chapter will begin with Aaron and the interethnic identity the novel appears to posit through his encounter with the Hare Krishnas. It will analyze the ways in which Aaron’s spiritual journey towards disembodiment facilitates a fantasy of abandoning his Jewishness that emphasizes the novel’s recourse of religious identity to the body. It will then turn to Miriam, for whom the sense of corporeal wholeness she gains from Perfectimundo, which represents an activation of the Kabbalistic concept of Tikkun Olam, provides a solution to the suffocating family life that Saul expects. But while Miriam and Aaron’s spiritual explorations and trajectories are portrayed sympathetically, they are ultimately represented as inadequate solutions to the problem of Saul’s domination. Therefore, the chapter will use these two characters to argue that Eliza is the only family member who can openly defy her father because, like Walter Benjamin’s translator, she successfully reassembles and hybridizes aspects from all her family member’s religious narratives: Aaron’s experiences of fluidity and warmth, her mother’s quest for physical fulfillment, and Saul’s knowledge of Kabbalah. The chapter will conclude by placing the spelling bees in the novel in the context of the assimilationist, liberal multiculturalism with which it is associated. It will turn to recent anxieties and ambivalences among Jewish American and critics of color to explicate how Eliza’s decision at the end of the novel speaks to those voices, allowing her to both shed the confines of her father’s restrictive version of Jewishness and reassert her own, feminist Jewish identity.

II. Aaron: Leaving Behind the Maya Body
The novel opens by introducing two spaces that highlight Eliza’s mediocrity in her intellectual, scholastic pursuits: her classroom, and her father’s office. By moving between descriptions of these two spaces, the narrative articulates the indifference towards Eliza that Saul shares with his daughter’s school. Shortly after the opening description of Eliza’s classroom, the “fourth/fifth combination, which everybody knows is where the unimpressive fifth graders are put” (1), the reader learns that the last time Saul has entered Eliza’s school was to unsuccessfully petition the principal that she be admitted into the Talented and Gifted program, which Aaron was invited to join when he was Eliza’s age. Since that failure, Saul has shown no interest in Eliza’s educational growth; at the start of the novel, Eliza cannot remember ever having entered his study, “a paper-lined nursery in which his scholarly interests may grow and blossom by the light of two 80-watt soft white bulbs” (10). Saul’s religious passions, which are limited to the cerebral and the intellectual, extend to his son and the metaphoric children that he nurtures and tends. His actual daughter, on the other hand, stands anxiously on the other side of his study’s closed door, unable to deliver the letter announcing her victory in the school spelling bee.

In stark contrast, Aaron is regularly welcomed to Saul’s study; there, he practices guitar with his father and prepares for his eventual ascent to the rabbinate. When the novel begins, Aaron is still Saul’s Jewish literacy prodigy, easily reciting for memory the Shabbat service at Saul’s synagogue, Beth Amicha, whereas Eliza feels alienated by “the robotic monotone of the congregation reading as one” (12) and “can’t read Hebrew like her brother” (14). Fearing she is unable to compete with the richness of her father’s textual knowledge or with her brother’s literary religious competence, when she finally
follows Aaron into Saul’s study to tell her father about her victory, “Eliza feels odd stepping over the threshold. She envies the ease with which Aaron enters” (25).

Like Eliza and Miriam’s narratives, Aaron’s journey from the favored son of a Jewish clergy member to an aspiring Hare Krishna devotee is focused on his relationship to his body. But whereas Eliza and Miriam feel complete through the metaphoric impregnation and fullness of spelling and Perfectimundo, respectively, Aaron aspires to a spiritual consciousness through disembodiment. However, an experience in his early adolescence, whereby his sense of the inevitability of his “inheritance” of Jewish leadership from his father is deeply connected to the physicality of prayer, frames his religious identity in terms of an embodiment that turns out to be inescapable. On the day of his Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish ceremony marking the arrival of 13-year old boys to Jewish manhood,

His father’s pride in him seeps into his skin, infuses his blood, and whispers his future…. Aaron is on the bima, speeding through the final brachot after completing his Haftorah portion when a warm flush starts at his toes and spreads, opening like a feather fan, to the top of his head…. He can sense each part of his body… but at the same time he feels he is one fluid whole…. [The prayers] have become body knowledge, so deeply ingrained that they flow as naturally as air from his lungs. (41)

This passage is notable for a number of reasons. First, the bar mitzvah dates back to an era in which membership in the public Jewish community was extended only to men. So although Jewish girls from non-Orthodox families have undergone a parallel ceremony since the first American bat mitzvah in 1922, as a traditionally male rite of passage from which Eliza is additionally barred because of her age, Aaron’s bar mitzvah underlines her exclusion from her family’s patriarchal lineage of Jewish identity. Furthermore, that Aaron’s corporeal experience of transcendency begins with the sense of his father’s pride
seeping into his skin and blood and “whisper[ing] his future” positions Saul as the mother-figure transferring the fluids of scholastic knowledge and paternal pride to his fetus, his religious progeny and prodigy. In contrast, Aaron’s actual mother, Miriam, is not mentioned in this scene at all; like Eliza, she is excluded from Aaron’s Jewish epiphany by virtue of being female.

However, as I will elaborate later, many of the physical phenomena that Aaron experiences in this moment presage descriptions of Eliza and Miriam while spelling and searching for Perfectimundo, respectively: the warm flush and the movement of blood to his toes that Aaron feels foreshadows the warmth Eliza experiences in her stomach and the “rush of blood traveling from heart to her fingers” (60) while she is spelling. In addition, his heightened awareness of each part of his body, at the same time that he feels that body comprises “one fluid whole,“ echoes Miriam’s search for the “missing pieces” that will complete her internally. The prayers that have become Aaron’s “body knowledge” presage Eliza’s sense that “The dictionary is her body’s knowledge made manifest” (71), the prayers flowing from his lungs Eliza’s words that expand “with each stretch of her lungs” (44). Therefore, although his bar mitzvah is very much a male coming-of-age that appears to exclude the women in his family and align him with his father, the imagined corporeal connection that here manifests in images of impregnation signals the correlation between his spiritual trajectory and those of Eliza and Miriam. It also emphasizes that despite his later pursuit of disembodiment, his formative experience of religious fulfillment and consciousness emerges from a deeply felt relationship to his body.
If Aaron’s bar mitzvah helps solidify his assumption that he would “inherit” his father’s leadership position in the Jewish clergy and by extension, in Jewish family life, that belief is shattered by the devastating speed with which he is replaced by Eliza in his father’s favor, a rejection made even more painfully apparent by his displacement from Saul’s study. Five years earlier, when Saul realizes how badly his then sixth-grade son is being bullied at school, he invites Aaron into enter his study out of his “desire to protect his smaller, paler, and smarter than average son.” Once Eliza wins the district spelling bee, Aaron is no longer welcome. Instead, Saul sets up a study station for his daughter; and when Aaron shows up “at the appointed hour, guitar case in hand… the door has been closed” (74) to him. Up until this sudden exclusion, Aaron likes attending Saul’s synagogue because “he’s pretty sure girls smile at him sometimes. He never doubts his clothes. He is neither too tall nor too pale” (14). Beth Amicha represents to Aaron an extension of his father’s study, offering him sanctuary from the harsh realities of high school life, where his prepubescent, “breakable” body (23) is the subject of much cruel ridicule from his peers. His exclusion from the study, therefore, triggers his doubts about how much he really belongs at Beth Amicha, and by extension in Jewish communal life. He begins to consider the aftermath of his corporeally transcendent bar mitzvah experience: “compared to that magic moment three years before, the synagogue has become yet another place where he doesn’t fit in” (82). Perhaps, he considers, the answer to his dissatisfaction with the religious program dictated by his father is to shed his weak body instead of trying to protect it.
Aaron’s discovery of a book called *Eastern Religions* inaugurates the novel’s only narrative of interethnic crossing, identifying Aaron and the Hare Krishnas, rather than Eliza and Kabbalah, as the novel’s Orientalist, “new age” spiritual practice.

Even the words ‘Eastern religion’ are alluring to Aaron. They feel like a tropical island or a far-flung mountain range which requires several layovers and a spectrum of transportation to reach. Aaron has decided that he will fly, he will sail, he will ride camelback, but he will reach Eastern religion. (88)

For Aaron, the great appeal of “Eastern religion” is its otherness, its jarring contrast to the white mainstream he has known all of his life. In contrast to Catholicism, which is available in the next town, “Eastern religion” requires long distances traversed by complicated routes. Most important, “Eastern religion” promises Aaron the means to evade his disappointing body: “It is as if his entire life up to this point has prepared him for this book. His too pale, too skinny body…. with all its failings, is immaterial” (88).

When Aaron imagines himself meditating as a Buddhist, he also fixates on the dissolution of his inadequate body: “There is no pain, only a feeling of release as his skin, muscle and bones are worn away to reveal a shining light like a small sun” (97). This language of release echoes the “release” Miriam feels the “first time Perfectimundo finds” her (64) and Eliza’s “sense of release” while permutating (170), even though in Aaron’s case, his feeling of release comes, so he believes, from the disintegration of his body, rather than the fullness of it. Saul’s departure from the house to accompany Eliza to her first national bee about half way through the novel grants Aaron “his first fatherless night” (107), an ideal occasion to finally try Buddhist meditation. But his first effort at naked meditation

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8 Notably, the national bee for which Saul and Eliza abandon Aaron takes place in Washington, D.C., as if to drive home the allure of Buddhist’s exoticism: Aaron’s journey to the far-flung destination of “Eastern religion” is occasioned by Saul and Eliza contrasting journey to the nation’s capital, a potent symbol of
leads only to “sticky failure” (162) because he cannot help masturbating—an incident which foreshadows his inability to completely detach himself from his body. Shortly after his unsuccessful attempt, while reading Are You Hindu? in a park, Aaron meets a young man named Chali who invites him to the ISKCON temple.

While the novel opposes Aaron’s efforts to evade his maya, or earthly body with Eliza and Miriam’s expressions of mystical completion through figurative pregnancy and bodily fulfillment, his spiritual climax in an imagined scene of interracial biological reproduction, which in turn fuels a physical experience of transcendence, demonstrates the inadequacy of disembodiment as a viable form of resistance to Saul’s program of Jewish identity. At the ISKCON temple one afternoon,

Aaron knows, deep in his heart, that he is meant to marry the guru’s daughter. This girl is the one with whom he is meant to create a new life for Krsna…. Preceding the special meal, they will chant for six extra hours to insure that they are spiritually clean enough to merit a child with a pure soul. Then they will perform the sacred act. Aaron has only pictured the girl’s body in dreams he doesn’t remember, prides himself on the fact that in his waking fantasies he pictures only the girl’s smiling face and a baby with her eyes. After a few weeks of this fantasy, he realizes he has been erroneously picturing a white baby, retouches his imaginary infant’s skin until it is a shade closer to that of his imaginary bride’s. With a flush of pride, he realizes how far he has from his father’s study and the Stacey Liebersmans of the world.

Filled with visions of dark babies, Aaron participates in kirtan for the first time, dancing and chanting with the others until he is no longer mainstream American politics. The distance that Aaron perceives between “Eastern religion” and widespread, secularized, commercialized Christianity is a large part of its draw for Aaron. Although he first dapples in Catholicism, mostly out of convenience—there is a church in the next town over to which he can drive—he is quickly alienated by “the Son of God factor, which a lifetime of Judaism has made difficult to swallow…. The proverbial nail in the Christian coffin is Aaron’s realization that, in a country of shopping mall Santas and plastic manger scenes, everyone is Christian by default” (87-88). Aaron is turned off by both Catholicism’s contradiction with a core Jewish belief he is unable to relinquish and by its mainstream ordinariness. “Eastern religion,” on the other hand, seems disparate enough from “default” Christianity that it will not force him to embrace anything that fundamentally contradicts his Jewish values.
Two words here stress the inevitability of the recourse to the body: “flush” and “retouches.” Aaron again feels the “flush” he experienced at his Bar Mitzvah, but this time, it results not from his father’s pride in him but from his own pride in his separation from his father. He no longer needs either Saul’s study or “the Stacey Liebermans of the world,” the Jewish girls whose attention he used to regard as validations of Jewish manhood. In fact, the one-time object of his Jewish sexual desire, Stacey, has been replaced by the guru’s nameless daughter, with whom he will have “spiritually clean” and “sacred” carnal relations not for the sake of sexual pleasure, but to produce a “pure” child worthy of Krsna. The “flush of pride” he feels for escaping Saul’s study echoes the pride he feels for being able to focus on the child and on his future wife’s immaculate, “smiling face.”

What’s more, he “retouches” his child’s skin to be a more accurate blend of his wife’s and his own, a verb which, despite its virtual function, accentuates tactile aspect of his fantasy. The “flush of pride” here thus has a double meaning: not only does it repeat the “warm flush” of his Bar Mitzvah, suggesting that Aaron’s spiritual subjectivity is developing from his embodied Jewish identity rather than in spite of it, it also implies the physiological, visual effect of a flush in the darkening of his child’s complexion. In fact, the “flush” of the baby’s skin is so effective that the “images of dark babies,” his dark babies that will prove his true devotion to Krsna, fuel his body’s participation in kirtan, thus incorporating not just the fantasy of biological reproduction but his actual, material body into his ecstatic worship.
The striking parallel between the language describing Aaron’s experience of *kirtan* and that of Abulafia’s writing on permutation reinforces the immutable corporeality of spiritual transcendence, which Aaron erroneously believes is the result of his *detachment* from his body: “You will feel then as if an additional spirit is within you, arousing you and strengthening you, passing through your entire body and giving you pleasure. You will experience ecstasy and trembling” (181). Through the quotation of this passage, the novel stresses that despite Aaron’s efforts towards disembodiment, his fantasy of baby-making and his participation in ecstatic worship at the ISKCON temple share with Eliza’s spelling and Miriam’s Perfectimundo the crucial component of *embodiment* that facilitates their escape from Saul’s religious authority in the Naumann household.

Furthermore, despite defying his father and eventually leaving home, Aaron is unable to entirely eradicate embodied aspects of his Jewish practice and identity, which reemerge at unexpected moments: certainly his efforts to evade his *maya* body parallel the Kabbalistic goal to “transcend this world” (Halevi 19). At his first weekend retreat at the temple, dressing himself in saffron cloth Aaron “wills the scent to mark his body the way the beads have marked his fingertips. A phrase from the Shabbat service suddenly pops into his head: *I am anointed with fragrant oil*” (193). Although one is Hare Krishna and the other Jewish, both the scent of the saffron cloth and the Bible verse exemplify the novel’s consistent return to the body as the site of authentic spiritual experience. The visceral pleasure Aaron takes from the smell of jappa beads on his skin reminds him of the “fragrant oil” of the ninety-second Psalm, which is itself evocative of the “one fluid whole” (41) he felt himself to be at his bar mitzvah. These moments articulate another
aspect of Aaron’s spiritual journey of which he himself is unaware: despite all of his efforts to evade his father’s course for his Jewish development, the novel never implies that Aaron successfully abandons his Jewish identity. On the contrary, as all these embodied experiences show, he cannot abandon that identity because it is engrained in the very body that he also cannot evacuate. And while recent literary critics who privilege the formation of “interethnic” subjectivities in American literature might be tempted to read Aaron, with his interracial fantasy and spiritual fulfillment among “Eastern Religion,” as the novel’s “living nexus of an expanding interethnicity” (Rody 6), the novel evades an interpretation that would fixate on Aaron’s body as the site of “charged, riddling, potentially liberating multiethnic fusion” (viii). Rather, through its recourse to his body, Aaron’s narrative suggests that what is embodied in the very impossibility of his fantasy is the intransience of Jewishness itself.9

III. Miriam’s Perfectimundo: Repairing the Shattered World

In Eliza and Aaron’s mother, Miriam, the novel presents another narrative of spiritual exploration that is not immediately recognizable as Jewish; and yet, just as Aaron’s dancing at the ISKCON temple closely parallels the writing of the Kabbalist Abulafia, Miriam finds the ideal articulation of Perfectimundo in the Kabbalistic concept of Tikkun Olam, taught to her by Saul. What both Aaron and Miriam’s narratives also

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9 Perhaps unsurprisingly, Eliza recognizes the intractability of her brother’s Jewishness, and never regards her brother’s decision to join ISKCON as a rejection of it. When he first reveals to her that he has been going to “A religious place. For people who want to get closer to God” (210), Eliza, while surprised and a little hurt that he might “like it better than here” (213), is remarkably sympathetic to his spirit of rebellion. Although still under her father’s tutelage, Eliza is unwilling to relinquish her sense of loyalty that is first and foremost for her brother. She agrees not to tell their father about Aaron’s activities, because “She has learned for herself that there are things Saul shouldn’t be told” (211).
share is a desire for flesh and warmth, an impulse towards embodiment that runs counter to Saul’s literary, scholastic version of Jewish practice. For Miriam, Perfectimundo represents a reconstitution, not an escape, of her Jewish self, one that places emphasis on the figure of the pregnant body.

Miriam first experiences Perfectimundo as a seven-year old girl, three years younger than Eliza at the start of the novel:

The first time Perfectimundo finds Miriam, it is a complete surprise, a game of hopscotch in which the stone falls into the perfect center of a square 3…. The absolute rightness of the stone’s placement in the square opens something deep inside Miriam that had, until this moment, always been shut. Miriam can feel the release. Her body fills with warmth at the sight of the stone, beckoning like a talisman to another world. (64)

Like Eliza, Miriam is a child when she discovers the alluring possibility of completion—note the pun of the “complete surprise”—and “another world” that it promises. As if impregnated, Miriam feels this state of completion “deep inside”; like Aaron’s “warm flush,” Miriam’s “body fills with warmth.” The sexual connotations of this moment—her sense of something opening “deep inside” her, her sense of “release” and her body filling with “warmth”—make her first experience of Perfectumindo a precocious vision of corporeal, heterosexual fulfillment.¹⁰ This orgasmic, body-based sense of completion fuels the quest that is to become an obsession: “even if she must spend her whole life searching for the door to Perfectimundo, she will find it” (64).

¹⁰ The sexual connotations of Miriam’s first experience of Perfectimundo are made stronger by the passage’s parallels to a similar moment in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, in which young Janie “was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in… the panting breath of the breeze…. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!” (10-11). Like Janie, who interprets the erotic sinking of the bee into the flower as a vision of “a marriage,” Miriam interprets the falling of the stone into the center of the square as prophesy of the sense of completion and fulfillment that heterosexual union will bring her.
Her search leads to her marriage to Saul, whereby Perfectimundo operates as both an alternative to, and a critique of, the domestic model of Jewish femininity that eventually drives Miriam crazy. Since her childhood, Miriam has felt no connection to the gendered religious customs that as a Jewish wife and mother, she is expected by Saul to practice. On Shabbat, “It is traditionally the woman’s job to handle the candles, but it has always been Saul who retrieved the candlesticks and the wineglass…. Miriam… waves her hands over the candle flames but leaves Eliza to chant the blessing alone” (127-28). Perfectimundo, by contrast, provides Miriam with self-made rituals and practices that allow her to channel her burgeoning symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder towards her own spiritual goals. As a girl, her nightly routine of checking her shoebox that holds her first Perfectimundo item, a pink rubber ball she stole from a toy store, and whispering “her favorite P-word five times…. looks like prayer” (73). Perfectimundo thus operates as the outlet of an inclination towards ritual that has been in development since her childhood.

Her decision to marry Saul results from her belief that he has the spiritual language for her life-long obsession. One night in bed, early in their relationship, he tells her,

“The mystics believe that in the beginning of the world God’s Divine Light, containing all that is good, was enclosed in sacred vessels…. But because there was already sin in the world, these vessels could not contain the Light and shattered into countless pieces….. According to the mystics, it is our job to locate these shards and to mend them through good deeds…. This is called Tikkun Olam, or the fixing of the world.”

….Miriam realizes she is a broken vessel, pieces of her scattered everywhere. She has been finding these pieces, in their many forms, and bringing them together so that she can be made whole again. Miriam can feel Saul’s words falling into place inside her. She knows then and there that they will marry.
Saul has been hoping Miriam would stay the night but had not dreamed they would make love again. (86-87)

Miriam’s image of words “falling into place inside her” echo the rock falling onto the hopscotch board and the “pieces of the letter break[ing] apart or fus[ing] together” inside of Eliza (157). And the name “Perfectimundo”—literally, “perfect world”—presages Eliza’s feeling of being filled to completion in pursuit of a new world; while permutating, “A sense of completion had filled her, the small movement of her head encompassing a new world” (190). In addition, Miriam gathering pieces “inside her” to make herself “whole again” reads as a kind of spiritual impregnation, but it the reverse of the biological process: rather than her marriage to Saul leading to her impregnation, her recognition of a name for the impregnation of Perfectimundo leads to her decision to marry Saul. That decision, which she follows by having sex again with Saul, indicates her hope that heterosexual married life will provide the means to achieve Perfectimundo.

But despite his promising talk of Tikkun Olam, Saul turns out to be spiritually (and thus sexually) unsatisfying and binds her to a family role she finds repugnant. As the novel slowly reveals, Perfectimundo truly takes over her life once she is married and realizes that Saul’s script of Jewish family life will not lead her to that door; instead, she turns to objects as the missing pieces she needs in order to repair the fractured vessel of the world and of herself. It is especially significant that Perfectimundo “finds Miriam,” and not the other way around. From Miriam’s perspective, her missing objects lie in wait for her to reunite them and set things right. Like a newborn taken from her at birth, the first object that Miriam shoplifts as a girl, the pink rubber ball, “is a part of her from which she was senselessly separated” (72), her act of retrieval “as much a given as her beating heart” (73). As an adult, when she combs “floor after floor” of a department store,
she knows she has come across “the singular item waiting for her swift hand” because
“She and this object are intimately joined, its discovery a matter of attuning herself to her
body, sensing the size and shape of the internal gap meant to be filled” (76).

After her disappointing marriage with Saul, filling the “internal gap” through
Perfectimundo becomes an explicit compensation for the result of that marriage, the even
more dissatisfying experience of her actual pregnancy with her biological children.
“When Miriam has pocketed an item, she experiences the ideal pregnancy. There is no
round-belly reminder of something inside, feeding upon her in order to grow. There are
no sickening turns and kicks, proof of the stranger soon to emerge from between her
legs” (79). For Miriam, the “ideal pregnancy” is an internal repair through her reunion
with and incorporation of a lost object, rather than the growth of an actual body inside of
her.11

11 Her disgust towards actual pregnancy stems from the trauma of biological motherhood. Before she
marries Saul, Miriam decides she wants children because she “has inherited her parents’ idea of procreative
legitimacy….. She sees in Saul the househusband who will enable her parental ambitions without disabling
her autonomy” (22). Miriam’s expectations are decidedly masculine, positioning her as the independent
breadwinner, free to pursue Perfectimundo while her “househusband” attends to the trivial, domestic
matters that are traditionally the wife’s domain. Her experience of pregnancy is a rude awakening: “The
first time Miriam’s belly grows, her mind fills with visions of monsters…. Breast-feeding Aaron, Miriam
senses some vital part of herself escaping into his tiny, sucking mouth. She resents that her body must
continue to give….. She hates her breasts, grown voluptuous with milk” (80). In contrast, Saul loves feeding
Aaron with his pinky finger. For Miriam, breastfeeding is an experience of self-loss to a parasitic, little
monster, and she transfers her resentment towards Aaron’s infant greed to an antipathy towards her
expanding, maternal body. As soon as possible, she “delegates late night feedings and sodden diapers to
Saul,” who “revels in the intimacy these duties afford” (47).

Miriam’s hatred of the physical excess of her adult, female body while her children are infants
manifests itself in her distance from them as they grow up: she “has been telling herself that Eliza is more
Saul’s than hers, focusing on Eliza’s straight hair and long fingers for proof” (95). Echoing the
ambivalence she feels for Jewish ritual, Miriam regards her biological children with, at best, bemused
distance. Saul’s “sense of possession” for Aaron (47) has left “her the child to whom she has the least to
say” (59). Even so, Eliza does share a physical resemblance with her mother, which Miriam notices during
the regional bee that the members of the Naumann family attend together: “she looks exactly
like Miriam when she was a girl…. There is a pain in this recognition. Because Miriam knows that such powers of
concentration come from years of being alone, of needing to focus so strongly on one thing because there is
nothing else” (59). Miriam associates her focus on “one thing,” Perfectimundo, as necessitating “being
alone”; it is the reason that she has never been able to be an attentive mother or sexual partner. This
moment of recognition, which Miriam does not feel for Aaron, who “has always been Saul’s child” (195),
When Saul takes Eliza to Washington, D.C. for the national bee, his absence serves “as a trigger for something growing inside” Miriam (101). His departure, it turns out, incites the transition of Perfectimundo’s objects from department store items to private property in the middle class homes of strangers. Her first morning without Saul, her “recalibrated body direct[s] her toward the external manifestation of her internal change” (109). Miriam’s body is leading her to a new site of Perfectimundo that will allow her to match the growth within her. In a nearby town, she spots “the house,” which she enters with a key she finds under the front mat.

Miriam knows, technically, that she doesn’t belong here, but neither does the object she has come to rescue. As long as it stays in this house, the world will remain slightly realigned. By reclaiming it and becoming more whole, she is working toward the correction of a larger imbalance. She is carrying out *Tikkun Olam*.

