LOST IN WHITENESS:
JEWS WRITING BLACKS IN POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICAN FICTION

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Tamara Zipora Milstein, B.A.

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Tamara Zipora Milstein, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Lori Merish, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the significance of the black presence in post-World War II Jewish American fiction. After World War II, the formerly racialized American Jews were able to embrace whiteness. Although the whitening of the Jews enabled their rapid ascent into social and economic prominence, it also forced them into a world of compulsory homogeneity. Many “whitened” Jews thus lost their sense of ethnic distinction and cultural expressiveness. Despite a desire for the social and economic status and security that accompanied whiteness, there was often resistance to the whitening process and to the accompanying repression of ethnicity. In grappling with their newly acquired whiteness, many Jews have thus consistently wavered between an embrace of white Americanness and a yearning for the restoration of their lost ethnic distinction. I will examine how black characters are a means through which texts explore the Jews’ uneasiness concerning their postwar racial status. I focus my study on three novels by Jewish American authors: Jo Sinclair’s The Changelings, Jay Neugeboren’s Big Man, and Lore Segal’s Her First American. These novels were published in different decades and feature profoundly different styles, plots, and protagonists, but they share a post-World War II setting and a black presence. All three texts examine a relationship between a Jew and an African American in postwar America and employ blackness to examine the complex mixture of Jewish fears and desires regarding their new racial identity. These texts suggest the Jews’ ambivalence concerning their entry into the homogeneous world of whiteness and the enduring nature of the desire for identity fluidity rather than rigidity.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to all those who supported me along the way, in particular my amazing husband Michael and my wonderful, inspiring daughter Leah Michelle, as well as my incredibly helpful and encouraging advisor, Lori Merish.

Many thanks,

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INTRODUCTION

LOST IN WHITENESS

Of her childhood in a “white suburb on Long Island” in the 1950s, Karen Brodkin writes:

Trying to be ‘normal,’ that is, white, and Jewish presented a double bind. Neither was satisfactory by itself, and it seemed to me that each commented negatively on the other: to be ‘normal’ meant to reject the Jewishness of my family and our circle… to be Jewish meant to be a voluntary outsider at school. I wanted to embrace my family and to be an insider. At the time, it seemed that I had a choice and that I had to choose; one couldn’t be both at the same time. (11)

Brodkin felt that Jewishness and “normal” Americanness (a.k.a whiteness) are mutually exclusive and feared that her assimilation into the world of Americanness would necessitate distancing herself from Jewishness. Her apprehension is characteristic of the concern that faced many Jews in post-World War II America: would their newly-acquired whiteness require an erasure of their particular Jewishness? The racial identity of American Jews transformed in the postwar period from what Brodkin refers to as “off-white” to white (1). The rapid and promising change in the Jews’ national status from remote racial Others to fully enfranchised members of the prominent white majority resulted in a swift assimilation into the world of whiteness and a high level of social, economic, and political prosperity and security. It simultaneously produced a yearning for a lost ethnic singularity. The privilege of whiteness came at the expense of the ability to express cultural enthusiasm and exclusivity. As Eric Goldstein notes in *The Price of Whiteness*, “Jews’ long-awaited entry into the white mainstream often left them vacillating between forms of self-expression acceptable to the larger white society and more particularistic commitments that could not be comfortably expressed in public” (190). American Jews in the postwar moment, having at long last shed their perpetual strangeness, struggled with the compulsory suppression of an ever-present desire to reclaim the cultural vibrancy that accompanies Otherness. Taking hold of the comfort and opulence of the white world seemed to require a renunciation of Jewishness.

The status of the Jews in America was indeterminate through the early twentieth century. Differences among immigrant Jews in geographical descent and vocational backgrounds and abilities meant that the process of whitening was uneven and class-inflected. Thousands of Sephardic and German Jews came to America from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, many working as “successful merchants” and
businessmen, easily fitting into America’s “social elite” (Katz-Fishman and Scott 329, 330). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, three million eastern European Jews immigrated to the United States, most of whom were “working class in occupation… and urban in locale” (332). Jews in America thus belonged to the full range of social and economic classes. According to Michael Rogin, “During the period of mass European immigration, roughly the 1840s to the 1920s, the racial status of… Jews… was in dispute” (12). The Jews’ racial category was uncertain through the early twentieth century; by the postwar period, however, the whitening process culminated and Jews, no longer racialized, were imagined as a cohesive group belonging to the community of prominent whites. In Whiteness of a Different Color, Matthew Frye Jacobsen has traced the racialization of Jews throughout history and their eventual whitening in America. He notes that the “alien Jew figured prominently in European discussion as early as the sixteenth century,” thus firmly rooting Jewish exclusion in the historical fabric of civilization (175). This “alien Jew” of early times was not yet racialized; according to Jacobsen, “until the second half of the nineteenth century… it was generally… their religion that marked the Jews as a people apart. The Jew was the perpetual ‘Historical Outsider,’ in Frederic Jaher’s phrase, whose perceived difference derived above all from ‘Christian hostility’” (176). The distinction, then, between Jews and the majority was one of spirituality rather than biology, and, in early America, this difference did not usually result in significant confrontations. Jews were disliked, but they were not necessarily oppressed: “Although the popular view of Jews was ‘amply negative’ in the colonies… their status was characterized by a general state of toleration disrupted by only occasional anti-Semitic outbursts” (177). As long as white Christians abided them, Jews apparently enjoyed a rather safe, undisturbed existence in early America. The evolution of Jews from a religious to a racial Other occurred only later, as several trends coincided to bring about a new construction of their difference. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, “the rise of races and phenotypes in scientific discourse” brought about the ill-fated perception of Jews as essentially different from the majority based upon inherent, biological discrepancies (Jacobsen 179). As the New York Sun clarified in 1893, it was a specific, immutable “Jewish face” that set the Jews apart (qtd. in Jacobsen 178). Their distinct “physiognomy,” from their “Israelitish nose” to their “dark” complexion, marked them as more than just a people with hostile religious beliefs, but rather a conspicuously separate, and thus inferior, race (178). The heightened popularity of “scientific racialism” collided with “nativist discussion of immigration restriction in
the 1890s and the eugenics movement of the earlier twentieth century” to bring about an onslaught of hostility directed toward Jewish (and other European) immigrants and their descendents (179, 183). Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these previously tolerated and free foreigners were now seen as fundamentally different, genetically substandard interlopers, who thus belonged in a socially, politically, and economically subjugated class of people.

By the 1940s and 50s, however, there were domestic and international concerns which facilitated the whitening of the Jews. As Jacobsen writes, “World War II and the revelations of the horrors of Nazi Germany were… part of what catapulted American Hebrews into the community of Caucasians in the mid-twentieth century” (187). The need for disidentification with Nazism compelled America to reevaluate its racial politics. America could not situate itself anywhere but in opposition to such “horrors.” America could not continue to delineate Jews as a race apart from (and thus inferior to) the white majority and risk aligning its agenda with a group of genocidal extremists. Goldstein notes that the war “had the effect of redrawing American racial boundaries… Ultimately, the Roosevelt Administration believed that domestic stability would be best achieved by consolidating immigrants into the ‘white’ population and by reestablishing the clear division between blacks and whites” (192). This “redrawing” of racial lines and “consolidating” of ethnic groups brought Jews into the world of white privilege and reaffirmed blacks as the quintessential racial Others. According to Brodkin, “any new map of a multiracial nation continues to rest solidly on the preservation of the old black-white binary and continuity of institutionalized racism against African Americans” (74). With the restoration of this “black-white binary,” including the fortification of the white community and reemphasis of blacks as the problem group, the opposition between white and black was all the more insistent. The intensity of race relations led to “the steady but certain ascendance of Jim Crow as the pressing political issue of the day” (Jacobsen 188). Any residual perceptions of Jews as a racialized group dissolved, obscured by the “pressing” black/white race politics at the forefront. The formerly “problematic” Jews “became ever more ‘white’ as the politics of segregation overwhelmed the national agenda. Thus by the 1950s what was ‘forgotten’ was that [this group] has ever been [a] distinct race… in the first place” (Jacobsen 246). The shock of Nazi evils and the subsequent rise of the “Negro Question” and segregation as national imperatives helped to obliterate Jewish
exclusion from the national landscape (247). The door was thus finally open for the Jews to become fully assimilated (white) Americans and reap the associated social, economical, and political benefits.

Jews had been historically racialized, but, in the postwar years in America, they were able to be distanced from that definition. Brodkin refers to the “Jews’ new postwar, racially white place” and the fact that they “were granted many institutional privileges of white racial assignment after World War II” (10, 3). These “institutional privileges” were obvious benefits to whiteness, particularly because racialized groups tend to face institutional economic marginalization. Race can thus indicate an inferior material status, whereas Jewishness after World War II became more of an ethnicity, a cultural status. Ethnicity, however, is inexorably tied to race, and, while expressions of ethnic distinction tend to be associated with racial groups, whiteness is characterized by an undisturbed homogeneity. For Jews, then, the loss of a racialized status meant not only upward social and economic mobility but also the potential loss of their cultural uniqueness. As Andrew Hoborek notes, “assimilating Jews” were “concerned… with the homogenizing effects of suburbanization and white-collar work” (556). Goldstein also refers to this compulsory homogenization: “as Jews integrated into the white mainstream, they were expected to keep expressions of group difference at a level that would not offend the sense of unity and homogeneity from which whites of the postwar era drew their confidence and stability” (194). According to Deborah Dash Moore, “Nineteen forty-five marks a turning point for American Jews. That year they crossed a threshold to embrace the fulfillment promised by America. Behind them lay the immigrant working-class world… of passionate politics and a vibrant Yiddish culture (1). Jews were forced to give up the “passion” and “vibrancy” of the “working-class world” to protect their precarious, newly-acquired white American status and enjoy the “fulfillment” associated with the uniform, upper class world of (white) economic success. Many Jews performed their homogeneous whiteness through displaying their aversion to the most obvious and sinister racial presence in America: the African American. As James Baldwin wrote in 1948, “Jews, like Negroes, must use every possible weapon in order to be accepted, and must try to cover their vulnerability by a frenzied adoption of the customs of the country; and the nation’s treatment of Negroes is unquestionably a custom” (qtd. in Trotter 205). Brodkin writes that Jews have an “experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness” and that immigrant Jews eventually learn “the lesson that so many immigrants learned—that one could become an American by asserting one’s white superiority over African Americans” (2,
Daniel A. Rochmes and G.A. Elmer Griffin contend that “Jewish... immigrants became white by endorsing white supremacy and actively oppressing those thereby constructed as black” (198). Toni Morrison notes that “the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American” (Margin 146). Although the whitening of the Jews in America often meant a loss of ethnic distinction, the benefits of social and economic progress tended to outweigh that loss, and many Jews protected their whiteness through, among other things, joining in the oppression of African Americans.

Despite desires for success and performances of white superiority, the whitening of the Jews was never absolute or complete; there was always some resistance to that process and to the repression of ethnic expressiveness. The postwar moment was “a turning point,” indeed: having been invited to discard the mask of racial strangeness and enter the white world of belonging, would Jews regret the piece of themselves they left behind in the darkness? Would they be irrevocably lost in whiteness, forever abandoning the passion and vibrancy of their former ethnic enclaves? Postwar assimilation was thus complicated by the desire to recover a sublimated ethnic self, the pre-whitened, culturally vibrant self. This desire was often made manifest through a desire for blackness. In grappling with their whiteness, many Jews have thus consistently wavered between an aversion to and desire for blackness, with aversion representing an embrace of white Americanness and a fear of marginalization, and desire indicating the yearning for the restoration of their ethnic distinctiveness. As Morrison asserts, immigrants have historically understood their Americanness “on the backs of blacks” (Margin 145). Blacks, as the most ubiquitous nonwhite presence in postwar America, could represent both the undesirability of belonging to an oppressed race and the attractiveness of ethnic uniqueness. Blackness was thus an easy means through which to express conflicting fears and desires. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a conspicuous black presence in Jewish American writing, including works by Norman Mailer, Nat Hentoff, Saul Bellow, Anne Roiphe, Cynthia Ozick, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth (Budick 120). The Jews’ persistent use of blacks in their postwar literary endeavors demonstrates their contradictory feelings about the benefits of whiteness and the accompanying compulsory homogeneity. I will focus my study on three novels by Jewish American authors: Jo Sinclair’s *The Changelings*, Jay Neugeboren’s *Big Man*, and Lore Segal’s *Her First American*. Though these texts have not received much critical attention,
desire to bring them onto the critical map as saying something about Jewish identity. These novels were published in different decades and feature profoundly different styles, plots, and protagonists, but they share a postwar setting and a black presence. All three texts invest in questions of race and employ blackness to examine the difficult mixture of Jewish American fears and desires regarding their postwar whiteness.

Jo Sinclair’s *The Changelings* was published in 1955, at the height of the Jews’ promising yet problematic integration into the community of American whites. The novel takes place on a predominantly Jewish street in an unidentified Ohio city in the summer of 1945. Rather than staging her Jews in New York, the sprawling, cosmopolitan entrance to America, Sinclair places them in the Midwest, firmly rooted in the heart of the country, thus signifying their integration into white America. The story follows the nervous Jews of East 120th Street; nervous because the wealthier Jewish families are moving to more expensive homes in the suburbs leaving empty units on their street. The “Black Ones”—the “Schwartze” as they are called in Yiddish—are the only people who appear interested in renting, but, if African Americans move in, the consequences for the white residents would be catastrophic (Sinclair 31). Blacks have already moved onto some nearby streets, and the collective fear is that it is only a matter of time before blacks get into East 120th, too. The setting, an unnamed town in middle America, suggests that what takes place in *The Changelings* was not unique—it was a national phenomenon. According to Goldstein:

> When residential proximity to African Americans threatened their social status, [Jews] often… supported the path that best facilitated their continued integration into the white mainstream. In the years directly following the war, for example, tensions continued to emerge in changing urban neighborhoods, concerning the questions of racial proximity and succession…. Jews left behind urban neighborhoods for more suburban locations. (200).

These “changing urban neighborhoods” were worrisome for Jews who wanted to hold onto their newly gained status as whites by keeping their distance from blacks, and Sinclair makes this conflict quite clear throughout *The Changelings*. The first sentences of the novel set the unequivocally anxious tone: “All that summer, as no white people came to rent the empty, upstairs suites of the Valenti house or the Golden house, tension had mounted in the street. Only Negroes came” (Sinclair 1). The explicitly Italian “Valenti” (one of the few non-Jewish but still white families living on East 120th) placed alongside the Jewish “Golden” blurs ethnic lines
and merges these groups, in their joint hatred of blacks, under the umbrella of whiteness. As Jacobsen writes, “Italian and Jew are here joined as consanguine ‘whites’ in contrast to invading ‘Negroes,’” thus immediately uncovering “the depth of the division between the black and the white races” (131-2). These opening lines establish not only the problem of racially shifting neighborhoods, but also the American Jew’s place on the white side of the color line. This categorization of Jews as white sets the stage for the novel’s central problem: if Jews are considered “white,” what happens to their Jewishness? Such blanket categorizations foster identity crises, especially for the novel’s central character, twelve year-old Judy Vincent.

Throughout The Changelings, the tomboyish Vincent, as she likes to be called, questions every aspect of her identity. She consistently finds herself in the ambiguous space between male and female, adult and child, black and white. Everything changes for Vincent when her gang of boys ousts her as their leader for being a girl. Although it never mattered before, her sex is suddenly an issue: “No girl’s going to be my boss,” says Dave, Vincent’s former best friend (Sinclair 17). At a gang meeting, the boys decide to “pull of her clothes and prove” to everyone that Vincent is, in fact, a girl (1). As the boys come toward her, Vincent, horrified, becomes truly conscious of her sex: “Suddenly they all looked towering as men, lumpy with muscle” (19). The violent undressing that follows strips Vincent not only of her clothes and dignity but also of her misconception that she can elude societal classifications. As a girl on the cusp of womanhood, she can no longer hide from the gender line and visible markers of difference, like “lumpy… muscle,” that separate her from these “men” that she used to play with. Vincent must begrudgingly accept her separateness, and what is, to her, the lesser position. It is at this moment that she meets Clara, her black counterpart. Clara, too, is a twelve year-old tomboy who wears pants and once led a gang of boys. As Vincent learns that Clara, one of the Schwartze, is not actually an enemy, she begins to understand the oppressiveness of rigid identity categories. One must be male or female, not both, and, likewise, one must be black or white. Clara becomes the symbol for all of Vincent’s fears and desires as Vincent questions her place in the world. Surrounded by panicky Jews who blame all of their problems on the encroaching black community, Vincent transforms through blackness as she tries to claim a fluid identity for herself that evades easy classification.

Vincent’s identification with previously disavowed blackness is conjoined with and enables a contestation of gender binaries. Regarding the postwar reinstitution of gender norms, Rogin notes that “World
War II created a special problem. The absence of men at war, followed by the need to orchestrate the traditional family’s restoration, denaturalized the domestic just as its naturalness was being proclaimed” (193). In *The Changelings*, Clara’s presence incites and nurtures Vincent’s ability and desire to challenge the boundaries of both race and sex. Vincent learns that the characteristics so often attached to and that supposedly inhere in blackness and whiteness are just as arbitrary as those attached to maleness and femaleness. *The Changelings* illustrates the inextricable link between race and gender categories as confining boundaries based on inherent, “natural” differences. As Rogin states, “Racial integrationists, like gender-benders, wanted to break down a socially constructed binary that was presented as biologically based” (31). Vincent attempts to “break down” the walls that are meant to confine her to both whiteness and femininity and question the supposed naturalness of these divisions. The unsettling of gender thus goes hand in hand with the unsettling of race in this text. The novel experiments with identity fluidity as the resolution for the problematic racial and sexual identity boundaries that trouble the community of East 120th Street and Vincent in particular, but the success of this outcome is ambiguous at best.