Her body confirms this. Inside this strange house, looking for the missing piece, she feels intensely, acutely alive. (110)

Upon exiting the house with her reclaimed “missing piece,” a blue ceramic dish, “Miriam is reborn…. Her new inner rhythm, born that first Saul-less night, now fits her outer body. Her looser heart beats closer to the surface than before…. *Tik-kun. Tik-kun*” (111). This passage describing Miriam’s first episode of “breaking and entering,” the crime for which she will eventually be arrested, is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it reinforces the significance of Saul’s lesson of *Tikkun Olam* to her mission of Perfectimundo. Miriam truly believes that by rescuing her object, she is fulfilling the Kabbalistic imperative to repair the imbalance of the world. Moreover, she will complete this task through impregnation, by “becoming more whole”; physically reclaiming the object is the

implies a connection between mother and daughter that will become more explicit as Eliza’s resistance to her father’s rules, particularly to his insistence that they wait to progress to Abulafia’s next book, increases.
“external manifestation” of the “internal change” set in motion by Saul’s departure. It causes the “new inner rhythm” to rise to the surface it shares with her “outer body.” The heartbeat of her “reborn” self pulsating to the word “Tikkun” emphasizes that Miriam’s internal change, wholeness, and rebirth are inseparable from her adherence to this Kabbalistic concept. Finally, the passage reinforces the connection the novel draws between Miriam’s Perfectimundo and Eliza’s spiritual development during her spelling studies: “Eliza can sense herself changing. She has often felt that her outsides were too dull for her insides” (45). These moments of similarity between Eliza and Miriam’s narratives demonstrate their shared motivation to overthrow Saul’s scholastic version of Judaism and establish spiritual autonomy on their own terms.

Insofar as Miriam turns to objects because she is neither sexually satisfied as a wife nor emotionally fulfilled as a mother, a logical, if perverse, extension of Perfectimundo’s function as an “ideal” impregnation is Miriam’s projection of any feelings of eroticism she might have felt with her husband onto her thefts. This displacement enacts her attempts to reclaim her own spiritual narrative from Saul. After taking the ceramic dish, “This is passion, she realizes, finally understanding the smoldering heat of a lifetime of love scenes… that have left her cold. She wants to call Saul…. Is this what you feel? she would ask…. Is this what we are supposed to feel? the question she will never dare to ask, afraid to acknowledge the answer” (134). Miriam is aware that her relationship with Saul lacks the intimacy (and the gender roles) dictated by traditional marriage protocol, but she has long ago realized that only her lost objects can give her the erotic level of “passion,” “release” and “warmth” she experienced playing hopscotch as a seven-year-old.
As their marriage progresses, the novel pushes her view of Saul as “her newest missing piece” (87) to its most objectified extreme: it is not Saul’s love or companionship, but his penis that becomes the “missing piece” she desperately needs to get back inside of her: “How can she tell him she needs him inside her or she fears she will float away?” (143). With a fervor entirely disconnected from sexual pleasure, she begins to wake him up at night by putting his penis in her mouth or vagina. “He knows it can’t feel good for her, knows she needs time…. [S]he’s not even looking at him, not even aware that he’s come. She’s still pumping up and down. He has to push her off before she stops” (154).

Although Saul tries to convince himself that this unprecedented boon in his sex life is a positive development, even he realizes that Miriam’s nighttime aggression has nothing to do with her feelings of tenderness or sexual attraction and everything to do with a parasitic, obsessive desire for his penis, the reasons for which he cannot yet understand. In one particularly realistic dream of his, Miriam “starts pulling at his penis,” which “suddenly tears away as easily and as painlessly as a piece of clay…. Miriam rolls away from him, completely focused on her new prize” (160). Saul’s imagined castration in his dream is particularly significant because it points to the ways in which Miriam’s Perfectimundo not only threatens to emasculate him, but to rob him of the organ that sired his two children. In combination with the metaphoric reproduction that Miriam undergoes during Perfectimundo, Aaron imagines while rejoicing with the Hare Krishnas and, as I will discuss shortly, Eliza experiences while spelling and permutating, the loss of Saul’s sexual and reproductive organ hints at the very real threat that all of these alternative forms of spirituality pose to his once unquestioned patriarchal control over his family. After all, not only is Saul the only member of his family who seems unable to
become metaphorically pregnant or even to change from within; the loss of his penis would mean that he is also unable to impregnate, to participate in any way in the bringing about of the “new world” that his family members are determined to pursue without him.

The disturbing nocturnal encounters end after Saul violently “parts her legs and thrusts himself inside…. He has never treated a woman this way, never. He is not cruel” (183-84). From that point on, “He sleeps in his study now…. One night she tries his door, but it is locked” (184). With his marriage falling apart, Saul retreats from his bed to his patriarchal Jewish bastion, against which he locks his wife, just as he did Aaron. It is important to note that Saul has a fortress to which to retreat, while Miriam is more or less driven out of the house. Saul’s avoidance of her grants Miriam a sense of relief that she no longer has to “use Saul as a buffer between herself and the houses” (195). With her realization, the narrative’s indictment of Saul as a catalyst for his wife’s estrangement from her family, as well has her mental illness, becomes increasingly explicit.

Shortly after Saul moves into his office, Miriam is arrested for breaking and entering. Upon her arrest at the stranger’s house, Miriam takes the cops to a storage unit, where a policeman later brings Saul. There, Saul finally learns how his wife has spent the past eighteen years of their marriage, and the reader discovers the extent to which Perfectimundo has consumed Miriam’s life. In the storage unit, Saul discovers what Miriam calls her “kaleidoscope,” named after her girlhood toy through which she believed she saw Perfectimundo in all of its carefully arranged shapes. In the kaleidoscope, eighteen years of Miriam’s stolen objects mimic the internal pathways of the human body. The buttons, for example, are “grouped together in vague stepping stone arrangements which… remind Saul of pictures he’s seen of the circulatory system”
Standing in this space, Saul notices that the objects “form an integrated whole…. Saul cannot look without recognizing something lost, the room a return to … a pure existence he suspects only at a fleeting, subcellular level” (224-25). It is particularly notable that while even Saul, who has been completely oblivious to his wife’s activities and whereabouts for their entire marriage, as well as to how he has pushed Aaron away from himself and thereby from Jewish practice, is able to recognize the bodily impact of Perfectimundo, he can only associate it with pictorial reproductions. He can “suspect,” but is unable to feel those processes inside his body, as his wife and daughter do.

When Saul visits Miriam in the mental hospital where she has been placed after her arrest, she explains how she has adapted his lessons of Jewish mysticism: “I’ve been searching for the proper pieces since childhood, before I even knew what they would become. It was you who made me realize what they were…. Tikkun Olam, the fixing of the world…. I’ve been gathering up the broken vessels to make things whole again” (235-36). While Miriam means to express gratitude to Saul for providing her with the spiritual goal of Tikkun Olam, spoken as they are in the ward of a mental hospital, her words comes across to the reader as further indictment for why she ended up in this extreme situation. Although he does not realize it, Saul, who provided the Jewish frame for his family’s life, both the positive Kabbalah and the negative cage of domestic

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12 In addition to the core motivation of Tikkun Olam, the number eighteen further connects Miriam’s pursuit of Perfectimundo to Jewish belief. In the Hebrew alphabet, each letter is assigned a numeric value. The two letters that comprise “ chai,” meaning life, add up to eighteen. The eighteen year-period that Miriam has been assembling her Kaleidescope underscores her determination as a child to spend “her whole life searching for the door to Perfectimundo” (64, emphasis added). The letter-based meaning of “chai” in Jewish tradition also reinforces the connection between Miriam’s narrative and that of Eliza, who is metaphorically impregnated by, and gives life to, the letters she assembles and permutates according to Jewish (Kabbalistic) tradition.
femininity and middle class motherhood, bears the primary responsibility for his wife’s breakdown.

It would be easy to interpret Miriam’s pursuit of Perfectimundo and her insistence that she has “never stolen anything in [her] life” (237) as “pathology” (Eisenstein 30), *Tikkun Olam* warped by a lifelong obsessive-compulsive disorder to its most deranged ends. But by representing the Kaleidoscope as the alternative to Saul’s patriarchal, scholastic program for Jewish identity, which is itself opposed to her and Eliza’s narratives of embodied spiritual fulfillment, the novel represents Miriam’s pursuit of Perfectimundo with surprisingly little moral indictment. She appears even more sympathetic because Saul’s resentment towards her is magnified by his anger towards his son, for whom Eliza feels increasingly protective. Nonetheless, although *Bee Season* presents Perfectimundo as a sacred practice and not as mere kleptomania, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or sexual dysfunction, given that it causes Miriam to end up estranged from her family or from any sense of reality, it also portrays Perfectimundo as an untenable form of resistance against the suffocating, bourgeois gender roles for Jewish American women that it critiques. Like Aaron’s pursuit of disembodiment, Perfectimundo represents a noble attempt to rebel against Saul, but a faulty form of Jewish embodiment. Miriam’s method of stealing, trying to appropriate Saul’s penis as

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13 Towards the end of the novel, while Eliza is still under his tutelage, Saul lumps Miriam and Aaron together as the family members who have disgraced him. The night before the first spelling bee of the next school year, Saul shouts at Aaron, “So, for your information, your mother is in the loony bin and she’s there because she is completely crazy, and I have no idea when or if she is ever coming out.” When Aaron insists that this isn’t true, Saul replies, “God, Aaron, if you want proof, just look at yourself. Like mother, like son…. Why can’t you just be like me, Aaron? When I was your age, I had friends. Real friends, not religious freaks” (264-65). Saul’s frustration with Aaron for being just as “crazy” as his wife is exacerbated by his son’s refusal to become a religious copy of himself. Eliza’s primal reaction, letting out “the sound a small child might make if it were trying to run away from a frightening animal” and eventually slurring “Please stop it, please stop, please, Daddy, just leave him alone” (265), conveys the solidification of her loyalty to her brother and mother, and, as a result, the cohesion of the three of them against Saul.
her “missing piece” (87), and distancing herself from her children ultimately represent inadequate solutions to the problem of Saul’s patriarchal, scholastic script of gendered Jewish identity. In particular, the difference in their fates—Miriam ends up alone in a mental hospital, while the novel closes by emphasizing Eliza’s self-confidence—underlines the difference in their approaches to embodiment. In the next section, I demonstrate why and how Eliza’s experience of metaphoric pregnancy while spelling and permutating her way to shefa, by contrast, is able to unite the spiritual narratives of her brother and her mother and successfully displace Saul from the helm of the Naumann family.

IV. Eliza: The Reparative Powers of Corporeal Reclamation

While Bee Season makes clear that both Aaron and Miriam are on separate spiritual journeys away from, and largely invisible to, their patriarch and one-time leader, only Eliza gains the power to stand up to her father. This is because her positive relationship to embodiment fulfills the work of Walter Benjamin’s translator. In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin writes:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of reassembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (21)

Benjamin’s messianic idea of translation as an “effort of assembling” (21) the fragmented shards of a vessel positions both Miriam and Eliza as translators who attempt to repair what is broken in the service of creating a “greater language,” or, in the words of Bee
Season, a “new world.” The language of brokenness, assemblage, and physical completion that Miriam’s narrative shares with Eliza’s suggests that Miriam’s Benjaminian goal, gathering together the broken shards of the world to achieve a “perfect” world in rebellion against Saul’s script of domestic Jewish femininity, is no less noble or sympathetic than her daughter’s. But only Eliza is able to “lovingly and in detail incorporate” each of her family members’ “original mode[s] of signification”—Aaron’s ecstatic worship, Miriam’s sense of physical completion, and even Saul’s knowledge of Kabbalistic meditative practices—into what Benjamin calls “a greater language.” In addition, only Eliza’s spiritual journey is intertwined with an unselfish determination to reunite her family: as the novel progresses and the Naumanns becomes more fractured, Eliza becomes increasingly resolute that Benjamin’s “greater language,” what she identifies as her spelling and permutating, will allow her to repair the damage by drawing Miriam and Aaron back. Eliza imagines herself as a “letter doctor” who will aid her mother “with injections of B for steadfastness, tincture of Q to remind her of her family” (249). She is confident that by practicing Abulafia’s methods, she will have God’s attention; “once Eliza reaches God’s ear she knows she’ll be able to get her brother and mother back” without Saul’s help (252).

To fully comprehend the magnitude of Eliza’s task at the end of the novel, it is necessary to recognize the span of her own spiritual journey. As discussed earlier, at the start of the novel, Eliza feels almost as mediocre in her father’s synagogue as she does in her school. Because she “can’t read Hebrew like her brother…. she chooses to keep her mouth shut” (14-15). When it comes to conventional signs of Jewish aptitude as measured by her father, Eliza falls so far behind Aaron that she assumes that Saul’s initial
reaction to the news of her first spelling victory will be embarrassment: “That all his
daughter can do is spell? His daughter, who still can’t recite the Hebrew alphabet?” (16).
As it turns out, her anticipation is not far off. While watching her “in complete
concentration, employing the techniques of the ancient rabbis” during the regional
spelling bee, Saul cannot believe this “mystical prodigy” is “His own quiet, unassuming
Elly-belly who does little more than go through the motions of the Shabbat service every
Friday and who, until the day of the district bee, had never set foot inside his study” (61).
For Saul, the possibility that Eliza could be a Jewish mystic is incompatible with her
incompetence thus far in the traditional Jewish study and practice at which he and his son
excel.

During her spelling practice, Eliza begins to achieve a sense of physical,
embodied fulfillment entirely absent from her experiences at Beth Amicha.

When Eliza studies, it is like discovering her own anatomy. The words
resonate within her as if rooted deep inside her body. She pictures words
lining her stomach, expanding with each stretch of her lungs, nestling in
the chambers of her heart…. When she closes her eyes to picture a word
she imagines a communion of brain and body, her various organs
divulging their lingual secrets….

Eliza can sense herself changing. She has often felt that her
outsides were too dull for her insides, that deep within her there was
something better than what everyone else could see. (44-45)

Compare this experience of body-awareness to Aaron’s bar mitzvah, when he feels a
“warm flush” and “can sense each part of his body…. [The prayers] have become body
knowledge, so deeply ingrained that they flow as naturally as air from his lungs” (41).
For young Aaron as for Eliza, language becomes a part of their flowing corporeal
processes, so internalized that it heightens both children’s consciousness of the changes
happening within their bodies. Spelling allows Eliza to transcend her dull “outsides,” not
only by incorporating the words into her more splendid, private “insides,” but by metaphorically impregnating her with the language that becomes “rooted deep inside.” Welcome tenants, the words make a home of a body and settle into her “stomach… lungs… heart,” her most essential, life-maintaining organs. As Eliza becomes impregnated by the words, her body and her mind participate in an intimate intercourse, a “communion” that takes place across her “various organs.” These words change Eliza from within, so that although what “everyone else could see” might remain the same, Eliza can “sense herself changing.” Sense is significant here in its double meaning: not only does Eliza suspect that she is changing, but she literally senses it through the newly attuned senses of her body.

As Eliza becomes more and more absorbed in preparation for the national bee, she increasingly senses her spelling experiences not just in her body, but specifically emerging from within her lungs, her heart, and her stomach. Participating in the Philadelphia Metro Area bee, she “feels overwhelmingly, intensely alive. She can feel her lungs expanding, the rush of blood traveling from heart to her fingers” (60). And when Saul tells her about Abulafia, whose technique of meditation through permutating Hebrew letters he hopes to teach her, “Eliza starts getting a warm feeling in her stomach” (173), echoing the “warm flush” Aaron feels during his bar mitzvah and the “warmth” that fills Miriam’s body during her first moment of Perfectimundo, at the same time that her sense of being “alive” foreshadows Miriam’s experience the first time she breaks into a house in search of a missing item (110).

During the regional bee, Eliza’s sensitivity to the “rush of blood traveling from heart” (60) and to the warm feeling in her stomach culminates in her imagination of
growing a word inside herself. She “closes her eyes and feels her mind empty out,” in order to make room for her creation: “Inside Elly’s head, L grows longer, its edges curving inward to form an O. Her body loosens. When the edge of O grows a tail to become Q, Eliza feels the change in her fingertips. Q’s top evaporates and its tail disappears, U settling warm in her belly” (130). The novel draws a sharp contrast between this experience and Miriam’s distaste for the “stranger” inside her when she is biologically pregnant, “feeding upon her in order to grow” and filling her with “sickening turns and kicks” (79). Unlike Miriam, Eliza has never experienced biological pregnancy, and her experience is not connected to a sexual consciousness. Yet she shares with her mother the ability to reproduce, and with her brother a sense of physical fullness through prayer—both of which, it seems important to stress, Saul lacks.14

Although Eliza learns Abulafia’s chanting techniques from her father, she “feels most like her brother then, the ghost of his guitar entering the room. The letters become music, the alphabet their own duet” (155). Unbeknownst to Saul, she is thinking of her brother, chanting in a “duet” with the guitar he no longer plays. The first time she hears Aaron chanting, Eliza “finds echoes of her own chanting, this a secret she didn’t know they shared” (215). The novel strengthens the connections between the children’s secret spiritual explorations through the descriptions of each of their acts of private meditation: The first time Aaron tries meditating completely naked, he does so sitting on the carpet of his bedroom floor when no one else is home (108). Eliza also tries meditating in an

14 Even Aaron is able to undergo a parallel experience of movement and growth in his stomach, and an “emptying out” that makes room for a divine presence, while meditating at the ISKCON temple: “He feels his voice resonating in his chest and belly. The feeling takes up everything… His mind empties of his boredom with school and his mounting anxiety over his covert visits to the ISKON temple. He is only the sound of God’s name coming from his mouth” (158). Aaron’s meditation also gives him a feeling of something inside filling him up, “[taking] over everything” so that, in a sense, he is giving birth to God’s name out of his mouth.
empty house by “Sitting on her bedroom carpet, the door closed behind her” (219). She feels “closest” to Aaron when she “can hear her brother chanting in his room as she works a permutation…. his sounds blending with hers in the shared space of the air vent” (259). The commingling of his children’s voices behind the walls forms a spiritual conversation and a coalition to which Saul is not privy, and signals the weakening of the domestic structure that has kept him at the head of his family.

When she doesn’t win the national spelling bee, she and Saul return to her spelling studies with even greater fervor, only now Saul’s ulterior motives are becoming clearer to Eliza. Saul sometimes has Eliza “write the alphabet over and over without looking at the paper,” to the point that “Eliza imagines the alphabet climbing inside her arm and taking her hand for a ride until she is no longer aware of her fingers’ movements” (155). Other times, he has her visualize letters growing in her head; still other times, they chant the alphabet together. During these sessions, Eliza learns a technique that is mirrored in her mother and her brother’s individual spiritual journeys:

The trick is to think about babies.

Eliza imagines she is floating in a warm space. She is a mere half something waiting to be made whole. Rushing toward her are all the letters of the alphabet…. One pulls away from the others. It comes closer and closer and closer until, finally, it passes into her, filling her with its A-ness or R-ness, K-ness or Y-ness, and now she is a growing thing, the letter present in every fledging heartbeat, every newborn drop of blood. … The key is to take baby-making to its natural conclusion. Filled with a letter, she imagines growing with it. Pieces of the letter break apart or fuse together to form her eyes, her nose, her hands and her feet…. Through it all, Saul watches. Elly’s eyes dance back and forth behind her closed lids. Her fingers flutter and twitch. (156-57)

There is a striking ambiguity in this passage: is Eliza a fetus, or a pregnant woman? She is the fetus, “floating in a warm space,” with fingers that “flutter and twitch” behind the “closed lids” that shield her from the world, the “growing thing” being nourished by the
letters that suffuse her “every newborn drop of blood.” But as the “growing thing,” she is also the impregnated mother who is being filled with the letters, each with its own “fledging heartbeat” and “newborn drop of blood.” In contrast to Miriam’s first vision of Perfectimundo as a precocious image of heterosexual desire, Eliza’s spiritual experience, while informed by her knowledge of the biological process of pregnancy, is entirely divorced from the eroticism of sexual intercourse. Her idea of what the “natural conclusion” of letter/baby-making entails is notably de-sexualized and chaste: her “growing with” the letter, whose pieces “break apart or fuse together” to construct her body parts.

At this moment, Eliza is still under Saul’s watch; he observes Eliza’s concentration, although of course he does not know, nor can he understand, the “baby-making” that is taking place: after all, Eliza is “afraid” to reveal to him her physical relationship with the letters (156). However, once she begins reciting her permutations, rather than writing them out as Saul has instructed her, Eliza’s “baby-making” and internal sense of fullness and completion move beyond the jurisdiction of his guidance and become even more her own: “She could feel the different vowels in her marrow, her bones chimes through which the letters blew. A sense of completion had filled her, the small movement of her head encompassing a new world” (190). This sense of completion assures her that despite her father’s insistence that she wait, “she knows she’s ready for more” (190). She decides to break the rule against borrowing books from the study and begins to read Abulafia’s *Light of the Intellect* on her own.

Miriam’s arrest, which occurs the same night that Aaron secretly departs for the ISKCON temple for a weekend retreat, demonstrates to Eliza what her secret chanting
with Aaron has led her to suspect: that her father is not to be trusted with the spiritual welfare of the family. When Saul, furious with Aaron for abandoning Judaism and accusing him of driving Miriam away, shouts at his son that his mother is “completely crazy,” the reaction of Eliza’s body is the exact opposite of its warm, fluid expansion during her spelling: “Eliza has dried up, her body an empty husk. The moisture is gone from her mouth and eyes…. Her skin has become so fragile she knows it will crumble away at the slightest movement, reducing her to bones and reddish dust that was once her blood” (264). After the ensuing argument, during which Aaron slaps Saul across the face, Saul tries to hug Eliza, but she “can feel her father’s arms crushing the dry shell of her body” (265). Predictably, Eliza’s horrified reaction to Saul’s evocation of his authority over his family, an authority that is steeped in a patriarchal tradition of literacy and textuality, occurs at the level of the corporeal. It is as if Saul’s cruelty has temporarily sucked the moisture and warmth out of the reparative vessel that is Eliza’s body.

In protest of this horrible sensation of physical disintegration brought on by her father, Eliza decides that night to chant and permutate according to Abulafia’s *The Life of the Future World*, which she takes down from her father’s shelf without his permission. She reads Abulafia’s description of *shefa*: “After you have cast the pen from between your fingers, the divine influx will prevail in you, and will weaken your external and internal organs. Your entire body will begin to tremble until you think you are about to die. This is because your soul is separating itself from your body” (255). Eliza’s experience, quoted in excerpt below, suggests that she is achieving *shefa*. As Eliza begins permutating by pen,

> Her hand and voice are working in such harmony that it seems her mouth is extending through her arm to the tip of her pen…. The exploration of
is a journey across rolling terrain, traversed to the rhythms of her breath and blood.

…. [H]er entire body is humming. Eliza can sense her skin producing sound through its pores… until she is no longer aware of the floor, the air, her clothes, her room, the pen dropped from her hand.

Warmth floods her body until she glistens with sweat.

…. Eliza’s body begins to tremble. Her body sinks to the floor…. Pain arcs from her scalp to the soles of her feet and carves inward to the marrow….

Even as Eliza continues to chant, she can feel the muscles of her lower face clenching and unclenching as she chews her tongue. She can feel her jaw straining…. She does not feel the urine pooling beneath her and mixing with her sweat…. She is willing to die for this to end, wishes she could die so that it would be over. (266-68)

Just as Abulafia predicts, shefa is nothing less than a full-body experience. Eliza drops her pen; her body trembles; she feels tremendous pain; the internal organ of her bladder “weakens” to the point that she wets herself without noticing; and she is certain she is going to die.15

15 In light of the physical pain she experiences here, Eliza’s name offers another clue as to why she alone is able to take on the work of the Benjaminian translator who repairs her fractured family. As the only non-Jewish name among the Naumanns—why, we must ask, does Goldberg call her protagonist “Eliza” rather than Esther?—Eliza’s name stands out, and calls to mind the character of Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. According to Lauren Berlant, the figure of “Poor Eliza” crystallizes the American zeitgeist of feminine sentimentalism that has long “been deployed to bind persons to the nation” (636). Berlant elaborates this argument through a reading of the play-within-a-play in Rogers and Hammerstein’s musical, The King and I. In the musical, the sexual slave Tuptim protests the hardships she must endure under the King of Siam through adapting and performing a production of The Small House of Uncle Thomas for his Western guests, whom she hopes will be a sympathetic audience. By identifying with Stowe’s sentimental heroine, who runs away from a slave catcher to be with her lover, and by “putting her body on the line to bridge the authoritarian world in which she lives and the emancipated world of freedom and love to which she seeks transport” (639), Tuptim foregrounds the political power of “Poor Eliza,” the sentimental heroine whose feminine sacrifice evokes the “witnessing and identifying with pain” that “authorizes the reader,” or in this case both audiences—the one to Tuptim’s performance, and the one to The King and I—“to imagine changing the world” (645). While Eliza Naumann does not “sacrifice” herself in the same dramatic manner as either Stowe’s heroine, who leaps across the Ohio on rafts of ice to save her baby, or Tuptim, who is beaten offstage in The King and I (and publicly executed in the film 1946 Anna and the King of Siam), the physical pain she endures in order to heal her family echoes Tuptim’s act of “putting her body on the line” to bring about a new world of freedom. Even more so than Stowe’s Eliza or Tuptim, however, Eliza Naumann’s body, rather than “virtuous feeling” or “sentiment,” acts as the vehicle for world-transformation.
What clinches Eliza’s experience of shefa as uniquely Eliza’s and by extension Miriam and Aaron’s—but not Saul’s, even though he translated the text that Eliza now reads—is the narrative that follows:

It is the stillness of an uninhabited coast at ebb tide, of the womb in the moments presaging the first beats of a tiny heart. In gratitude, Eliza finds herself pronouncing the first six triplets of God’s name.

… She expands with every syllable. Slowly, delicately, she stretches beyond her bones, beyond her skin.

… Pain has been replaced by a sense of release.

… As far as Eliza has expanded, filling all of space, she begins to contract, her impossibly small body rushing up to meet her at enormous speed…. She knows she must, somehow, prepare herself for this corporeal reclamation…. The thing she has become and the body she left behind will cancel each other out upon impact…. This is the pain of creation, of life emerging from void, of vacuum birthing being. (269-70)

The “quiet” that Eliza reaches after the extreme physical pain of “the muscles of her lower face clenching and unclenching as she chews her tongue…. her jaw straining as it opens and shuts” (268) is that of a human womb just before the first beating of the fetus’s heart. As with her previous experiences spelling and chanting, Eliza “expands,” stretching “beyond her skin”; and like Aaron and Miriam, she feels “release” as she approaches completion. But this time, she has gone so far beyond the pregnancy and expansion experience that she implodes, and has to undergo a “corporeal reclamation” of “the thing she has become” as well as the thing to which she is giving birth: her new, post-shefa “being,” “emerging from void.”

It is this “reclamation” and re-birth of herself after shefa, the reconstitution of Benjamin’s once-fragmented vessel, that enables Eliza to defy her father and, at the same time, stand up for her mother and her brother against him. The next morning, the first day of the classroom spelling bees, which will lead to the school bees, the district bee, the regional bee, and finally the national bee, “It was only a dream, she thinks until she
realizes she is lying on the floor, in damp clothes that smell of urine. Her jaw muscles ache. Her tongue hurts to move” (270). Afterwards, when she assures her father that she is “all right,” Eliza realizes that she has achieved the reclamation of her body: “She can feel the truth of her answer deep inside herself, at a level where she used to think the words resided but where she now knows there is just heart and stomach and lungs” (271-72). While as before, Eliza feels the change “deep inside herself,” this time, the transformation has reversed: she has taken her body back from the letters and words that once, so she imagined, colonized it, “lining her stomach, expanding with each stretch of her lungs, nestling in the chambers of her heart” (44). This time, Eliza feels “truth” inside her body, not through the letters that overtake it, but simply in her organs themselves, “just heart and stomach and lungs” that our now fully hers again.

On the way to school, Eliza tries to remember what happened the night before, and elucidates an awareness that what she is about to do at the first spelling bee of the school year is for her mother, too.

She spends the bus ride to school puzzling the previous night together, alarmed and relieved at the profusion of missing pieces…. She knows that whatever happened last night was her fault. She knows she’d like to be forgiven. Looking into the bus window, Eliza sees Miriam reflected in her own face. ‘Hello,’ she whispers to the window. When she smiles, her mother’s reflection in the window smiles back. (272)

The ambiguity of the “whatever happened last night” for which she believes she is at fault suggests that Eliza is not just thinking about the mysterious shefa, but also about the enormous fight between Aaron and Saul. Eliza suspects that at some basic level, her misguided solidarity with Saul is responsible for both the traumatic chasm between her father and her brother and for his complete ignorance of Miriam’s spiritual needs, so obsessed was he in making his children “just be like [him]” (265). Her feeling of relief at
the profusion of “missing pieces” suggests that she is taking over her mother’s quest for Perfectimundo but that the brokenness she observes no longer poses a threat; rather, it is that very brokenness that opens the space for more questions and possibilities, for more “assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed” (Benjamin 21). Although the object of her plea for forgiveness is unspecified, its proximity to her vision of her mother’s face in her own reflection, followed by her gentle greeting, suggests that it is to Miriam whom Eliza offers her apology for colluding with her father, for hoarding his affection and attention, and for not making more of an effort to bridge the gap between mother and daughter. That her mother’s reflection “smiles back” at Eliza indicates the start of repair between them. Through taking control of her family’s spiritual welfare from Saul, Eliza is able to restore the novel’s mother-daughter narrative that her father’s authority previously made so difficult and tenuous.

The novel closes during the first class bee of the titular “bee season.” Saul’s entrance into Eliza’s classroom to witness what he assumes will be her (and his) inevitable victory makes clear that their roles have been reversed. Unbeknownst to him, Saul has been stripped of his pedagogical, familial, and religious authority by his wiser, more mature daughter: “Looking at him, Eliza feels incredibly old…. She wants to take him aside and tell him that it will be okay, that it will only hurt for a little while” (272). While the scene on the school bus demonstrates that Eliza’s thoughts are with her mother, she is also thinking of Aaron: “Though Eliza doubts that what she is about to do will affect her mother much, she wishes Aaron were here. She’s pretty sure he would like to see it…. Eliza had thought that once this moment arrived she wouldn’t want to look at her father, but now she realizes that she must” (273). In solidarity with Aaron, whom she
wishes could see her act of defiance, and also in opposition to her usual habit of closing her eyes when she spells, when Eliza is given her word, “origami,” she “doesn’t close her eyes…. She faces her father as she pronounces [the letters] one by one. ‘Origami,’ Eliza says. ‘O-R-I-G-A-M-Y. Origami’” (273).

Saul’s reaction emphasizes that the rebuttal is against him specifically: He “is covering his mouth as if his hand could somehow block the moment, removing from the room a word which was never his to claim” (274). That the word Eliza deliberately misspells was in fact “never his to claim” emphasizes that through her decision, she is continuing her experience of “corporeal reclamation” (270) post-shefa. The spelling bee, with its focus on memorization and texts, can additionally be read as an extension of Saul’s scholastic literacy. Deliberately ejecting herself from the bee, therefore, emphasizes that Eliza is not just reclaiming her body; she is also reclaiming her family, her spirituality, her relationship to language, and, I argue, her Jewish identity.

V. Conclusion: Re-assembling Jewish Identity

I would like to conclude by examining that Jewish identity that the novel posits at its close with Eliza’s defiance of her father and her premature disruption of the “bee season.” One could easily contend that because Eliza rebukes her father, a clergy in the local synagogue who led her to Kabbalah in the first place, out of solidarity with a brother who abandons Jewish practice for the Hare Krishnas, and a mentally ill mother who shows no sign of wanting to see her children again, that she is turning her back on her Jewishness. However, I argue that Eliza’s final gesture of defiance comprises more than a simple abandonment of traditional Jewish norms or Kabbalistic lessons. Rather, by
locating and re-inventing Jewish authenticity at the level of the body, it simultaneously dismantles the ideological force of two temporally opposed perspectives: Saul’s traditional, patriarchal, cerebral version of Jewishness on the one hand, and the future-thinking, “post-ethnicity” ideology—which includes the universalizing impulse of “McMysticism”—on the other. In doing so, the novel privileges a young, female protagonist who, unlike her literary foremothers, is not doomed to be either “the silent foil of a male-dominated tradition” or “the ‘outsider within’” (Aarons 393). Instead, Eliza embodies the promise of her family’s redemption.

In order to explicate this claim, it is necessary to consider the significance of the spelling bee in the context of the late twentieth-century discourses of multiculturalism in which the novel was written. In American culture, the spelling bee is often regarded as a custom by which children of immigrants overcome the obstacles of ethnic difference in order to take part in a competition that symbolizes the promise of acculturation and upward mobility.¹⁶ In the novel, many of the successful spellers and “smart” students are the first-generation children of immigrants, whose names betray their families’ foreign countries of origin. The “smartest girl in school” is Sinna Bhagdudori (7); Eliza’s early competition in the school spelling bee is a fourth grader named Li Chan; Aaron recalls that one of the “smart girls” in his fifth grade class was Denise Li (34-35); and at the regional bee, the last two surviving spellers other than Eliza are “two serious-looking Pakistani boys” (59-60). (We later find out Eliza’s runner-up is named Chopak Singh.)

Through the inclusion of these incidental characters, spelling bees in the novel echo

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¹⁶ This belief is underscored by the success of first-generation American-born children in the actual Scripps National Spelling Bee: of the thirteen past champions, nine have been of South Asian descent (“Champions and Their Winning Words”).
liberal multicultural’s assurance that difference from mainstream whiteness does not need to pose an obstacle to American success.

But by sharply contrasting the public, de-ethnicizing, multicultural space of the spelling bee with Eliza’s private study of an elusive, mysterious form of Jewish mysticism that pulls her out of the diverse social world of her classmates and emphasizes to the reader her ethnic, religious specificity, *Bee Season* complicates a multicultural imperative that “levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism” (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 86). That is, Saul and Eliza use spelling, and the spelling bee competitions, not to overcome Eliza’s ethnic difference and succeed as an American, but as the means to an ethnically specific, Jewish form of spiritual transcendence. Far from allowing her to blend in with her peers, her ethnic difference is actually heightened during the spelling bee: in the program for the national bee, which features photos and profiles of all the participants, Eliza’s “eyes, nose, and mouth could be Any Jew. They are features which… will look very much the same in years to come” (123).

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17 It also speaks to a frustration among Jewish intellectuals about their erasure within liberal multicultural. See, for example, the Jewish American novelist Cynthia Ozick, who excoriates multiculturalism as “intellectual deceit [that] prides itself on rescuing groups from the margin (with the exception of Jews) and ends by marginalizing nearly everyone” (qtd. in Furman, *Contemporary* 9). See also Andrew Furman’s critique of mainstream multiculturalism’s inconsistencies: “A multiculturalism true to the inextricable promises of its name cannot effectively advocate a ‘resistant politics of the marginalized’… while it simultaneously silences other minority voices that contribute to our cultural conversation” (*Contemporary* 10).

Ultimately, however, the version of Jewishness as an ethnic identity that *Bee Season* shores up speaks to the privileged position of Jews as a “white” ethnic group who have been able to assimilate to the extent that they can participate in an American(izing) ritual like the spelling bee while still retaining their ethnic difference. “What used to be a liability,” writes Halter, “has now become an asset, a luxury of assimilation” (10). Eliza is able to participate and succeed as a speller not in spite of, but *because of* her Jewish education in Kabbalah.
In fact, if there is an aspect of her identity Eliza might be said to be rejecting, it is not the American, but the Americanizing multiculturalism of the spelling bee. That is, in deliberately misspelling a word she knows how to spell, “origami,” Eliza not only defies her father’s scholastic, patriarchal version of Jewish identity. She also defies the liberal promise of the spelling bee: that any child from any background can achieve American success by highlighting, and then rendering insignificant, the difference of her historically specific ethnic identity from both the mainstream norm and from her fellow ethnic others. In choosing to misspell her word, therefore, Eliza asserts the ethnic difference that the spelling bee, and for that matter, the universalist “McMysticism,” would seek to tone down. In *Bee Season*, the context of the “post-Jewish” Kabbalah Craze serves a similar function to that of the “mulatto millennium” context in *Caucasia*: it appears at first to suggest a version of Jewishness that is available to all, but it actually ends up emphasizing a return to an idea of ethnic essence that is inassimilable and located in the ethnic body. Both novels suggest that at the start of the twenty-first century, far from moving away from the body, ethnic American identity is returning to the corporeal as the site of racial or ethnic specificity.

This embodied, ethnically specific Jewish identity that *Bee Season* posits anticipates and responds to recent anxiety among critics of Jewish American literature about the “end” of contemporary Jewish American fiction and the “Jewish sensibility.” In

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18 That the word Eliza misspells in her defiance of Saul is a Japanese word is significant on two levels. First, Eliza’s refusal to spell a Japanese word can be read as a rejection of the assimilating multiculturalism of the spelling bee, which even in its choice of words effects a blending of disparate cultural forms into the “dominant culture” of the English language. Second, origami means “folded paper,” and paper, or texts, is the central vehicle of Saul’s version of Jewish identity, the very identity that he tries to use to assert authority over his family. By rejecting the word “paper,” Eliza is rejecting Saul’s literacy-based program of Jewish identity in favor of a Jewish authenticity that is located not in books but in bodies.
its insistence on the immutability of a Jewish identity that cannot be diluted by either hybridization or the end of Jewish identity as such, Goldberg’s novel, much like Senna’s, seems to address a late 90s shift in literary criticism towards skepticism about identity politics, particularly the utility of grounding oneself in a coherent, communal, ethnic or racial identity. In “The Exaggerated Demise of the Jewish-American Writer” (2001), Andrew Furman identifies as the first “death knell” of the genre Irving Howe’s claim in 1977 that “American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning out of materials and memories.” In 1986, Furman narrates, the pre-eminent literary critic Leslie Fiedler gave a similarly dour prognosis, claiming that “the Jewish-American novel is over and done with, a part of history rather than living literature.” For Furman, the real problem with these current “eulogists” of the Jewish American novel is their raison d’être: “crippling and rather sad nostalgia” for the 1950s and 60s, which in reality was a “moment of lingering cultural marginality and alienation that I, for one, don’t care to revisit.”

19 While it is tempting to dismiss Howe and Fiedler as merely nostalgic for the “golden age” that was “golden” precisely because it made them—that is, male, Jewish intellectuals—culturally relevant, Furman points out that obituaries for the Jewish American cultural “sensibility” are still going strong in the twenty-first century.

Furman’s connection of “the Jewish sensibility midcentury” to “a particular sociocultural moment… of… marginality and alienation” to which we should not want to return deftly anticipates Kenneth Warren’s claims a decade later in “Does African-American Literature Exist?” (2011). Warren argues that because the genre we now call “African American literature” emerged from the Jim Crow era, “from the standpoint of a post-Jim Crow world, African American literature is history.” Like Furman, he sees no need to romanticize that past moment: “this fact should occasion no lament… because the society that gave us African-American literature is a society that black Americans did not want then and certainly don’t want now.”

Neither Furman nor Warren wishes to mourn the passing of historical periods that were defined by systematic discrimination against Jewish Americans and African Americans, respectively. However, Warren’s overarching claim that “African American literature is history” echoes Fiedler much more than it does Furman; and Furman, for his part, condemns the “petrified vision of the Jewish sensibility” that has “never been able to see… contemporary writers and their work.” In contrast, Furman wants to celebrate what he claimed Howe could never anticipate: “the emergence of new, distinctively Jewish-American
In contrast to this gloom and doom, in *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma* (2000), Furman argues that despite these claims of Jews’ “complete and utter assimilation…. we are in the midst of a powerful countervailing trend towards rediscovery” (17). What is especially striking about this perspective is Furman’s insistence that “a significant number of Jewish Americans continue to ‘feel Jewish… in a variety of ways’” (*Contemporary* 17). For this is the very crux of Jewish identity in *Bee Season*, and what makes the novel a resolutely “Jewish” work of fiction: Eliza knows she is Jewish because she can *feel* that Jewishness within her body. (By contrast, even when standing in Miriam’s Kaleidescope, Saul can only abstract, but cannot *feel*, the embodied spirituality behind the patterns and designs his wife makes with her found objects.) In fact, the novel suggests, *feeling* Jewish from within is what determines the authenticity of Eliza’s Jewish identity. By foregrounding Eliza’s embodied Jewishness as a source of stability in her family and the means to perpetuate her ethnic and cultural difference, therefore, Goldberg’s novel pre-empts the insistence that at the turn of the twenty-first century, there is “no such thing” as Jewish literature, and by extension, Jewish identity as a cohesive entity in literature by American Jews.  

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20 Like Furman, Lewin links the style of the mid-century writers to their unenviable experiences of social marginalization. Both critics speak to what Thane Rosenbaum, literary editor of the journal *Tikkun*, identifies as the “new wave” of Jewish American writing in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Rosenbaum, this group reversed “the flight from ethnic identity so common in earlier American Jewish writing and participates in what he calls a kind of ‘neurotic millennial return’ to religious and/or cultural commitments rebelled against by immigrant writers and all but abandoned by writers of the fifties, sixties, and seventies” (Burstein 803).

21 Although Goldberg’s blending of spelling bees, Kabbalah, and Hare Krishnas certainly makes for a “new” formula of Jewish narrative and identity, in a very significant way the idea of Jewishness as an inassimilable, inescapable “feeling” within the body is not new at all. As Nadia Malinovich writes of Ludwig Lewisohn’s novel, *The Island Within* (1928), which was published during a period of growing
But as with *Caucasia, Bee Season*’s location of ethnic authenticity within bodily “feeling” might be said to exemplify what Paul Gilroy calls the problematic reinvestment of the body with “the power to arbitrate in the assignment of culture to peoples” (24). Certainly Saul’s sense in Miriam’s kaleidoscope that he “cannot look without recognizing something lost… a pure existence he suspects only at a fleeting, subcellular level” (224-25) seems to validate Gilroy’s warning that “we should question the ways in which the body has emerged as an anchor in the stormy tides of identity politics” (255). In particular, given that the “new” boundaries of “race” are “cellular and molecular, not dermal” (47), “racial memory” is said to reside “in every cell” (265). Although Gilroy is writing here about African Americans, in particular the African American male body, his critique points to the questions raised by *Bee Season*’s recourse to the racial or ethnic body as a site of authenticity. What is more, the specific history of anti-Semitic characterizations of Jewishness as embodied difference, taken up by critics ranging from Sander Gilman to Judith Halberstam, makes any embrace of embodied Jewish essence potentially problematic.

So how then, does the novel resolve this contradiction and position young Eliza as the translator who brings together the fragments of her family without reifying an earlier, derogatory notion of Jewishness? The first means of resolution is Eliza’s sex and age. While Gilroy does not address the role of gender in the “new raciology,” taking for granted a male subject, that Eliza is a Jewish girl on the verge of adolescence—but
crucially not quite there—allows her embodied reclamation of Jewishness to evade Gilroy’s critique, not just of the commodification of the sculpted, hyper-muscular black male body, but also of genomic-focused constructions of race and ethnicity; after all, she is too young to biologically reproduce, so the novel does not suggest that Eliza’s Jewishness, however rooted it is within her body, will necessarily be re-generated by her passing on of her Jewish genes. Instead, like the children on the school bus at the end of Caucasia, Eliza is “on the verge of puberty” (432), more perfectly positioned than Birdie Lee to embody and imagine the future of those who share her ethnic identity.

The second means of resolution might be the narrative itself. In The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act, Frederic Jameson writes that the genre of romance “may be understood as an imaginary ‘solution’” to narrative contradiction. Romance ‘solves’ this conceptual dilemma by producing a new kind of narrative” (118), which unfolds in the “realm of sorcery and magical forces” (119). In Jameson’s language, then, Bee Season can be understood as a kind of generic romance, whereby, by entering the “magical” world of Jewish mysticism, the text is able to unify its own internal contradictions and posit, in a sense, the “new form” (141) of Eliza’s embodied Jewishness.

Finally, the Kabbalistic necessity of choosing transcendence provides an important context through which to consider the role of choice in Eliza’s Jewish identity at the end of the novel. “Only when the signifier of revelation has been radically emptied,” writes Paul Eisenstein on the Kabbalistic tenants portrayed in Bee Season, “are we genuinely choosing it and all that it subsequently entails. It is… this free and reasonless choice that conditions and enables our recognition of flesh-and-blood others”
(31). Eisenstein usefully points out that Aaron’s spiritual wanderings are prompted by his realization that “he never really chose Judaism for meaningful reasons, that his Jewish identity is tantamount to the purchase of a brand of cereal ‘without consulting the side of the box’” (33). While I would contend that Aaron’s abandonment of Jewish practice (Judaism) for the exotic allure of “Eastern religion” is not tantamount to his abandonment of Jewish identity (Jewishness), I take Eisenstein’s point that choice is a central element of Aaron, as well as Eliza, Miriam, and even Saul’s religious journeys. Just as Kabbalistic revelation must be chosen, so too does Eliza choose “Y” as the last letter of “origami,” thus shaping and weaving her own agency into her decision.

The ambiguity of Bee Season’s closing is as multi-sided as the spiritual paths that converge to motivate Eliza’s decision. What happens after Eliza deliberately misspells “origami”? Do Aaron and Miriam return home? Does Eliza’s daring act repair her family, as she once hopes shefa will give her the power to do? Rather than tying up these loose ends, the novel closes with the words, “Instead, she nods her head. She is sure” (274). The “Instead” insists to the reader that the words that follow, “she is sure,” are more significant (instead) than any of the questions the ending raises. As Eisenstein eloquently concludes, “To read Y as Why” foregrounds the open-endedness of Jewish identification, so that “Judaism and Jewish ritual is not ultimately the place to which we go for all the answers but rather for the proper framing of the questions” (32). Eliza may not have in fact saved her family just yet. But in her reclamation of her body, her defiance of her father, her sense of solidarity with Miriam and Aaron, and her assertion of her Jewish identity, she is “sure.” By concluding with her sureness, the novel intimates that no matter what happens to the characters from this point on, Eliza has attained the spiritual
maturity to act as the Naumanns’ Benjaminian translator, gluing together the fragments of her family in the service of reassembling their embodied Jewish authenticity and beginning to lead them towards recovery.
CHAPTER THREE

Listen to Your Body:

Ugly Feelings and the Post-Political Japanese American Subject

of Susan Choi’s American Woman

I. Introduction: The Radical Subject Goes “Bad”

In response to different culture pressures around racial and gendered identity at the end of the twentieth century, both Caucasia and Bee Season feature bodies that house some form of biological, ethnic essence. In both cases, these bodies are in need of repair. In Caucasia, the damaged body is the protagonist’s: Birdie’s asthmatic body is the “canary in the coal mine,” the racial experiment gone wrong—the corporeal manifestation of a young girl forced to hide her father’s blackness but constantly trying to reclaim it. In Bee Season, the internal relationships of the Naumanns are fractured; but through a positive relationship to her Jewish body, Eliza develops the ability to heal the other members of her family.

In the second half of this dissertation, I look at two Asian American novels that also engage with the ethnic female body and focus on biological father-daughter relationships: Choi’s American Woman (2003) and Ozeki’s All Over Creation (2003). But these novels depart from Caucasia and Bee Season’s representations of the ethnic body as a sometimes damaged vessel of genetically inherited identity, and instead focus on the body as a signpost of political subjectivity. This new direction calls for a
comparative approach that can begin to respond to the questions the novels raise: why is the Asian American fiction less interested in the body as a site of immutable, internal essence? How does its focus on adult protagonists who happen to be only children alter the power dynamics of the novels’ respective families? How does the “fundamental visualism” of Asian American difference construct Asian American subjects differently from, for example, light-skinned African Americans or Jews?

One of the reasons for these more explicitly political settings is that Asian American female writers do not have a Yezierska or a Larsen, ethnic “mother figures” of the 1920 or the turn of the century, whose representations of identity, assimilation, passing, or interracial encounter they can adopt or adapt. Instead, they look to the models of a more recent period, the cultural nationalist movements of the 1970s, which in many ways gave birth to what we now understand as Asian American identity, literature, and community. Thirty years after the fact, as they navigate racial identity in an alternately “genomics” and “post-racial” world, these two novels are exploring the contemporary relevance—and anachronism—of those earlier paradigms of political identity. Both novels offer an Asian American perspective on political movements that have traditionally ignored or downplayed the participation of Asian Americans. Furthermore, in contrast to Birdie and Eliza, who are fourteen and ten, respectively, the protagonists in the Asian American novels, Jenny Shimada and Yumi Fuller, are adults with fully-developed sexualities. However, not only do both Choi and Ozeki’s novels detail their characters’ sexual comings-of-age; they also identify those moments as central to the characters’ political development and critical awareness. Sexual autonomy is the means by which Jenny and Yumi first defy and stake their independence from their fathers, and
it remains deeply connected to their understanding of their own political subjectivity as Asian American women. Finally, in contrast to Caucasia and Bee Season, which attend to the way ethnicity feels within the body, the Asian American novels attend to how ethnic difference appears on the body. In Choi’s novel in particular, the visual difference of the protagonist is the most obvious trigger for her reductive hail and her physical discomfort among the white radicals.

About halfway through American Woman, Jenny Shimada undergoes a somewhat puzzling physiological experience that can be described as one of extreme discomfort. Juan, the leader of the white radical fugitives who have been placed in Jenny’s care, begins to berate the young heiress, Pauline, whom he and his now-dead comrades kidnapped several months earlier in that same year, 1974: “Let’s see you accomplish one fourth of what Jenny accomplished. Let’s see you come from a nonwhite-skin background —” when Jenny angrily cuts him off.

“Oh God,” Jenny said. “Don’t.” The staircase was buckling beneath her. They were still arguing as she crawled upstairs, clutching the banister. Back on her bed, time slowed down to a crawl. Her bed sheets were drenched with sweat but she was shaking from cold. She kept rising and closing the window and later realizing she still hadn’t closed it. Noises, the noises of dogs yapping, although there weren’t dogs, and of traffic, although there wasn’t traffic, filtered to her from outside. (171)

Jenny’s immediate verbal reaction to being extolled as a paragon of radicalism solely on the basis of her visible racial difference demonstrates what Viet Nguyen calls “the surprise, alarm, or shock that is experienced when we are hailed by dominant society as the Oriental or the outsider” (152) or, in Jenny’s case the racial other. The proximity of her verbal refusal of Juan’s naming—“Don’t”—to her physical discomfort suggests a causal relationship between these two moments: the verbal refusal triggers the physical
refusal. As an expostulation, Jenny’s “Don’t” is also as automatic, and thus as unreasoned, as the responses of her body. While Juan seeks to exploit the visible difference of her body for the purposes of reinforcing the cadre’s hierarchy, her physical discomfort—losing her balance, sweating, freezing, hearing noises—indicates her corporeal rejection of his attempt. In other words, were we to put this in Althusserian terms, we could say that through its discomfort, Jenny’s misrecognized, exploited body registers her transformation into a “bad subject” of her so-called “non-white skin background.”