Writing pseudonymously as the gender-unspecific Jo Sinclair (real name Ruth Seid), the author of *The Changelings*, like her protagonist, seems to see identity fluidity as a possible solution to the problematic identity politics of the postwar period. Although the whitening of Jews would afford them great opportunity for social and economic advancement in America, the stifling of their identification with Jewish culture underneath their wholesale categorization as whites would be a confusing and often unwelcome repression. This text employs blackness, gender-bending, and the space of a coming-of-age story to articulate the dilemmas associated with the rigid boundaries of whiteness. In *From Girl to Woman: American Women’s Coming-of-Age Narratives*, Christy Rishoi writes that “adolescence… is by definition a time when identity is fluid and contradictory” (13). Vincent’s youth thus affords Sinclair greater possibilities for identity play. The text can experiment with a pants-wearing girl and white/black friendship; and both the gender-bending and cross-racial friendship can figure merely as youthful indiscretions. Adolescence is an ideal setting for identity fluidity and one which indicates the fleeting and partial nature of Vincent’s transformation. Her defiance of race and gender boundaries may be revolutionary, but it is likely short-lived. Although many Jews may have yearned to desublimate their ethnic identities, the desire to maintain their social and economic prominence
often superseded that yearning. Vincent’s youth, and her inability to ever fully extricate herself from her fears of blackness, indicate that her capacity for identity boundlessness is only partial and temporary. The realities of America’s postwar social and political climate, including compulsory white homogeneity, the reinstitution of gender norms, and institutional black oppression, will inevitably overcome Vincent’s youth-inspired enthusiasm for a fluid identity.

By the mid-1960s and 70s, American Jews had achieved “impressive economic mobility and high degree of integration into universities, neighborhoods, professions, and other central institutions of American life” (Goldstein 213). Their whiteness was thus consolidated and more secure. This higher level of confidence regarding their social position in America often nurtured the Jews’ desires to finally differentiate themselves from white Americans and reclaim their repressed ethnic distinction. The Black Nationalist movement served, for many Jews, as an impetus and an example to set themselves apart. With this movement, “Black nationalists proposed their own form of segregation, a separate nation celebrating the strength of black culture,” thus providing a framework for reconsidering and reclaiming previously reviled ethnicities (Goffman 93). Many Jews began to feel the need to prioritize and revitalize their own ethnic customs and cultural issues, just as African Americans were doing. With blacks expressing their unique blackness louder than ever, some Jews felt a desire to “celebrate the strength of” Jewish culture, which seemed possible now that their social and political status in America was no longer so shaky as to hinder them. The problem with this change in priorities would be whether or not America could acknowledge the minoritarian issues of such a prosperous group. Because racialized groups tend to experience economic marginalization, just as racialized Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America tended to be marginalized in poor urban ethnic enclaves, expressions of ethnicity are often linked to the lower classes. Manifestations of ethnicity were thus seen as “oppositional to civilization” and associated with “taboo forays” and “a dangerous mix of sex and violence” (Goffman 131). Ethnic expression would unsettle the conventions of the homogeneous white upper classes. Although many Jews sought to release their repressed cultural identities, they wanted to do so without necessarily being contaminated by the negative characterizations associated with Otherness and thus demoted on the social hierarchy. Conformist whiteness, however, was also not satisfying in that it erased their cultural distinction and placed them among members of a racist majority. If in the 40s and 50s the primary concern for Jews was
comprehensive assimilation to ensure a national status that would hinder future persecution and allow them to seize the American Dream, by the mid-60s and 70s, their concerns shifted to reclaiming a lost Jewishness without forsaking their prominent national status.

Jay Neugeboren’s *Big Man*, published in 1966, returns to the postwar moment to explore the fallout of the Jews’ integration into white racist America and the subsequent desire to reclaim their ethnic distinction. The text both affirms the Jews’ status as undifferentiated whites and resists that whiteness by revealing a deeply rooted Jewish desire for blackness. The 1950s setting brings the text back to the postwar moment when the Jews first assimilated whiteness. The Jews’ assimilation, ending in success, stands in stark contrast to the failed assimilation of the black protagonist, Mack Davis. Despite the fact that “New York City [is the] the scene of a barrage of cultural intersections, a plethora of voices and dialects,” the characters in this Brooklyn setting are fixed into rigid racial identity categories (Goffman 174). The diversity of the setting emphasizes the utter inflexibility of the identities set forth for blacks and whites. Although Mack has opportunities to enjoy the success of the white world and many successful white men are desirous of aspects of Mack’s stereotypical blackness, by the end of *Big Man*, whites and blacks return to their “proper” places—Mack to his degradation and white men to their lives of comfort and propriety. The failure of identity fluidity is to be expected in the more racially separate Midwestern setting of *The Changelings*, but depicting the boundaries of race in such a cross-cultural setting as New York City is truly telling of their stringency.

Mack is a perpetually downtrodden black man surrounded by upper class white Jewish men who exploit him. He is a young black man and former star college athlete with NBA potential, who has lost everything because he was caught fixing basketball games in a gambling scandal. Having been kicked out of college and blacklisted from the NBA, he now lives with his parents and works at a carwash. Unlike *The Changelings*, which is the story of first generation American Jews struggling with their assimilation into the white world, *Big Man* is another kind of assimilation narrative: a black man’s impossible struggle to integrate into the primarily white world of privilege. Mack’s attempts at success are consistently thwarted by his internalization of the racism of the dominant, white society. He cannot help but succumb to the characteristics attached to the rigid, stereotypically imagined identity for a black man: he is “animalistic and hypersexual,” engaging in “criminality” (King and Springwood 102), participating in a “bachelor subculture… drinking and
carousing” and in “the violence endemic to urban working-class life” (Gorn 237, 239). Ethan Goffman’s description of Her First American’s Carter Bayoux also applies perfectly to Mack, as he “flounders almost willfully in the squalid state that American society expects of Negroes” (189). As a racialized man, Mack cannot escape dejection, whereas the formerly racialized Jews have successfully escaped theirs. The Jews in Big Man have successfully integrated into the white world of privilege, but Mack is stuck in the predictably “squalid” space imagined for American blacks. He is surrounded by successful white Jewish men, “big” men, who commodify him for his talent as a black athlete. Mack’s life of “almost willful” squalor highlights the whiteness of the Jews around him. In contrast to Mack’s animal-like athletic prowess, marginalization, and behavioral abandon, the Jews in Big Man are proper, intellectual upper class executives, journalists, and business owners. These differences signify that the Jews, having been able to shed their Otherness, now belong the community of undifferentiated whites. Mack, on the other hand, remains racialized and trapped in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of failure.

Despite Mack’s social and economic marginalization and the contrasting opulence of the Jewish characters, aspects of Mack’s character are depicted as highly desirable throughout Big Man. His athletic prowess, body, working-class masculinity, and defiance of upper-class convention are at times figured as enviable characteristics. In Beyond the Cheers: Race as Spectacle in College Sport, C. Richard King and Charles Fruehling Springwood describe how the “the black athlete has been constructed as a site of pleasure” and that the “preoccupation of the African American as jock, with natural prowess, is one of several key white stereotypes of blackness” (101, 107). Mack, in his stereotypical blackness and with his subsequent “natural” athletic abilities, is a “site of pleasure.” His body on the basketball court, in its display of brute, animalistic strength and speed, provides a spectatorial release from bourgeois propriety. Mack’s body is also rendered aesthetically off the court, as he attributes the ease with which he attracts women to his black “skin” (Neugeboren 30). In addition, Mack’s unrestrained masculinity and inclination toward violence are figured as potentially desirable. In “The Meanings of Prizefighting,” Elliott Gorn contends that “many in the bourgeoisie envied what they perceived as the uninhibitedness of the working class and itched to break out of their own cultural confinement” (226). The culturally-confined Jews in Big Man, most notably journalist Ben Rosen, yearn to release the physical, manly side of themselves which comes so easily to the unrestrained Mack.
Everything about Mack, from his speech to his gambling, his interracial sexual conquests to his apparent lack of concern for consequences, flies in the face of bourgeois respectability. This behavior runs in sharp contrast the propriety and homogeneity of the white world. As many Jews were concerned with the “homogenizing effects of suburbanization and white-collar work,” Mack’s resistance to the decorum expected from the white world might appeal to their underlying desires to express difference.

Although the white world is one of lackluster conformity, it is, on the other hand, a world of prosperity, security, and accomplishment. To deviate from conformity and display one’s distinct Jewishness through dress, speech, or behavior could place that social and economic status at risk. The Other is thus “threatening,” placing the Jew in danger of being contaminated by blackness and then “succumbing to a racialized image of Otherness” (Lott 25). Expressing one’s difference from whiteness brings one closer to the ever-different and “incessantly undermined” blacks; therefore, the Jewish desire to liberate the ethnic self is consistently complicated by a fear of infectious demoralization (Goffman 189). Mack Davis will never be a “Big Man,” and neither, perhaps, will the Jews if they allow themselves to succumb to their desires. Despite Mack’s aesthetically pleasing body, superior athleticism, and enviable lack of inhibition, his economic marginalization and seemingly inescapable degradation are absolutely not desirable. The desire for blackness, then, is ultimately eclipsed by a desire to escape it. All of the Jews who enter Mack’s life eventually abandon him, returning to their life of homogeneous affluence and leaving him behind in his dejection.

By the 1980s, Jews were some of the “most secure economically and socially of any white Americans” (Goldstein 223). Jews could ostensibly feel confident enough in their social status to reclaim their ethnicity. Despite, however, this seemingly ideal circumstance for expressions of cultural distinction, many Jews have remained ambivalent in their relationship to ethnicity. Although the Jews’ highly influential social position and the advancement of diversity in recent decades might have had the potential to foster the development of a strong, exclusive and ethnically marked Jewish community, many Jews have continued to struggle in distinguishing themselves from the white majority because of the re-entrenchment of racial polarities occurring in the 1980s and beyond. Because of “the cancellation of the social contract and dismantling of social reforms,” many blacks who had previously been helped by social programs were once again facing economic immobility in the 80s (Katz-Fishman and Scott 340). Many blacks and whites were
thus, yet again, polarized on opposite ends of the economic spectrum, with Jews on the white side of the (re)growing black/white divide. With “African Americans… disproportionately in the lower strata of the class system” and “Jewish Americans… disproportionately in the upper strata of the class system,” the social and economic margin between American Jews and the often racially distinct lower classes was only growing (Katz-Fishman and Scott 310, 310-1). The pre-civil rights era optimism and hope for racial alliances had largely faded, and racial identities, particularly in terms of economic differences, were being rigidified. According to Walda Katz-Fishman and Jerome Scott, the “fabulous success of the American Jews and their integration into society’s power elite” facilitated “their embrace of the worldview and ideology of the ruling class, distancing them more than ever from their advocacy for the truly disadvantaged in the United States” (337). The “ideology of the ruling class” tended to be a racist ideology, and the “truly disadvantaged in the United States” tended to be black. Changing economic trends thus drove many Jews to continue to adhere to their whiteness and repudiate blackness and all of the ethnic behaviors associated with the racialized lower class.

There is a distinct racial semiotics that governs perceptions of race in the United States and attributes to the continuing economic marginalization of blacks. In White By Law, Ian Haney Lopez describes what we well know, that “race is not… simply a matter of physical appearance and ancestry. Instead, it is primarily a function of the meanings given to these” (11). The meanings attached to whiteness are positive, and those attached to blackness are negative. As Haney Lopez notes, “to be non-White… implied a certain degeneracy of intellect, morals, self-restraint, and political values… to be White… suggested moral maturity, self-assurance, personal independence, and political sophistication” (11-12). Jews, having internalized this damaging racial semiotics, learned that their whiteness endowed them with a superiority of character and that any deviation from white conformity might strip them of that positive perception. Because “White identity is tied inextricably to non-White identity as its positive mirror, its superior opposite,” it seemed that Jews had to reject all things non-white, including blacks and ethnic behavior, to protect themselves from the negativity and inferiority attached to non-whiteness (Haney Lopez 21). The divisive racial politics and economic trends of the 1980s seemed to confirm America’s racial semiotics, as the “lazy, ignorant, lascivious, and criminal” blacks stayed fittingly in the lower classes and the “industrious, knowledgeable, virtuous, and law-abiding” whites
naturally inhabited the upper classes (Haney Lopez 20). Lore Segal’s *Her First American* returns to the postwar moment to reveal the damaging effect of internalizing the meanings attached to race in America. The text revisits the moment when Jews finally gained entry into the coveted world of white privilege to illustrate the often taut, uncomfortable, and compulsory nature of that transformation. In Segal’s fictional world, Jews have no choice but to integrate, to become conforming, respectable, middle to upper-class members of white society, despite any personal reservations or discomfort with the restrictions attached to that integration. The Jews’ consciousness of social norms informs them that they will be tolerated and accepted into the ranks of prosperous American whites as long as they fulfill their potential to become exemplary members of that undifferentiated, affluent class. Just as African Americans must view themselves through the lens of an aggressive and unwelcoming society that expects failure, Jews are compelled, through society’s expectations, to exist within the limiting and homogeneous space of whiteness.

The setting is New York City in the 1950s, and twenty one year-old Ilka Weissnix, a recent Jewish immigrant from Vienna, has survived the Holocaust and come to America. She lives in a cramped apartment on the Upper West Side with her American cousin Fishgoppel, an intelligent, independent woman working toward her master’s degree in English. In contrast to her more intellectually sophisticated cousin, Ilka is entirely naïve to racial prejudice, and she quickly falls in love with Carter Bayoux, a much older black man. Unlike *The Changelings*, which progresses from separation between blacks and whites to togetherness, “the overall movement of *Her First American* is from togetherness to separation” (Goffman 191). Ilka spends the majority of the novel wanting and striving to belong in Carter’s world, but she is ultimately unsuccessful. Carter’s descent into black degradation is the negative mirror of Ilka’s rise into the world of white opulence. Although Carter is a seemingly successful intellectual with many career prospects and important connections, he squanders all opportunities and succumbs to alcoholism, just as Mack Davis succumbs to gambling. Carter’s failure is drawn as “a response to socially generated stress” from “having internalized group degradation” (Goffman 189). Carter’s success in the white world will forever be sabotaged by his understanding of American racial politics and perception of himself through that racist lens. Similarly, Ilka’s ascent into Americanness and white privilege is represented not so much as a choice, but as a response to societal pressures that demand whiteness of her. Sinclair’s Vincent internalizes racial tolerance to accept Clara
as her friend and attempt to defy a society that aligns her only with whiteness, whereas here Ilka internalizes racial difference to realize that she must distance herself from blackness in order to reap the benefits attached to American whiteness.

Initially, many aspects of Ilka and Carter would seem to draw them together. Both are worldly, cosmopolitan figures (Carter as a well-read, well-traveled scholar and Ilka as an immigrant) who have experienced victimization and exile (Ilka as a Jew in the Holocaust and Carter as a black man in Jim Crow America). The young and impressionable Ilka’s hunger for knowledge of the people of her new country would seem to make her a perfect fit for a well-connected and knowledgeable born and bred American. When Ilka meets Carter, she tells him, excitedly, that he is her “first real American,” but, in reality, he is a less-than-American who will educate her in the meaning of true Americanness (Segal 16). Carter teasingly yet truthfully informs Ilka that he is “of the second class,” because he knows that to be a “first class” American is to be white (16). Ilka spends the rest of the novel internalizing this racial consciousness and the notion of blackness as the inferior opposite of whiteness. She learns that, as a white woman in America, her intimacy with the black world is inevitably short-lived. As a black man, Carter’s engagement with the white world can only be “partial” and “problematic,” and, likewise, Ilka must understand that her assimilation into American life can only be comprehensive if she repudiates blackness (Goffman 191). By creating an unrealistically naïve character in Ilka, Segal is able to suggest the sheer intensity of America’s divisive racial politics through its rapid and powerful effect upon Ilka’s formerly colorblind sensibilities. Despite the excitement and comfort Ilka finds in her relationship with Carter, she is inadequately employed and adrift during her entire relationship with him. Ilka’s aimlessness throughout her association with a black man points toward the utterly destructive effect of blackness on social advancement. It is only upon cutting ties with Carter that Ilka can fully engage in the world of white propriety. She acquires a respectable job, marries and has a child. Her life becomes fruitful only after she abandons ethnicity. Segal’s New York setting functions similarly to Neugeboren’s; if “New York City is… an archetypal scene of cultural hybridization” (Goffman 129), then the characters’ inability to inhabit fluid identities in such a diverse setting indicates the stringency of America’s racial boundaries.

In the 1920s, when Jewish immigrants populated the Lower East Side “ghetto” of New York, they were poor, excluded, and downtrodden, but they were also a distinctive, lively cultural community. Ronald
Takaki describes this spirited atmosphere in the Jewish immigrant communities of the early twentieth century: “The laughter of children joined ‘a symphony of discordant noises’ filling the air. Pushcarts lined the streets, and a cacophony of Yiddish voices, ‘a continual roar,’ rose from the crowds” (267). This ethnic vibrancy was silenced by the whitening of the Jews in the 1940s and 50s, and, despite their great success and advancement throughout the second half of the twentieth century, they continue to long for their lost ethnic distinction. Accompanying this yearning, however, is a fear that too close an identification with ethnicity will bring them back to the subjugated state and marginalization from which they worked so hard to escape. Many Jews are thus perpetually torn between the world of white privilege and the world of Otherness, wanting to embrace parts of both without entirely embodying either one. Jo Sinclair’s *The Changelings* is a fantasy of such identity fluidity and suggests the pre-civil rights era optimism regarding the potential for cross-racial alliances. Illustrating fluidity during girlhood, however, suggests the impermanence of such a transformation. The staying power of such a change for a girl who has yet to come of age in America is uncertain, to say the least. Jay Neugeboren’s *Big Man* and Lore Segal’s *Her First American* unravel that fantasy and optimism to demonstrate more forcefully the impossibility of fluidity in a society of rigid identity categories. All three novels, published in utterly different moments in time, return to the same time period and revisit the same questions of race and Jewish American identity, the same fears and desires. The continuous reexamination and re-narrating of the moment when Jews became white and the complexities that accompanied that transformation demonstrates that, since the moment Jews were initiated into the world of whiteness, their discomfort with that comprehensive whiteness has remained unresolved and their desire to reclaim a piece of their lost Otherness unfulfilled.
CHAPTER I

BLACKNESS AS A JEWISH GIRL’S YOUTHFUL INDISCRETION:

JO SINCLAIR’S THE CHANGELINGS AND THE FLEETING NATURE OF IDENTITY FLUIDITY

After World War II, the Jews’ entrance into the world of whiteness at times resulted in an internalization and demonstration of American racism. Rather than generating a bond between blacks and Jews, the Jews’ history of persecution often had the opposite effect of fostering “the regressive impulse among some whites to take economic and political refuge in whiteness” (Jacobsen 247). For many Jews, their newly acquired whiteness was a sanctuary from their past Otherness, from living a poor, isolated existence on the margins of society. African Americans could thus embody a threat to that newfound safety. Goffman writes that, “for Jewish Americans the Black presence becomes a jarring reminder of a past history of ghettoization and marginalization” (174). Rather than viewing blacks as a group with mirroring difficulties in need of their assistance, Jews often perceived black subjugation as an unpleasant and unwelcome reminder of their past Otherness, which resulted in a distancing between Jews and blacks that reflected American segregation. As a protective measure, Jews tended to dissociate from blacks, the embodiments of their past struggles, to keep that threatening Otherness at bay. Adapting whiteness, then, often involved an assimilation of racist behaviors and attitudes in the interest of self-preservation. Jews’ desires to be socially separate from blacks were reinforced by housing policies which helped to keep blacks and Jews apart residentially. Jacobsen notes that “the Federal Housing Authority’s ‘whites only’ approach to suburban housing loans re-created Jews in their new regime of racial homogenization” (188). Now that Jews were deemed white, segregation practices like discriminatory housing loans “re-created” Jews by placing them, for the first time, on the privileged side of discrimination. Jews were thus legally allowed to situate themselves within homogenized communities to stave off the dangerous blacks.