If the characters or date mentioned above sound familiar, that is no doubt Choi’s intent. Her novel is a fictionalized re-telling of the Patty Hearst saga, in which a radical urban guerrilla group, the Symbionese Liberation Army, kidnapped the nineteen-year-old newspaper heiress in February 1974. What most Americans know about this story is explored in the documentary *Guerrilla: The Taking of Patty Hearst* (2005): two months after her abduction, Hearst participated in an infamous bank robbery in San Francisco with her new comrades, and was arrested in September of 1975. However, *Guerrilla’s* narrative, which typifies the mainstream view of these events, offers only a passing glimpse of Wendy Yoshimura, the woman who allegedly drove the getaway car in the Symbionese Liberation Army’s robbery of a Sacramento-area bank in 1975. Yoshimura’s role is explored at length in Curtis Choy’s documentary, *Wendy... Uh... What’s Her Name* (1975), whose title points to the widespread amnesia around the Symbionese Liberation Army’s Japanese American member.¹ *American Woman* takes up Choy’s

¹ Originally produced in 1975 and re-edited and updated for a second release in 2005, Choy’s film aims to tell the “true story” of the often overlooked Yoshimura. While Yoshimura has been generally marginalized within mainstream studies of the Hearst story, her role as a lynchpin of Asian American political solidarity has occasionally been taken up within the field of Asian American studies. See, for example, Grace I. Yeh.
fascination with Yoshimura; she is the figure on whom the twenty-five-year old Jenny Shimada is modeled.

What distinguishes Choi’s novel from other recent books that foreground the counterculture of the late 60s and 70s, such as Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997) or Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (2009), is its shift from the usual narratives of white subjects to the far less told story of Asian American radicalism. Choi’s decision to make Jenny her protagonist and thereby re-frame Hearst’s familiar tale as Yoshimura’s calls attention to the ways in which Yoshimura’s, and by extension Asian America’s, voice in the radical activism of this historical moment has effectively been erased. It therefore allows her to revisit this moment as a meditation on the relationship between Asian American identity and the radical politics of this period.²

The novel opens with Jenny living under a false name in upstate New York after evading arrest for bombing government buildings. There, she is enlisted by a fellow underground radical to take care of the kidnapped heiress, Pauline in the novel, and the two remaining members of “the cadre,” the survivors of an armed confrontation with the police that led to a deadly fire. While Jenny is fascinated by Pauline’s transformation and disappearance before she meets the cadre members, she soon becomes alienated from their violent radicalism as she comes to understand her demeaning position as the “third world woman” in their racialized hierarchy of political subjectivity. Months after her arrival at the farmhouse where the cadre is hiding, when the cadre’s botched hold-up leaves a storeowner dead, Jenny encourages Pauline to abandon the cadre and run away

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² While the plot of the novel is clearly inspired by actual events, Choi is not offering a documentary account, and takes historical liberties in her narrative. For historical and biographical information on the Patty Hearst case, see Shana Alexander, Christopher Castiglia, and William Graebner.
with her back to their home state of California. The two women live there under cover for a year until they are arrested. Both women serve jail sentences of fewer than two years, after which Jenny never sees Pauline again.

I began with the scene of Jenny’s feverish discomfort because I believe this representation is powerfully evocative of the challenges that Choi’s novel poses, not only to the popular whitewashing of 1970s radical activism but also to continuing notions of what it means to be a politically resistant Asian American subject. In this scene, Jenny’s body is uncomfortable, rather than physically disciplined; her verbal reaction and her departure express frustration, rather than outright confrontation. Whereas one might expect Jenny to resist her degradation explicitly through arguments with the cadre, Choi interestingly pursues a different line of character and narrative development, one that demands an attention to Jenny’s physical discomfort. That is, the body and its physiological reactions are of signal importance in analyzing the transformation and trajectory of Jenny’s political subjectivity.

The centrality of Jenny’s physical discomfort in American Woman at first seems similar to the central role of asthma in Caucasia. Based on my reading of Senna’s novel, it would make sense to assume that Jenny’s discomfort also manifests a paternally inherited essence. However, whereas Birdie’s asthma asserts her invisible but nonetheless embodied racial identity, Jenny’s discomfort connects her to her father in a more roundabout fashion: it first manifests her sense of alienation from her white peers, which in turn ultimately results in her sympathy for his historical suffering. Along with Bee Season, however, both novels share a commitment to race and ethnicity through biological father-daughter narratives that foreground the female body. If Caucasia and
Bee Season locate that commitment at the level of the biological-as-racial, American Woman locates it at the level of the biological-as-cultural-memory.

Throughout the novel, American Woman’s focus on such corporeal details as Jenny’s profuse sweating, goose bumps, chills, and other unsavory affects exposes and challenges the inadequacy of the usual interpretive frameworks from which the political subjectivity of someone like Jenny Shimada—or her real-life counterpart, Wendy Yoshimura—becomes legible. The first of these frameworks is a certain white radical fantasy of Third World activism, allegorized in the novel by the cadre with which Jenny becomes involved. The second is allegorized in a more abstract way, in the specifically Asian American literary conventions that the novel mimics—conventions that have tended to reify a rather narrow conception of what political agency for an Asian American woman would look like. Both are problematic because they rely on the visual objectification of the Asian body, particularly the Japanese American female body.

As Viet Nguyen argues in Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America (2002), Asian American discourse has privileged a certain kind of political dissident as its “bad subject.” His book offers a strenuous critique of the “ideological rigidity” of Asian American intellectual work that reads for “signs of resistance or accommodation” in representations of the Asian American as either “the bad subject to be punished or expelled or as the model minority to be included or exploited for complicity” (5-6). The opposition of the “bad subject” and the “model minority” is problematic, he explains, because “Asian American culture is home not to a singular body but to “multiple ones” (17), whereby Asian Americans “can frequently occupy both positions simultaneously” (144). As both a quintessential “bad subject”—a radical and
government building bomber—and an uncomfortable body perhaps in need of model minority’s discourse of healing (149), Jenny Shimada seems an example of this more complex Asian American subjectivity. In her refusal to speak for her “constituency” and in her sense of bewilderment at the “tireless support” (359) she is given at her trial by people “of similar background” (353), Jenny epitomizes, in Nguyen’s language, one of “those who are not hailed’ by the discourse of Asian America as the bad subject, who do not respond to the call that they are Asian American, or at least do not respond in the way desired” (166) or valued by mainstream Asian American intellectuals.

_Race and Resistance_’s impact on the field of Asian American studies has been profound; since its publication, critics have become more attuned to subjects that do not conform to the resistance/accommodation binary. However, Nguyen’s assessment that the “bad subject” is privileged in Asian American studies because it represents a daringly “foreign threat” to “dominant American society” (7) departs from the original meaning of the term in his source text, Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971). Althusser’s “bad subject” is a far more ambiguous figure who poses little permanent threat to the State’s self-reproducing, ruling ideology. Even when bad subjects “provoke the intervention” of the repressive State Apparatus (181), Althusser attributes to their actions neither rebellious intent nor the possibility of political efficacy. For Althusser, the “bad subject” does not knowingly reject his interpellation for political ends; rather, he is simply “a man who is either ‘inconsistent’… or cynical, or perverse” (168). In the context of Althusser’s original coinage, therefore, the force of Nguyen’s critique is not so much that Asian Americanist critics are interested in “bad

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3 Nguyen identifies the premise of this discourse as “the assumption that all Asian Americans… suffer from a cultural damage that needs to be healed” (149).
subjects” in the Althusserian sense, but in good subjects that are interpellated by progressive models of political subjectivity.

In the novel’s scenes of physical discomfort and (failed) interpellation, Choi demonstrates what an “‘inconsistent’… or cynical, or perverse” Asian American female subject—Althusser’s bad subject, in other words, not Nguyen’s—might look like. At the same time, the corporeal nuances of her experiences as a radical lend her political subjectivity the kind of complexity to which Nguyen calls attention. What *American Woman* invites us to consider, as I argue here, is how multiple interpellations of Asian Americans by both Asian Americans and white Americans might interact with each other to engender a more indeterminately “bad” Asian American subject, one who is neither completely resistant to mainstream America nor completely assimilative into white radical politics. Instead, Jenny’s physical discomfort in white radical settings positions her body as the site of these ideological conflicts. In this essay, I analyze the ways that *American Woman* narrates the formation of an embodied Asian American subject who, rather than becoming political the way we might expect—through blatant opposition to white radical racism—becomes what might best be described as “post-political.” As I will ultimately show, the “post” is not meant to indicate that Jenny’s relationship to the

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4 Althusser himself suggests that ideology is a practice of the body, particularly in Christianity: If “the individual…. believes in God, he goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses, does penance… and naturally repents and so on. If he believes in Duty, he will have the corresponding attitudes, inscribed in ritual practices” (167). Belief, in fact, results from those practices: “Pascal says more or less, ‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe’” (168). For Althusser, ideology is never just ideas—that is to say, language—but also includes a range of affects and physical rituals, which make the body not just the surface for ideology but central to it, and thus to the construction of the subject as we know it.

I should clarify that while I wish to rethink Nguyen’s application of Althusser in order to discuss the emergence of what I see as a post-political or politically transient subjectivity in Choi’s novel, my reading is not strictly Althusserian, either. That is, I am more interested in the ways that *American Woman* complicates the reduction of so-called bad (Asian American) subjects to explicit political resistance than I am in teasing out the specific dynamics of Althusserian interpellation at work in the novel—not because the latter is a topic unworthy of investigation, but because it is beyond the scope of my argument.
political is one of total rejection; it is rather, a rejection of the available models of political subjectivity for someone like her.\(^5\)

I will begin with two instances in which white radicals construct Jenny as a radical subject: the first concerns her lover, William, with whom she blows up government buildings to protest the Vietnam War, and the second, her interactions with the cadre. I will analyze two scenes of Jenny’s bodily discomfort among the racialized radicalism of the cadre, and her brief but thwarted flirtation with lesbian subjectivity with Pauline, to discuss the various principles and ambivalences toward racial and sexual identity that shape these moments of misfired interpellations. Finally, I will consider the role of her two Asian models of resistance in the formation and eventual disintegration of her radical identity: a Vietnamese monk she sees immolating himself on her television, and her Japanese American father, whose experience in the internment camps initially symbolizes for her the narrative of a prototypical dissident subject. I will conclude by reading the ending of the book, including Jenny’s changed attitude toward the monk and her reconciliation with her father, to attempt to articulate the kind of complex Asian American subject that the novel presents: one who resists the exploitative ideology of the white radicals and recognizes her connection to her familial, cultural legacy of suffering, internment, and trauma, but without being contained by the parameters Nguyen outlines of either the bad subject or the model minority.

\(^5\) While I do not take up this discussion here, another possible paradigm for reading the relationship between Jenny’s uncomfortable body and her political subjectivity is that of Freud’s hysteric. Freudian scholars have interpreted the hysteric’s body as a communicative force: as Charles Shepherdson writes, “In conceiving of the body as a relationship between the signifier and the flesh, psychoanalysis points out that the organization of the body... is accomplished by virtue of a certain relation to language” (21). In turn, Freudian feminists have argued that the hysteric’s somatic, female body gives voice to her refusal of patriarchal, misogynistic discourses. For more feminist responses to the hysteric, see Maria Ramas and Jacqueline Rose.
II. Little Asian Hands, Flushes, and Fevers: The White Radical Hail

After months of fighting with her father about her involvement in the antiwar movement, but long before she ever hears of the cadre, Jenny moves to Berkeley without finishing high school to enroll in a night class on modern political science. Her instructor, William, is “a clean-shaven senior at Berkeley, who’d just been thrown out for taking over the dean’s office a few credits shy of his B.A. degree” (163). William’s radicalism is predicated on the notion that Vietnamese bodies are suffering because of the actions of the American government; his counter-action, which he believes to be measured and proportionate, is the destruction of carefully selected government buildings rather than bodies: “One of the first things she’d loved about William was his tireless perfectionism; he never chose a target for an action without researching exhaustively first… without knowing its board of directors or slate of officials, its funding, the whole range of its acts” (216). And in their time together, this works out; as far as they know, no human bodies are ever harmed by their bombs. When William is arrested and jailed for his violent activities, Jenny goes into hiding. During her early days with the cadre members that follow, Jenny maintains that their radicalism, which included kidnapping and possibly abusing Pauline, sharply departs from her revolutionary practices with William; it is a belief confirmed by William, who writes to her in a letter from prison, “I’ve been thinking a lot about zealots. How they taint the whole lake of ideas they drink from, and taint everyone who might share that lake with them. I assume you know the ‘comrades’ I mean” (110). But as she spends less time with William and more with the cadre, Jenny begins to realize that their versions of radicalism might not be so dissimilar after all.
First, both Jenny and Pauline’s radical identities are engendered by the development of their sexual subjectivities. Jenny’s evolution as a Berkeley radical occurs concurrently with her romantic relationship with her political science teacher. “By the end of the term they’d become lovers…. She had never before had a lover…. She remembered… sometimes even daring to utter aloud that They Had Become Lovers…. the joy she’d felt being propelled, by a manner of speech she would never have used, toward a life she had never imagined” (163-64). Her once inconceivable rebirth as a radical subject is explicitly facilitated by the act of becoming a lover, specifically by the phrase that signals the realization of her adult sexuality. Notably, all of Jenny’s radical actions occur in close proximity to, and are validated by, sexual intimacy with William. When she returns from leaving a bomb in a building, “William knows she’s done it right…. [S]he and William walk straight to each other and lock mouths desperately” (226). And when, a few hours later, they wait to watch the explosion of the building from afar, “She feels William work his hand beneath her shirt, under her waistband…. He sometimes comes, with sudden and great force, while touching her this way” (229). The most obvious meaning of the phrase, “touching her this way,” is the movement of William’s hand under Jenny’s shirt, but it could also refer to touching her while watching the successful detonation of a bomb he has taught her how to plant. That is, William’s sexual attraction to Jenny climaxes because of, or concurrent to, her demonstration that she has done him proud as his violent, radical student. In fact, William “hadn’t begun to include her in his political activities until she’d proved she was really the woman—the woman who could swagger down barrio streets at his side” (277).
It is William’s choice of her as his lover, even more so than his activist practices, that facilitates Jenny’s achievement of recognizable, radical subjectivity and allows her to express the “overwhelming anger” that she had felt as a teenager over being “such a ridiculous, small, not-taken-seriously, average American girl” (350). That she felt herself to be an “average American girl” suggests that a “minority” subjectivity or awareness of her racial otherness did not have a place in her youth, which partially explains why she does not expect her racial otherness to factor into her political identity. Instead, at the time she regards her transformation as a sexual one: William, she believes, changes her from that small, average girl, to a swaggering, radical lover. For even though “she had understood that she wasn’t the only one…. she had been the central one, somehow unrivaled” (166), her status as William’s political disciple confirmed by, and affirming, his selection of her as his sexual favorite.

Pauline’s political identity is also determined by the act of sex with fellow white radicals: when Juan and his wife, Yvonne, realize that Pauline is the only other member of the cadre to survive the fatal stand-off with the police, they invite her to their bed, an act which made them “a family now” (257). But like Jenny, who can correspond with her jailed lover only through letters that are transcribed before they reach her, the sexual element of Pauline’s radical identity cannot last; after a brief period, “the chapter was over. No one ever spoke about it” (258). Pauline is left trying to remain a devoted radical despite her exclusion from Juan and Yvonne’s sexual bond, just as Jenny struggles to retain her political allegiance to William even as the memory of their physical intimacy fades during their separation: all of her letters from him feel sterile, void even of “the orthographic equivalent of his hands on her skin” (111).
As Jenny’s sexual contact with William fades, so does her radical subjectivity, so that by the time she has been released from jail after her arrest with Pauline, and the communication between the two women has ended, she and William are barely corresponding.

The one thing she was not was his lover.... She received the same love he extended to all humankind.... He finally, quietly let her go, let three months pass before answering one of her letters. She knew then to stop writing back.

The loss of her freedom... ended up being nothing next to the loss of her confidence in the choices she’d made. The world hadn’t healed itself in the meantime. If anything she felt it was worse. (357)

Jenny became initiated into radicalism with the moment when “they had become lovers”; her demotion from the position of William’s chosen lover to his political pen pal, treated the same as “all humankind,” leads her to question the legitimacy of her years of radical activity. After all, she realizes, despite everything she and William had done as a political (and sexual) team, the world was in no better state now than before they had met. The corresponding trajectory of her status as a radical and as William’s love object thus confirms the fragility of the former, predicated as it is on a white man’s interest not in her radical activities on their own, but in the melding of those activities with her sexual appeal. It is this entanglement that is the occasion of her current crisis. For if her violent radicalism was “sexy” in William’s schema, then her sexual objectification, rather than her radical conviction, was at the root of what she believed to be her political empowerment.

Second, although the cadre’s radical embrace of armed robbery seems to oppose William’s creed of non-violence to all bodies, it eventually exposes to Jenny the racial assumptions behind his stance. The quotation above depicting Jenny’s annoyance with
her own mediocrity as a teenager conveys the non-racialized outlook that drew her to William’s radicalism: she does not see herself as a racial minority, but rather, an average American girl. But the narrative hints early on that William’s politics are not as color-blind as Jenny might wish to believe. For example, the couple who hide Jenny after William’s arrest espouse a brand of multicultural universalism that positions Jenny as an outsider, even as it seems sympathetic to William’s political principles and is thus meant to assure Jenny of her safety: “One of the truly great things about academic life in this country, Jenny,” Dick tells her, “is that it has always embraced every race and every nation. White, black, yellow, red. So it’ll make perfect sense to our acquaintances that Helen and I would have known Chinese people” (63). Embedded in Dick’s romantic fantasy of academia’s embrace of racial difference is that of the white subject who benevolently tolerates or befriends racial others. He also misrecognizes Jenny as “Chinese,” exemplifying a white inability to acknowledge intra-Asian ethnic difference at the same time that his error eradicates any possibility of the legibility of that difference.

Later, among the cadre, although she responds coldly to Juan’s bizarre claim that she “must be a good shot. Oriental people always have exceptional aim” (189), she remembers the pride that William took in the revolutionary potential of her Asian body: “Little hands!.... Little hands but big deeds. She had been very good at wiring explosives.... She’d learned from him quickly and hadn’t needed him to check on her work.... Little hands. Something about this memory made her cringe now” (198). After

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6 This early self-identification on Jenny’s part begins to suggest the intentional slipperiness of the novel’s title: Jenny was still thinking of herself, rather than any of her white, upper class counterparts, as an “American woman.” Choi no doubt means to contrast Jenny’s somewhat naïve self-image with the real-life Hearst’s frequent invocation in the media as a former “all-American girl,” while the Japanese American Yoshimura, barred from such a title by her racial difference, was largely ignored.
watching together the explosion of the building that Jenny had wired with those “little hands,” William

grabs her hands, her little hands, squeezes them, as if she is a child. “Think of that being dropped onto people,” he hisses. “Balls of fire dropped down onto children. Little children who look just like you.” “I know what I did,” she says angrily… “And I know why—you don’t have to coach me.” (230)

Here, in order to emphasize the urgency of her political actions, William reminds Jenny of her resemblance to the Vietnamese whom they are trying to save. For William, it is not only the Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese “little children” who look just like Jenny; he identifies her as a child-victim, visually and racially different from her white, adult sympathizers. The contrast between this label and the interaction immediately preceding it, when “She feels William work his hand beneath her shirt, under her waistband” (229), signals the displacement and effective erasure of her subjectivity as a radical, racially undifferentiated woman worthy of his sexual desire. Jenny responds to this displacement by insisting that she has her own revolutionary reasons independent of William’s “coaching” or his condescending assumption “that because he dignified them with his efforts, he deserved a particularly hearty reception in the realms of the poor and the marginalized” (277).

Despite her initial assumption that her Asian appearance played no role in William’s interest in her as a radical subject, by the end of the novel she realizes the similarities between William and the cadre’s valuation of her racial difference. William values Jenny as a radical subject because she visibly resembles the “little children” of Vietnam; the cadre values her because she adds “third world woman” credentials to their politics. Perhaps this likeness is unsurprising, given that William has more in common
with Pauline than he does with Jenny: unlike Jenny, both of them are “the self-confident children of the white upper class” (343). The difference, however, between the cadre and William’s valuations is largely a matter of Jenny’s immediate, physiological reaction. Whenever the novel mentions William, it does so through Jenny’s memories, thus conveying the remove of her conscious reflections. In contrast, when the novel depicts Jenny’s interactions with the cadre, it focuses on her body’s unconscious responses.

In Juan’s estimation, each member of the cadre, including Jenny, represents a different model of the radical subject; each of them, moreover, has a particular role in upholding the racial and gendered order he constructs for the cadre. As a working-class white man who has “always wished [he] was black” (141) and has inexplicably given himself a Spanish name, Juan regards himself as the logical successor of the cadre’s original, now-dead leader, making a habit of silencing Pauline and Yvonne even before they meet Jenny. The supportive, obedient Yvonne can claim revolutionary credibility because she is “at least… blue-collar.” But blue-blooded Pauline, he explains to Jenny, is “a big step behind us that way. That’s why you’re a good lesson” (140). In identifying Jenny as a “lesson” for Pauline, Juan hails her as a kind of model minority subject, albeit a radical one: her skin color models “integrity” (141) for Pauline, the “publicity princess” whose radical indoctrination is crucial to maintaining the cadre’s media attention. Juan regards Jenny’s visible racial difference, what he calls her “Third World” “reality” (140), as a revolutionary asset: it can be used to dismiss and school Pauline on the basis of her white, American economic privilege.7 Previously, when Juan insists that her “brown

7 Juan’s label for Jenny, “third world,” rather than “Asian” or “Japanese American,” positions her as the subject of 1970s third-worldism, which Juan is eager to co-opt into his own revolutionary agenda. Because he does not regard Jenny’s racial difference as tied to a specific country or geographic region, he is able to make her into a metonym for any number of national liberation movements that fit his ideology.
“Skin” makes her owe “your people,” Jenny replies angrily, “Just because I’m a Japanese woman, you can’t define me in terms of just that” (139). Her frustration with Juan’s efforts to enfold her into his radical agenda is exacerbated by his insistence on calling her “nonwhite” and “brown,” which both stresses the visibility of her difference and makes explicit the irrelevance of her Japanese ethnicity to him. As far as he is concerned, she is useful in so far as she appears the racial negative of Pauline.

I would now like to return to the moment with which I opened, when Jenny’s ambivalence towards Juan’s racial ideology is embodied in her intensely uncomfortable fever. In this passage, Jenny’s exit from the room, her silence in the previous lines of dialogue between Juan and Pauline, and the continuation of their argument after her departure, underscore Judith Butler’s point that “the subject need not always turn around in order to be constituted as a subject” (31). That is, whether or not Jenny acquiesces to the Althusserian “rituals of ideological recognition” (172) to which Juan subjects her and willingly submits to being his model minority radical actually matters little to him, as long as her body’s visible racial difference is foregrounded. Through its discomfort, therefore, Jenny’s misrecognized body registers her rejection of his exploitation of her so-called “non-white skin background.” Jenny’s hallucinations of dog and traffic sounds further convey her sense of alienation from, and resistance to, Juan’s interpellative gestures. Given that were they real, these sounds would mean that she was not isolated from the world in the cadre’s forsaken farmhouse, they express her desire to elude Juan’s

Incidentally, Juan’s “third world” hail bears a remarkable resemblance to William’s assessments of Jenny’s radical worth, particularly when William insists that the Vietnamese children whom the American military are bombing “look just like you” (230). For both Juan and William, it is unimportant that Jenny is actually neither “third world” nor “Vietnamese”; instead, what matters to Juan is that Jenny’s visible racial difference makes her a suitable participant in his radical cause and the same time that her so-called “third world reality” validates that cause. For a reading of the novel’s critique of U.S. imperialism, see Peggy Vlagapoulos.
rhetoric, both the demeaning position of her racial difference within it and the disturbing power structure it is used to bolster.

The assertion, vis-à-vis her physical discomfort, of Jenny’s isolation from the cadre’s ideology becomes further complicated when the role they assign her is not only demeaning but false. One afternoon, the owner of the farmhouse unexpectedly appears. As he introduces himself to the fugitives, “Jenny felt her skin crawl. She knew it was only her paranoia that made this man look like a cop, but what must they look like to him?” (192). Jenny’s “crawling skin” physiologically demonstrates not only her fear of getting caught, but her anxiety that the landlord construes her as one of the cadre. Insofar as her uncomfortable body expresses her rejection of Juan’s interpellation of her as the “third world woman” or “model minority” subject and thus of her position in the cadre, the owner’s assessment of them as a collective threatens to annul the force of that rejection.

While Jenny worries about what the owner must be thinking about them, Yvonne undermines his power to recognize and name them as fugitives by improvising false identities. She announces: “I’m Dierdre’s sister…. And this is my husband, George. And this is our friend Judy.” In response to Yvonne’s confident “warming to the exercise….” Jenny felt a bead of sweat leave her armpit and draw a wet path down her side. The man had shaken her hand very briefly and turned his gaze back to Yvonne. Juan was still staring hard at the man but the man only glanced toward Juan courteously. ‘Excuse me,’ Jenny murmured, and slipped from the kitchen” (192). In contrast to the garrulous Yvonne and Juan, who “was still staring at Bob as if he were a steak to be carved up and eaten” (193), Jenny’s reaction to this predicament resembles her fevered self-cloistering
in the previous passage. Unwilling to answer to the false label of “Judy,” or to stalk the unwelcome visitor murderously like Juan, Jenny first reacts by sweating and then by attempting to remove herself from the theater of fake identities and the inquisitive gaze of the landlord. She cannot completely escape the farmhouse, but she does have the agency to leave the room.

Her bodily discomfort steers her into the front room, where she sees the “riot of ashtrays and unwashed wine glasses and empty potato-chip bags and heaps of newspaper and inexplicable detritus” from an outsider’s perspective. “[A]nd this was not even the barn,” she thinks, “with the block-mounted gun and the silhouette shot full of holes, or the pasture, where the grass was stamped flat in an oval-shaped course,” all evidence of the rigorous physical training enforced by Juan. Her decision to destroy Juan’s “code of war,” which had been taped to a wall and was the most damning evidence of the cadre’s activities (193), underscores both the alienation that enables her to imagine how their lifestyle must look to a stranger, and her disconnection from the body-disciplining militancy that underlies Juan’s misogynistic authority. Certainly she hopes to conceal her housemates’ terrorist identities, but her destructive act is also motivated by her anxiety about being implicated as “one of them,” forced to accept either Yvonne’s explicitly false naming as “Judy,” or the role of “third world woman” in which Juan attempts to confine her.

Perhaps because Juan extols Jenny as a “brown-skinned” model for Pauline, and because Jenny suspects that like her, Pauline’s induction into the cadre—which included being blindfolded and locked in a closet—was not entirely voluntary, instances of Jenny’s bodily discomfort, particularly with regard to temperature, occur often during
encounters between the two women. When Pauline claims that if she does not succeed in convincing Jenny to drive the getaway car, Juan might kill her, Jenny reluctantly agrees to participate. Recognizing Juan’s violent control over both of them, however, Jenny “was suddenly sweating, she realized. Profusely” (223). As she watches Pauline tell Juan that Jenny has agreed to drive the car, she could “feel hatred for him like a rash of small spines burning out of her skin” (224), a physiological reaction that seems to solidify her determination not only to leave the cadre, but to take Pauline with her: “When this is over, you have to leave them” (224), she insists. A few days after the disastrous hold-up, when finally escape from Juan and Yvonne and take to the road, Jenny feels “her scalp glowing with heat” in reaction to Pauline’s claim that Mr. Morton, the innocent storeowner who is shot dead during their botched hold-up, is merely “an establishment pig” (241). Jenny hears in Pauline’s callous dismissal echoes of Juan: “I’m upset that you seem to have more sympathy for a store-owning pig than for the people we’re trying to help. The people! Your people, Third World People—” (213). Because Juan groups his categorization of Mr. Morton as a “pig” with his categorization of her as one of the “Third World People” so in need of his white, radical rescue, Jenny senses that they are inextricably linked in the ideology that Pauline has absorbed as well.

While driving across America with Pauline back to their home state of California, the possibility of yet another subjectivity for Jenny emerges, that of the lesbian outlaw. However, the failure of this subjectivity to take hold suggests a further breakdown of the white radical fantasy of Asian American political identity that the novel allegorizes and critiques. The narrator describes how “In sleep their bodies twine together at the center of the bed…. [E]ven when it’s not cold they still wake up touching…. Pauline’s small
breasts crushed to her back, Pauline’s arm on her waist…. A scent like warm bread from their groins” (280). But nothing more explicitly sexual comes of these moments of contact. Instead, “there is only this edging against the idea, in the same way their bodies edge up to each other in the guise of blind sleep” (281). The allusion to blindness suggests why lesbian subjectivity fails to endure as a possibility for Jenny: in order for her to fully embrace that subjectivity, she cannot pretend to be “blind” to her physical intimacy with Pauline. She has to see their sexual contact, which would necessitate a clear visualization of her body not entirely dissimilar from the visibility of her racial difference, the premise of Juan’s “third world woman” label. Instead, their moments of near-intimacy only result from, and can only be glimpsed through, drug-like hazes:

Then it will only be late nights when they’ve possibly drunk too much wine…. They’ll dream back to the floating motel rooms, the one mushy bed, and yet while they are there they do nothing. They wake up, feeling drugged from the long deferred sleep…. In the near future this will be the half-grasped fever dream. Perhaps that they don’t make love isn’t surprising; their haze is too dense. (281)

A lack of clarity shrouds these moments of physical proximity, so that even the would-be encounter is narrated from the future, when the women can only revisit it through fevered, narcotic dreams.

8 And yet, perhaps because both Jenny and Pauline’s radical subjectivities materialize vis-à-vis their sexual initiations, and because the lovers who engendered those sexual and political identities are absent when the two women are on the road, their bond becomes for Jenny deeper and more resonant than her heteroerotic relationship with William had been. Her “dreams of revenge on Pauline… were really heartbreak—it was possible that this was the first true heartbreak of her life…. [S]he stewed in a pain even worse than she’d felt after William’s arrest” (350). With Pauline, she believed she had created a “perfect comradeship…. [u]nlike, even, [her] previous life with William, in which she had felt herself struggling to keep his approval…. With Pauline she had never felt that, but that their mistakes they at least made together” (352-53). Even though their connection is not sexual, Jenny is able to achieve with Pauline a sense of equality, far beyond the gendered, racialized, and thus lopsided teacher-student dynamic that she now realizes comprised her union with William. This sense of egalitarianism between the two women, while short-lived, further undermines the cadre’s racialized hierarchy in which Pauline is the “publicity princess” and Jenny her “third world” “lesson.” It also by extension challenges the narratives of this period that fail to consider the presence of Yoshimura specifically or the work of Asian American radicals more generally.
Sianne Ngai’s work on affect in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) gives us a theoretical vocabulary, more supple and nuanced than the one provided by an Althusserian framework, for analyzing the ambiguity and confusion of Jenny’s feelings for Pauline and the role of this relationship in the formation of her post-political Asian American subjectivity. As I indicate in my conclusion, Ngai’s position is in alliance with the work of Laura Hyun Yi Kang, which calls for more expansive definitions of the female Japanese American subject. Ngai’s study attends to “minor and generally unprestigious feelings,” including envy, irritation, and paranoia, instead of the “grander passions” and “potentially ennobling or morally beatific states” normally privileged in “philosophical discourses of emotions, from Aristotle to the present” (6). It thus offers a constructive framework for investigating the relationship between Jenny’s physically uncomfortable feelings—a pun on the affective “feelings” Ngai discusses and located in the middle range between radical ideas and radical activities—and the political ideologies that seek to claim Jenny as their minority radical subject. As Ngai writes, ugly feelings “are explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no… therapeutic or purifying release” (6). Likewise, the ambiguous emotional feelings suggested by Jenny’s physically uncomfortable feelings have no obvious object of purification or healing, and do not facilitate her reconciliation with Pauline or the white leftist politics that she represents.

Ngai’s formulation is especially helpful in a scene that occurs late in the novel, after Jenny and Pauline have been separated in prison but Jenny still feels protective of Pauline. When Jenny’s lawyer informs her that Pauline, to take the blame off of herself, 

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9 In particular, the consideration Ngai gives to “minor affects that are far less intentional or object-directed, and thus more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities” (20) than are “grander passions” invites us to pay attention to the connections between the racialized dogma espoused by the three fugitives, Jenny’s physiologically ugly feelings, and her eventual relinquishment of her radical beliefs.
has betrayed her by falsely naming her as an accessory to Mr. Morton’s murder, Jenny’s “face seemed to be glowing, not with a blush or humiliation or shock but with plain, beating, furnace strength heat, independent of any emotion” (348). The intensity of Jenny’s physiological reaction, divorced from a straightforward, emotional response, suggests that her body is registering her disbelief of Pauline’s betrayal before her mind can find the language for it. Instead of responding to her lawyer’s information with clear emotion, Jenny’s inexplicably “glowing” face performs, at best, disgust—“the ugliest of ‘ugly feelings’” (Ngai 335)—that Pauline seems to have adopted Juan’s regard for her as the cadre’s non-white member who must be sacrificed to ensure the survival of the more recognizable “publicity princess.” But perhaps even disgust’s emotional connotations are an inadequate explanation for the “plain, beating, furnace strength heat” of Jenny’s face in this moment. That is, if Jenny can be said to feel “disgust” here, it is still a vague disgust. Ngai positions disgust as the exceptional ugly feeling because it is “never ambivalent about its object” (335), but the object of Jenny’s disgust—or whatever ugly feeling is behind that heat—is not entirely clear. Is it Pauline herself? Her disloyalty to Jenny? Her sacrifice of Jenny in the narcissistic service of maintaining “good publicity” for herself? What makes Jenny’s disgust so “ugly” in this moment is that very ambivalence, the inability of her burning face to locate an object, an explanation, or even an emotion for its unconsciously, automatically generated heat. The title of the subservient “model minority” for the white “publicity princess” is one that she has many times refused, and its resurgence now, even after her separation from the cadre, provokes the same strong, suggestive physical discomfort.
III. The Shock of the Real: A Model Asian Radical

As I have discussed, *American Woman* allegorizes the erasure of the Asian American perspective from familiar accounts of this period through its portrayal of Jenny’s often problematic position as the only woman of color in her white radical circles. However, I argue that the novel goes a step further, rewriting “American” history as Asian American—might the novel’s titular “American Woman” be an *Asian* American woman?—by reframing this moment as a meditation on the relationship between Asian American identity and radical politics in this period. In the next two sections, I argue that it does so by foregrounding the role of Asians in the shaping of Jenny’s political consciousness. The trajectory of Jenny’s incarnations as a Japanese American radical activist—from Vietnamese-resembling bomber to “third world woman” and finally to reconciled, “post-political” daughter—is crucially framed by her interactions with an Asian man (a Vietnamese monk she sees immolating himself on TV) and an Asian American man (her father). In what follows, I turn to an analysis of the ways in which Jenny responds to these two Asian models of political subjectivity. As she reconsiders their significance in the formation of her radical consciousness, I argue, Jenny comes to realize that ideologies are not the exclusive purview of white radicals, but that she has also attempted to deploy them to indoctrinate others, including other Asians.

The irony of Jenny’s estrangement from the cadre, the result of their attempts to name her as a “third world” subject who defies the same bourgeois ideals they do, is that her own radical political identity has its roots in a similar reading of an Asian body as resistant. On her drive back to the hide-out early in her stay with the fugitives, she recalls her return at the age of fourteen to the United States from Japan, where she lived with her
father for five years. Upon her re-entry into the United States, Jenny perceives something “astoundingly different about California…. an aura of fraudulence in the burnished sunlight and the dense floral yards and in the bland self-absorption of faces” (162). This fraudulence is nowhere more disturbing to Jenny than in the contrast between the sunny, self-absorbed American lifestyle and the brutality of the Vietnam War that this lifestyle refuses to acknowledge.

In Vietnam at the start of that summer a monk had immolated himself, and the ghastly flames eating his body had been shown on TV. Now her father was declaring a truce on his one-sided war on the land of his birth, but it was at that same moment she’d started to grasp why he’d waged it. It had been at her school in Japan that she’d learned about the internment. She’d never heard of it in California, where it had happened, or from her father, to whom it had happened…. But to her it had seemed like a key: to understanding him, to knowing him, perhaps even to being his daughter. (162)

The monk appeals to Jenny as a dissident Asian subject, his self-immolation representing a violent, bodily rejection of the American military’s and media’s demand for a passive native witness. His action succeeds as a political gesture because it makes apparent the suffering of other Vietnamese bodies, a notion on which William’s antiwar activism, with which Jenny will soon be indoctrinated, is based. Jenny interprets the monk’s protest against white American imperialism as a potential model for Asian American subjectivity. She chooses to identify with him as she simultaneously rejects her California school’s historical silence on Japanese American internment and later drops out of high school altogether. This identification highlights the political motivation she imagines she and the monk share: both defy the white, American State’s efforts in the Vietnam War to construct ideologically compliant, “good” Asian and Asian American subjects. It is the
televised image of the monk that Jenny believes interpellates her as a resistant Asian American subject.

However, it is important to consider that Jenny witnesses the immolation on her television set, at a great physical, as well as temporal, distance from the act. Her remoteness from this image of physical pain and death corresponds to her disassociation, demonstrated by her “ugly” bodily feelings, from the cadre’s valuation of her as a particular kind of Asian American subject. These suggestions of remoteness foreshadow her later disenchantment with the radicalism that is initiated in this moment and that she pursues as William’s lover and revolutionary student.

Towards the end of the novel, after she is separated from Pauline and awaits her trial, Jenny’s thoughts return to the monk, only this time her memory is colored with the altered perspective of hindsight:

She thought of the monk she had seen years ago on the news, immolating himself. It was a sight that had shocked and transformed her perhaps more than anything else in her life. She supposed now that in her time with William it had been that unparalleled shock of the real she had wanted to force onto others, the way she’d felt it forced onto herself, by the monk in his column of flame. She had wanted to force others to see, no matter what it might take, and had felt this was just what the monk had been doing. (351)

Her renewed attention to the monk at this late moment in the narrative conveys the similarities between her introduction to radicalism and the cadre’s principles toward which her bodily discomfort displayed such ambivalence. She realizes that she had not so much wished to emulate the monk’s act of physical self-destruction as she had wanted to engage others, including her reluctant father, with the same “shock of the real” that she had seen on her television. As she now understands, this shock was not about the monk’s race, but about his willingness to destroy his own body. Her desire to visually inculcate
others mirrors Juan’s insistence that Pauline learn from Jenny’s “third world” “reality” through seeing the racial difference of her Asian American body. At the same time, the two aspects of “force” inherent in Jenny’s induction to radicalism, that which she felt from the monk and that which she had hoped to use on others, echoes the force with which, so Jenny suspects, the original cadre members coerced Pauline to join them. It is a force that she no longer glorifies as a laudable means of political education but identifies as misdirected, even oppressive; she realizes, “she was no better than Juan or Yvonne. No wiser, no less prone to dumb, selfish acts” (357). It now occurs to her that her radicalism with William had resembled the cadre’s more than “the injured party [of] her pride” cared to admit (357). During these reflections, Jenny’s once clear-cut political subjectivity as a radical inflamed by “vast anger” (350) fades into something much more ambiguous, a muted seething related to the “heartbreak” she feels towards Pauline.

“But perhaps she had been wrong,” the novel continues about Jenny’s first reaction to the monk,

> and the monk had really meant to convey the horrifying idea that had first crossed her mind seeing him, and that afterwards she’d so urgently tried to refute: that a passion for rightness was never enough, that one’s every attempt would be futile. That in the end the only way to protest was by simply removing oneself from the world. (351)

Amid her doubt about the monk’s intended message, Jenny’s previous belief in the formation of her radical subjectivity through the sight of the physically suffering Asian body disintegrates, as does her interpretation of the monk’s political resistance. Only now, after her years on the run, does Jenny understand that passionate rhetoric and moments of radical, visual identification, whether her identification with the monk or Juan’s identification of her as a revolutionary “lesson” for Pauline, do not make for a viable,
effective political platform. Her antiwar activities, for example, have not brought her any closer to the actuality of life in Vietnam: “it was hard to know, caught up in the rage and confusion at home, if the Vietnamese were most rightly described as ‘angry.’ Hard to know anything about them, these people to whom she’d felt pledged. They had been an abstraction, the way Mr. Morton had been an abstraction” (352). Despite even her acts of protest, she remains as ignorant about the Vietnamese as when she started, just as the cadre could only ever conceive of Mr. Morton as a disposable representative of the ruling class rather than as a living individual.

Given her suspicion that the sole possible means of protest that “guaranteed you would never do harm” is self-removal (351), Jenny’s bodily discomfort, which expresses through physiology her ideological separation from the cadre, can be read as a preliminary exercise in this practice. Upon her release from jail after two years, her physical discomfort among the cadre becomes an actual abandonment of her original radical identity, now seen as “a degraded past self, a self that craved irresponsible freedom” (360). She moves in with a group of young people for whom “living communally, buying their staples in brown paper bags, pushing the compost around with a hoe,” rather than bombing, kidnapping, or armed robbery, “were their forms of resistance” (362). Through them, she obtains a job at a juice bar, where, indifferent to her “minor celebrity,” she “neither shrugged off nor acknowledged” those who recognize her from her trial (362). Jenny’s distance from her previous radical subjectivity heralds the birth of an identity based on personal sympathy rather than panethic, political abstraction and divorced from her former conviction and rage.
IV. Conclusion: After the Flames of Radicalism

The above passages on the monk capture the process by which Jenny’s initial politicization, generated by witnessing an act of dissent through physical suffering, provokes her interest in her father’s struggles against racial discrimination during World War II. She even hopes that her identification with the monk will transform her in Jim Shimada’s eyes into a sympathetic offspring-ally, providing the “key to… being his daughter” (163). However, in the nascent years of her radicalism, Jenny mistakenly assumes that the two versions of Asian suffering represented by the monk and her father are synonymous and that to identify with one is to understand the other: “Her discovery of what he’d endured was the beginning of her discovery of history and politics, of power and oppression, of brotherhood and racism, and finally, of radicalism; but it only drove them to fight with each other” (163). Jenny does not consider that, unlike the monk’s act, the physical injury and violent surveillance to which Jim is subject in the relocation camps is not his choice, nor is it a statement of his political resistance against the abuses of the American government.\(^\text{10}\) In fact, the physical trauma that Jim endures as a Japanese American comes first from his fellow Japanese Americans, when he and his parents are sent to Manzanar: “inside camp, Jim Shimada is beaten by the pro-Japan gang over whether he’ll say yes or no to the loyalty questions. Jim Shimada, before this, had not been a political person” (320). Given that he had even tried to enlist after Pearl Harbor

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\(^{10}\) Jenny’s inability to recognize the reality of her father’s experience reflects a divide between the Japanese American internees and their offspring who came of age in the 1960s and 70s. Historians like Roger Daniels have described how many Japanese Americans of this generation “questioned the wartime behavior of their parents. They have asked: Why didn’t the Japanese American people resist? Why did they go off to camp so meekly?” (58). In contrast to these young people, however, Jenny does not question why her father did not resist. Instead, she wishfully projects onto his past a resistance that perhaps was never there. Jenny fails to realize, as Rogers writes, that “life behind barbed wire in America’s concentration camps was not, in the main, a story of resistance or of heroism, but essentially one of survival” (65).
with his friends, only to be turned away because of his Japanese ancestry, the novel equates Jim’s previously “not political” identity with his lack of resistance to the United States government and military. He does, however, retaliate against other Japanese Americans: At Manzanar, “in the midst of his bloody beating [by the pro-Japan gang], which he is fiercely resisting,” he is transferred “to a new camp for ‘incorrigible’ Japanese” (320), “an actual prison” with cellblocks of “horse-stable construction,” and “no heat or hot water to bathe” (321). In the prison camp, already suffering from bronchitis, he “is… given, and gives in return, broken bones, concussions, knife wounds, purple bruises, split skulls and continual torrents of verbal abuse” from the other Japanese American inmates in a place where “the reviled ‘Japs’… eat their often-spoiled food… beneath the poised muzzles of guns of white boys their same age” (321). While in this camp, Jim learns of the draft of all Japanese Americans over the age of eighteen. He refuses, is tried and convicted of draft evasion, and is transferred to a federal prison.11

11 While not historically accurate, Jim Shimada’s internment narrative is a composite of actual events. In War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps including Manzanar, internees who were suspected by their pro-Japanese neighbors of collaborating with the United States government were routinely threatened, harassed, and beaten for being inu, meaning dog in Japanese; at Manzanar and Poston, the informant problem led to bloody confrontation. In 1943, the WRA distributed a loyalty questionnaire in which internees over the age of seventeen in all camps were required to answer if they were willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States and if they swore unqualified allegiance to the United States. The WRA announced a segregation policy in July 1943: based on the results of the loyalty questionnaire, “disloyals” — those who answered no to both question — from all nine WRA centers were to be relocated to Tule Lake. In total, 8,559 persons classified as “disloyals” and their family members were brought to Tule Lake, under the rationale that they would be allowed to pursue a “Japanese way of life” (Smith 321). In actuality, “Tule Lake filled with dissidents, became a strife-ridden camp, and was for a time turned over to the army in an attempt to quell the almost constant disorder there” (Daniels 70). The greater number of interior police and soldiers, the barbed wire fences and tanks, and the more limited movement of the internees all suggest that Tule Lake is the inspiration for the “Camp for Incorrigibles” to which Jim was sent, and where he would have learned, in January 1944, of the reapplication of the draft to all male Japanese American citizens of military age. Unlike Tule Lake, however, Jim’s prison camp has “no old people or children, no family groups whatsoever” (320). The injuries to his masculinity and body that Jim endures in Choi’s single-sex version of Tule Lake inform his view of himself as a Japanese American man, as well as his wariness of Asian American political activism.

Because he does not want to revisit these shameful experiences, Jim does not talk about them to Jenny. As a result, Jenny interprets her father’s refusal of the draft and his trial, conviction, and transfer to a federal prison in the same manner as she does the self-immolating monk: as actions of a revolutionary subject who deliberately refuses the State’s hail. Her assumption of his bold assertion of political agency is shaped by her early failure to identify and contemplate the sense of shame that remains from his injurious experiences. When Jenny is nine, her father, who “had been so embittered by the internment and his imprisonment for resisting the draft” moves them both to Japan, where he hopes “he would finally get some respect” and forget the pain of his life in America as a Japanese American; however, he “emerged as indelibly and hopelessly American. It had been in his slight advantage of height and his unerasable Los Angeles accent… in his inability to master Japanese” (161). While Jenny blends in physically with her classmates and “seemed to absorb Japanese in her sleep” (161), Jim is unable to become a speaking subject in Japan.

The novel foregrounds Jenny’s childhood inability to empathize with her father’s wartime trauma in the scene of their flight to Tokyo. Jenny’s most “durable memory” (343) of this flight includes First Class seats that feel “fraudulent” (342) because they are obtained only after her father creates “a terrible scene, of the sort that featured a blond, silk-scarf-wearing woman repeating, ‘I’m going to call the police’” (340). Mortified by his inability to follow the rules of the white airport staff, Jenny wanders up a spiral staircase to the First Class lounge, where she falls into play with “incandescently gold-

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skinned and gold-haired” children—“some kind of royal family” (343)—and their “quantities of beautiful toys” (341). In her memory of her father finding her hours later, “she only saw [his] head and shoulders, awfully emerging from the stairs. And the look on his face that had not been concern, as the other adults might have realized, but wounded and rewounded, vengefully bandaged-up pride” (343). For Jim, his young daughter’s embarrassment with and abandonment of him and her willingness to be momentarily and symbolically adopted by a wealthy, white American family is yet more fodder for the feelings of inadequacy that drive him to Japan. For the child Jenny, who cannot discern her father’s hurt pride, Jim’s odd behavior is not worthy of her admiration or even compassion; instead, she is only humiliated by him.

Whereas the monk’s death in the moment of his refusal forecloses the possibility of the complex aftermath of regret, Jenny’s father must live with the residue of his original injury. Therefore, Jenny’s initial radicalism, informed as it is by the monk’s bodily anguish, estranges her from her father rather than facilitating a nuanced understanding of his traumatic experiences of discrimination. Unsurprisingly, Jim is uncomfortable with Jenny’s efforts to regard him as her version of a “bad” Japanese American subject. “As she grew increasingly involved in the antiwar movement she and her father fought with increasing intensity…. What do you know? He would shout” (163).12 After his disappointing experience in Japan, Jim retreats from political alliances

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12 Upon the Shimadas’ return to the United States, Jenny, at the age of fourteen, is subjected to a series of “tests of the sort she imagined were given to retarded or incorrigible children” (162). Much like her father, Jenny is assumed by the American government to be an “incorrigible Japanese” and must prove her ability to comply with Americanness. She does not quite adjust, however, as the year of her return marks her first awareness of the war in Vietnam and initial curiosity about her father’s internment experiences. Ironically, at this point their shared “incorrigibility” only causes friction between them. It is not until the end of the novel, when they travel back to Manzanar together, that their connected experiences of alienation are recognized and reconciled.
with other Asians, “the tight-knit people [he] had always avoided” (359). Jim’s reasons for avoiding other Japanese Americans are a mystery to Jenny, but not to the reader:

He had felt a tinge of guiltiness his whole life after being interned; the same blameless guilt that had made him feel disgust for his parents, and for everyone else who’d have been wrongly accused. Jenny once had asked him why they knew no Japanese in California. “Do you want to?” he’d said. “They’re all sheep!” But he’d been the same way and still was; so that he sweated when he saw a policeman; and though he even filed his taxes on time, he still expected the dark suits of the FBI men to appear on his doorstep again. (324)

Jim’s physically felt anxiety about run-ins with authority figures—the police, the FBI—mirror Jenny’s physiological discomfort in reaction to the arrival of the owner of the farmhouse where she hid with the cadre. But neither of them can see what they have in common; Jenny, for her part, erroneously assumes they share a passion for resistance.

However, Jim, having decided that the familiar, however injurious, subjectivity of a Japanese American in California is preferable to the absence of subjectivity as a Japanese American in Japan, has accepted his “truce” with the United States and finds Jenny’s attempts to appropriate his painful past through her political activism uninformed and inappropriate. It is not until Jenny is in jail that Jim reflects on his role in his estrangement from his daughter. “He supposed he had never, through Jenny’s childhood, thought of her quite as much as he had of himself. Dragging her to Japan, the captive of his anger, was an example of that” (338). In Jim’s recognition that his daughter had been a “captive of his anger,” the novel suggests another similarity between father and daughter: both used force on the other to act out their rage against white racism. Like Jim, who “dragged” his daughter to Japan, Jenny “wanted to force others,” including her father, to share in her outrage.
Jenny’s recognition of the monk’s true message, that “the only way to protest was by simply removing oneself from the world” (351), is demonstrated through her final act of self-removal from her radical life: her re-evaluation of her father’s history of racist injury. Jenny thus sets into motion her reconciliation with her father in a way that Jim, who has come to believe in the inevitability of their miscommunication, could not. “[H]e knew that the fact of his fatherhood didn’t make him any more able to understand his mother or father than Jenny, if she ever had children, if she even emerged from her own fiery youth, would be able to understand him” (329). But as Jim was unable to anticipate, Jenny does emerge from her “fiery youth,” from that “column of flame,” to attempt to learn more about her father’s internment experiences beyond the resistance narrative she once projected onto them.