The Jews’ internalization of American racism and self-defensive separation from blacks are exemplified in Jo Sinclair’s The Changelings. On an all-white, predominantly Jewish street in an unnamed Midwestern city, the struggles of immigrant parents and their Americanized children to cling to their newly acquired whiteness are projected upon and reflected through the “Black Ones”, or, in Yiddish, the
“Schwartzes” (Sinclair 31). The risk of black people moving onto the street threatens the current tenants’ livelihood, status, children, religion, and close-knit community. The residents employ the discourse of blackness to express their frustrations as they negotiate the uncertain space between Jewishness and Americanness. Their struggles to embody the whiteness now applicable to them, to prosper economically and rise above the inferior blacks, are articulated through their disdain for the Black Ones. Their journey toward assimilation, however, is complicated by a fear of losing the intimacy of the Jewish community which is manifested through an undercurrent of desire for the Other that runs throughout The Changelings. The Black Ones are objects of both “fascination and a self-protective derision” (Lott 6). As ethnic Others, they “fascinate” in their mirroring of the Jews’ former status, but they also require a “self-protective derision” in that their presence is a constant threat to the Jews’ freshly obtained prominence. In representing what the Jews once were, the blacks in The Changelings are both intriguing and alarming. Transforming into whites erases the Jews’ cultural exclusivity, which the blacks, as a group apart, retain. The fact that Sinclair’s Jews reside in a mostly-Jewish neighborhood and associate almost exclusively with other Jews confirms that, though they yearn for the prosperity and security attached to whiteness, the bonds of ethnicity remain valuable. The blacks’ ethnic distinction is thus simultaneously desirable and menacing. Eric Goldstein notes, “If [Jews] sought to become undifferentiated Americans on the suburban frontier, they often restricted their most intimate contacts to other Jews” (206-7). Jews may have wanted to maintain the public face of whiteness by sticking to all-white neighborhoods, but, privately, they often desired the comfort to express their unique Jewishness by socializing mainly with other Jews. The black presence disrupts the public mask of whiteness, but it also provides a mirror and possible outlet for the Jews’ repressed ethnicity.

Toni Morrison writes that “Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (Playing 17). The “Africanist presence” in The Changelings allows for an exploration of the divided Jewish American self. The simultaneous and sometimes conflicting fears of losing one’s hard-earned status in America and losing the intimacy of the Jewish community are expressed in The Changelings “through and within” the representation of blackness. As the threat of the Black Ones, real or imagined, looms, the Jews’ various anxieties regarding their place in America emerge. The narrative centers around twelve year-old Judy
Vincent, a first generation American tomboyish adolescent who goes by her last name, “Vincent,” to avoid being associated with the “soft, plaintive weakness” of girls (Sinclair 17). In From Girl to Woman: American Women’s Coming-of-Age Narratives, Christy Rishoi writes that “adolescence—coming of age—is by definition a time when identity is fluid and contradictory” (13). In writing a “coming of age” narrative, Sinclair has created a space within which to play with identity. Vincent’s adolescence thus allows for fluidity in terms of both race and gender. She is the leader of a gang of young boys, and she dresses like a boy. Michael Rogin writes that cross-dressing “celebrates boundary fluidity” (31), and Marjorie Garber likewise notes that “cross-dressing... represents... the necessary critique of binary thinking, whether particularized as male and female, black and white... or in any other way” (10-11). Through her cross-dressing, Vincent represents both the “fluidity” of gender divisions and a “critique” of the male/female binary, but this cross-gender behavior implies the fluidity of racial categories as well. As both Rogin and Garber suggest, cross-dressing signifies the instability of identity categories across the board. The connection between cross-dressing and universal identity fluidity is made clear through Vincent, the cross-dresser who crosses the racial boundary to befriend a young black girl named Clara. Vincent defies both femininity and whiteness to suggest that both the disruption of conventional gender roles and the unsettling of racial categories are equally difficult and often short-lived processes. As an adolescent, Vincent can experiment with the dismantling of these overly confining identity binaries, but such conduct will likely end with the onset of adulthood. She can attempt to inhabit the spaces in between maleness and femaleness, whiteness and blackness, but she will, eventually, succumb to the “many restrictions and the suppression of the self that are ostensibly unavoidable when a girl comes of age” (Rishoi 8).

When Vincent’s gang unseats her, thus reinforcing the very gender boundary she wishes to evade, Vincent meets Clara. At the moment when Vincent’s gender-bending is challenged, she discovers her potential for defying racial categories. The “Africanist” figure thus arrives on the scene at a “choked” moment of identity anxiety to provide Vincent with a new outlet for her “fluidity” and for playing out her discontent with “binary thinking.” Clara’s arrival in this moment seems also to signify the potential for girlhood strength, for a space in between girlhood “weakness” and boyhood might. Clara’s presence, her marginality as a black girl and her mirroring tomboyish-ness, defies conforming womanhood and whiteness, thus strengthening and
facilitating Vincent’s journey toward identity fluidity. Vincent is somewhere between childhood and adulthood, masculine and feminine, and she vacillates between fear and acceptance of difference. She is the changeling, an in-between figure, and her journey throughout the novel is a quest to evade the stringent racial and gender categories imposed on her by American society. Her desire for the fluidity of racial boundaries is inextricably linked to her desire for an unfixed gender identity. In her study of tomboys, Michelle Ann Abate writes that, often, “the ambiguity of the tomboy’s gender mirrors the ambiguity of her purported Caucasian identity” (xxiv). Vincent’s gender-bending thus goes hand in hand with her crossing of racial boundaries. She challenges the rigid identity categories that are based upon supposedly biological differences.

Although Vincent challenges convention throughout The Changelings, she cannot help but be simultaneously confined by it. She is surrounded by people who blame blackness for every disappointing facet of their lives, and so she has internalized this fear of blackness, this “self-protective derision” that her family, friends, and neighbors use to distance themselves from the deviant forces that threaten their livelihoods.

Vincent’s street is made up of mostly two-family homes, and three Jewish families have moved from her street to “the Heights,” a wealthier, more outlying suburban neighborhood into which the richer Jews have been migrating, leaving East 120th uneasy with three “empties” and no one wanting to rent them but the Black Ones (Sinclair 11, 7). For the Jews on Vincent’s street, the coming of the blacks represents the precariousness of their position in America. African Americans are a threat to their newly obtained white status and their desire to leave Otherness behind. Vincent’s father Abe struggles with “having to work for other men and being a nothing” (101). He earns a modest living as a painter, and the prospect of black people moving onto his street is a reminder to Abe Vincent that his status is no better than that of the most despised group in America. As Abe discusses the Schwartze situation with his upstairs neighbor Hersch Levine, Hersch comments, “It is an American habit… It has to happen. For years a neighborhood is peaceful, pretty, well kept. Then, overnight, the Black Ones start hammering to get in. They want it… They’re hollering, ‘Let me in, give me your house!’” (40). The blackness here is a stand-in for Abe and Hersch’s sense of failure and inadequacy in America. They immigrated with big dreams for themselves and their children, and the reality has not measured up to those dreams. As the text portrays it, the blacks that come to inquire about the houses for rent are peaceful and polite. They never “hammer” or “holler,” and the power to take houses away does not lie with them. Banks repossess
homes, not black people. Abe and Hersch’s discussion of the problem of “the Black Ones” is really a discussion of the unrealized American dream. They cannot afford to move to the Heights, the new ideal neighborhood for white Jews; and they have thus failed to provide well enough for their families. Vincent’s brother Nate is a gambler who has lost all interest in Jewishness and her sister Shirley married a gentile (a goy), so Abe’s dreams for his children have also fallen short. In lamenting the Black Ones, Abe actually expresses grief over his family’s fate in America and their inability to embody perfect whiteness.

According to Matthew Frye Jacobsen, “class markers have often been read as inborn racial characteristics: members of the working class… have been viewed in more sharply racial terms than their upper-class compatriots” (21). As Hersch Levine’s family struggles financially, his wife Lizzie racializes her class fears. Because blacks are seen as innately lower class, she uses the discourse of blackness to signify her fear of poverty. One Sunday morning, when her youngest son, Louis, is finally old enough to join his brothers in the newspaper business, Lizzie thinks: “The house was still hot from the blazing sun of Saturday… the heat stays like the threat of the Black Ones, to wear us out. Yet this morning she felt hopeful. Louis’s entrance into the working world was like another weapon against life” (Sinclair 81). The “threat of the Black Ones” is a substitute for the threat of poverty. The presence of black people is held accountable for “wear[ing]” Lizzie “out,” when actually the daily concern for making ends meet is that which is truly tiresome. In addition, “Louis’s entrance into the working world” is not a “weapon against” the Black Ones. His earnings may stave off poverty or hunger, but it certainly will not have any effect upon whether black people rent property on East 120th. Lizzie displaces the blame for her family’s unstable social and economic status onto blackness. The relationship between blacks and the lower class makes blackness an appropriate linguistic tool for expressing her fears of class descent. Rather than contemplating the problems at hand, Lizzie employs blackness as a surrogate and scapegoat for her unrealized dream of prosperity. Attributing life’s difficulties to uncontrollable forces (black people buying houses) is easier than admitting personal defeat and deficiencies (the inability to make enough money).

The Golden family also attributes their hardships to the encroaching black community. They are one of the three families with an empty upstairs suite, and each of their four children is in some way dysfunctional: their son, Jules, is dying at seventeen of a bad heart, their adult daughter, Becky, is mentally challenged, their
other daughter, Heidi, is on the brink of becoming an old maid, and their youngest, Alex, is an often misbehaving teenage son. Alex reflects on his family’s situation: “He felt surrounded by danger. The ring of the doorbell and the black face waiting there to grab a house, Jules gaunt and pale in the bed, Becky. She, too, was a kind of death in the house” (Sinclair 72). Alex conflates “the black face” outside with the danger of the family’s misfortune inside the house. Blackness has nothing to do with Jules dying or Becky’s simple-mindedness. The feeling of “death in the house” is a result of the sorrow surrounding Jules and Becky, and the black face outside casts a shadow over the house that merely intensifies the already-present anxiety over illness and death and children that do not fulfill their parents’ aspirations for them. Likewise, Heidi attributes her inability to find a husband to the Black Ones: “’A dance, a wedding,’ Heidi cried. ‘Who’ll I go with… a Schwarze?’” (75). Heidi displaces the blame for her singleness onto the Schwartzes as though they have penetrated the neighborhood so deeply that there are simply no Jewish prospects left. In reality, not a single black family lives on her street, and Heidi’s true problem is her unrequited love for one of her neighbors, Chip Levine. Blackness, in its “inherent” inferiority, can stand for any difficulty: scarcity, illness, death, and even the unsettling of traditional marriage or family life.

Despite a general repudiation of blackness, the text also demonstrates a simultaneous desire for blackness that complicates that repudiation. Eric Lott, in his study of blackface minstrelsy, contends that “intercourse between racial cultures was at once so attractive and so threatening” (6). This simultaneous attraction to and fear of the “intercourse” between black and white is exemplified in an incident in which Heidi is out walking one night and comes across Santina, a young Italian girl from her street, having sex with a boy inside Vincent’s gang’s clubhouse. At first she becomes aroused: “For an aching, wonderful second, she was in the little hot house, on the floor, passion pouring down on her,” but then she hears the girl screaming, “Oh, you black man, oh, you sweet black sweety man, Blacky honey!” (Sinclair 158). Heidi’s arousal shifts immediately to “horror,” and she runs home, crying and shaking.. Her angry shock at the sight of a white adolescent girl from her street “laying with a Schwarze!” is an expression of her own sexual frustration (159). Her desire for love and the shame associated with her spinster status is made manifest through her rather melodramatic reaction to witnessing a white girl with a black man. Heidi is ashamed of her arousal, her momentary desire to be the girl lying underneath that dark man. She cannot voice her burning sexual longings,
but she can engage in the easy, familiar discourse of disapproval over the Black Ones. Ironically, the black man is later revealed to be Alex, Heidi’s teenage brother whom Santina had nicknamed “Blacky” because of his dark complexion. This revelation points toward the fragility and artificiality of racial construction. The physical markers of race are unreliable; Alex, a white Jew, is just as dark as a black man. If whites cannot even spot their own “kind,” then how are they to protect themselves from the threat of blackness? Santina’s nickname for Alex unsettles the usual racial categorizations. The residents of East 120th Street employ the language of blackness to express their fears and disappointments, whereas Santina uses “Blacky” as a term of desire and endearment. Heidi is horrified upon hearing the previously destructive term used to express sexual pleasure. Her simultaneous desire and revulsion at the sights and sounds of black passion is representative of the push-pull nature of Vincent’s vacillations between identity fluidity and conformity. Heidi at first desires to participate in the cross-cultural “intercourse” as she sees the white girl and the dark boy and imagines the liberation of her repressed yearnings for intimacy. At the sound of “Blacky,” however, the vocal, indisputable acknowledgement of the transgression, she feels horrified at the violation of social norms. Similarly, Vincent finds her relationship with Clara, “the intercourse between racial cultures,” simultaneously attractive and threatening. Vincent’s desire for fluidity, for the release from identity rigidity, pushes her toward blackness, while her deeply internalized racial consciousness pulls her away from it.

Early in the novel, Vincent also articulates her fears through references to blackness. When she begins to feel her leadership role in the gang (and her one-of-the-guys status) slipping away from her, she thinks about how she “hated these inexplicable changes; they loomed over her tight, little, safe world like the black people standing in front of the empties. Who had permitted them in… her gang!” (Sinclair 7). Of course, blacks have nothing to do with Vincent’s transforming into a young woman and no longer belonging with the boys, but Vincent has come to understand blackness as a familiar rhetorical device for expressing aggravation at life’s unfair circumstances. She uses the discourse of blackness to reflect the fact that her “world” of masculinity is being threatened by the undeniable presence of her physical femininity. She has learned to regard the encroaching blacks as the most detestable “change” in the world, thus any other threats to her “tight, little, safe world” are somehow related to that larger problem. It is Vincent’s femininity, though, not the surrounding black community, that produces trauma. In his chapter, “Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews,” Jacobsen describes
how “visible” markers of Jewish ethnicity were used to forcibly racialize the Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jews were described as having “peculiar characteristics and physiognomies” that “everybody can distinguish,” and these physical qualities supposedly pointed toward a natural inferiority which justified the institutional limiting of their citizenship rights (178). The members of Vincent’s gang similarly reveal the visible signs of her femininity to mark her as unfit for gang leadership and strip her of her authority. They ask her, “who the hell do you think you are? …A guy?” and Vincent sees this as “an accusation. She had never actually called herself a boy, but neither had she ever thought of herself as one of the girls… She was simply Vincent, with the proud right to walk with the strong” (Sinclair 16, 17). Vincent believes that she is “strong” enough and has earned the “right” to evade gender classification, but she is sorely mistaken. On the cusp of womanhood, the visible markers of her sex are growing more and more apparent, and the gang employs these markers to challenge her leadership and supposedly masculine status. The boys ridicule her, unraveling her attempts at masculinity:

‘Because you wear pants when you don’t go to school? That make you a guy?
…What do you have to wear in school?’ Dave went on inexorably. ‘Dresses—ha ha. Middy blouse, skirt. What do you get called in school, huh?’

‘Judith,’ Alex said derisively. ‘Judith Vincent.’

‘What does your mother call you?’ Dave said.

‘Judy, Judy!’ Dan’s taunting voice answered. (17)

The boys undo Vincent’s endeavors to circumvent gender norms through her name and clothing. They point toward the visible markers of gender to forcibly feminize her and undercut her non-normative behavior. They prove her femininity by “outing” her as the dress-wearing Judy to invalidate the pants-wearing Vincent. The naming of Vincent as “Judy,” the verbal acknowledgement of her sex, serves to expose her body as feminine. The linguistic and the bodily are conflated to reveal the power of language or linguistic categories to define and limit the body. Just as the name “Judy” defines Vincent as a female body, which thus excludes her from spaces of male strength and camaraderie, the “Black Ones” are inferior bodies who are excluded from houses and neighborhoods. When Santina calls Alex “Blacky,” she defines his body, for Heidi, as African American who is thus severely transgressive in his penetration of a white woman. When the boys call Vincent “Judy,”
they define her body as female and render her powerless and also transgressive in the space of male bonding and strength, the gang. She is crushed by their “taunts” because they mean the loss of her “proud right to walk with the strong.” Femininity opposes strength, so the Vincent delineated as female loses her “right” to the same status as the strong boys with whom she wishes to play. Gender and racial norms come together here to reinforce the systems of social exclusion. Despite Vincent’s contention that the “looming” changes threatening her world are “black people,” the threat lies both in blackness and the binary categories of male and female. Blackness is a threat because Vincent is threatened by inflexible identity categories resembling those that limit African Americans. Blacks are marginalized by their racial category, similar to how Vincent’s world, her gang, friendships, and toughness, stands to be ruined by her inescapable gender category.

After Vincent is violently assaulted and stripped by the gang, Clara appears for the first time, and Vincent’s perceptions of blackness begin to change:

…she saw the girl, standing with her hands in the pockets of her slacks. She was colored. There was a mechanical tensing for Vincent, weight on her toes, arms ready to fly up at the first move from the enemy… she took in everything about the girl: brown pants, white blouse, tennis shoes… They were as tall as each other, and the girl’s straight, black, shining hair was ear length too, parted on the side.

For a fantastic second, it was like staring into a mirror—except for the brown color of her face. (Sinclair 21-2).

Vincent at first sees Clara as one of the many nameless, faceless “enemy” Others, and her defensive instincts kick in with a “mechanical tensing.” She then, however, begins to notice the similarities between hers and the girl’s particular qualities like height and style. She realizes that this being before her is more than just another Black One; this is a girl, identical to her, a “mirror” image. Despite their visual resemblances, Vincent cannot yet shake her aggression toward the supposed enemy: “The suspicion and hatred, the fear, which had made strident echoes all the past summer, clanged through her like a warning” (22). Vincent has so internalized the panic surrounding the black presence that she essentially has an alarm sounding, “clanging” within her at the sight of this black girl. She soon realizes, however, that the girl standing before her is an ally rather than an adversary. Clara expresses her anger at Vincent’s attack: “I saw the whole thing. I wanted to kill him! ...I hate
guys like that” (22). She moves Vincent to understand that she is on her side and that they actually have a common enemy in men. Vincent realizes that she and Clara share more than just looks, they have a “sharing fury and bitterness, a mutual intense pride” as girls (22). They face a common struggle in being restrained by femininity and dominated by men. The fact that this racial twinning occurs directly after the assault indicates Vincent and Clara’s shared physical vulnerability as gendered figures. They both wear pants and tennis shoes, clothing which is flexible and unrestricted, signifying their attempts to evade restrictive categories and obscure their femininity behind the trappings of maleness. Both are foiled, however, by society’s insistence on their irremovable, inherent difference. As Vincent has learned, her clothing is merely a temporary mask of masculinity that can be removed at any time to reveal her femaleness.

Having just been assaulted by a group of white, Jewish, boys, Vincent begins to realize that the threatening enemy is actually present in her own kind more so than in blacks. Clara gives Vincent a knife to protect herself from the boys and, as she leaves, tells her to “Cut him good… You, Vincent,” and Vincent feels that Clara has given “the name a powerful, fisted sound” (Sinclair 23). In presenting Vincent with a defensive weapon and restoring the strength of her preferred, masculine name, Clara has empowered her. In an unexpected reversal, a black person has uplifted Vincent while her fellow white Jews have weakened her. Later, as Vincent watches a boxing match between Chip Levine and her former friend and gang member Dave, she muses that “the new leader of the gang was showing her that he was stronger than she, that he had the right to dispossess her” (92). For Vincent, associating dispossession with a white, Jewish, male figure is a significant step toward understanding social inequality. The enemy has previously been racially delineated, but here Vincent understands that enemy tendencies are not necessarily based on race or religion but on one’s inner character. She is also learning that, as a woman, she has a connection with Clara and the other Black Ones. They are both unfairly “dispossessed.” Blacks lose houses just for being black, and Vincent loses her gang just for being female. Though they invite comparison, these racial and gender differences are not analogous. Being black, for example, means belonging to a racial category that suggests an “inborn” class difference. African Americans’ racialization fixes them into an inescapably lower class identity; they are barred from living in middle-class neighborhoods like Vincent’s because of an imagined, inherent working-class status. Though they are not parallel states of subjection, the connection between blacks and women is
important for Vincent’s understanding of the artificiality of socially-constructed identity categories. Vincent cannot shed her sex any more than blacks can shed their skin color. They both wear a physical difference that make others (whites and/or men) “stronger” than they are, more powerful in society. Vincent is beginning to realize the significance of “the sudden mystery of having Dave turn enemy, and the enemy turn into a girl named Clara, who had thrown a present of protection at her feet” (31). Dave assaulted Vincent and maliciously usurped her role as gang leader, and this makes him an oppressive enemy; whereas Clara’s black face, which previously engendered “suspicion and hatred,” is now associated with “protection” and solidarity.

Having discovered an unlikely friendship in Clara, Vincent begins to alter her perception of black people:

…she looked out into the street and peered had at the faces of the Negro couple leaving the Golden porch. Was he Clara’s father? Was she Clara’s mother, aunt, cousin?

She had been watching Negroes in this new way for the last two days. It was the first time she had ever looked for anything beyond the dark color—eyes, shape of a face, an expression of yearning or of laughter. Funny!—to be looking for such things. (Sinclair 91)

Vincent now imagines family ties in the black community. Aligning blackness and family suggests that the Black Ones are people with relationships just like hers and not just a collective threat. She muses over the details of their features rather than just passing over them as a “dark color” and looks for “expression” in their faces. Vincent begins to realize that there are actual human feelings and personalities behind the once sinister color of the Black Ones. Seeing beyond Clara’s blackness has allowed her to understand black people as more like herself and less like an indeterminate, enemy force. When she meets with Clara a second time, she discovers even more similarities that bridge the gap between her and black people. Clara is once again wearing “pants” and “tennis shoes,” reinforcing for Vincent their commonality as tough girls (127). She tells Vincent that she carries a knife because “you can always pull it out, see? If white people get funny. Hell, they’re always looking to hit us, rob us. My mother and father told me all about that.” Vincent is stunned by this information and thinks, “But they had always told her exactly that about Schwartze” (128). She learns that both blacks and whites see the enemy in one another. Clara has been raised to believe in an enemy known as “white people,” just as Vincent has been raised to hate the Schwartze. She also learns that Clara once belonged to a gang of
boys, that she once had a masculine nickname like Vincent—“Jack,” short for her last name, Jackson—that she has a baby cousin whom she loves, just as Vincent loves her baby nephew Manny, and that she will attend the same school as Vincent in the fall (131). As she discovers this information, “Vincent marveled about the mounting list of things she and Clara had in common” (130). For Vincent, it is incredible to find so many connections between herself and a black girl. These similarities unite blackness and whiteness and suggest the possibility for equality. If a black girl and white girl can be so much alike, “mirror” images both inside and out, then the supposedly inherent divide between blacks and whites must be an imagined construct. The comparison that Sinclair sets up between Clara and Vincent demonstrates the permeability of racial boundaries. If it is merely a socially imagined division rather than a biologically based fact, then it is destructible. The two girls’ similar characteristics and life experiences indicate that, to a certain extent, black equals white and white equals black. White is not naturally superior if white and black are reflections of one another. If whites and blacks are equally human rather than two patently different races, then racial fluidity is possible. The naïve notion that Vincent should be able to step in and out of each world with relative ease is indicative of her adolescence as well as the fleeting nature of that notion. According to Rishoi, “By focusing on adolescence, by definition a time of rebellion and resistance… the coming-of-age narrative provides a congenial form for women writers to successfully question the power of dominant ideologies to construct their lives” (9). Vincent’s coming-of-age is thus a convenient space for the questioning of dominant racial ideologies. Adolescence, however, is merely a short-lived interval between childhood and adulthood. The time of “rebellion and resistance,” of identity boundlessness, is, then, only temporary.

Despite the provisional nature of Vincent’s fluidity, she continues to appreciate the artificiality and illogicality of racial divides as she begins to associate Clara with her beloved baby nephew, Manny, the son of Vincent’s sister Shirley and her gentile husband Johnnie. Shirley has been shunned from the Vincent family for marrying a gentile, so much so that Vincent’s father and grandmother refuse to even speak of Shirley or Manny. Vincent, however, maintains a close relationship with Shirley, Johnnie, and Manny, babysitting and visiting frequently. When Vincent hears her highly respected grandmother asking her father: “If a man’s own family can open itself to the enemy, shall we be surprised at the enemy outside the wall?” Vincent knows that the grandmother is referring to Shirley’s marriage to Johnnie, the goy, as the “enemy” to which her family
opened itself (Sinclair 101). Vincent interprets that if Johnnie the gentile is an enemy, then that must mean that
Manny, the half-gentile baby, is an enemy too. She becomes angry and thinks, “So a beautiful Manny could be
an enemy…? If the Grandmother said it—sure, she was a big shot in the shul! …The voice of authority:
Manny was an enemy, like a Schwartze… Manny, Shirley, Clara: name your enemy!” (101). Here Vincent
realizes that, for the Jews on her street, blacks, gentiles, and disgraceful Jews like Shirley are all lumped
together. They are all not-Jews, so they must all be the enemy. The rigid white/black boundary is complicated
by the Jews’ preference for other Jews. Once again, the Jews wear a public mask of whiteness which requires
an abhorrence of blacks, but, privately, they aspire to retain their cultural exclusivity, which manifests as an
aversion to the white, gentile world and all things contaminated by that world, like Manny and Shirley. To
Vincent, the idea of her adored Manny being an enemy of the Jews is unimaginable, so Clara’s enemy status
must be negotiable as well. Vincent is redrawing the rigid social boundaries drawn by her people. As Vincent’s
father lament’s her grandmother’s move to Israel, she feels a “violent anger” and thinks, “I don’t care about the
Grandmother! Why are you talking about her instead of Manny?” (193). Now, instead of blacks, it is Vincent’s
own family that is inciting fury within her. She begins to see enemy qualities within her family, within the
Jewish world, while the so-called outsiders—Shirley, Johnnie, Manny, and Clara—suddenly represent friends
and allies.

As Vincent reinvents her perceptions of racial difference, she questions the notion of holding the black
presence responsible for life’s failures while simultaneously struggling to let go of her own fears. She begins to
grasp the absurdity of displacing one’s frustrations onto black people: “what a puzzle that the men had blamed
all their losses on the mysterious, terrible Schwartze: rabbis and money and love and sons” (Sinclair 43). After
meeting Clara, Vincent finds the Schwartze no longer “mysterious” and “terrible” but familiar and friendly,
and she thus realizes the irrationality of the elders being so fearful and condemning of them. To attribute the
losses of “rabbis and money and love and sons” to the Schwartzes is no longer sensible to Vincent. She
challenges the perceptions that have been passed down to her from the older generation, particularly the fearful
attitude toward black people as an ominous, foreboding presence. Although Vincent is slowly internalizing the
illogicality of black hatred, she is at times unable to completely disentangle herself from those same fearful
prejudices. Before her second meeting with Clara, she muses that “it would be dark soon, and nobody would
see them,” and, when she arrives at the gang’s former clubhouse at which they have agreed to meet, she checks to make sure that the place is “deserted and safe” (127). Vincent is obviously afraid to be seen with Clara. She is relieved that the darkness will hide them, and the emptiness of the clubhouse makes her feel “safe” from the gaze of a reproachful society. Tough girl Vincent, who defies gender conventions by wearing pants, going by her last name, climbing, running, and spending all her time with boys, suddenly fears the consequences of defying racial conventions. It seems that Vincent cannot yet abandon the racist perceptions under which she has been raised. Her desire for fluidity and Clara’s friendship is confused by an insistent fear of Clara’s blackness.

Lott notes that the desire for black bodies has been complicated by a “white racial dread” (6) and “a strange dread of miscegenation” which are founded in “fears of a degraded and threatening… Other” and “fears of succumbing to a racialized image of Otherness” (25). The degradation and racialization of the Other are threatening in that they are feared to be infectious conditions, resulting in the “dread” of all things “racial” and of a terrifying “miscegenation” or mixture of races which will forever contaminate and disgrace the white race. As Vincent’s own fears trouble her, she exemplifies this dread of contamination in an incident in which she unexpectedly encounters Clara on the street near her sister’s house while babysitting her nephew. She immediately “glanced around to see if anybody she knew was watching” (Sinclair 175). Vincent’s tension suggests that she is not entirely comfortable with her friendship with Clara, her proximity to blackness. She is not yet ready to assert their relationship in public. She notices that Clara’s “skin looked more black than brown in this light,” and she even “casually” tries to pull Manny’s stroller backward to lead Clara “farther from the lights of the avenue” (176). In full public view, Vincent’s awareness of Clara’s blackness is heightened; it becomes more apparent and thus more frightening. Despite all that she and Clara have in common and their growing closeness, Vincent remains hesitant about being seen; she wants to keep their relationship literally in the dark. Clara’s visible racial-ness is problematic, and Vincent wants to conceal her association with inferior blackness, similar to how she wants to hide her femininity before behind masculine clothing. It is in fact the seeing, the ocular proof, of her femaleness that forces her damaging identification with womanhood. To avoid yet another destructive identification, this time with blackness, Vincent must not be seen with Clara, must not allow for others to have that ocular proof of Clara’s blackness and Vincent’s nearness to that ostensibly
contagious blackness. Vincent’s anxiety over such contamination is further evidenced when Clara leans over the stroller to look at Manny: “Vincent waited, with a kind of dread, for Clara to reach in and touch Manny” (177). Vincent’s “dread,” as Lott might suggest, implies her fear Clara’s touch will somehow infect or defile Manny with degraded blackness. Although she quickly comes to her senses and asks Clara if she wants to hold Manny, this moment of alarm is indicative of the deeply rooted nature of Vincent’s fear of blackness. Her anxiety and dread also suggest the sheer potency of American racism. The permeability of the racial divide suggested by Clara and Vincent’s earlier twinning is essentially negated by these moments of doubt. Vincent’s “mechanical” hesitations expose her inner racism as a somewhat unrelenting force; it affects her unexpectedly and almost uncontrollably. Vincent’s inability to disregard her racist impulses in the face of clear evidence to the contrary foreshadows the failure of her transformation. Although Vincent recovers from her doubt and eventually feels “warmth” and “elation” from spending time with Clara and watching her interact with Manny, her initial, innate impulse is toward fear and revulsion (177, 178). Vincent’s reaction to Clara on the first day they meet is one of panic and self-defense. This time around, Vincent instinctively protects herself from the view of racist onlookers and fears that Clara’s contagious Otherness will infect her nephew. Her transformation is thus incomplete, at best. If American racial politics are so firmly entrenched in Vincent’s mind as to make her consistently troubled by the dread of blackness, then any possibility of partaking in Clara’s world and inhabiting a fluid space between blackness and whiteness appears doomed for failure.

Vincent later enacts the very blame displacement that had “puzzled” her when exhibited by her elders. When Mrs. Golden questions her disdainfully about her family’s plans for the High Holidays, “with cruel, hidden laughter in the voice,” implying the disgrace of Vincent’s family, Vincent feels her “joy,” “strength,” and “sureness” going away from her “like a puff of wind as soon as the woman had started to insult Shirley and Manny” (Sinclair 222). She runs, angry, toward her old clubhouse, “thinking with a sharp yearning of the old days when she had been the acknowledged leader in a fast, clear-cut world” (224). Mrs. Golden, having insulted Shirley and Manny’s in-between status, forces Vincent to second guess the recent ambiguity in her life. Before Shirley’s marriage, and back when Vincent had been accepted as one of the boys and surrounded by her white, Jewish comrades, everything had been “clear-cut.” Masculine was good, feminine was bad. White was good, Black was bad. Jewish was good, Gentile was bad. The binaries are no longer
straightforward. Vincent’s body has blurred the line between masculine and feminine, her love for Shirley and Manny has blurred the line between Jewish and Gentile, and her friendship with Clara has blurred the line between black and white. She suddenly feels that “the thought of Clara was just another burden,” and her confidence in their friendship and in her own “changeling” status, is utterly shaken (224). When Vincent finds Clara unexpectedly waiting for her at the clubhouse, she unleashes her rage on her, exhibiting how she, too, can hold blackness accountable for her problems. She finds Clara sitting in front of a fire roasting potatoes for herself and Vincent, using Vincent’s old “firestick.” Vincent rebukes her “dirty nerve” and shouts, “Nobody uses my stick! …What do you think you’re doing, snitching my stuff?” (225). Vincent suddenly accuses Clara of fulfilling black stereotypes, of being “dirty,” sneaky, and stealing from her. Clara hurls back the racial insult, saying “Don’t worry, white folks, I won’t bother you in school, either” (226). The girls’ fast and effortless descent from friendship to race hatred is another hint toward the ultimate failure of identity fluidity. Despite her growing understanding of the irrationality of American racism, Vincent regresses under its influence and treats Clara like a common menace. She easily transforms Clara from a friend to a “dirty” and “snitching” black, just as Vincent quickly becomes just another one of the racist, collective “white folks” who view Clara as a problem. Although Vincent feels guilty afterward and realizes that her anger was “senseless,” her argument with Clara still suggests the inadequacy of her transformation in the face of the prevailing racism, as well as the seemingly insurmountable separation and conflict between the two worlds (225).

Although her fight with Clara hints toward the provisional nature of their friendship and a reduced potential for identity boundlessness, Vincent continues to resist the limits of both gender and racial categories. When yet another black man approaches one of the houses for rent on Vincent’s street, the owner refuses to show him the unit. When the black man persists in asking about the room, the owner attacks him, and the two engage in a violent fight. The neighbors observe “the battle they had been fighting for so long in secret, now abruptly in the open” (Sinclair 232). The residents of East 120th Street watch silently as their white neighbor savagely beats this black man, thus playing out their collective internal “battle.” Vincent at first remains “nailed to her step,” maintaining her fearful attitude about the social consequences of crossing the color line (233). Eventually, though, she begins to imagine the black man’s humanity:
For Vincent, who heard Clara’s father-brother-uncle call out in fear as he plunged backward to the sidewalk, that instant went on forever as she sat staring at the motionless-like-dead body. Then, terribly, it was like seeing her father lying there, the short stocky body, the middle-aged face with lines of worry in the forehead even now, even dead in the sunlight. Only her father’s face was brown, like Clara’s. (235-6)

Vincent envisions, at first, that the man is related to Clara and then perceives him as her own father. The middle-aged black man comes to stand simply for fathers, black or white, as Vincent seems to recall the earlier similarities between herself and Clara. In her mind they are twin fathers, interchangeable, thus she again suggests the mirroring of the black and white worlds and the subsequent permeability of the false divisions between them. The black man is not simply an embodiment of the anonymous, menacing enemy, he is a person. He could be someone’s “father-brother-uncle,” or even a reflection of Vincent’s own kin. This realization is the impetus for Vincent to breach the code of separation and help the incapacitated black man. As she runs to his aid, her mother screams “Judy!” but Vincent ignores this and keeps running toward blackness. Dave runs after her and calls “Vincent!” and she looks at him as they kneel beside the black man, “sharing a togetherness again that held all the… gladness of companionship” (236). Vincent’s dangerous violation of racial decorum, her brave sprint toward blackness, restores the potential for boundlessness that her fight with Clara had somewhat erased. Vincent turns away from “Judy” and becomes “Vincent” once again, “the familiar figure in pants, the fast, daring leader of all the fighting” (236). Vincent, in her “pants,” crosses both gender and racial lines. Her courage and physical speed restore her to her earlier masculinity; she is defined here as a “figure” and a “leader” rather than a “girl.” These sexually ambiguous delineations and Dave’s re-acknowledgement of Vincent as his companion imply that she has left behind the socially-imposed femininity and recovered her more ambiguous, tough girl, one-of-the-guys status.