At the novel’s close, she drives him to a reunion at the Manzanar internment camp. Jim protests, “This is the most miserable place in the world you’re dragging me to. I don’t want to do this” (366), ironically echoing Jim’s “dragging” of his small daughter to Japan. But the final words of the novel, “she followed” (369), suggests that Jim is taking the lead in claiming his internment story. Her decision to follow him into the American desert, the site of his government-inflicted racial injury, implies that her geographic removal from contemporary Bay Area urban life facilitates a change in her attitude towards her father’s past, from appropriation to empathy. This entails identification with a different Asian body—not a distant abstraction, but her father and his tangible, physically immediate history. As he looks out over the desert, Jim reminds Jenny, “I lived here” (369), finally asserting an agency and fullness of experience that he was unable to attain either as an “incorrigible Japanese” or an American in Japan.
Whereas the monk, whose power derives from his death in the moment of injury, cannot be “cured,” Jenny’s decision to “follow” her father suggests the possibility of reconciliation—not interethnically with the white cadre, or internationally with the monk, but inter-generationally between father and daughter. Jenny thus sympathizes with Jim’s rejection of her original, ill-fitting attempts to understand him as a radical subject and accepts the possibility of a Japanese American subjectivity that is reconciled to its cultural history of trauma.

Despite Jenny’s self-removal from her previous radical subjectivity at the end of *American Woman*, however, the ending of the novel is not without its own resistant politics. The reunion between father and daughter creates the opportunity for Jim’s return to the location of the Japanese American internment. This return in the narrative to a subject that “they never teach” in Jenny’s American schools (159) represents a refusal on the part of Japanese American history to assimilate into a white version of America’s national past, just as the discomfort of Jenny’s Asian body, which disrupts her assimilation into the narrative of Pauline’s radical subjectivity, allegorizes the novel’s refusal to perpetuate the erasure of Asian Americans from historical accounts of the period’s radical politics. At the same time, that return to Manzanar retaliates against William and the cadre’s exploitative view of undifferentiated “third world” or Asian people by insisting on the specificity of the *Japanese* American experience of racist trauma. Like Birdie Lee and Eliza Naumann, Jenny embodies a commitment to a particular, historical ethnic American tradition. Through her reconciliation with her

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13 That Jenny first learns of the internment in Japan, which had such an impact on her American political identity and her relationship to her father, *outside* of the United States, further complicates the possible meanings of the titular “American Woman.”
father’s injurious past, Jenny becomes a different kind of “bad subject,” shaped not by the (white) radical fantasy of panethnicity, but by her own personal, ethnically specific mode of empathy.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that Jenny’s initial misreading of her father’s experiences and the eventual reversal of her attitude speak to the novel’s complication of a familiar Asian American narrative of female political subjectivity formed in resistance to physical oppression. In particular, Jenny’s uncomfortable body, her rejection of Juan’s and ultimately of William’s radical rhetoric and practice, and her status at the end of the novel as a Japanese American subject whose social consciousness results largely from ethnic and familial empathy for trauma rather than from the firsthand experience of that trauma, expand typical constructions of the female Asian American body both within Asian American fiction and also more largely within Asian American critical practice. That neither Jenny’s radicalism nor her experience with radicals is one of outright physical duress contradicts a popular reading of the literary Asian American female subject who is formed through bodily discipline or oppression, what Laura Hyun Yi Kang calls “stock figures” (3) of female Asian American representation. In perhaps the seminal example of this narrative, Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, the narrator laments that “Even now, China wraps double binds around my feet” (48), stressing that Chinese American female subjectivity is an endless negotiation of American feminist aspirations on the one hand, and the metaphoric, but also material oppression of women imposed by Chinese culture on the other.  

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14 King-Kok Cheung, for example, reads the protagonist’s “warfare…. against Chinese patriarchy” (80) through her “development… from silence to voice” (Articulate Silences 79). For Cheung, Maxine’s transition from a mute child to a loquacious writer demonstrates the success of her “feminist strategies” to
Obasan (1982), the internment survivor Naomi’s molestation by a white man allegorizes the trauma of the Japanese Canadian internment; the sexual, bodily violation of internment thereby becomes an event whose scar she has to acknowledge in order to assert her political agency as a Japanese Canadian adult.

Jenny fails to fulfill the prototypically resistant Asian American roles of the racial spokeswoman or the revolutionary terrorist. And yet, her physical discomfort nonetheless resists the American radical and media culture that would otherwise render her Asian body subservient or invisible, just as it resists Juan’s hail of the model minority “third world” radical. The novel’s last reference to Jenny’s bodily discomfort occurs during her interaction with Frazer, the man who originally set her up with the cadre: “He would say… listen to your body…. Hers was hot, teeming, pleased in some way. Exact message unclear” (364). The ambiguity of “the message” makes her “hot, teeming” response an “ugly feeling,” but it is a now positive as well, “pleased” with the possibilities that this ambiguity affords her. Throughout American Woman, the “unclear” messages of Jenny’s body comprise a series of physiological resistances to her debasing status as a political subject of color. By the end, these rejections make possible a Japanese American subjectivity that has personal, accessible models of social identification, and is consciously assessed and chosen by the subject herself, rather than assigned to her by a white, male authority. Jenny’s eventual reconciliation with her father and their trip to Manzanar thus introduces an alternative to the “stock figures” that Kang identifies, one that is formed vis-à-vis Ngai’s “ugly feelings” and that complicates the

 combat, among other physically oppressive Chinese customs for young girls, the alleged snipping of her tongue.
resistance/accommodation binary critiqued by Nguyen. What emerges is a sympathetic, historically sensitive Japanese American woman and daughter who confounds both the topographical and visual demands of 1970s white America, and our own still limited notions of Asian American political subjectivity, entirely.
CHAPTER FOUR

Return to Walden Pond:

Reclaiming the Great White Father in Ruth Ozeki’s All Over Creation

I. Introduction: Yumi Fuller’s Walden Pond

I began this dissertation by tracing the cultural roots of contemporary ethnic American father-daughter narratives. I would like to conclude by revisiting this cultural genealogy in the specific context of American and Asian American studies. Following the influence of 1970s “world of our mothers” ethnic and women of color feminism in literary studies, Americanist paradigms for literary criticism began to expand to account for both gender and ethnic difference in the following decade. Mary Dearborn was one of the first Americanist critics to approach ethnic literature from a feminist perspective: “Do women understand or represent ethnicity in a gender-specific way?” (6), she inquires in Pocahontas’s Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture (1986). Like her predecessors, Dearborn’s paradigm had a particular interest in mothers. Dearborn claims that the first-generation American’s repudiation of his or her ethnic heritage led to family conflict, and is particularly interested in what the generational conflicts between female family members “tell us about American culture” (6).

In light of the comparative approach of my project, it seems important to point out that Dearborn’s focus on mother-daughter conflicts in the mid 1980s continues to have relevance in Asian American literary criticism today. In Assimilating Asians: Gendered
Strategies of Authorship in Asian America (2000), Patricia P. Chuh focuses on the “mother-daughter plot,” which she reads as a vehicle for uniting two generations of women in their “claiming of agency” (165). In the “mother-daughter plot,”

the immigrant mother’s desire for America becomes focused on her American-born daughter…. Because of the intensity attributed to mother-daughter relations in such stories, and the structural similarities these dyads bear to romantic partnerships in earlier assimilation narratives, I consider such mother-daughter plots another form of… the immigrant romance. (142)

It is a “romance” because the American-born daughter “fills multiple functions… previously linked with white romantic partners in narratives about immigrants for whom marriage and child-rearing are seen as remote and unlikely” (142). In Chu’s examples, the mother-daughter plot is a vehicle of feminist solidarity, whereby “each mother guides her daughter to create greater agency in her own life” (143). In a sense, it is another adaptation of “world of our mothers” feminism. However, this time the mother is not metaphorical or mythic, but biological.

My previous chapters have shown that in Caucasia, Bee Season, and American Woman, the emergence of female protagonists’ political subjectivities vis-à-vis their relationships to their biological fathers all depart from, or at least complicate, the role of the “mother-daughter romance” as a feminist strategy of immigrant and ethnic American women authors. My final chapter focuses on an Asian American novel that reconfigures the ethnic female narrative of patrilineal descent one step further: Ruth Ozeki’s All Over Creation (2003). While All Over Creation shares with Caucasia a biracial protagonist and with American Woman a Japanese American protagonist, Ozeki’s novel is the only one in my dissertation to center on the conflict and reconciliation between a mixed-race daughter and her white father. Ozeki’s pointed critique of agribusiness and its
sympathetic, gently satirical portrayal of the environmental activists who fight it in an Idaho potato farm town thus adds another question to the possibility of the paternal legacy of identity politics, particularly Asian American politics: can a feminist, mixed-race Asian American political subjectivity find its roots in white, patriarchal evangelicalism?

In Ozeki’s novel, Yumi Fuller is the only child born to evangelical potato farmer Lloyd and his Japanese war bride wife, Momoko “[a]fter twelve years of trying” (5). Nobody in the town pronounces her name correctly, addressing her instead as Yummy, as in “Yummy, yummy, yummy, I got love in my tummy” (5). When Yumi’s seduction as a fourteen-year old by her high school history teacher, Elliot Rhodes, leads to her impregnation and back-alley abortion, she runs away from her furious father and her hometown of Liberty Falls. Most of the novel takes place a quarter-century later, a few years after Lloyd’s ailing health and Momoko’s senility have forced him to sell their farmland to their neighbor and Yumi’s childhood friend, Cass Quinn, and her husband, Will. Unable to work as a potato farmer, Lloyd is relegated to the part-time duties of promoting his wife’s diverse seed collection in a newsletter they send to their customers. The newsletter turns out to be the perfect platform for Lloyd to articulate and spread his ecological principles through evangelical, patriarchal rhetoric. When Lloyd’s health begins to rapidly deteriorate, Cass, who acts as a part-time caretaker to the Fullers, summons Yumi home from Hawaii, where she is teaching, selling real estate, and raising three ethnically mixed children from three different fathers.

Yumi’s homecoming triggers the meeting of the novel’s political and the familial narratives, in that her return to the land of her father occurs more or less in tandem with
the discovery of Lloyd’s impassioned ecological ideology by the (white) activist group
the Seeds of Resistance, comprised of male members Geek, Y, and teenaged Frank, and
female members Lilith and teenaged Charmey, who are Y and Frankie’s partners,
respectively. *All Over Creation* pits its ardent ecological activists against the
encroachment of Cynaco, manufacturers of a genetically modified potato plant called the
NuLife.¹ As the Seeds fulfill the role of Lloyd’s surrogate children by becoming his
ideological heirs, Yumi feels increasingly alienated from their ecological politics; her
sense of distance from her father is further exacerbated by her children’s adoption of the
Seeds’ reverence for Lloyd, whose rigid and unforgiving character already made for an
uncomfortable homecoming.

The junction of the two storylines is also literally embodied in the figure of Elliot,
who returns to Liberty Falls and briefly resumes his sexual relationship with Yumi. The
novel alternates between an omniscient narrator, Yumi’s first person narrative, and
occasionally even includes the first-person narration of the earth, who addresses the
reader in the second person. The former reveals only to the reader the reason for Elliot’s
return: he has been hired by Cynaco to head its public relations effort. Yumi’s
relationship with Elliot causes a strain between her and the Seeds, who (rightfully) do not
trust his motivations; between her and her oldest child, fourteen-year old Phoenix, who is
bullied at school for having a “slut” for a mother; and between her and Cass, who, unable
to have children, eagerly takes care of Yumi’s baby when Yumi is with Elliot but harbors

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¹ Susan McHugh writes, “*All Over Creation* closely follows the commercial introduction and
unprecedented, rapid recall of Monsanto Company’s NewLeaf brand potatoes…. [T]his potato was
modified to include a gene sequence from a soil bacterium whose spore contains a protein that releases a
fatal toxin when it breaks down in the gut of the Chrysomelidae beetle family… the pest posting the
greatest threat of insect damage to US potato crops” (27).
bitter resentment towards what she perceives to be Yumi’s negligent mothering. As the narrative progresses, Lloyd becomes increasingly sick, eventually passing away while Yumi and her children are still in Liberty Falls. Shortly after his death, Charmey dies in an explosion of the Spudnik, the Seeds’ RV. The Seeds take off for Seattle, and Yumi returns to Hawaii with her children and mother.

The novel’s explicitly progressive politics and its focus on the earth as an indispensable, organic, life-giving force have garnered the attention of scholars of “[e]nvironmentally oriented literary and cultural studies, or ecocriticism for short” (Heise 382). Furthermore, its interweaving of these political concerns with a paternal narrative and a female Japanese American subject echo Susan Choi’s novel, American Woman, published the same year. As I discussed in my third chapter, American Woman raises but ultimately rejects the possibility of a 1970s radical “third world woman” label as the foundation of female Japanese American political subjectivity. In its stead, or at least in its absence, the novel concludes by ambiguously suggesting another possibility for the roots of Jenny Shimada’s political identity: her return to her father’s traumatic, male Japanese American internment past, a past that is mapped onto the stark desert landscape into which she follows him in the novel’s closing image. Jenny’s return to her father’s internment history—her mother dies in childbirth and is rarely mentioned—thus complicates Chu’s assessment that through the mother-daughter romance, “Asian

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2 For a historical account of the emergence of ecocriticism as a literary field, see Lawrence Buell’s The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination (2005). Buell divides ecocriticism into two waves. For first-wave ecocriticism, “the environment” meant the natural environment, and ecocriticism was initially understood to be synchronous with the aims of earthcare (21). In contrast, second-wave ecocriticism has tended to “question organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism” (22), because it sees the line between urban and “natural” landscapes as increasingly blurred (22).
American women have written back” (20) against “an explicitly masculinized model of Asian American subjectivity” (5). Quite the contrary: having worked through and exhausted white radical models, Jenny ends up following her father’s model of Japanese American subjectivity.

All Over Creation’s father-daughter narrative, then, destabilizes this way of reading Asian American women’s writing even further. For while Ozeki’s novel also stages a Japanese American woman’s return to the “cold, high desert” (73) that is her paternal inheritance, this desert is not the site of a Japanese American father’s discriminatory trauma, but that of a white father’s familial and political sovereignty: the potato fields that anchor his ecological, evangelical politics.3 Unlike the internment story in American Woman, Black Nationalism in Caucasia, or Kabbalah in Bee Season, the ecological and ethnocentric, patriarchal values that Lloyd upholds have nothing to say about Yumi’s ethnic ancestry and are entirely removed from a recognizably Japanese tradition. And contrary to the ecofeminist impulse that guides so many responses to Ozeki’s fiction,4 Lloyd’s politics are not especially feminist, either; his pro-life ideals are explicitly patriarchal and contingent on a rather conventional pairing of metaphors, the

3 The correlation between Lloyd’s evangelical Christian beliefs and his militant environmentalism is surprising, given that these two ideologies are often taken to be oppositional. In fact, Y initially rejects the idea of Lloyd as their guru, pointing out, “Dude’s a major Christian. All this God shit is way too heavy for me.” (He makes this comment while holding “Virabhadrasana, lunging forward on one leg and raising his arms overhead into a V,” no less.) Geek, however, believes that this paradox is what makes Lloyd such a perfect icon for their cause: “But that’s the beauty of it! Don’t you see how amazing this is? He’s an icon! Totally salt of the earth. The American farmer making a lonely stand” (106).

4 Ursula Heise identifies ecofeminism has a movement that “linked environmentalism with feminist theory through its emphasis on parallels between the oppression and exploitation of women and that of the natural world” (384). Since the movement’s emergence in the late 1990s, many literary critics have attempted to equate the ecologically-oriented plots of fictional works like All Over Creation with an ecofeminist agenda. See, for example, Rachel Stein, who argues that All Over Creation reflects and critiques “global neocolonial power relations, which are reinforced when transnational, global North corporations seize control of the sexual and reproductive capacities of plants and women” (177).
female body as the stationary, nurturing earth, and the male body as the mobile, propagating seed.

Why then, does Ozeki choose to rewrite the ethnic father-daughter narrative within an ecologically conscious plot that seems unsuited to engage Japanese American, female political identity? Even without the character of Lloyd to complicate the assumed progressivism of the environmental justice plot, her decision would already be striking in light of the lack of engagement with issues of race and ethnicity in environmental criticism. In 2005, Lawrence Buell claimed that “ecocritics are still only starting to explore minority canons” and that “minority critics are still very few in number,” because “minority scholars with strong environmental interests of any sort still seem self-conscious of being thought eccentric by their communities” (118). Robert T. Hayashi writes from a similar perspective in “Beyond Walden Pond: Asian American Literature and the Limits of Ecocriticism” (2007). His essay faults ecocriticism’s limited canon of authors—generally confined to figures like Henry Thoreau and Willa Cather—and its dependence on a transcendentalist concept of “nature” as a de facto definition of the environment (58) for discouraging Asian American participation in the field. He urges ecocritics to take up issues that are mainstays of Asian American literature, like immigration, acculturation, and migrant labor, which may not seem obvious points of inquiry from an ecocritical perspective (61). The title of his essay, a reference to the first paradigmatic example of American “nature writing” that to this day positions Thoreau as the “great white father” of American ecocriticism, also suggests the need for Asian American critics and writers to look outside the field’s normative, white demarcations in
order to depict and reveal the ways in which race and class have shaped Americans’ interactions with the environment.⁵

Seen in this context, Ozeki’s decision to make Yumi’s white father her entry point into the politics of ecological justice appears regressive: she implies not that Asian American writing should go “beyond” Walden Pond, but that it should go back to Walden Pond. This position raises a series of pertinent questions: Can environmental politics, even those that are grounded in white, patriarchal norms, be the means by which a Japanese American female subject articulates a positive, empowered political subjectivity? Or does Ozeki’s novel demonstrate that such empowerment must come at the cost of deracination because these politics can only enact multicultural inclusivity through “post race” blindness to racial difference? This chapter argues that All Over Creation locates the answer somewhere in between these two poles. That is, the centrality of women and women of color to the ecological justice project and the biraciality of this Asian American woman novelist and her protagonist demonstrate that the white, patriarchal past is not impermeable to feminist and multicultural influences and adaptations. As the first section of this chapter will discuss, this possibility is made clear in both the depiction of the Fuller family as a microcosm of the multicultural potential—both social and botanical—of Idaho’s agricultural landscape, and the positive and

⁵ Hayashi’s critique by no means represents a monolithic stance within ethnic studies, however. For example, only two years after his essay was published, the editors of MELUS’s special issue on ethnicity and ecocriticism intimate that this position has become increasingly moot: “As of 2008,” they narrate, “the engagement with questions of ethnicity and the natural world was becoming almost routine” (Abramson and Slovic 11). In fact, they argue, the discipline’s identification “of multicultural authors as contributing to all aspects of environmental experience” comprises a “new ‘third wave’ in the ecocritical movement” (11).
influential roles of the adult Lilith and the pregnant teenager Charmey in the Seeds of Resistance.

However, as the second section will address, the reliance of Lloyd and the Seeds’ ecological politics on patriarchal and even white supremacist tropes of the gendered body limit their potential to serve as the foundation of Asian American female subjectivity and make a critique of them important. The final section will then discuss why Ozeki’s “return” to Walden Pond, despite its obvious problems, is ultimately a necessary intervention in both Asian American women’s writing and in Asian American paradigms of political subjectivity. Given that at the end of *All Over Creation*, Yumi and her family part ways with the Seeds and return to Hawaii, the novel suggests that although their activism is not completely incompatible with a female Asian or mixed-race identity, neither is it a perfect fit. Instead, Yumi’s return to Hawaii *after* her initial return to Idaho gestures towards the possibility of a new kind of mixed-race, Japanese American political subjectivity: one that the novel cannot quite see, but that exists in a state of deferral, in an open-ended, imagined utopia.

II. Planting Eggs: The Promise of the Ecological Justice Narrative

In its generally positive, sympathetic portrayal of the Seeds and their mission, *All Over Creation* invites the reader to take seriously the progressive politics of the novel’s ecological justice narrative, and, at the same time, offers the possibility of an alternative political identity to one determined exclusively by race-based experience: a politics that would allow mixed-race subjects to affiliate with a philosophy that is primarily the domain of white people, and white men in particular. *All Over Creation* presents the
environmental justice narrative as both positive in and of itself and as the potential basis of Japanese American and mixed-race political identity through the centrality of the symbolic and material work of the novel’s female characters.

In the novel, the Fuller family functions as a microcosm of both plant and cultural diversity. Momoko serves an indispensable role in the diversifying aspect of this allegory. While the novel associates Lloyd with the monoculture of potatoes, it connects Momoko to botanical and cultural variety; in particular, her ecological output is intrinsically tied to her Japaneseness. This correlation is obvious from the novel’s opening passage: “It starts with the earth,” the novel begins. “Imagine the planet like a split peach, whose pit forms the core, whose flesh its mantle, and whose fuzzy skin its crust” (3). As peach in Japanese is momo, this metaphor privileges the positive relationship of Momoko, and by extension that of women of color, to the earth. The union of Lloyd and Momoko, the only one of its kind in Liberty Falls, seems an odd social experiment between a tall white man and a doll-like Japanese woman who

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6 According to Ursula Heise, this allegory relies on an “understanding of ecosystems and human social systems as analogous” (394). The analogy enables what she calls the “ecological family romance,” “a highly allegorical multicultural family made up of parents from different cultural and/or national backgrounds and children who sometimes are and sometimes are not genetically related to them” (389), to “function as narrative solutions to environmental problems” (394). As part of her criticism writ large of ecocriticism’s blindness to the nuances of the transnational subject, Heise argues that “the novel’s recurrent equations between human and plants” relies on a problematic “‘natural’ affinity” between multicultural and environmental politics (399).

7 Ozeki is no doubt aware of the Japanese folk tale of Momotaro, in which a childless, elderly couple raises a baby boy whom they discover in a giant peach, and its prominence in Japanese and Japanese American literature. See, for example, John Okada’s No-No Boy (1957) and Joy Kogawa’s Obasan (1981), novels about the aftermath of the internment of Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians, respectively. All Over Creation tells us only that Lloyd brought Momoko back from Japan after the war, and not that Momoko ever suffers from overt prejudice. Nevertheless, the connection of the peach to narratives of the internment reminds the reader that the Momotaro legend, while “emphatically a story about life” that celebrates “fertility, fruitfulness, and eroticism” (Sato 246), also casts the long shadow of a history of systemic discrimination over the novel. This background suggests that the “oppositionality” (Heise 400) that Momoko represents may not just be to her husband’s monoculturalist tendencies or to agribusiness, but also to a more severe, and more familiar, legacy of racist trauma. Furthermore, through the peach imagery, Ozeki is recognizing a Japanese American ethnic tradition of which most of her characters, including Yumi, seem ignorant.
resembled “the son he never had” (5); perhaps unsurprisingly, their mixed-race offspring felt like “a random fruit in a field of genetically identical potatoes.” Growing up, Yumi “preferred rice, a taste I inherited from my mother, Momoko, and which, in a state of spuds, was tantamount to treason” (4). Momoko’s preparation of rice balls for her daughter’s lunch demonstrates fealty to her own cultural origins at the same time that it introduces another crop into the otherwise agriculturally monotonous Liberty Falls.

Utilizing the “oppositionality of the multicultural and transnational subject” (Heise 400), Momoko’s ethnic and gendered specificity offers an internal balance to the male- and ethnocentric aspects of Lloyd’s ideology and thereby makes a positive, proactive relationship to agriculture and gardening more conducive to adoption by the novel’s mixed-race characters. Perhaps the most salient metaphor for Momoko’s indispensability in the small-scale ecosystem of the Fuller family is her garden, full of “varieties of fruits and flowers that no one had ever seen before in Power County…. People drove for miles to see her Oriental ornamentals and Asian creepers” (5). Momoko’s garden and seeds are notable both for their diversity and their exoticism, just as Momoko herself embodies racial difference and biologically reproduces a racially heterogeneous child (who in turn procreates with three men, each with a different racial identity). Yumi recalls that Lloyd “had always been a bit disparaging of my mother’s garden. It wasn’t that he disapproved of seeds per se, but he was a large-scale potato farmer, a monoculturalist, so you can imagine how nervous all that diversity must have made him” (111). Far from “disapproving” of seeds, Lloyd frequently latches onto their symbolism as the divine product of a male deity, telling his followers, “Our seeds contain our beliefs. That’s why we urge you to continue to save them and propagate them… in
accordance with God’s plan…. In this way we… fulfill His design” (302). However, the “Oriental” and “non-native” seeds that Momoko collects and sells for “seed money” and the garden she tends fulfill the designs of a woman independently propagating and working the earth.

After Yumi leaves home to escape Lloyd’s rage over her abortion, Momoko only increases the diversity of her garden: “Momoko’s garden began to change. She began to branch out, and soon there was an extravagance of blooms, in sizes and colors and shapes Lloyd had never seen” (111). Because of Lloyd’s refusal to find Yumi and bring her home, Momoko “more or less stopped speaking to him” and moved into Yumi’s bedroom, implicitly siding with her cast out daughter and opposing her husband’s rigid pro-life, sexist stance. But “Under his window, her garden grew” (112), defying him, his unforgiving rejection of their daughter, and his dismissal of her biologically diverse garden. Furthermore, when Lloyd’s heart problems cause him to become bedridden and leave him no choice but to sell his family’s acres to Cass and Will Quinn, Momoko’s “seed money” becomes their primary source of income.

Upon her return to Liberty Falls as an adult, whenever Yumi comes across her mother in her garden, Momoko is speaking to her seedlings in Japanese, a language that her daughter, but not her husband, understands. Most important, Yumi is reunited with her mother in Momoko’s garden the night that her mother’s Japanese encouragement to her seedlings, in a moment of unspoken, biological connection, “moved [her] like a heartbeat” (331). It is in this conversation that Momoko, who “usually remembered she had a daughter and that daughter had run away, but only rarely… connect[ed] that girl” with Yumi (332), recognizes her daughter: “Yumi-chan?” she asks, “her eyes… wide and
confused as she searched my face.” In response, Yumi’s “heart leaped. It had been weeks since she’d called me by my name” (333). Yumi discovers that Lloyd did not ignore all the letters she had written him in her exile, as she previously believed, but that Momoko, out of concern for her husband’s health, never showed them to him. Instead, she sent her daughter “all [her] seed money” (333). Thus, by maintaining her own collection of seeds, Momoko was able to circumvent Lloyd’s authority and support and stay in contact with her daughter all the years that Yumi was away.

Here, contained within the story of Yumi’s return to her father’s land, is a lingering mother-daughter romance, and it takes place, quite literally, in the “mothers’ gardens” of which Alice Walker wrote in the 1970s. Yumi’s connection with her mother in Momoko’s garden offers another reason why the ecological justice narrative, despite having Lloyd and other white men as it auxiliary head, has the potential to be hospitable politics for her mixed-race identity. Yumi mostly associates evangelical ideology with her father—which makes sense, given that he is the one who publishes their monthly newsletter and enforces his rigid morals. But Lloyd would not be able to do the former at all if it not for Momoko, tending the diverse seeds in her garden and financially supporting him. Momoko also brings botanical diversity to a town in which she herself is a singular racial species. In other words, Chu’s mother-daughter romance is not erased here—but it makes possible the father-daughter “romance” that becomes the central conflict of the novel.

The peach tree in the Fullers’ front yard is another botanical symbol of Momoko’s diversifying, subversive influence, in particular on her female grandchild. When Will tells Cass that he saw the Seeds of Resistance “doing something weird under that damn
peach tree. They had Yummy’s girl with them, singing and dancing and banging on drums like heathens” (274), his classification of the Seeds and Yumi’s daughter, Ocean, as “heathens” and his reference to “that damn peach tree” demonstrate his simplistic, narrow-minded prejudice that the activists are un-Christian outsiders disruptive to the patriarchal order. What is particularly significant in his description, however, is Ocean’s inclusion by the Seeds under the peach tree. Thus Momoko’s tree is the generative site of her granddaughter’s indoctrination into the environmental justice narrative. The political significance of Momoko’s peach tree is further reinforced after the Seeds organize a rally that leads to their arrest and to another of Lloyd’s strokes. Momoko “had stopped eating meals with us…. Instead she bought a small Tupperware container of food outside with her and ate it with chopsticks under the peach tree” (321). By eating in the outdoors under her namesake tree, Momoko conducts her own private act of resistance against the agribusiness forces that threaten the Seeds and Lloyd’s efforts; she is thus indirectly aligning herself and her peach tree with their activism. Parallel to her speaking to her seedlings only in Japanese, her use of Japanese utensils claims this gesture of political affiliation and support as specifically Japanese.

Momoko’s subtle ideological influence on her granddaughter, Ocean, is particularly significant given that overtly, at least, *Lloyd* has the stronger political pull over his grandchildren. In light of the connection between grandmother and granddaughter, Lloyd’s longstanding illness and eventual death signal an important shift in the novel from a single white patriarch’s monarchic reign over the ecological justice storyline to the possibility of its adoption by a more pluralistic, racially diverse matriarchy. At Lloyd’s burial, “people stepped forward and took turns planting a few
seeds of their own in the newly turned soil” (372), a detail that corresponds to the parallel
the novel evokes between the male body and plant seeds. However, when it is Ocean’s
turn, she announces, “I didn’t bring a seed, but I brought an egg… and I know they don’t
grow this way, but Grandpa likes eggs, so I’m gonna plant it anyway” (373). Ocean’s gift
of an egg is especially significant because she also gave her grandfather an egg on his
deathbed, a gesture that causes Lloyd to recognize her as a potential political heir:

“We’re late,” Ocean announced. “Because of this!” She reached
into her pocket and, with greatly exaggerated care, drew out a very small egg…. She took his hand and opened it, then slipped the little brown egg
onto his hardened palm, curling his stiff fingers around it.
He brought the thing up close to his face and studied it, blinking
his watery eyes like he’d never seen such a marvelous egg before.
“My!” he whispered. Then he looked at his granddaughter like
he’d never seen such a marvelous child before either. (355)

Ocean’s action in this scene, contrasted to Lloyd’s passivity—he is waiting for her, she
curls his hand around her gift—foregrounds her robustness and vitality and opposes them
to his weakness. In addition, his response, “My!” and his look of wonder at his
granddaughter causes Yumi to feel “a quick, sharp pang” of jealousy.  

8 Yumi’s acute feelings of jealousy towards her daughter and her sobbed confession, “I love you, Daddy,” as Lloyd is dying (367), exemplify the novel’s rhetoric of sentimentalism, which marks an aesthetic
departure from the other chapters in its lack of explicit focus on affect as physiology. While sentimentalism
is not a widely explored trope in Asian American letters, All Over Creation’s version fits with an earlier
affective model of mixed-race characters in the African American literary tradition. In books like
Chestnutt’s The Marrow of Tradition and Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy, mixed-race characters are able to
triumph over racial discrimination by appealing to personal, sentimental dimensions of human interaction,
conduct, and behavior. In Iola Leroy, the sentimental “implication… is that textual representation can effect
social change, and… that social change will happen as readers come to experience the appropriate moral
response through sympathetic identification with literary characters” (Robison 433). All Over Creation’s
sentimentalism, therefore, emphasizes the novel’s concerns with the mixed-ness of the protagonist’s racial
identity over the politics of a recognizably Japanese American narrative.
Lloyd’s sentimentality in this scene, his exclamation of “My!”, is deeply evocative for Yumi. As a
girl, Yumi would also make Lloyd presents, and “would wait, so excited, for him to come home from the
fields before my clay cracked or my noodles came unstuck…. ‘My, my, my,’ he’d say, turning the object
over in his hands” (136). A few pages after this interaction with Ocean, in response to Yumi’s declaration
of her love, Lloyd utters his final words to his daughter: “My, my, my…” (367). The long awaited
acknowledgement that she is his daughter causes her to crumple in relief, a gesture which is almost swoon-
like in the loss of Yumi’s control over her own body.

8
name and an upbringing he does not approve of, Lloyd claims Ocean as his ideological heir. In the context of his Christian fundamentalism, it would seem he is also claiming her as his religious heir. At the same time, however, Ocean will repeat this legacy with a difference: her (female) egg replaces the (male) seed as the novel’s dominant symbol of propagation and reproduction.

Like her grandmother, Ocean has a name that is fraught with symbolism. At first Lloyd does not approve of Ocean’s name, or for that matter, that of Yumi’s older son, Phoenix, gruffly responding, “What kind of names are those?” when Yumi introduces them to him (73). But in addition to Ocean’s ability to win Lloyd’s approval and open affection when Yumi could not, Ocean’s name, with its hippy overtones, points to her character’s compatibility with the politics of the Seeds of Resistance, themselves a relic of 60s activism, right down to the French fry oil-powered RV in which they live and travel. The word “ocean” also connotes vast expanse and possibility, in contrast to the limited geography of waterfalls, as in Liberty Falls. The relationship between the names of this young mixed-race girl and that of the monoculturalist Idaho town suggest Ocean’s promise as the harbinger of true “liberty” to Liberty Falls—the advent of liberal multiculturalism, whose future is placed in her young hands.

In addition to her grandmother, Ocean has female ecological role models in the Seeds, who offer their own positive version of feminism that complicates Lloyd’s reverence for the male deity. “The wondrous thing about nature, her gift to us, is her wanton promiscuity. She reproduces herself with abandon” (268), the Seeds’ leader, Geek, tells Yumi, casting nature as a loose woman rather than a strident male God. Not only is diversity positive, but it is brought about by sexual licentiousness and
experimentation. Given that Geek’s statement could be about Yumi herself, it suggests the adaptability of the Seeds’ philosophy to her own sexual history. Seemingly unable to avoid getting pregnant, and yet frequently accused by moralistic Lloyd and envious Cass of being careless for not attending to her children as consistently as they believe a mother (but not a father) should, Yumi and her body are a parody of the “narrative tradition” whereby “humanlike plants, along with plant-human hybrids are figured as noxious female forces weeded out by rational men” (McHugh 45). In Yumi, the “mother nature” paradigm has gone wild, resulting in sexual excess and negligent mothering. Like Momoko’s diverse, “exotic” garden, Yumi’s sexual behavior—and by extension the ecological philosophy that privileges feminized botanical promiscuity—challenges Lloyd’s ideals of the male “divine farmer.”

The novel also makes this philosophy credible by satirizing the gendered clichés upon which it relies, especially through Lilith’s online “Garden of Earthly Delights” and its membership site, the “Secret Garden,” in which Lilith poses naked with organic produce. While her co-option of the Garden of Eden and the Lilith of Jewish folklore, whom God created alongside Adam but replaced with Eve when Lilith refused to be a subservient wife, are obvious counters to Lloyd’s Christian evangelism, the gardens’ unequivocally capitalist function suggests the humorous edge with which we are meant to read Lilith’s espousal of “mother nature” discourse, such as “Earth is Life! Love Your Mother!” (185). “We take Visa, MasterCard, American Express…. We’re raking in the

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9 Yumi’s sexuality and relationship with Elliot dismantles Lloyd’s righteous, patriarchal rhetoric on another level as well. As a teacher who implants lofty idealism and his biological seed in his underage student, only to quickly abandon both, Elliot’s character demonstrates that many men are in fact morally unequipped to emulate the “divine author” and be the responsible, masculine farmers (or fathers) upon which the division of his gendered earth metaphors relies.
“dough,” the Seeds’ leader, Geek, explains to Frank (152). At the same time that the novel presents Lilith’s gardens with a tongue-in-cheek tone, however, they are the Seeds’ only source of reliable income, much like Momoko’s garden for Lloyd. Charmey contradicts Geek’s insinuation that Lilith naively believes that the site’s male frequenters share her “feminist sentiment”: “‘She is not stupid. Except somebody must work and make the money, no?’ She thrust the leaflet at Frankie and left them standing there” (152).

Charmey tartly reminds the men that the money from Lilith’s gardens is what allows the Seeds to mount their activist demonstrations. For both Lloyd and the Seeds, women’s labor makes the propagation of their politics financially possible.

As a fertile, pregnant “foreigner”—she is from Montreal, and throughout the novel speaks English peppered with French—Charmey embodies the “fecundity, the spontaneous regeneration of her procreative force” (186) that Lilith’s goddess-centered gardens espouse and upon which the Seeds financially rely. Charmey uses her “procreative force” to seduce virginal, bewildered Frank and become pregnant. While she and Lilith eagerly watch hours of images of women giving birth on the internet, “Frankie gulped and nodded, but his mind was screaming” (180). Even after the baby is born, Frank harbors feelings of jealousy for the “blind, pouting dwarf who’d snuck onto the scene behind his back” (345) and absorbs all of Charmey’s attention. Charmey takes the lead in the naming of their daughter as well. She chooses Tibet, an Asian country that for her symbolizes “people who have lost their homeland” (346). Her decisions enable one of the two alternative family formations with which the novel closes. When Charmey dies in an explosion of the Spudnik, Frank decides to leave Tibet with the childless Cass and Will, thus resolving Cass’s loneliness. Although the Seeds leave Liberty Falls for Seattle
at the end of the novel, a piece of their female “fecundity” stays behind to bring new, feminist, bi-national life to the otherwise monoculturalist landscape.

III. The Limits and Future of Ecological Justice

As the previous section discussed, *All Over Creation* largely presents its ecological justice narrative in an affirmative light. In particular, through positive gendered connotations of the earth, it suggests the possibility that the convergence of the political and the paternal narratives can offer Yumi, Momoko, and their mixed-race offspring the grounds for political identity by affiliation with the activism of the white Seeds, led by the male Geek. However, as this section will argue, the reliance of the novel’s ecological storyline and Lloyd’s ideology on reductive metaphors of the human body means that despite its ambitions towards post-race inclusivity, the white, political legacy cannot be truly inclusive of women and people of color. As a result, the narrative of Japanese American and mixed-race identity is unable to fully cohere with the environmental activism of Lloyd and the Seeds; and the latter cannot transform the racially homogenous potato country of Idaho specifically, or the project of environmental activism more generally, into a lasting identititarian framework for Japanese/American political agency.

Lloyd’s ideology is most explicitly problematic because it confines women to a particular social and biological role; the most searing example of this narrowness is his Christian fundamentalist, pro-life beliefs, which are repeatedly emphasized by the novel’s form and structure. Above, I briefly quoted the beginning of the novel, which refers to the earth as a peach. I argued that this opening, by referring indirectly to Momoko, alludes to
the important role of women in cultivating and planting seeds. However, this opening also makes overt the novel’s patriarchal, Biblical frame and establishes a dynamic that positions fathers as mobile propagators, like the seeds they spread, and mothers as inert dependents, like the earth with which they are associated. Although Momoko is referred to in the opening passage, she is not explicitly identified; instead, the first human name in the novel is that of the male farmer, “my father, Lloyd Fuller,” no doubt a reference to the divine “Father.” Playing on the multiple meanings of the title’s “creation”—divine, plant, human procreation—the first chapter is called “in the beginning,” alluding to the opening words of Genesis, in which “God created heaven and earth.” Furthermore, the novel itself is divided into seven sections, mirroring the seven days of the week in which God created the world.

The most obvious correlation between the sanctity of the untainted earth and that of the mother’s body is captured in the pro-life discourse that is at the heart of Lloyd’s radical environmentalism. In the newsletter that convinces Geek that the Seeds have found “the one!” (106), Lloyd preaches, “God made Man in His Own Image…. We are not gods…. Beware of the ungodly chimera they manufacture in their laboratories!” (105). Despite their initial hesitation about Lloyd’s evangelism, the Seeds soon embrace wholesale Lloyd’s patriarchal, Christian dichotomy between a divine male author raising life from the ground and the godless imposters who seek to desecrate His “very Act of Creation” (105). When Yumi accuses Geek of brainwashing Lloyd with alarming information about genetically modified crops, Lloyd explodes,

“This is not about politics. This is about life!”

My face was burning. “Oh, for God’s sake, Dad. It’s just plants.”

Geek said, “Plants have a right to life, too.”
And then I lost it. I looked at Geek, and then at Lloyd, and then back again. The two of them—the young radical environmentalist and the old fundamentalist farmer—made a ridiculous alliance, and I started to laugh. “Oh, wow! That’s the kind of pro-life bullshit that drove me out of here in the first place.”

Lloyd brought his fist down on the arm of the chair. “A life is a life!... It is God’s gift! How could you be so careless?” (267)

Lloyd’s Christian fundamentalism lumps human pregnancy and potatoes under the morally unassailable banner of God’s gift of “life”; for him, Yumi’s abortion of her fetus and a scientist’s genetic engineering of plants are equally unforgiveable sins. Yumi’s realization that this belief is the basis for the white, male partnership against her causes her to walk out of the house, the stronghold of Lloyd’s politics and of the activists who gather there to worship him.

Lloyd’s reverence for the patriarchal God-farmer who “holds the only patent!... is the Engineer Supreme! And… has given up His seed into the public domain!” (302) further stresses Yumi’s position as the disobedient mixed-race daughter cast out of her white father’s garden paradise because of her desecration of her female body’s duty to nurture human life. Lloyd’s language of “His seed” emphasizes the gender make-up and bias of the Seeds of Resistance; unlike Yumi, Geek, Frank and Y are able to easily form an alliance with Lloyd because they are at least all white men. Her feelings of exclusion from the ideology that drives their activism continue until Lloyd’s last moments. The day before his death, when Lloyd gazes at the Seeds after they convince him to give up his and Momoko’s seeds for “adoption,” Yumi again “made my exit then, at that tender moment when the perpetuity of life itself was being affirmed. I could feel my face burning. Maybe it was the way Lloyd gazed at the Seeds, so pleased with them, that made me feel so excluded” (358). Lloyd’s recognition and approval of the environmental work
of the Seeds is signaled by his affirmation of “life”; by contrast, so long as Yumi refuses to recognize the sanctity of that “gift,” she will be never be recognized as an heir to Lloyd’s political program, even if he loves her as his daughter.

The Seeds’ adoption of the Lloyd’s conservative, anti-feminist position is perhaps unsurprising given the history of misogyny among the activist groups of the 1960s that clearly serve as a model for the contemporary Seeds. A closer examination of the positive roles for women in the Seeds further underscores these limits. Lilith and Charmey are influential insofar as they fulfill a proscriptive, “earth mother” role: Lilith is “sexy mother nature,” and Charmey is literally a mother. But it clear in all the Seeds internal decisions and in their interactions with others that the male Geek is their public face and leader.

Furthermore, while the novel satirizes “mother nature” discourse and its patriarchal, Biblical overtones through representations of exaggerated, pointedly un-divine sexuality, the nodes of satire also expose the white supremacist aspects of Lloyd’s ideology and its inability to account for racial difference. As girls, Yumi and Cass took part in Liberty Falls Elementary School’s Thanksgiving “Pilgrims’ Pageant” every year, and “even in first grade, when everybody else in their class was still playing gravy,” Yumi was typecast as the “Indian princess” (7).

“Noble Pilgrims,” Princess Yummy used to say, “my people and I welcome you to our land…. Pray, take our seeds and plant them—”

It wasn’t like they didn’t have real Indians in school. They did. But back then even the Shoshone kids didn’t seem to mind, or maybe they just

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10 See for example Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978); Robin Morgan’s critique of sexism in the New Left, “Goodbye to All That” (1970); essays on *El Movimiento*, the Chicano social protest movement of the 1960s and 70s in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (1997); and Devon A. Mihesuah’s “Commonality and Difference: American Indian Woman and History” (2002).
knew better than to care. Year after year Yummy’s lines stayed the same, while slowly she grew into her role. Tall and slim, wearing love beads, a buckskin miniskirt, and a headband with a jaunty hawk feather stuck in the back—by the time she entered ninth grade, Yummy made a luscious ambassador. (7-8)

At first glance, the satirical thrust of this “Indian princess” narrative seems familiar. For one thing, Indian bodies, like those of women, can turn a monetary or moral profit for either side of the agricultural battle. Even Elliot considers getting a Shoshone spokesperson to endorse NuLife: “Wisdom. Heritage. Indians always made for positive imaging” (188). For another, the objectionable nature of Yumi’s casting as the tokenized, gendered “other” who willingly presents her people’s land, and by extension, her body, for the consumption of the white, male, “noble Pilgrims”—themselves proxies for the novel’s white men—is ironized by the suggested explanation for her unchanging role: the sexualized transformation of her costume to “love beads” and “a buckskin miniskirt.” It cannot escape the reader’s notice that Yumi’s development into a “luscious ambassador” occurs the same year that Elliot Rhodes becomes her history teacher.

Unsurprisingly, Elliot is both repulsed and deeply turned on by the pageant: “It’s revisionist bullshit! It was genocide—we stole their land, and then we exterminated them…. Don’t you know anything about the Shoshone and the Bannock who’ve lived on this land for thousands of years, before there was even an Idaho?” he shouts (22). “Then he stopped… and before you knew it, he had pinned you in his arms against the desk, and he was kissing you, hard” (22-23). Elliot of course isn’t telling Yumi something she doesn’t know—she is aware of her Shoshone classmates—but his self-righteous rant underscores the irony with which he assumes the role of the insatiable, not-so “noble Pilgrim.” Even after Yumi corrects his mispronunciation of her name, Elliot responds by
“nibbling [her] neck” and whispering “You’ll always be yummy to me” (28). Thus the “Indian princess” passages contribute to the parodies of Yumi’s racialized commodification of her own body and Elliot’s racist, predatory sexual appetite.

The historical erasure of Native Americans by the problematic casting of a half-Japanese girl in the stereotypically self-effacing, hypersexualized Pocahontas role reinforces the privileged position of Lloyd’s claim that “our plants are as immigrant as we are” (67), which itself elides the Native American perspective on the introduction of “non-native” species, both botanical and human, to the New World (Heise 403). As a result, the satirical nature of the “Indian princess” storyline is unable to fully subvert the “noble pilgrims” who most appreciate Yumi in her submissive role, in particular her white father. When at the beginning of the novel, Cass searches for traces of Yumi in her parents’ house so that she can contact her, the only “ornament” she finds in Yumi’s childhood bedroom is a “small framed photograph, in black and white, of a solemn Indian princess standing in front of the screen door of the farmhouse, hand in hand with Lloyd. Noble Pilgrim. The tip of her feather barely reached his hipbone” (17). It seems significant that this is the object that Yumi leaves behind, as if that era when she was her father’s tiny, diminutive, obedient “Indian princess” has no place on her rebellious, independent journey. Perhaps more to the point, though, Momoko has been sleeping in Yumi’s bedroom; therefore, she is likely the one who put that photograph there. And at

11 As I will discuss in the next section, the references to indigenous peoples and species also call to mind the problems with the novel’s romanticization of Hawaii as an Asian American, mixed-race paradise free of racial and gendered strife.

12 The allusion to The Pilgrim’s Progress makes the allegorical aspects of the characters’ name all the more noticeable. As Yumi responds when her father defensively explains to his grandchildren that his name “doesn’t mean anything” because it’s a “proper name” (73), Lloyd means “gray-haired…. In Welsh. Or something” (74). Lloyd is named for the old, wise, (white) man that he is. The aural similarities between “Elliot” and “Lloyd” intimate their common role as Yumi’s “noble pilgrims.”
the end of the novel, in preparation for Hawaii, Momoko packs only some clothes “and
the framed photograph of Lloyd standing next to a tiny Indian princess whose feather
barely reached his belt buckle” (414). The photo follows Yumi back to Hawaii, but not
by her choice; it is transported by Momoko, who also “barely [came] up to his buckle”
(5), as if mother and daughter are, in Lloyd’s eyes, replicas of each other’s tiny, foreign
selves. Part of Yumi’s difficulty problem with the “return” to her father’s lineage, then, is
that she is unable to dictate the political terms of her stay or her departure. If she wants to
come back to Idaho and retrieve her usable white past, she must also grapple with his
problematic racial and gendered politics, especially since they follow her back to Hawaii,
a place she assumes is free of them.

Perhaps the novel’s most pointed evidence that the ecological justice narrative
cannot account for racial difference is the shadow of another group of ethnic outsiders:
migrant Mexican workers. As with the Shoshone, All Over Creation’s few, brief
references to Mexicans indicate the presence of other non-white figures in Liberty Falls
and indicate the characters’ awareness of racial difference, if not much concern about its
material consequences. Although Mexican labor is no doubt essential to the potato
industry, neither Lloyd nor the Seeds ever express any awareness of the migrant workers’
employment conditions or their political interests. In this way, the novel reflects Heise’s
critique of ecocritical discourse writ large: that it seeks to recuperate “the oppositional
stance associated with the transnational subject” (383) without fully exploring
transnationalism’s “other, more economic disguises” (400). That is, the migrant Mexican
workers are also transnational subjects, but they have no place in the novel’s ecological
justice story and appear only four times.
Yumi’s two brief references to Mexicans display little consideration of class difference, specifically of the racialized hierarchy that aligns her social experiences more closely with that of the white characters than with those of the Mexican migrant workers. The first appearance occurs in a passage describing Yumi and Cass’s furtive smoking habits as teenagers. They smoked at the crossroads because the sight of faraway cars gave them “[p]lenty of time to stub out a butt and flick it into the field, unless it was a truckload of Mexican farmhands, in which case you usually didn’t bother” (8), the implication being that Mexican farmhands have no authority to enforce rules. The second reference to these same farmhands serves to underscore, by way of comparison, their degraded position on the Idaho farms:

Adjunct teachers are the professional equivalent of the migrant Mexican farm laborers hired during harvest. If you can score a good contract at the same farm every year, where the farmer pays on time and doesn’t cheat or abuse you, then it’s in your best interest to show up consistently from year to year. Neither job gives you health insurance or benefits. (172)

Yumi, herself an adjunct instructor, mentions the Mexicans so as to give an example of another kind of migrant worker, rather than to call attention to the Mexicans’ particular condition. Her ignorance of the obvious class divides comes across as somewhat callous; if Yumi, the only mixed-race adult in Liberty Falls, is unable to acknowledge the interconnectedness of identities like race and class, what hope is there for the Seeds to make such observations? Nonetheless, the comparison she draws between the Mexicans and herself, however limited, implies the possibility of interracial solidarity that is nowhere else developed in the novel. That is, if the Seeds are successful in persuading Yumi’s children to join their cause, it is certainly not on the basis of their racial difference, but in spite of it. In the spirit of post-race thinking, their environmental
activist practice offers Phoenix and Ocean the possibility of a political identity without race-based identity politics.

And in another reference, Elliot, en route to Liberty Falls, visits a local restaurant he remembers as a diner, only to discover that now “it was called Gringo’s…. it was staffed by a Mexican teenager in a stained peasant blouse, and the two-egg breakfast special had been replaced by huevos rancheros” (188). This example implies that something has changed in the Mexicans’ condition since Yumi’s adolescence; no longer solely at the mercy of farmers, they have enough financial security, as well as the customers, to sustain their own business. However, if some Mexicans have experienced a change in fortune, none of the named characters seem cognizant of this shift or its potential relevance in their ecological justice campaign. Even for Yumi, they are still significant only as a go-to example of abused employees.

The last appearance of Mexicans in the novel, however, suggests that for most of them, neither class status nor participation in the ecological justice narrative has changed much over twenty-five years. Shortly before their final departure for Seattle, the Seeds work for Will Quinn to pay him back for the damage they did to his crops during their protest and to save up money for a new Winnebago. After several weeks of harvest, “once the Seeds had gotten the hang of it, they were doing eighteen-hour days alongside the Mexicans” (400). Despite this side-by-side work with the Mexicans, however, there is no indication that that the Seeds interact with the Mexicans in any way. The camaraderie hinted at by Yumi’s comparison between the migrant Mexican workers and adjunct college instructors never comes to pass. On the last night of the harvest, the Seeds gather in the Quinns’ kitchen and wait for Will, “who was paying off the last of the Mexicans”
It is as if the white ecological justice players must make sure the Mexicans are gone from the farm, and from the novel, before they can announce and set in motion a new order among them: Frank’s decision to leave his infant daughter with Will and Cass.