Vincent’s defiance of the color barrier in her run toward blackness (and away from whiteness) also restores her racial ambiguity. As Vincent helps the injured black man and “wiped each streak of blood on the brown face,” she is essentially washing the stains of racism off of herself as well as the man (Sinclair 237). Up until this point, Vincent has concealed her relationship with Clara for fear of public criticism, but here she finally, publicly acknowledges her desire to break down the compulsory separation between black and white.
Vincent’s transgression of racial and gender lines, including her pseudo-cross-dressing in “pants,” flaunts the changeability of those lines and exhibits the pleasure of inhabiting an in-between space. If a girl can dress and run like a boy, and if a white person can treat a black person as an equal, then the boundaries of sex and race must be fluid. Vincent exudes pleasure in this moment; as she moves toward the indistinct space between male and female, black and white, she feels a thrilling combination of “freedom” and “danger” (236). Disturbing convention is simultaneously dangerous and pleasurable, thus signifying that Vincent’s transformation, though potentially joyful, is not without risk. The inherent “danger” associated with questioning these socially-accepted categories suggests the difficulty of liberating herself from convention and the precariousness of her fluid identity.

Immediately after defying racism, as well as all of the Jews on her street, by helping a Schwartz, Vincent goes to find Clara. She apologizes for her outburst in the clubhouse and the two girls reconcile, but the differences between them still loom, threatening their relationship and Vincent’s identity fluidity. Clara laments the fact that her family had to move into her aunt’s crowded house because, despite having money, they cannot find a house to buy (presumably because whites will not sell to them and banks will not loan to them). As Vincent imagines this difficulty, “she tried to visualize a house so crowded that there was no place to do homework. She tried fitting Clara and her books into her own bedroom… but she could not visualize that either” (Sinclair 244). Vincent, who has always had a comfortable house and her own bedroom, cannot imagine being deprived of those things (placing herself in the world of blackness), nor can she imagine fitting Clara into her world. Vincent’s inability to relate to dispossession or to perceive Clara in the house of whiteness suggests the overwhelming nature of racial separateness as well as the intractability of class differences. For Vincent, the idea of breaching the all-white code of East 120th Street and bringing a black girl into her parents’ house is inconceivable, which suggests that she is not entirely ready to disregard the color line. When Clara tells Vincent that her great-grandfather was a slave, Vincent wonders, “Does she know how a lot of guys in Russia ran away from the army there, and came here? That’s like slaves!” (246). Vincent, excitedly, has found a parallel between the histories of her people and Clara’s, but this “connection” actually serves to highlight their difference. Immigrant Jews like Vincent’s parents escaped persecution in another country and discovered a more tolerant space in America, a land to call home. American Blacks, on the other
hand, escaped slavery only to remain in the land of oppression. The end of slavery merely made way for new forms of subjugation, like segregation and housing discrimination. Blacks are not accepted like Jews in America. If Clara’s family is excluded from home ownership, then how can they call America their home? The treatment of Jews in Russia in the early twentieth century might be analogous to the treatment of American slaves, but the experiences of Jews and blacks in the United States are utterly incomparable. The reference to this significant disparity between blacks and Jews in 1940s America further widens the gap between Clara and Vincent, making their friendship even more unlikely. When Vincent suggests that she and Clara meet at school, she “thought of a hundred white faces in the main hall, all turning, all staring at her as she met Clara, all watching as she pushed the button that squired the water while Clara leaned to drink. She felt a little scared” (249). Vincent’s earlier fears have not yet subsided; she is still concerned about the white reaction to her defiance of racial barriers. Her vision of Clara drinking from the water fountain recalls the familiar notion of segregated water fountains, and suggests the same “dread” of contagion that she previously felt over Clara touching Manny, only this time the dread belongs not to Vincent but to the “hundred white faces” who would be watching her with Clara. Although Vincent has recovered from her own fear of Clara’s “infectious” blackness, she understands the instinct so well that she can easily imagine the “staring” that would occur when Clara places her black mouth on the water fountain. Vincent’s racial consciousness significantly obstructs her ability to move liberally and comfortably between the black and white worlds. Her discomfort is further demonstrated when she realizes that Dave has spotted her with Clara: “She tensed, waiting for the snarling words: What the hell were you doing with a Schwartz?” (251). Although Dave does not react this way, Vincent’s tension reveals her continuing uneasiness with crossing racial lines. Though she would like to break from conformity and maintain a friendship with Clara, she is consistently troubled by the supposed wrongfulness and impropriety of her actions. Vincent’s deep-rooted fear and shame again point toward the inevitable failure of her ability to uphold a dangerously ambiguous racial identity without being pulled back toward safe, definitive whiteness.

At the end of the novel, Vincent eagerly arranges to babysit Manny at Shirley’s house with Clara and Dave, which would mean introducing Clara to her white world for the first time. Vincent, still anxious about Clara’s acceptance, wonders: “What if Shirley and Johnnie tell Clara to get out? …What if they insult her,
make her feel bad?” (Sinclair 315). The fact that Vincent is still hesitant about blackness at the end of *The Changelings* indicates the tentative nature her relationship with the black world. Vincent has alienated Clara once before; thus, if her concerns have still not subsided, the friendship hinges on her resilience—the unpromising resilience of a confused, adolescent girl. The future of this friendship is darkened by the looming and likely possibility that Vincent will again surrender to whiteness. Also problematic is the fact that Vincent has decided to bring Clara to Shirley’s house and not to her own house on all-white East-120th Street. Shirley’s house, on a black and white street, is a much more neutral space in which Jew and Gentile have converged to produce a hybrid baby. The convergence of white and black will be, most likely, much safer and more accepted in this in-between environment. Vincent’s choice to bring Clara there betrays the partial nature of her determination to defy social convention and her ever-lingering fears of condemnation. The final image of the novel reveals Vincent and Dave travelling to meet Clara at Shirley’s house as it snows, and they are shrouded in whiteness. Vincent feels a “wonderful sensation of lightness” as she happily runs through “a think, white fairyland” and “the beautiful, thick whiteness” that is “like a dream in snow” (321). The notion of a “fairyland” and a “dream” indicates the fantastical, unrealistic nature of Vincent’s excitement, of her vision of perfect harmony between black and white. The “wonderful… lightness” and “beautiful… whiteness” imply, menacingly, terrible darkness and ugly blackness. If blackness is repulsive in contrast to magnificent whiteness, then Vincent will inevitably turn away from it and take refuge in her old world. Her incredible pleasure in this moment suggests that whiteness, and not the ambiguous space between whiteness and blackness, is an enticing, easy space of joy and security for Vincent. Just as the snow overwhelms her with its beauty, her will to break down the repressive divisions between black and white will, eventually, be overpowered by the allure of comfortable whiteness. As she travels through the snow, Vincent feels that she is “running swiftly over the gently sloping, known terrain of the dream, no longer an outsider, no longer an enemy of the world beyond her street. There was no one to hate or to fear, no one to weep over, in the dream” (321). The repetition of “the dream” demonstrates the unreality of this moment. Vincent feels that she has shed her status as “outsider” and “enemy of the world beyond her street,” but it is Clara, not Vincent who has suffered from her status as enemy outsider. Clara is the one who has no home, no bedroom, no place to do her homework, and no friends at her new white school. Vincent’s disregard for Clara is disturbing and points
toward her incomplete understanding of the racial politics that affect her world. For the entirety of *The Changelings*, Vincent has not ventured beyond the ten block radius of her town. She is not entering a bold new “world beyond her street,” she is merely bringing Clara to her sister’s home, which is a short walk from her street and a kind of safe house for unwanted diversity. Vincent innocently feels that the “hate” and “fear” are gone, neglecting to realize that most white people, including the residents of her street and her own parents, maintain their desperate hatred toward the Schwarze. The “hate” and “fear” are still all around her, even within herself, as evinced just moments earlier by her apprehension over Shirley and Johnnie’s possibly negative reaction to Clara. Vincent’s disturbing naiveté highlights her youth and again portends the fleeting nature of her transformation and friendship with Clara. Clara, in fact, is conspicuously absent from this final image. Vincent never reaches Shirley’s house within the space of *The Changelings*. The final, redemptive moment in which Vincent unites the worlds of black and white is just out of reach. *The Changelings* ends not with black and white together in a newly-formed space of boundlessness, but with white man and white woman together in complete whiteness. Dave’s presence in this moment of ominous bliss foreshadows a future of separation. Clara’s absence and Vincent’s youthful, misguided euphoria demonstrate that identity fluidity is no more than a mere fantasy.

The residents of East 120th refer to Vincent as the “black alley cat” for her speedy running and climbing abilities, but, when her grandmother asks if they still call her that, Vincent’s father replies dismissively, “It is a nickname for a child… She no longer climbs roofs” (Sinclair 173). Just as Vincent has grown out of climbing roofs, so, perhaps, she will outgrow her pants-wearing, black-befriending ways. “Vincent” is just another childhood nickname; eventually she will be forced to become “Judy.” As Rishoi contends, because adolescence is a time “when identity is fluid and contradictory,” coming-of-age narratives are “sites of identity production” which are “constantly shifting” and which “privilege contingent subjectivities” (9). Vincent’s constant vacillations are characteristic of her youth, and her movement toward identity fluidity, toward acceptance of difference, is depicted as a symptom of youth. Her in-between subjectivity is contingent, and the racist, conforming environment surrounding her will inevitably hinder her fluidity both racially and sexually. Though she sometimes leads boys, wears pants, and goes by “Vincent,” social pressures still confine her to femininity. The gang has broken up, Vincent’s mom calls her Judy, and the
school mandates that she wear dresses and skirts. Though Vincent forms a friendship with a black girl, she cannot truly empathize with Clara’s subjugated position nor can she shake her insistent fear of blackness and of the social repercussions of associating with black people. The fear of the Schwartze is irrevocably rooted in her. Society can dismiss Vincent’s identification with masculinity and blackness as youthful indiscretions, but it presumably will not tolerate such transgressive behavior from an adult. Shirley is the example of this intolerance. If society can shun Shirley for forming a relationship across separate subsets of the white race, it will certainly reject Vincent for forming a relationship across the much more rigidly separate racial boundary. Sinclair employs childhood as a safe space within which to experiment with identity fluidity. Many Jews in 1940s America, having just been welcomed into the community of white Americans, felt the necessity for self-preservation at the expense of blacks. Upholding the conventions of whiteness, including segregation and the postwar reinstitution of gender norms, often resulted in the internalization of racism and rigid identity boundaries. Vincent’s youthful foray into a space between maleness and femaleness, between black and white, is presented as impossible and fleeting as Sinclair leaves us with a Vincent who is blanketed by comfortable whiteness, side by side with the dominant white male who serves to highlight her femininity, and who never reaches the fantastical in-between space.
CHAPTER II

BLACKNESS AS A JEWISH MAN’S INNER ETHNICITY:

JAY NEUGEBOREN’S *BIG MAN AND THE MIXTURE OF FEAR AND DESIRE FOR THE OTHER*

What Matthew Frye Jacobsen refers to as “the white ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s” was greatly influenced by the rise of Black Nationalism (246). The example of the Black Nationalist movement, among other things, caused many Jews to shift their primary concerns from assimilating into American mainstream life to differentiating themselves from the racist white majority and attempting to recover their status as a distinctive cultural group. Many Jews had already accomplished such “a high level of integration into white, middle-class society” that they could easily afford to focus on Jewish issues rather than assimilation (Goldstein 212). For the African Americans who turned to Black Nationalism, “integration was no longer an option… because… all American whites, were part of an inherently racist power structure” (213). The African Americans’ desire to assert themselves as a group separate from and thus transcending that racist system had a powerful effect on Jews. Black Nationalist allegations unsettlingly lumped Jews together with all racist white Americans, perhaps fueling a desire, within some Jews, to dissociate from mainstream whiteness. The charge of racism was particularly problematic for a group like the Jews, who held the Holocaust in recent memory and thus understood the horrors produced by institutional racism. In addition to this soul-cleansing (and image-improving) incentive to dissociate from whiteness, many Jews were also motivated by the African Americans’ turn to group-centric issues. The example of blacks, focusing on Black Power and the development of a strong African American identity in the face of racism, resulted in the Jews’ “renewal of their own cultural traditions and the highlighting of their own ethnic distinctiveness” (Goldstein 213). Many Jews wanted to reclaim what whiteness required them to repress: a lost ethnicity, the freedom from convention and propriety that is ever-associated with racial and ethnic identities. As the most racialized figures in America, blacks represent, for many formerly “ethnic” whites, a lost ethnic self, but the desire for that lost ethnicity is always complicated by fears of once again “succumbing to a racialized image of Otherness” (Lott 25). With the haunting collective memory of the Holocaust always looming, Jews’ desires, in the mid-1960s and 70s, to recoup their status as an
ethnic minority group were muddied by the persistent fear of losing their hard-earned status and returning to the category of persecuted Others.

Jay Neugeboren’s *Big Man* explores the result of the Jews’ integration into the racist majority of American whites as well as their ever-present desire to reclaim and liberate their repressed Otherness. Through the lens of Mack Davis, the downtrodden African American protagonist, the Jews in *Big Man* are shown to be greedy and opportunistic, undifferentiated from, or perhaps even worse than, any other white men who commodify Mack for his talent on the basketball court. The narrative thus affirms the perspective of many African Americans during the civil rights era, that Jews are not minority allies but rather just like any other American whites who are “part of an inherently racist power structure.” The use of a black narrator, then, highlights the whitening of the Jews. Also emphasizing the Jews’ postwar whitened status are the polarizing images projected in the novel. In the world of *Big Man*, Jews are middle to upper-class; blacks are working-class. Jews are proper and well-spoken; blacks are unrestrained in behavior and undignified in speech. Jews are economically shrewd; blacks are economically reckless. Jews are consumers and spectators, blacks are commodities and performers. Black and white stereotypes are affirmed in order to highlight a binary opposition aligning Jews with supposedly superior features of whiteness and blacks with the characteristics that are opposite and inferior to those of whites. The schema situates Jews within the dominant group that perpetuates negative black stereotypes. The unfavorable portrayal of both Jews and blacks in *Big Man* underscores the fact that many Jews in the postwar moment have become utterly indistinguishable from whites and that they participate in a system which subjugates and marginalizes the minority figure. In portraying Jews as exploiters of blacks and filtering that narrative through the victim of such exploitation, Neugeboren suggests the ugly results of the Jews’ assimilation into the world of whiteness. The result of Jewish integration into the white mainstream, of their insertion within a binary system of race relations which promotes white superiority and advances and reinforces negative black stereotypes, is a concealment of their cultural uniqueness and a direct contribution to the subjugation of blacks, as evinced by the situation of Mack Davis. The grim portrayal of Mack’s life, posited as a result of white Jewish exploitation, is perhaps a cautionary tale for American Jews, suggestive of the imperative of disentangling themselves from the racist, exploitative white mainstream.
In addition to affirming the undifferentiated whiteness of the Jews, the use of a black protagonist un masks the Jews’ whiteness by uncovering a distinct Jewish yearning for the racial Other. The Jewish desire for Mack and the stereotypical blackness that he embodies, including his athletic prowess, seemingly uninhibited speech and behavior, and unpressed working-class masculinity, is suggested throughout *Big Man*. Regarding Mack’s desirable athleticism, according to C. Richard King and Charles Fruehling Springwood, “sporting spectacles… absorb [the masses] into a libidinal economy of excess,” and “the black athlete has been constructed as a *site* of pleasure, dominance, fantasy, and surveillance” (18, 101). Mack’s bodily strength and athletic abilities are commodified by universities, coaches, gamblers and journalists, who literally traffic in the black body. Spectators take pleasure in the “libidinal” release associated with gazing upon Mack’s physical skill and rugged, animalistic masculinity on the basketball court. Mack thus embodies a pleasurable “sporting spectacle.” In addition to his desirable physicality in sports, Mack’s black body is figured as sexually desirable, as women of all races flock to him. His desirability is also represented by the stark contrasts set up between Mack and white Jewish men. White Jewish men are figured as grotesque in opposition to Mack’s black beauty; they are meek, diminutive, and brainy as opposed to Mack’s brawn and propensity for fighting and violence; they are proper, articulate, and restrained as opposed to Mack’s disorganized yet authentic black dialect and behavioral abandon. The use of Mack’s perspective emphasizes the desire for blackness in that it reveals how Mack is continuously exploited and consistently approached by both men and women who desire to gain something from him, be it profit, sex, or proximity to blackness. Mack’s point of view also suggests the desirability of his black attributes in that it stages a contrast between white men who are stiff, weak, pathetic, and insincere and Mack, who is strong, unrestrained, and genuine.

In addition to illuminating this Jewish desire for lower class blackness and all of the ethnic qualities associated with that status, Mack also embodies the archetypical downtrodden Other. Many Jews’ desires to reclaim their ethnicity are accompanied by the perpetual fear that, should they reaffirm their minority status, they may risk returning to their “past history of ghettoization and marginalization” (Goffman 174). Mack stands for that dreaded Otherness: he is a perpetual failure, trapped in an unbreakable cycle of dejectedness, doomed to yield to his consciousness of racist norms. When he thinks he might succeed, he asks himself, “Who I fooling?” and succumbs to self-sabotage (Neugeboren 57). His “incessant self-perception through the
assumptions of a hostile society” consistently hinders his progression and returns him to a state of miserable stagnancy (Goffman 10). Mack’s continual demoralization is a performance of the Jews’ greatest fear realized and an exemplification of the fear that persistently accompanies and clouds the desire for blackness.

Mack Davis is a former college basketball star who is caught in the 1951 point-fixing scandal and subsequently thrown out of college and banned from the NBA. As a participant in “the most famous gambling scandal in college sports history,” the now notorious Mack has returned home to his parents’ home in Brooklyn and taken up work at a carwash (Shapiro 175). Neugeboren’s choice to stage a black basketball player in Brooklyn is interesting in light of the fact that, throughout the 1930s and 40s, “the Jewish presence in sports… was particularly notable in basketball” as “‘the city game’ was very popular among New York City Jews at a time when most still resided in poor and lower-middle-class, densely populated Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx” (Shapiro 177, 178). Mack is essentially where the Jew once was—a poor, urban basketball player attempting to achieve success and establish belonging through sports. Now that Jews are well-established members of the white majority, they have a decreasing need to use sports as a means to fit in. Lower-class blacks replacing lower-class Jews in the cities as Jews move away from these dense urban settings toward more prominent, suburban lives is representational of their whitening and the reaffirmation of blacks as the American Other. In Big Man, blacks are taking over where formerly ethnic whites like the Jews left off, both as members of the residential margins (poor, urban neighborhoods) and as spectacles of athleticism in a sport associated mainly with the working class.

Within the world of Big Man, Jews are members of the problematic white society that exploits Mack. They are exhibited in an almost excessively unfavorable light, as Mack seems to be surrounded by opportunistic Jews looking to profit off of his high “market value” on the basketball court (Neugeboren 40). Mack’s high school basketball coach, “Goldstein,” promises college recruiters that he will “put in a good word to” Mack about their schools as long as they “would slip [him] some juice” (75). Here we have a greedy, sneaky Jew accepting bribes in exchange for the promise of steering Mack’s talent (his product) in the right direction. When Mack describes how he and his peers played basketball on semi-pro leagues to make money during their summer vacations from college, he uses the words “Gamblers” and “Jews” interchangeably. He says, “Gamblers, they haunted those games” to enlist college basketball players in betting schemes in exchange
for a cut of the winnings, but a few lines he later refers to those gamblers as “all these Jews watching us, dressed up in their shiny clothes” (125). Mack’s description implies that “Jews” and “Gamblers” may as well be synonymous, and it once again suggests the devious nature of Jews. They do not just watch the games; they “haunt” them, further emphasizing their disturbing intentions. They are also dressed in “shiny clothes,” implying wealth. Their illegality has paid off; these Jewish gamblers are profiting, and profiting well, from commodifying these college athletes. Through Mack’s eyes, Jews are avaricious people who will go to extraordinary lengths, engaging in bribery and rigging basketball games, to make money. This representation of Jews as greedy and blacks as financially irresponsible (and thus easy targets for their schemes) is a reinforcement of classic stereotypes. In 1891, for example, Marion Crawford wrote that Jews are “intoxicated by the smell of gold, mad for its possession, half hysterical with fear of losing it… irresistible in the unity of their greed” (qtd. in Jacobsen 174-5). Anne Norton writes that blacks are consistently “portrayed as prone to extravagance… full of desires, easily lured by the pretty and the prestigious, seduced by advertising, and given to consumption and display… never saving” (56). These stereotypes set the stage for Neugeboren’s economically aggressive Jews to entice reckless blacks like Mack to participate in their point-fixing schemes.

With the Jews acting as a destructive force in the lives of African Americans, they are whitened. Racism, and, subsequently, perpetuating black oppression, was a hallmark of the 1950s white majority, and, ironically, in Big Man, it is the Jews’ performance of their “Jewish” greed that allows them to partake in mainstream whiteness by working to keep blacks wretched and inferior.

In addition to Goldstein and the rich gamblers, several other middle to upper-middle-class Jews exploit Mack. Louie, the owner of the carwash at which Mack is employed, is another prosperous Jew who takes advantage of Mack’s athletic abilities for personal gain. Louie plans to sponsor a basketball team in the B’nai B’rith charity league, and he wants his poor black employees, particularly Mack, to play for his team, which he will call “Louie’s Leapers” (Neugeboren 55). Louie will sponsor, and thus, own, the team financially; these “Leapers” belong to Louie. They are his commodities. The team T-shirts promote his carwash, thus the players will be walking advertisements for his business. With Mack on the team, Louie’s Leapers will be one of the most dominant teams in the league. The better the team is, the more recognition for Louie and the carwash, the more customers he will have, the more money he will make. Louie’s black
employees thus do the dirty work for him both at the carwash and on the basketball court. Louie profits from their sweat and physical labor while paying them a working-class salary. Although his actions are not unlawful, he certainly exploits Mack. When Louie first approaches Mack about playing on the team, Mack describes how, “Louie, he calls me over and puts his arm around me like I’m his regular ass-hole buddy” (55). Mack’s sarcasm reveals the transparency of Louie’s agenda. Louie, a respected white businessman, would never treat Mack, a poor, black carwash employee, like “his regular ass-hole buddy” unless he wanted something from him. For Louie to break the social barrier between black and white and pretend for a moment that he and Mack are equals, he must surely stand to profit.

In addition to Louie, the B’nai B’rith organization and the Jewish Center at which the charity basketball games will be hosted will also benefit from having Mack in the league. A former college star will bring in more spectators and thus more funds for both the charity and the center. Here was have yet more successful Jews who profit from Mack’s talent. The executives of the charity and the Jewish center are unheard, unseen, and unnamed in the space of the novel, but they are nonetheless powerful, exploitative influences. Louie even mentions that the “head of his Jewish Center thinks it’s a great idea” that Mack play in the league, and this “head” of the Center, this nameless, faceless Jew, is a subjugating force despite his absence (Neugeboren 56). He is a looming, authoritative figure who participates in the system of commodification of African Americans. He takes advantage of these black athletes as valuable commodities and profits from their physical abilities without ever coming in contact with them. The system of racism is so strong that white men need not even be present to wield their power over blacks. In addition to their monetary investment in blackness, these white Jews also invest in the masculine capital of blackness. Ethan Goffman writes, “As a spectacle for a surrounding, curious gaze, Black athletic success means a continuation of the minstrel role in which the audience may hoot and insult, releasing their aggressions freed from the constraints of ‘civilized’ daily life.” (164). The masculinity associated with blackness and the lower classes was often defined in terms of uncivilized “toughness” and “ferocity” in contrast to the white, more “tamed men” of higher classes (Gorn 237). Watching blacks perform their athletic “minstrelsy” allowed whites to engage in a kind of vicarious violence and expend their repressed masculinity. Jews thus exploit blacks for both economic profit and surrogate manliness. Mack’s labor provides white Jews with money as well as an outlet for (and an assertion
of) masculine potency. His perspective once again showcases Jews as active members of the oppressive, commodifying white majority.

The primary Jewish figure in *Big Man* is Ben Rosen, a sportswriter for the *New York Star* who wants to feature Mack in a magazine profile. When Ben first proposes the idea, he tells Mack, “If the article sells – who knows? – there might be something in it for you” (Neugeboren 8). Ben clearly stands to make money off of Mack’s story, but the benefit to Mack is uncertain. The ambiguity of “who knows?” and the notion that there only “might” be something for Mack—and that the possibility is contingent upon the article selling—suggests that Ben is acting somewhat deceitfully. Ben would presumably be paid for his work regardless of whether the article is well-received, and it seems illogical for the interviewee to wait until an article sells to only have the chance of getting paid for his time. Although it seems that Ben is trying to take advantage of Mack, he tells Mack that he wants to write this article to reveal “how big-time college sports ruthlessly exploits the young athletes of our nation” (8-9). Ben hypocritically criticizes the exploitation of these “young athletes,” while he himself seems to want to profit from Mack’s story without necessarily paying him fairly. Although Ben eventually compensates Mack, his original proposition suggests that, had Mack been more naïve or less money-motivated, Ben would have been content to give him little to nothing for his time. Throughout the novel, Ben continues to operate under the pretense that he wants to help Mack. Just as Louie tries to influence Mack to play in the charity league by putting his arm around him, Ben “puts his arm on mine like somebody died” and says, “You can do better than this, I know it” (47). Ben’s touch, like Louie’s, is an artificial attempt to suggest that these two are equal men in the world, that they are on the same side. In reality, Louie and Ben have the same self-serving agenda: to convince Mack to work for them in some way that benefits them more than it does him. Ben’s encouragement that Mack “can do better” is part of his sales pitch. If he builds up Mack’s trust and confidence, Mack might be more willing to work with Ben on this so-called justice-seeking magazine article, and Ben might have a big-selling article that will boost both his earnings and reputation as a writer. Mack says, “According to Rosen I’m a six-foot-six victim who made bags of cash for everybody – high school, college, bookies, sports arenas, writers like him” (48). While going on about how Mack has been victimized by those who profited off of his talents, Rosen neglects to acknowledge that he, too, seeks to make money off of Mack. The key is that “writers like him” were able to make “bags of cash” from
writing about Mack when he was a star. Rosen is just “like” those victimizing writers; he wants to capitalize on Mack’s legendary status and notoriety.

Despite his obvious agenda and his substantially superior social position, Rosen continues to try to establish himself as Mack’s equal. He tells him, “Just talk to me the way you would to a friend” and, when Mack becomes suspicious of his intentions, Rosen asks, “What makes you think I have a game? Do you think everybody in the world has an angle? That everybody is trying to use you?” (Neugeboren 66). This feigned innocence further suggests the duplicitous and cunning nature of Jews. Rosen is not only using Mack, he is being sneaky about it. The gamblers who approach the college basketball players about fixing games are at least upfront about their intentions, whereas Rosen masks his agenda with false niceties. When he asks Mack if he thinks that “everybody is trying to use him,” his performance of incredulousness is quite suspect considering Ben’s knowledge that Mack has in fact been used time and time again. As Ben himself asserted, Mack has been commodified by “high school, college, bookies, sports arenas, writers,” so he has no reason to trust yet another sportswriter. Ben wants to take his plan a step further and suggests that he and Mack pursue legal action against the NBA for unfairly blacklisting Mack. When Mack asks Ben what he will get out of it, Ben replies, “A certain pleasure, let us say. The high and the mighty… those who are as guilty as you – they crumble. Money? All right, I’ll take a little. A slice from the lawyer’s cut” (99). Ben acts as though his primary incentive is to take down the big gamblers for whom Mack and many other players took the fall, but it seems that contributing to a legendary and trailblazing court case would yield more than just “a little” money for Ben. The possibility for great financial gain is more than likely the impetus for this sudden consideration for a fallen college basketball star. Ben himself could be categorized as one of those “high and… mighty” who is just as “guilty” of scheming as Mack was when he fixed basketball games. He feigns morality and a genuine concern for Mack, but his true intentions are much more self-centered than they are ethical.

By the end of the novel, Ben’s intentions become clear. Mack visits Ben to tell him that he is finally on board with his plan to pursue legal action against the NBA, only to learn that Ben is no longer interested. Ben gives him a list of excuses—their case “won’t hold up” in court because of semantics in the documentation (“the passive voice, Mack… Who can place responsibility?”), he has a heart condition, his “managing editor is putting the pressure on to stop” because “there has been no response to my columns” and
“this stirring of embers is no good” (Neugeboren 209). After all of Ben’s inspirational discourse, his contentions that Mack could make something of himself and have a chance to play in the NBA, that he was treating Mack like he would his “own son,” it is all too convenient that he suddenly has several justifications for backing out of the plan (50). Ben’s remark that he regards Mack as a family member is obviously insincere in light of his capacity to discard him so quickly. The veracity of certain statements is also suspect. He titles his first column about Mack and the fixes “Does Anybody Remember?” and his second column on the subject is titled, “You Remembered, All Right!” (47, 63). The first two sentences of that second column are as follows: “I was gratified to have so many of you respond to my column last week about the basketball fixes. Your response proves that you do remember them” (63). These statements contradict Ben’s claim that “there has been no response” to his columns. Ben either lies to his readers or to Mack about the amount of responses generated by his columns about the scandals. Either way, he is deceitful. His life circumstances also contribute to the suspicious nature of his sudden change of heart. Throughout Big Man, Ben and his wife are separated, but they reconcile just when Ben decides to drop Mack’s cause. As a separated couple in the 1950s, Ben was presumably bearing the full financial responsibility for the two households. It would follow logically that Ben’s financial burdens are essentially cut in half when his wife and son move back in with him, thus relieving the pressure for him to supplement his income with feature magazine articles and legendary legal victories. Once Mack is no longer valuable to Ben, he abandons him. As Mack leaves Ben’s home for the final time, he can “hear [Ben] laughing” (210). What is funny about this moment? Mack’s one glimmer of hope that he might have had a second chance to rise up out of dejection and play professional basketball has been destroyed, and Ben Rosen is laughing. For Ben, it is a happy ending. He reclaims his family and domestic order is restored, but Mack is left with nothing. Mack is like a son when Ben’s “own son” is absent from his life, but, upon the return of the legitimate son, Mack is no longer part of the family. Ben must take care of his true family, and Mack must return to the carwash, to his parents’ house, and to his dismal state of notoriety. Ben’s inappropriate laughter in the face of Mack’s disappointment is quite menacing. On the surface, Ben appears to be a hopeful, passionate man looking to right some wrongs, but, at second glance, he is no better than Goldstein, the shiny-suited gamblers, Louie, or the unnamed Jewish executives who are out to take advantage of the commodity that is Mack Davis.
The integrity of these Jews is clearly questioned, but it is not their only unattractive quality in the eyes of Mack. He also perceives Jews as physically ugly. Louie is described as a “short and fat” man with an “ugly puss” (Neugeboren 55) who looks like an “eggplant” (178). When he is introduced to the crowd at one of the charity basketball games, he is absurdly “bowing all over the place” (178). Ben Rosen is “a half-pint guy with a big nose,” and, when Mack sees an old picture of him, he says that “You can tell it’s him by the nose and the stupid grin” (8, 66). Ben’s mannerisms are described as almost cartoon-like: when he gets excited he is “like a little kid” and “a contented moron,” he “smiles like a goon,” and, when he laughs, “his eggplant body shake[s]” (63, 65, 156, 70). Louie and Ben are ugly, exaggerated, caricatures of men. The repeated description of Jews as “eggplants” facilitates the creation of an image that is distorted and ludicrous. Mack’s perception of Jews is reminiscent of both Jewish and black racial stereotypes. It evokes nineteenth and early twentieth century stereotypes of racialized Jewishness: in Races of Man (1859) Robert Knox describes, “a large, massive, club-shaped hooked nose, three or four times larger than suits the face,” and in The Witch of Prague (1891) Marion Crawford describes Jews as “crooked, bearded, filthy, vulture-eyed… hook-nosed and loose-lipped… contemptible in body (qtd. in Jacobsen 180, 174-5). It also evokes black stereotypes of that time period. As noted by King and Springwood, “Nineteenth-century… media depicted African Americans with a series of exaggerated features, such as thick lips, bulging eyes, huge ears, and gaping mouths” (104). The invocation of these once-popular physical stereotypes of blacks and Jews serves to establish a parallel between blacks and Jews, to reflect the absurdity of mid-twentieth century beliefs of white superiority, and to further highlight the unattractiveness of the Jews’ internalized racism. Mack’s exaggeratedly distorted view of Jews points toward the illegitimacy of racism. Both Jews and blacks were once identified in similarly grotesque terms. Mack is still seen as less than white, but the substandard racial-ness of Jews was proven to be an irrational and false construct. The supposedly “natural” inferiority of the African American race, then, must also have the potential to be invalidated. The unattractive outward appearances of these Jews also serve as a mirror for their equally unattractive behavior. This negative portrayal of Jews through the eyes of a black man suggests that, though many of the newly-whitened Jews were enjoying a lofty social status and great professional success in the mid-1960s, they had become something ugly in the process—participatory members of a fundamentally racist society. The result of this “ugliness,” of the Jews’ participation in the
American system of racism, is the racial oppression of people like Mack Davis. Mack’s first-person voice allows for direct access to the despair of the racially oppressed. Had Mack’s story been told in the third person or from a white Jewish point of view, we would have been distanced from the wretchedness. Mack’s first-person narration provides a forceful and convincing account of his exploitation at the hands of Jews, thus highlighting their integration into the white racist mainstream and the problematic results of such wholesale assimilation.

In addition to emphasizing the Jews’ damaging association with white privilege, Mack is also the embodiment of their desire for dangerous yet pleasurable Otherness. Mack is a highly desired object throughout Big Man. He has, for example, no trouble establishing sexual relationships with women. He says, “With… my skin I don’t need to but mumble a few words to get the meat I need,” implying that his blackness is some sort of exotic, sought-after sexual commodity (Neugeboren 30). When Mack goes to a bar one night, a woman asks him “if I’m the black brother she wants to love,” again situating Mack’s black body as a striking and magnetic object of female desire (30). It is not just Mack himself that draws women; it is his particular “skin” and his being “black” that attracts them. The association between blackness and desire exemplifies “racial fetishism” that “eroticizes the most visible aspect of racial difference—skin color” (Mercer, “Looking” 244). The eroticization of Mack’s skin color points toward a particular desire to engage in the world of difference. The “most visible aspect” of Mack’s difference from the majority is sexualized, thus indicating that it is his distinction from the safe, comfortable world of the white mainstream that is so attractive. Women’s desire for Mack’s “skin” also signifies the male Jewish desire for his supposedly alluring, exciting blackness.

Ethan Goffman discusses “the rugged masculinity constructed around Black America,” “Blacks as role models of physical abandon,” and “the myth of savage, emotion-charged Blacks” (37, 53, 219). Jewish males, stereotypically imagined as “bookish, nonviolent… aestheticized, physically passive,” were often driven by “the Jewish emphasis on intellect and education rather than on physical accomplishment as a sign of masculinity” (Goffman 37, 38). Because of this customary devotion to intellectual aptitude among Jewish men, as well as the propriety expected in the white world, they often lacked an outlet for physical aggression. Jews and other middle to upper-class whites tended to invest in the working-class male as a vicarious release for that inner “brute,” as Eric Schocket discusses in his essay on “the class transvestite.” In exploring middle-class
fascination with working-class masculinity: Schocket offers June Howard’s description of a “libidinal
investment… [in] the image of the proletarian as brute” (108). Brutish masculinity is not only imagined as a
working-class characteristic; it is also specifically tied to blacks, as evinced by the brains/brawn opposition
discussed by Goffman. Kobena Mercer, too, notes that “African peoples were defined as having bodies but not
minds: in this way the superexploitation of the black body as muscle-machine could be justified” (Jungle 138).
This “libidinal” attraction to primitive, working-class, African American masculinity is thus a result of the
“racial epistemology based on a mind-body dualism in which brains and brawn are opposed in popular
discourse” (King and Springwood 114). Jews’ compulsory intellectualism stood in opposition to the
uninhibited physicality associated only with marginalized peoples, thus resulting in a desire to release that
repressed masculine brutishness. This uniquely Jewish desire for black working-class masculinity is made
explicit through Ben Rosen. As he describes Mack’s physical abilities, he becomes quite excited: “‘You
reminded me of Sugar Ray on a basketball court… you had style, Mack! …The quickness of the cat, the power
of the lion – you and Sugar Ray.’ He’s breathing hard, voice rising. ‘And your body. Your body…”
(Neugeboren 89). Ben’s passion over Mack’s “style,” “quickness,” “power,” and “body” suggests more than
just admiration; it is an intense yearning. The repetition of “your body” intensifies the moment and further
hints toward a longing for Mack’s physical masculinity. The notion of Ben “breathing hard, voice rising”
almost implies a sexual climax and suggests a deep desire for some aspect of Mack. Comparing Mack to
animals, to a “cat” and then a “lion,” implies his inner savagery, an animalistic, instinctual quality about Mack
that is suppressed within Ben. As a privileged, white journalist, Ben holds a certain level of status in society
that binds him to propriety. Mack, on the other hand, as merely a poor, black, carwash worker with little
expected of him, is relatively free to act as brutishly or impulsively as he wants. Once again, it is his difference
from mainstream whiteness that is erotically charged.

Ben’s desire for Mack’s working-class masculinity and black “savagery” is further evidenced by a
sparring match that occurs between the two. Mack becomes upset with Ben and shoves him, and Ben grows
excited and begins “dancing around me, his guard up, throwing jabs” (Neugeboren 92). He tries to bait Mack
into a fight, telling him “Try to hit me. Come. Try! …Come, hit me. Try. You can’t do it, I’ll bet… Hit me.
Try!” (92). Ben is literally begging Mack to get physical with him, revealing a desperate and deeply-rooted
desire to fight, as though these violent urges have been repressed within him for quite some time. When Mack shoves Ben, he wakes the animal within him, and it seems that the proximity to Otherness is what allows Ben to forego the usual decorum he would likely show with his fellow white people. He calls Mack “monster,” as if justify his own monstrous behavior, and as if to suggest that, because he is with a black man, a less-than-human beast-like creature, this belligerent behavior is acceptable or perhaps even necessary. Ben is again “breathing hard,” indicating his high level of excitement (92). In his essay on prizefighting as a working-class sport in the antebellum era, Elliott Gorn writes, “No doubt many in the bourgeoisie envied what they perceived as the uninhibitedness of the working class and itched to break out of their own cultural confinement” (226).

Ben, confined by the propriety and intellectualism of middle to upper-class whiteness, longs for the uninhibitedness he sees within Mack, the working-class black man. He “cackles” during the fight, suggesting his almost sinister pleasure and the accompanying sense that his desire to release his inner Otherness is somewhat dangerous (Neugeboren 93). Eric Lott, in his study of blackface minstrelsy, contends that the “intercourse between racial cultures was at once so attractive and so threatening” and that the “combined fear of and fascination with the black male cast a strange dread of miscegenation” (6, 25). The desire for male blackness, the attraction and fascination with it, or “racial fetishism,” was always accompanied by the “fear” and “dread” of contamination. Fighting brings Ben closer to Mack, and, though it may be liberating, he would not want to be like Mack, to be tainted by his Otherness. Ben’s behavior indicates the Jewish desire to move freely between the successful yet repressed world of whiteness and the more exciting and passionate world of blackness without being contaminated by poverty and demoralization.

In *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America*, Gavin Roger Jones notes that nineteenth-century dialect writing “appealed to the ears of wealthy urbanites seeking… colorful discourse,” and “dialect voices… appealed to the white mainstream” (7). He also states that “black language… was the most powerful demonstration of cultural contamination” (11). Similarly, Mack’s black dialect in *Big Man*, in contrast to the more socially acceptable mainstream speech of the white people, further suggests the mixture of fear and desire associated with the unreserved nature of the Other. Mack narrates *Big Man* in a black vernacular, distinctive in its terminology and defiant of normative grammar and syntax. His language is a representation of black, urban culture, whereas the Jews’ bland, mechanical speech signifies an erasure of
culture. In Mack’s ethnic dialect, men are “cats” (he tells his sister regarding her boyfriend: “You bring this cat home and I’ll look him over” [Neugeboren 129]), and women are “meat” (he asks his brother, “Which you like best – white meat or dark meat?” [6]). Performing tricks on the basketball court to entertain white spectators is “play[ing] nigger” (190). “Jig” refers to a black person; Mack says that in the “white boy’s schoolyard… you the only jig ballplayer down there when you eleven, twelve, everybody real nice to you” (14). Getting excited is “piss[ing] green,” as evinced when Mack, in his star college athlete days, learns that somebody has opened a bank account for him, “I about to piss green” (75). Speaking insincerely is “gassing,” as when Ben Rosen tries to convince Mack to fight for his cause, “he gasses on about why Americans, they don’t want to remember things like the fixes. He goes on about me, calls me a victim” (48). The word “do” is expendable when forming questions. Mack asks, for example, “Why you ask?” (27), “What you mean?” (43), and “Who you think you are?” (52). Mack’s vernacular contrasts with the formal speech of the white Jews with whom he comes in contact. For example, when Ben Rosen first introduces himself to Mack, he says, “Maybe you have heard of me,” and Mack replies, “I heard of you” (8). The omission of the word “have” in Mack’s response underscores the difference between the two men. The respectable white man is bound by the rules of “mainstream” English; the black man free to speak with the authentic “impropriety of the urban tongue” (Jones 12). Mack’s discourse is certainly more “colorful” and vibrant than mainstream speech and conveys a freedom from propriety that is missing from the white man’s formal, restrained speech, thus suggesting the “appealing” nature of black dialect that Jones discusses. In addition to its attractiveness, black dialect represents a transgression, a “threat… to polite linguistic norms” (Jones 9). Mack’s speech is thus characteristic of the simultaneously frightening and desirable notion of black deviance and difference. Because “African-American dialect was a sign of black-white intermixture,” it signifies the ever-present threat for “contamination” (Jones 11). Mack’s dialect thus simultaneously suggests the Jewish desire for a lost cultural vibrancy and ethnic difference as well as the enduring fear of contagious Otherness.

Mack further represents an object of desire for white Jews in his defiance of societal rules for behavior. He does not, for example, consider married women off limits. One night, when he decides he does not feel like “paying for it,” he calls an old girlfriend, “but she says her husband’s home” (Neugeboren 15). The exchange implies that Mack does not have a problem seeking sex from a married woman, and that, had the
woman’s husband not been at home, Mack would have likely been with her that night. He also flirts with a friends’ wife in a way that suggests it is not the first time that the two have shared an intimate moment. While visiting his friend, the wife “twitch[es] her butt,” apparently for Mack’s benefit, and, when he follows her into the kitchen and touches her, she acts “like she expected it” and then smiles at Mack and says, “C’mere” (19). The encounter does not go any further, but Mack’s complete nonchalance and comfort with the situation betrays a sense that the flirtation, or perhaps more, has been a repeat occurrence. Mack also admits to interracial sex; he has slept with both “white meat” and “dark meat,” disregarding social conventions decrying miscegenation. In addition to abandoning the codes of sexual conduct, Mack is fairly unrestrained when it comes to violence. He has violent urges and finds it difficult, at times, to resist them, thus fulfilling the stereotype of the black, working-class “brute.” When Louie first mentions the charity basketball league, Mack wants “to slug him” (57). When Ben Rosen peppers him with questions, trying to open him up about the past, Mack gives in to his urges: “I can’t take it anymore. I jerk him from his chair and his pencil and pad spill off. I pull his face close to mine” (67). The hostility does not go any further as Mack stops himself, but the incident reveals the “savage” within him. Ben makes many references to Mack’s violent nature: he thinks that Mack would like “to kill, to murder” him for bringing up the past, that Mack “relish[es] murder” because he wants “to get even” for the past, and he claims to see “a look of murder in Mack’s eyes” (68, 93, 159). Ben’s meekness is the polar opposite of Mack’s toughness. Mack’s “brute” behavior is a sign that he is not bound by the principles that govern the respectable white majority. As an African American, no decency is expected of Mack, and thus, he exudes a passion and a freedom that is absent from those who are stifled by convention. During the aforementioned sparring match, all Mack has to do to defeat Ben is to pick up the short, fat Jew “and lift him off his dancing legs” (93). Proper, feeble Ben yearns to release the physical side of himself which comes so naturally to Mack. In Lori Harrison-Kahan’s analysis of the Africanist presence in Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers, she writes that blackness, in the form of jazz, represents the qualities that Jews wish to see within themselves, such as “freedom, primitivism, and fieriness” (430), and allows for the release of an “authentic, unfettered” side (431). The “murder” that Ben sees in Mack’s eyes is something that he wants to see reflected within himself; he wants to liberate, to “unfetter” his innate, primitive aggression.
Although his “savagery” and lack of inhibition are posited as highly desirable, Mack simultaneously performs the Jewish fear of returning to marginality, thus exemplifying the “threat” and “strange dread” that Lott associates with the white desire for blackness. His persistent inability to rise up out of dejection is a response to an antagonistic society that expects failure from him. There are both legal and social customs at work to keep Mack down, and he has thus become bitterly disillusioned and socially liminal. Mainstream society only accepts Mack in the form of an athletic commodity, and Mack is forced to come to terms with that capriciousness. He says, “Shit, man, nobody give me an education cause they like my looks. The college, they got their money’s worth – they turn people away from their gates, I played there” (Neugeboren 14). Mack understands that the privilege of a college education was not granted to him because of society’s belief in his intelligence or future prosperity. Schools scouted him only for financial gain. It is Mack’s sincere belief that, without his talent on the basketball court, no college would have looked twice at him. Mack’s mentor, Big Ed, informs him at a young age that:

…if you don’t want to be a dumb jig janitor pushing a broom around your whole life, you come down here and live in this schoolyard the next few years. If you do that, people gonna be kissing your ass and giving you money and presents. You know why? Just because you can put that ball through the hoop. You got real market value, Mack, and you take advantage of it. Market value, Mack! What anybody wants to give, you take, hear? Because the minute something happens and you can’t put that ball through the cords better than the next guy, they’ll be sucking his ass and you’ll be left with nothing but a broom. (40)

Mack is made to understand that there are only two possible paths for a black man like him: janitor (having a poor, miserable life) or professional basketball player (gaining wealth as an athletic commodity). For a black man, athletic skill is one of the few avenues available for becoming a privileged member of society. Otherwise, one can be no more than a “dumb jig janitor.” Success at sports, however, is often short-lived. Big Ed explains that once Mack is no longer the best, once he is no longer the rarest and most exciting commodity on the basketball market, he will return to the subjugated state of the average black man. Society does not expect Mack to accomplish much more than “pushing a broom around” and, if they do one day see him as a talented
basketball player, that appreciation will be fickle and fleeting. Having internalized this hostile view of himself, Mack sabotages his own chances at success by succumbing to gambling.

Throughout Big Man, Mack is understandably skeptical of any positive changes in his life. Ben Rosen’s ideas about justice and having Mack reinstated in the NBA are “crazy” (Neugeboren 111). The merits of the charity basketball league are met with sarcasm: “here I am, gonna be the star of Louie’s Leapers. Oh yeah, I’m making progress, me” (69). Eventually, though, Mack begins to believe in the changes and the possibility of having a decent life. He actually begins to contemplate improving his station in life and moving out of his parents’ house and in with his girlfriend, Willa: “Maybe I get enough [money] from Louie and Rosen, I move out. Yeah. About time, too. Maybe me and Willa, we set up a place together” (95). A move like this would finally break the cycle of static bleakness in which he has been living and constitute the “progress” about which he was previously so cynical. He even gets a rush from playing in the so-called “rinky-dink league”: “I feel good… there’s no stopping me” (136, 183). Mack finally has more than washing cars to occupy his time: “Me and Louie’s Leapers, we burning up our league, win seventeen games in a row. These last few months, between games and Willa, and these sessions with Rosen, you want to keep up with me, you got to run, man” (117). To a lesser degree, Mack is back to where he was in college: starring in a basketball league, making money, being interviewed for sports columns, succeeding with women (this time only with one), and being able to do what he loves on a regular basis. Unfortunately, Mack succumbs to his demons and fulfills society’s expectations. Just at the climax of what should be his most celebratory and redemptive moment, when Louie’s Leapers defeats a rival team to win their final game of the season, Mack allows himself to fall back into the behaviors of stereotypical blackness. He had placed a bet on the game, once again involving himself in shady gambling. The man who is supposed to pay him leaves with his money, so Mack chases after him and assaults him, allowing the “brute” to take over: “I’m after him, let my fists move as quick as they want…I keep mashing, I can’t stop, tear his shirt, lift him up against the wall and pound his gut…I’m breathing hard… My knuckles all cut up and his face, you don’t recognize it… What I do I do good” (198-99). The notion of Mack’s fists having a mind of their own and his contention that he “can’t stop” attacking this man implies that this reaction is purely visceral. Mack has disregarded all common sense and permitted himself to be overwhelmed by his inner “savagery.” He is “breathing hard” just like Ben Rosen when he was
excitedly sparring with Mack, indicating that violence is a high for him. The ominous fact that Mack takes pride in beating this man to the point where his face is unrecognizable is insinuates that perhaps Mack is, in fact, no more than the brutal menace that society expects. He also loses his girlfriend Willa; when she sees this side of him, she decides she “don’t want no part of [Mack]” (199). He quits his job at the car wash, and the prospect of playing for the NBA falls through when Ben abandons his cause. Mack now embodies the marginal black thug who is marked by habits of gambling, violence, unemployment, and bachelorhood. He regresses into a common, idle hooligan rather than rising up out of dejection to become the talented professional basketball player that he once seemed destined to be.

When Mack had returned home after being caught in the betting scandals and kicked out of college, his father had taunted him: “‘You think you almost white, but you turn out to be just another nigger,’ he says. ‘You ain’t no star no more, Mack. You just an ord’nary nigger’” (Neugeboren 124). Enjoying the success of a college basketball star, Mack had money, status, and respect, and was thus indeed “almost white,” but integration into white society is always “partial” and “problematic” for an African American (Goffman 191). The end of Big Man confirms the problematic nature of a black man’s attempt to assimilate whiteness. Mack has failed miserably, and his future is utterly unpromising. He has returned to his state of stagnant despondency and bitter disillusionment. Although he has spoken with his sister about possibly going back to school, he quickly resigns to hopelessness: “Mack, I say to myself… Who you fooling? Who you trying to kid about going to school? Without them strings the coaches pull, you be lucky to pass beanbag” (Neugeboren 212). Mack refuses to believe that he can succeed without his athletic prowess (his “market value”) as a bargaining tool. He can only see himself through the lens of the racist society. His failed assimilation has left him more cynical than ever, and any glimmer of hope that he might have held onto before is gone. Mack will now fulfill his predicted role in society: that of “just another nigger.” As a historically persecuted people, Jews may always posses a fear of falling back into the ranks of the downtrodden. Mack epitomizes these deep-seated anxieties; he is the embodiment of the Jews’ most dreaded regression. He is confined to the lowest classes of society, and any hopes for success are torn down time after time because of the menacing, perpetually looming awareness of the majority’s racist ideology. Although Mack Davis is at times an object of
desire, it is safer for the Jews to keep that ethnicity at bay, lest the Jews be tainted by that layer of Otherness that they worked so hard to shed.

In Jay Neugeboren’s *Big Man*, the black voice is the medium through which Jewish fears and desires are revealed. Mack’s blackness highlights the whitening of the Jews around him and their comprehensive assimilation into the racist system that exploits him. The portrayal of Jews as merely, to borrow from *The Changelings*, undifferentiated “white folks” hints toward a desire and need to dissociate from the immorality that accompanies integration into the white world. The utterly ugly side of Jews is presented, presumably, as a motivation to begin diverging from that image of exploitative whiteness. Another incentive for stepping back from whiteness is the desire to reclaim one’s lost ethnicity, posited in *Big Man* as a desire for Mack. Mack’s freedom from the shackles of propriety, particularly his brutish working-class masculinity, is figured as highly desirable for the weak, scholarly, respectable upper class Jew. Mack, in his cultural uniqueness and distinction from mainstream society, represents the Jews’ lost ethnicity. Complicating the desire for that lost ethnicity, however, is the incessant fear of becoming like Mack. Jews never want to reclaim their status as an inferior race and the ever-present racial consciousness that accompanies that subjugation. In Mack, Jews can see the dreadfulness of being a racialized figure. Ben’s wife does not approve of his association with Mack, presumably because of the alarming possibility of being infected by his blackness. Mack is always haunted by the gaze of a society that views him as the bane of the nation and subsequently caught in a perpetual series of failures. Ben Rosen finally turns away from Mack to avoid the taint of this Otherness. His intimacy with the black world is temporary, a fleeting release that ends when his world of upper-middle class whiteness is restored to its original state at the return of his wife and son. Once the successful, stable, white family has been re-established, Ben cannot afford to have it contaminated by Mack’s black, low-class bachelorhood and fruitlessness. If Mack’s blackness bars him from prosperity, for Jews, it is their comfortable, homogeneous whiteness that prevents them from fully embracing ethnicity. Just as Vincent dabbles in blackness through her obviously fleeting friendship with Clara and ends up shrouded in complete whiteness, so Ben Rosen is eventually overwhelmed by the lure of secure whiteness and, presumably, the same fears of contamination that disturb Vincent throughout *The Changelings*. People like Clara and Mack will always be discarded. In *Big Man*, we learn that, though Jews may briefly consume blackness for personal pleasure, identity fluidity is still
not an option in a world where whiteness is akin to success and blackness to the inevitable dejection of a commodified Other.
CHAPTER III

BLACKNESS AS A JEWISH IMMIGRANT’S ROAD TO WHITENESS:

LORE SEGAL’S HER FIRST AMERICAN AND THE RIGIDITY OF AMERICAN IDENTITIES

In the 1980s, reconciling whiteness with ethnicity remained a struggle for many Jews. By this time, Jews were often among the “most secure economically and socially of any white Americans” (Goldstein 223). This prominent national status, which would ostensibly afford Jews the confidence to assert their group exclusivity, was actually liable to curb ethnic expression for several reasons. Many Jews had formed a “web of social attachments to non-Jews (including an intermarriage rate exceeding 50 percent),” and asserting Jewish exclusivity could place those non-Jewish attachments in jeopardy (224). The risk of alienating a business partner, friend, or worse, a spouse, or a child often prevented Jews entrenched in non-Jewish circles of white society from actively expressing their Jewishness. If expressing Jews’ ethnic distinctiveness in the white world was problematized by social trends such as intermarriage, Jews’ alliance with African Americans—historically, the nation’s most visible racial group—was undermined by economic trends. Class divides pushed many Jews further and further from (poor) ethnic America. The rise of the “meritocracy” concept and the mounting disapproval of affirmative action put an end to many programs and policies specifically targeting black uplift. This reduction in governmental assistance for the poor and invalidation of many affirmative action policies increased the division between Jews and blacks. In their article, “The Increasing Significance of Class: Black-Jewish Conflict in the Postindustrial Global Era,” Walda Katz-Fishman and Jerome Scott note that:

For African American workers… the… dismantling of social reforms [was] devastating… For Jewish American corporate elites and the superrich, these new economic and political realities furthered their accumulation of capital. Black workers and upper-class Jews were thus on opposite sides of the growing economic and political divide… It was, in fact, middle-class and upper-middle-class African Americans and Jewish Americans, pursuing a shrinking number of good professional jobs and contracts and facing a new reality of economic insecurity, who often found themselves in competition. (340)
The widening economic gap between upper-class Jews and lower-class blacks and the increased competition between middle class Jews and blacks generated tension between the two groups. As the new economic trends increasingly linked non-white ethnic groups like African Americans to economic and social wretchedness, Jews, many of whom now belonged to the community of dominant, privileged whites, became further distanced from the world of ethnicity.

Lore Segal’s *Her First American* returns to the postwar moment and explores the damaging internalization of the supposedly inherent nature of white success and black failure. Segal, like Jo Sinclair and Jay Neugeboren, imagines Jewish assimilation in the postwar decade as a time of tension and reluctance rather than as a celebration of shedding strangeness and at last belonging. She returns to the moment during which Jews finally gained entry into the coveted world of white privilege to illustrate the taut, uncomfortable, and compulsory nature of that transformation. Ilka Weissnix, a young white Jewish immigrant from Vienna, and Carter Bayoux, a middle-aged African American scholar, internalize a notion of race that defines the stereotypical qualities which are supposedly attached to blackness and whiteness, and this internalization is what ultimately divides them. Ilka arrives in America as an essentially blank slate. Twenty-one and naïve, she seems to have little to no understanding of difference, despite having survived the Holocaust. She immediately enters into a romantic relationship with Carter, a black man, and, at first, their relationship seems almost natural. A Jewish Holocaust survivor moving from Europe to the United States and a black man moving from California to New York for a fresh start, they are two migrating, displaced people coming together. Their cosmopolitanism—Carter’s as a well-travelled UN correspondent and Ilka’s as a European immigrant—seems to be a way for them to connect and escape a narrow nationalist identity. The novel envisions, in an almost utopian way, a black-Jewish solidarity and the possibility for identity fluidity, if only to efface it. We quickly learn just how unnatural Ilka and Carter’s relationship must be and how inescapable the narrow conceptions of American identity are. Segal stages the assimilation of an utterly unprejudiced immigrant to illustrate the powerful effect of American race relations. Ilka’s arrant naiveté does not last long under the compelling and insistent force of racism. As Ilka internalizes an understanding of her whiteness and Carter’s blackness, she slowly but surely distances herself from him. Carter’s perpetual downfall both facilitates and mirrors Ilka’s integration. It is only through contact with Carter that Ilka begins to understand her place in society as a white
woman and her inability, in America, to belong in the world of the racial Others. Carter’s surrender to his socially-anticipated identity, that of a fallen, disgraceful, useless failure, mirrors Ilka’s yielding to her own socially-sanctioned position as a white woman, married to a respectable (white) man belonging to the correct “species” and fulfilling her duties as wife and mother (Segal 282). Carter and Ilka utterly undo the fantasy of identity fluidity that is staged by Jo Sinclair in *The Changelings*. Sinclair’s Vincent naively believes that she can instigate tolerance and be the driving force that unites white with black. Published in 1955, prior to widespread black disillusionment with the integration movement, *The Changelings* exhibits a relative optimism facilitated by its focus on youth. The limited success of the 1960s project for black civil rights and the persistence of African American social and economic marginalization, which continued well into the late twentieth century, drive the Jews’ whitening process and shape Neugeboren and Segal’s narratives of failed “marriages” between black and white. Though the alliance between Vincent and Clara in *The Changelings* appears both imperfect and fleeting, the narrative’s rather ambiguous ending does not definitively divide black and white as Vincent is ostensibly on her way to unite Clara with some of her white family members and friends. Both *Big Man* and *Her First American* temporarily ally black with white, but those unions are troublesome and short-lived as the black and white characters are eventually relegated to entirely separate fates. Carter and Ilka represent the insistence of black/white polarity as the two spend the novel slowly unraveling their fluid identities to realistically, though reluctantly, accept their positions on opposite sides of the stringent black-white boundary line.

In *White By Law*, Ian Haney Lopez describes the racial semiotics that define race in the United States, noting that “Race is not… simply a matter of physical appearance and ancestry. Instead, it is primarily a function of the meanings given to these” (11). It is the meanings attached to race, not the physical differences, which consistently intrude upon Carter and Ilka’s attempts to belong in each other’s worlds. Haney Lopez discusses how “the statuses and cases that make up the laws of this country have directly contributed to defining the range of meanings without which notions of race could not exist” (12). American racism is not merely conceptual; it has been historically embedded within the legal framework of the country and is thus entangled with citizenship. As an immigrant, Ilka must necessarily internalize the racial semiotics that defines the society in which she seeks to establish herself as a citizen. Haney Lopez notes, “The prerequisite courts in
effect labeled those who were excluded from citizenship (those who were non-White) as inferior; by implication, those who were admitted (White persons) were superior. In this way, the prerequisite cases show that Whiteness exists not only as the opposite of non-Whiteness, but as the superior opposite” (20). Ilka learns that she, a white immigrant, can gain full citizenship through naturalization, whereas Carter, a black man born to America, is always excluded from that status. The inferiority attached to Carter’s blackness will forever mark him as a non-Citizen, whereas the oppositional meanings attached to Ilka’s whiteness afford her citizenship despite her immigrant status. Expanding on this notion of implicit superiority, or what he calls “oppositional constructivism” (21), Haney Lopez clearly describes the racial definitions attached to blackness and whiteness which haunt both Ilka and Carter throughout Her First American:

Witness the close connection between the negative characteristics imputed to Blacks and the reverse, positive traits attributed to Whites. Blacks have been constructed as lazy, ignorant, lascivious, and criminal; Whites as industrious, knowledgeable, virtuous, and law-abiding. For each negative characteristic ascribed to people of color, an equal but opposite and positive characteristic is attributed to Whites. (20)

Despite Carter’s brilliance and abundant career prospects, he consistently falls prey to the stereotypical construction of his black identity. Ilka, in internalizing this racial semiotics, learns the importance of dissociating herself from Carter’s world of stagnant delinquency and aspiring for the more “industrious,” productive white lifestyle assigned to her. Toni Morrison’s description of literary “Africanism” is an apt portrayal of Carter’s role in Ilka’s transformation: “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed… not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (Playing 52). Through naively involving herself with a black man, Ilka is able to learn the unsuitability of her association with blackness. Carter’s “enslavement” to his insistent blackness, his “repulsive” alcoholism, his “helplessness” in the face of his demons, and his inability to evolve, demonstrates to Ilka that she, in her whiteness, is “free,” “desirable,” “licensed,” and “progressive.” Just as Carter internalizes and subsequently embodies the negative characteristics ascribed to black people, so Ilka internalizes and eventually embodies the opposite, positive characteristics ascribed to white people.
Carter and Ilka meet each other at a whistle stop bar in the “ass end of Noplace, Nevada” (Segal 5). Ilka is on a trip from New York to California in search of the real America, and Carter is “en route from California to New York for a brand-new start and had stopped off for one last, big bender” (15). Their chance encounter in the middle of the desert in the middle of America, rather than at home in Manhattan, where their relationship later develops, suggests that such a meeting between black and white would only be possible in a small, practically forgotten, essentially unnamed town in the middle of nowhere, in a nearly empty bar in which Carter is the only patron with whom Ilka can engage. Only a virtually nonexistent place can accommodate this encounter, a place so empty of people as to afford Ilka and Carter the luxury of evading the disapproving gaze of a public who would awaken within Ilka a consciousness of the social norms surrounding race. In a large, cosmopolitan city, in which society’s rules apply, in which she has plenty of white people with whom to associate, and in which her only connection is her American cousin Fishgoppel, a graduate student whose contacts are probably limited to other educated white people, Ilka may not have had the opportunity to come in contact with Carter. This setting, in the middle of the country, is also symbolic of the fact that Carter and Ilka meet when they are both drifting somewhere in between whiteness and blackness. They are in an undefined middle space, existing, like outlaws, outside the organized, polarized American racial system, in an unreal place in which blacks and whites can partially belong to each other’s worlds—they are in “Noplace.” The word “utopia” translates literally from Greek as “not a place;” “Noplace, Nevada” thus evokes a kind of ideal, imaginary setting, one in which there can be a thriving kinship between blacks and Jews (“Utopia”). “Noplace” suggests that such a place, in which blacks and whites sit equally across from one another, in which a black man is a successful, sophisticated professor and writer, and a white woman is a transient stranger who yearns for proximity to blackness, is merely imaginary in America. Ilka and Carter quickly learn that their relationship is just as fleeting as their stopover in Nevada, and that their identity fluidity is no more than a short-lived utopian vision.

Carter is the medium through which Ilka learns about race and difference and comes to understand her own place in America. She arrives from Europe a naïve young immigrant knowing “next to nothing” about the United States (Segal 5). Because of her innocence, she is not yet equipped with a racial consciousness that intrudes upon every aspect of her life in the same way that Carter is. Upon meeting Carter in Nevada, “Ilka
said… ‘you are my first real American.’ ‘Of the second class,’ said the big man” (16). Carter informs Ilka from the start that to be black in America is to belong to a “second,” inferior class of people. When Ilka leaves the whistle stop bar with Carter, he asks her, “You’re not afraid of me?” (21). Here Ilka learns that she has entered a society of people in which someone like Carter should provoke fear, but Ilka does not yet fully grasp what it is about Carter that should be so terrifying. Later, on a date with Ilka, Carter mentions a book called “Black Sons” and Ilka notes that “this was not [her] first jolt of suspicion that Carter Bayoux was telling her he was a Negro” (37). Despite her “suspicion,” Ilka remains confused: she observes that Carter’s face is “not black” and that “if Carter Bayoux could be said to be a color it was a dangerous purple red” (37). Ilka does not at first understand the difference between race and physical appearance. As Haney Lopez illustrates, race “is primarily a function of the meanings” assigned to it, but Ilka is still comprehending race as an entirely physical aspect of difference. Once Carter refers to himself as black, though, Ilka thinks “with relief” that “he is definitely Negro” (40). Perhaps by now Ilka understands the American preoccupation with the classification of people, thus accounting for her “relief” to finally be able to place Carter under the category of “Negro.” When Ilka asks Carter if she is colorblind, he answers, “You… are a foreigner, but we’re going to get you naturalized. We’ll open up your eyes” (47). Carter’s response suggests that Ilka is doomed to internalize American racial prejudice. If, in her current naïve, foreign, in-between state, she is colorblind, this colorblindness is bound to disappear through assimilation into American society. Her eyes will inevitably be opened to the rampant discrimination and inflexible racial boundaries that surround her.

Ilka’s understanding of race is at first shaky, as is evidenced by her confusion over who can and cannot be categorized as “Negro.” She sees a “small brown man” on the subway and realizes that “she didn’t know a Negro when she saw one—or was this a Chinese?” (Segal 71). Ilka understands that there are at least two separate racial categories for nonwhites—Negro and Chinese—but she does not yet know how to look at a “brown” person and be able to tell whether he is one or the other. She is now, however, experienced enough to understand that “brown” is different from herself. Whether the man on the subway is Negro or Chinese, he is still not-White and thus not like Ilka. As Ilka spends more and more time in the United States, though, she becomes less and less sure of Carter, thus indicating her gradual internalization of racial semiotics and of the consciousness of herself as a white woman and Carter as a black man and the positive and negative
connotations of those respective statuses. On her date with Carter to hear jazz, she “watched Carter Bayoux…
and decided she must start to go out and see other people” (87-8). This is the first intimation of Ilka’s
realization that her relationship with Carter is somehow inappropriate. These “other people” that Ilka decides
she must “go out and see” are presumably white people, people more like herself. Ilka suddenly becomes
aware, in the middle of a date, of the disparity between her and Carter, perhaps because he has taken her to a
jazz performance. Ilka, in the midst of listening to African American music performed by African Americans
before an audience of African Americans, suddenly grasps that she is an outsider to this black culture. There is
another culture of people in America who look more like her, sound more like her, and act more like her.
When Carter takes Ilka to a benefit performance in Harlem, she further grasps the differences between herself
and African Americans. There are only three white people attending the performance, Ilka and two other
women. During a skit about race relations, the black audience members are “roaring” with laughter while “the
corners of the white women’s two smiling mouths looked as if four invisible clothespins were holding them
up” (92). The black reaction to a mockery of American racial politics is passionate and almost animalistic in its
“roar,” whereas the white reaction is much more reserved, strained, and decorous. The white women
essentially force themselves to smile so as to not upset the clearly hysterical blacks with their lack of
amusement. Here Ilka learns that blacks and whites have different social concerns, perceptions, and senses of
humor. Despite her desire to belong with Carter and his friends, she feels more aligned with the two white
women, as she, too, mechanically forces “her mouth to the ‘smile’ position” (92). As Carter predicted, Ilka’s
colorblindness was merely a symptom of her foreignness and inexperience, and it is slowly but surely
disappearing.

As her consciousness of racial difference continues to develop, Ilka persists in noticing the differences
between herself and others, namely Carter. After sleeping with Carter for the first time, Ilka notices his
physical blackness: she “studied the sleep-swollen lips and woolly hair of the sleeping head of—Ilka saw it for
the first time—a Negro” (Segal 106). Although Carter has always had the same lips and hair, Ilka is beginning
to see him in a new light. He is transforming in her eyes from the “big American” that so impressed her in
Nevada to an almost beast-like figure. He is suddenly “a Negro,” as Ilka internalizes the unflattering Negro
stereotype—big lips and “wooly hair”—and projects it onto Carter. She had not recognized these stereotypical
animal-like physical markers of blackness when she first met Carter; her sudden realization of his “savage” appearance is something she has learned through exposure to American racism. Societal reactions to Ilka and Carter’s relationship also facilitate Ilka’s internalization of racial definitions. As she and Carter walk in public holding hands, a woman “had come to a dead stop. Her… mouth hung open, staring after Carter and Ilka” (108). The woman’s shock upsets Ilka: “‘People are so stupid!’ Ilka said hotly. ‘They have to look’” (108). Ilka reacts “hotly,” not necessarily because she is protective of her relationship, but more likely out of embarrassment. When people stare at Ilka and Carter in the bar in Nevada, Ilka barely even notices, but now she finds it incredibly bothersome. Ilka has internalized society’s disapproval of her interracial relationship, and this disapproval manifests itself within Ilka as shame. Though she did not originally have a problem being seen with Carter, the white public’s reaction to their relationship is starting to weigh on her. Later, as Carter and Ilka ride a train home from DC together, Ilka again feels embarrassed at being seen with Carter. As he stubbornly smokes in the nonsmoking car, “an irate old woman” is ranting about his behavior. She is in a “rage” and mutters angrily about “the whole pack of them” (120). The woman’s anger clearly goes beyond Carter’s smoking. She sees him as merely one symptom of a much bigger problem: the “whole pack of” Negroes out there. For her, blacks are nothing but menaces to society, and Carter’s defiant smoking is just further proof of that. Ilka is profoundly affected by this woman’s intense loathing: her “heart thumped unpleasantly” as she implores Carter to move to the smoking car and, “her heart in an uproar, kept glancing at the other’s face distorted with hatred” (119, 120). The woman’s “distorted” and hateful expression epitomizes for Ilka the utterly revolting image that others see when they look at her boyfriend. The ugliness of this woman’s fury reflects society’s ugly perception of Carter, and sends Ilka into an internal “uproar.” It is Ilka’s internalization of this ugly perception which distorts Carter before her very eyes, turns him from the sophisticated Carter Bayoux into just another big-lipped wooly-haired Negro. This Ilka, humiliated and distressed by society’s reaction to Carter, is a far cry from the earlier innocent, essentially colorblind Ilka. Ilka is gradually overwhelmed by her internalization of the meanings attached to blackness and whiteness in America.

As Ilka continues to internalize racism, she becomes more concerned with categorizing people. She asks Carter if a “dark young Spanish speaking” waitress is a “Negro” and he explains that the waitress is
actually “‘Puerto Rican’…thereby giving a name to the category into which Ilka was now able to… distinguish this group of people from other groups of people” (Segal 142). Ilka has now expanded her vocabulary for non-White people to include, in addition to “Negro” and “Chinese,” “Puerto Rican.” Ilka, who barely comprehended that Carter was racially distinct from her in Nevada, now questions whether anyone of a remotely darker hue is a “Negro.” When Ilka joins Carter at a summer house in Connecticut, she continues this compulsory classification of people: “she organized them into those first categories by which we fix strangers: four males and four females… five whites… and three Negroes… Carter had said Stanley… was a Jew, so which one was he?” (169). Ilka’s need to fix people into categories is a manifestation of her growing Americanness. As Carter’s downfall will prove, one is either not-white or white in America, never both. In Ilka’s mental processing there is no room for any partial or divided identity, she must organize the summer houseguests into rigid gender and race categories. Interestingly, she also searches for the one person with whom she would most likely identify, the white Jew. The impulse to stay with one’s own kind is also a learned behavior for Ilka. When Ilka first arrived in America, her desire was not for other Jews but for “real” Americans who could teach her about America. Now Ilka seems interested in gravitating toward white Jews like herself, a behavior which mirrors American segregation.

The more Ilka develops a consciousness of social norms, the more she pulls away from Carter and his dysfunctional world. When Carter first broaches the subject of renting a summer house, Ilka is initially reluctant, arguing, “I must get on with my life. I’ve got to find a proper job where I can meet people” (Segal 163). Ilka works a menial filing job, but, as she internalizes whiteness, she begins to aspire for more. Having internalized a racial definition of blackness akin to those suggested by both Haney Lopez (“lazy, ignorant, lascivious, and criminal”) and Morrison (“enslaved,” “repulsive,” “helpless”), Ilka associates blackness with stagnancy and impropriety and thus realizes that Carter prevents her from progressing. Only by cutting ties with