Thus the marginalization of Mexicans in the novel formalizes the blind spots of the ecological justice narrative’s aspirations to multicultural inclusiveness. This is particularly so in the contrast the novel implicitly sets up between these eclipsed, silent migrant workers and legal immigrants, including Momoko to the United States and Yumi to Hawaii. As Mae M. Ngai writes, “Marginalized by their position in the lower strata of the workforce and even more so by their exclusion from the polity, illegal immigrants might be understood as caste, unambiguously situated outside the boundaries of formal membership and social legitimacy” (2). Through their spectral presence in the novel, ethnic and national others like the Mexican laborers and Yumi’s Shoshone classmates—who seem to have disappeared from Liberty Falls by the time she returns—emphasize the relative privilege Yumi and her children enjoy in even being invited to join the ecological justice movement.

IV. Conclusion: The Useable White Past in Paradise

In the previous sections, I have argued that by demonstrating not just the political potential of Lloyd and the Seeds’ environmental activist strategy but the internal feminist mechanisms that challenge the limits of that strategy, All Over Creation is able to critique the sexist and ethnocentric aspects of the ideology that it promotes. But given that the environmental justice narrative ultimately cannot serve as the grounds of minority political subjectivity, why does Ozeki take pains to present both its positive and negative
aspects? In this section, I turn to the novel’s series of “false endings” as a way to explicate its overall vision of the political utility of Yumi’s return to the ecological justice activism of her white father—what I have called her “Walden Pond”—and the intervention that this return, and the (simplistically) progressive potential of Hawaii, stage in conventional paradigms of Japanese American political identity.

The first “false ending” occurs with Lloyd’s burial, where, as I discussed above, Ocean places her gift of an egg on his grave. However, the peacefulness that this moment promises is quickly undermined by Yumi’s lament, “Oh, God, how nice it would be if the story could just end here!” (374). Instead, what follows in rapid succession are Charmey’s death, Yumi’s final break-up with Elliot, and her subsequent decision to return to Pahoa with her children and Momoko. This decision precedes the second false ending, for the novel does not conclude with their life in Hawaii. It leaves their story as they arrive at the Hilo airport and concludes with an epilogue in which Cass reads a letter to Tibet from her biological father, “Daddy,” who is “going to save the world” (417).

In the first “false ending,” Ocean’s gift of an egg on seems to herald the succession of the ecological justice narrative from an old white man who never left his native Idaho, a land of “sandy soil” where “you’d wonder why anyone would ever try to grow anything” (245), to a mixed-race girl from fertile, fecund Hawaii. The funeral scene ends with Yumi accepting Elliot’s plea that they meet one more time so that he can explain his complicity in the arrest of the Seeds and Lloyd’s final, fatal heart attack; if Yumi was never able to fully reconcile with Lloyd, this conversation suggests, at least there is hope with the other “noble pilgrim,” her former history teacher and lover. But then, after a break, the narration continues,
Oh, God, how nice it would be if the story could just end here! With Lloyd’s earthly body dead and buried in the ground…. and his daughter poised on the threshold of reconciliation with her onetime rapist. I could turn over the farmhouse to the Quinns and take Momoko and the kids back to Hawaii. Elliot could join us, and Phoenix would learn to tolerate his new stepdad…. Cass and Will could get back to their business of growing potatoes, a little lonelier—no, a lot lonelier—than before, and the Seeds of Resistance could pack up the Spudnik and move along down the road... saving the world. (374)

Although Yumi concedes that this unrealized ending would be “nice,” there are a number of elements that in fact come to pass—Yumi turns over the farmhouse to the Quinns and takes her mother and children back to Hawaii, and the Seeds “move along” to Seattle in the rebuilt Spudnik II, continuing to “save the world,” as the epilogue tells us. In fact, what happens to Cass and Will is an improvement on Yumi’s vision: far from being lonely, they adopt Tibet. The revision regarding Elliot, however, is especially noteworthy because it demonstrates once and for all the inadequacy of her father’s ideology for Yumi.

In their last encounter, Elliot proposes that they get married and have a child together as a way of making “amends”: “We took a life, Yumi. From the universe. And the way I figure it, we owe one back. You and me. Life is sacred” (386). Although Yumi “actually could picture” (387) their shared home in Pahoa or San Francisco, her lover’s desperate attempt to win her back by invoking the sacredness of life, which sharply echoes her father, only makes her feel “sorry for Elliot Rhodes” (387). After a few seconds of thought, she responds, “Forget it, Elliot. Not in a million years” (388). The autonomy that Yumi asserts by rejecting Elliot on the basis of his reversion to her father’s ideology suggests that in order to create a resolution that fully accounts for her gender and racial difference, Yumi needs to take the useable aspects of her father’s political fervor—his love of the earth—and break from its ideological limits—his pro-life politics—and start
a new chapter of life for her children and mother in what she believes to be the more botanically, socially hospitable terrain of Hawaii.

The second false ending narrates the reconciliation of Yumi with her oldest, most estranged child and her family’s departure for Hawaii. Although Phoenix vilifies her relationship with Elliot and idealizes environmental activism, regarding Frank as “just about perfect” (173), calling his grandfather “awesome” (306), having “a crush” on Lilith (412), and threatening to leave Idaho with the Seeds, ultimately his loyalty to his mother, grandmother and siblings override his infatuation with his grandfather’s political legacy. “I can’t leave my mom,” he tells Lilith. “She needs me” (412). Phoenix’s loyalty is all the more poignant because he is fourteen, the same age Yumi was when she ran away from Lloyd’s home and authority, but with an important change: his experiment with Lloyd’s legacy of environmental activism granted him political subjectivity and a sense of belonging in a town where he otherwise felt like an outsider. In the years following Yumi’s adolescence and with the influence of the Seeds, environmental justice has become genuinely inclusive. The Seeds care about incorporating people like Phoenix, Ocean, and even Yumi in a way that Lloyd was unable to imagine.

And unlike Yumi in her departure, Phoenix does not abandon Lloyd or Momoko; instead, by the time he leaves Liberty Falls, he has honored both, extolling his maternal grandfather as a “totally awesome… prophet of the Revolution” (373), but returning with his maternal grandmother and mother to Hawaii, a land where, the novel promises, gardens and families of all kinds cannot help but flourish. Literally “PARADISE FOR SALE,” Hawaii is the land of “Guavas, grapefruits and avocados!” or so Cass reads when she tracks Yumi down on the internet (31). Unlike in Idaho, in Hawaii
“Everything’s growing all the time—a regular hotbed of vegetative activity” (63). Yumi’s children represent the promise of a robust, new, Hawaiian generation who are far enough genetically removed from the wintry, barrenness of Idaho that they can transplant its ecological justice story to their own home turf. Although they are Lloyd’s offspring, Ocean and Phoenix seem not to have inherited the Idaho that runs through Yumi’s body. When Yumi first sees how physically uncomfortable her children are in the Idaho winter, she tells herself, “They needed to know that Mommy was not all about aloha. That she had cold, high desert in her blood” (73). And in contrast to Idaho, which often feels to Yumi very racially homogenous, Hawaii’s human population is diverse. In Idaho, Yumi was a “random fruit” (4) and a “rotten” apple (5), her mother is accused of pedaling “invasive” seeds, and her son, Phoenix, is bullied for looking different. But in Hawaii, Yumi has faith that her racially diverse family will be at home, and her Japanese mother will not need to start a garden, because there will already be so many. Even Momoko refuses to take any of her gardening tools or seeds with her. “I don’t need to make garden in Hawaii. Everywhere is garden. It is enough” (414), she assures Yumi.

Ozeki’s reliance on a culturally pervasive discourse about Hawaii as a “post-ethnic, ahistorical paradise” (Parikh 213), a depiction that has increasingly been critiqued by both Asian and native Hawaiians, is certainly not without its problems. For native Hawaiians, the most offensive historical erasure in romanticized accounts like Ozeki’s is that of the conflict between Asian immigrants and indigenous peoples. The central

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13 For example, Crystal Parikh reads two novels, Blu’s Hanging by Japanese-Hawaiian Lois-Ann Yamanaka (1997) and Rolling the R’s by Filipino-Hawaiian R. Zamora Linmark (1995) as “countering the exotic/erotic fantasy of Hawaii as Edenic space of escape by figuring the history of traumatic loss that such a fantasy disguises” (201). The “traumatic loss” to which she refers is that of ethnic strife within Asian immigrant communities.
project of a special issue of *AmerAsia* on Hawaii is “the positioning of all Asian peoples in Hawai‘i as settler groups…. not indigenous to Hawai‘i,” whose political “choice” is not, as Ozeki would have it, to spread their botanical and social diversity, but “to support, or not to support, Hawaiian sovereignty claims… and to serve as political allies for the movement” (Leong vii). Poet Haunani Kay-Trask’s protest of the colonization of her native land sets the tone for the issue:

“Settlers, not immigrants
From Asia, from America.
Come to settle, to take.
To take from the Native
that which is Native:
Land, water, women,
Sovereignty.” (xi)

Particularly in light of the novel’s fleeting references to Native Americans, this perspective troublingly re-positions Yumi, her children, and Momoko as Hawaii’s unwelcome “noble pilgrims,” complicating the novel’s utopian deferral and raising questions about the ecological geographic romance it posits. More to the point, Yumi works part-time as a real estate broker, advertising and selling Hawaiian land, ostensibly to foreigners. Not only does she “play” at being an Indian Princess in her adolescence, never experiencing a loss of land or culture that her invisible Shoshone classmates must know too well; as an adult she is in fact responsible for the allocation of Hawaiian land to outsiders—the “Settlers, not immigrants” who displace the natives.

This simplistic portrayal suggests again the limits of the ecological justice narrative, not just for mixed-race Yumi or people of color, but for those indigenous, native, and migrant people who are far more marginalized than her family is. Despite this oversight, however, I do not believe that Ozeki’s one-dimensional portrayal of Hawaii
delegitimizes the novel’s inclusive politics or suggests the ultimate incompatibility between mixed-race identity and the ecological movement. After all, the over-the-top representation of Hawaii seems fitting with the sometimes superfluous sentimentality that runs through the novel. Moreover, if we take seriously what Hawaii represents for Ozeki, as well as for Yumi and her family, then Ozeki’s decision to write another ending after the second false ending in which Yumi and her family arrive in Hawaii does not abandon Yumi’s story for Frank’s; rather, by taking the reader as far as Hawaii but not showing us the “promised land,” the novel defers its utopia to an imagined paradise and leaves Yumi’s narrative open-ended.

In my introduction to this dissertation, I explained that I chose to conclude with *All Over Creation* because of all the novels, it is the most post-racial. I would like to clarify that point here. I do not mean to imply that Ozeki’s novel subscribes to the belief that we have arrived at a moment in which race “no longer matters,” or that adherence to racial identities or racially-based communities is politically archaic or irrelevant. Rather, by choosing a political movement that is emphatically not connected to a Japanese American ethnic tradition, Ozeki emphasizes her distance from the kinds of ethnic essentialism in which the other novels in this dissertation are invested, focusing instead on the politics of multiracial communities and mixed-race people. As a result, *All Over Creation* most explicitly engages with utopian imaginations of mixed-race identity, even if in the end it does not fully endorse them. That is, the Seeds are hopeful that the biracial Yumi and her mixed-race children will join their political coterie. Their gestures towards inclusiveness suggests that the Seeds see themselves as blind to racial difference—even if,
as I have argued here, a platform of multiracial pluralism, in which members of all races and both sexes truly share power, is easier to idealize than to put into practice.

The figure of Geek intimates the possibility that Yumi’s family might yet be reunited with Lloyd’s legacy in Hawaii. Before the Seeds depart Liberty Falls, Geek tells Yumi, “So maybe I’ll see you in Pahoa” (412). This, after his insistence to Yumi, “I didn’t use you! I loved you!... I’m not like fucking Rhodes” (410), positions him as Elliot’s potential replacement, the romantic partner who can join her in Hawaii, be a father figure to her children, and educate them in his ecological philosophy. Yumi’s final words of narration before the epilogue also refer to him: “And you know what Geek would have said to that—in this day and age, without a label, how can you tell?” (414). The figurative, if not physical, presence of Geek in Hawaii intimates that Yumi’s connection to her father’s political inheritance has not been irrevocably cut. The prospect that these narratives can still be brought together in a positive way is further emphasized by the journey to Hawaii of the photograph of Yumi as an Indian princess with Lloyd. Even though they have left Lloyd’s body in Idaho, the novel’s most dominant “noble Pilgrim” has in a sense joined them in Pahoa. In the fertile soil of Hawaii, the novel imagines, Japanese American subjects do not need to rely on a cultural nationalist frame of identity that is based on inclusion or exclusion from “white” progressive politics, nor do they need to subordinate feminist ideals of independence and sexual freedom to patriarchal expectations of the female body. Rather, by planting and nurturing the seeds of ideology, they can grow a political identity that is as mixed as the racial composition of the land’s human inhabitants.
EPILOGUE

Visualizing the Hapa Body

In 2006, photographer, writer, and spoken-word artist Kip Fulbeck published a volume of portraits called *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*. As a person of mixed race, Fulbeck described this collection as “the book I wish I had access to growing up” (*Part Asian*, 15). *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* remains Fulbeck’s best-selling book, and has since evolved into a larger endeavor, called “the Hapa Project.” The Hapa Project includes the book, a traveling photographic exhibit, and an online community, where anyone who identifies as Hapa can upload a photo and accompanying text of her own. Fulbeck’s main goal in creating and curating these images is to normalize mixed-race identity and challenge mixed-race people’s sense of isolation: “Like many Hapa children,” he narrates in the introduction to *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*, “I thought I was the only one” (14).

Originally used as a derogatory label derived from the Hawaiian word for “half,” Hapa is now more often embraced as a term of pride for mixed-race people of Asian descent. According to Fulbeck’s website, the roots of the Hapa Project go back to 2001, when Fulbeck began traveling the country, “photographing over 1200 volunteer subjects who self-identified as Hapa…. Each individual was photographed in a similar minimalist style…. After being photographed, participants identified their ethnicites [sic] in their own words, then handwrote their response to the question ‘What are you?’” On the Hapa Project’s homepage, visitors can see excerpts from the book, which range from verbose and frantic,
to emphatically simple,

to adorable yet not obviously aware of the question:

What fascinates me about Fulbeck’s project is the essentializing force of “Hapa” that the visual representation of the Hapa body codifies—what Rey Chow has called the “fundamental visualism” of ethnic difference. In Part Asian, 100% Hapa, the diversity of
mixed-race identity and experience is conveyed exclusively through the pairing of the visualized mixed-race body with a verbal meditation of what that body means: not only did Fulbeck require his subjects to comment on their identities, but he required them to write these comments by hand. The bodies in the portraits, therefore, operate as a kind of meta-text of their visually reified mixed-race identity: the photo of the body is rendered legible and given meaning by the body itself.

In his introduction to the book, Fulbeck explains the style of the portraits: “I photographed every participant similarly: unclothed from the collarbone-up, and without glasses, jewelry, excess make-up, or purposeful expression. Basically, I wanted us to look like us, as close to our natural selves as possible” (16). Photographing every participant unclothed and unadorned draws attention to a kind of Hapa essence—what Fulbeck calls their “natural selves”—that all of his subjects share and display in and on their bodies. Furthermore, the transformation of “Hapa” from a slur to a term of pride relies on the essentialist empowerment that the Hapa label brings to its bearers: “Why is ‘multiracial’ still limited to a black/white paradigm in the national mind-set? Is it simply because until now Hapases had no title, no name, no way to even identify as a group?” (13). Drawing on and reinforcing Hapa’s multiple role as title, name, and “way to… identify,” the Hapa Project renders Hapases’ “natural selves” visible, both literally—by presenting their bodies as portraits—and figuratively, by using those bodies to widen public awareness of the diversity of mixed-race identities. The visualization of the Hapa body can even battle “racism and bigotry,” according to Sean Lennon in his foreword to Part Asian, 100% Hapa, by “eras[ing] the stereotypes by which we have been falsely defined” (21).
The visualization of the Hapa body is also integral to the sense of completion and unity that the label brings to its subjects. In the second portrait above, the subject identifies herself through and against more conventional labels, “Asian” and “white,” that have no doubt been applied to her because of the racial legibility of her features. But by asserting herself as neither “half-‘Asian’” nor “half-‘white’” but “a whole ‘Other,’” she challenges the original, halving connotations of “Hapa” at the same time that her alternative self-label as “a whole” performs the title of the book: her Hapa body is already a complete, “100%,” and her body is 100% Hapa. No longer signaling an outcast, “Hapa” has become a positive term for “Other”; it is the identity, the essence, the name by which the once divided, fractioned body becomes a cohesive whole.

I end this dissertation with Fulbeck’s work, which in addition to the Hapa Project includes such publications as the photo-book *Mixed: Portraits of Multiracial Kids* (2010), because I think it adds a vital dimension to the resurgence of embodiment that I have traced in contemporary ethnic women’s literature. In this case, it is not fictional bodies that transmit *specific* ethnic identity through paternal genetics, but visual bodies that are paired with text that comment on and in some cases reveal the *multiplicity* of the subject’s ethnic and racial composition.¹ On the one hand, the unifying power that Fulbeck’s project ascribes to “Hapa” echoes the embodied ethnic identity that appears in the first half of my dissertation; in particular, “Hapa’s” ability to unite the fragmented

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¹ Each photo in *Mixed* includes the child’s name, followed by a vertical list of his or her multiple ethnicities or nationalities; for example, on p. 76, NEVAEH Filipina Italian African American Native American Spanish Chinese
body is remarkably similar to the reparative powers of Eliza Naumann’s relationship to her Jewish body in Goldberg’s *Bee Season*. But on the other, Fulbeck’s investment in the body moves in the *opposite* direction of the work of Henry Louis Gates and Senna:

“Hapa” is also a kind of embodied essence, but a *multiracial* one. In sharp contrast to DNA analysis, which can definitively identify one’s ancestors’ places of origin, and to Birdie Lee’s insistence that she did not want to be “a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping toward completion” (*Senna, Caucasia* 137), Fulbeck’s “Hapa” celebrates “ambiguity…. the haziness, the blurriness, the undefinables” (*Part Asian* 13).²

In that sense, Fulbeck’s work is more similar to *All Over Creation*; this is unsurprising, given that Yumi Fuller and all of her children, even Ozeki herself, are themselves Hapa. And much like *Mixed*, whose child-subjects, as Cher concludes in her afterword, capture “a vision of the future” (263), Ozeki presents mixed-race children as the face of the utopian next generation. My dissertation, which groups the two Asian American novels together in the second half, reflects the importance of racial identity in determining the particular nature of the body’s resurgence. The fact that Fulbeck and Ozeki’s celebratory accounts of mixed-race identity and bodies focus on subjects of Asian descent is no coincidence. We simply don’t see projects like *AsiaDNA.com*, or read accounts of Hapa writers fleeing a group of mixed-race people “[i]n a fit of nausea” (*Senna, “Mulatto Millennium”* 15), in Asian American culture. This is not to say that mixed-race people of Asian heritage have a quantifiably easier time feeling accepted in this country than their African brethren, or that Asian Americans have always accepted

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² Fulbeck’s opposition to the resurgence of racial genomics is explicit in the introduction to *Mixed*, in which he writes, “And while we can rehash the fact that race doesn’t exist biologically, that the very idea of human beings being broken down into genetically discrete groups is scientifically unsound… we must also acknowledge that, for better or worse, in the reality of our daily lives, race exists.”
mixed-race people as “authentically” Asian American. After all, consider the narrow confines of Asian American identity put forth by the Aiiieeee! group in 1975. But it is to say that while Chin’s mid-1970’s polemic now seems entirely outdated in an Asian Americanist criticism shaped by feminism, mixed race studies, transnational perspectives, and South Asian cultural production, Gates’ stature as an authority on racial identity only increases with every new PBS special on genomics that he produces, with every purchase made from AfricaDNA of genomic testing—and with every invitation to the President’s Rose Garden to school a (possibly) racist white police officer over beers.

How to explain this difference in these accounts of bodies, between the African American body that houses racial specificity and the Asian American body that foretells an “expanding interethnici ty” (Rody 6)? Rody’s account of the transformation of Asian American literature into the “vanguard of the interethnic” is especially useful here. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act ended the longtime U.S. discrimination against potential immigrants from Asia. Since then,

[f]or a huge and heterogeneous segment of this new American population, notions of ethnic identity have developed in an era already ‘multicultural’…. At the same time, the powerful changes… that were set in motion by the African American civil rights movement… tend to engender a multiculturalist consciousness that affirms cultural and racial differences…. Americanness in the new immigrant writing, that is to say, is inseparable from an interethnic ethos” (19-20).

According to Rody, Asian American culture, and Asian American literature in particular, are uniquely situated to depict “the negotiation of shifting roles in an intercultural arena” (21). It follows then, that mixed-race Asian American writers like Ozeki and Fulbeck would feel much more open to idealizing the mixed-race body as a harbinger of the future than would mixed-race African American writers like Michele Elam and Senna, who
suspect that African Americans have the most to lose in a celebration that threatens to elide the long, specific history of their racial injury.3

Finally, by asking his subjects, “What are you,” Fulbeck presents racial identity as a choice. In doing so, he opposes mixed race studies skeptics who dismiss “race as choice” ideology as the “sole platform” of mixed race advocacy groups (Elam, “Ex-Colored”). But I would argue that by allowing his subjects to claim the question that they “can’t answer any more than we can choose one body part over another,” the question they “know… inside out” and that they simultaneously “love” and “hate” (Part Asian 13), Fulbeck gives Hapas the empowering opportunity to redefine their racial identity, and their mixed-race identity, in whatever language they wish.4 To borrow from Paul Eisenstein’s formulation of Jewishness in Bee Season, the identity that “Hapa” embodies “is not ultimately the place to which we go for all the answers but rather for the proper framing of the questions” (32). In this sense, although his identity politics are not always in accordance with the novels, Fulbeck echoes their spirit of feminist agency: like Birdie, who chooses to pursue her black father and sister; like Eliza, who chooses to defy her father through her Jewish body; like Jenny Shimada, who chooses to follow her Japanese

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3 The specificity of that injury hinges on the fact that most African Americans today are descendents of slaves who came here by force, a fact that Gates regularly stresses in his genomics projects. For example, African American Lives opens with Gates at Ellis Island, lamenting that “there is no Ellis Island for those of us who are descendents of survivors of the African slave trade.” He then credits “miraculous breakthroughs in genealogy and genetics” for giving African Americans the tools to “celebrate their ancestors’ journey,” “understand how our ancestors made that incredible transition from slavery,” and re-write a history once thought to be lost. Gates does not hesitate to emphasize the uniqueness of African Americans’ lack of family records among other American racial and ethnic groups. In Faces of America, as he hands Yo-Yo Ma photocopies of his family’s centuries-old genealogical records from China, he points out, “I’ll never be able to do this with my African ancestors. Ever.” And then, as if to live vicariously through his guest, he asks plaintively, “What does it feel like, Yo-Yo?”

4 As Paul Spickard writes in his afterword, Fulbeck takes on “the old form” of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific “racial” portraiture, so that “Every one… gets to define him or herself however he or she wants. That is taking the old racist trope and turning it on its head” (261).
American father into the American desert; and like Yumi, who chooses to bring her white father’s ecological consciousness to multiracial Hawaii, Fulbeck’s Hapas have the ability to determine, on their own terms, “what” they are and what their corporeal inheritance means to their identities.

In “The Mulatto Millennium,” Senna derides “mulatto-pride folks” for wanting “their own special category or no categories at all” (14). In Fulbeck’s work, “Hapa” unabashedly asserts itself as its “own special category” and grants Asians their version of “mulatto pride.” But Fulbeck does more than just celebrate Hapas’ confounding of categorization. He goes so far as to assert that “The new face of the millennium is part Asian Pacific/Islander. Modeling agencies clamor to sign the next Devon Aoki or Tyson Beckford. We watch Keanu Reeves, listen to Norah Jones, cheer Tiger Woods… and get our news from Ann Curry” (Part Asian 17). The participation of Lennon and Cher in his projects demonstrates the centrality of celebrity endorsements. For people like Elam, Fulbeck’s invocation of the pop-cultural hype around “Hapa” only further compounds a problematic position: Critiquing what she calls the emergence of millennial “Mulatto Glam,” Elam writes that today’s generation of mixed-race people are shallowly hailed as “members of society’s hip new A-list… racially mixed… ambassadors to a new world order, the fashionable imprimaturs of modernity” (Souls xiii).

But by summoning famous names to popularize his cause, is Fulbeck’s methodology really any different than Gates, whose African American Lives and Faces of America center entirely on celebrity subjects? While I take Elam’s point that simplistic celebrations of mixed-race people as the cure-all for racism can distract from larger social issues about racial inequities, the popularity of visual art projects like Fulbeck’s, the
“resurgence of racial biomedicine” (Bliss, “Racial Taxonomy” 1019) in Gates’ endeavors, and the novels I discuss in this dissertation demonstrate to me that we have more to learn about our contemporary investments in race by recognizing and investigating the body’s pervasiveness than we do by outright condemning it. To paraphrase Diana Fuss, the body will not simply go away. It is incumbent upon us to figure out why. This dissertation has been my effort to begin that conversation, to trace the role of the genetic and material body in recent and contemporary representations of race, gender, and ethnicity, and to articulate the complexities, anxieties, and hopes revealed in this new embodied identity politics for the twenty-first century.
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Wendy... Uh... What’s Her Name. Dir. Curtis Choy. Chonk Moonhunter Productions, 2005. Film.


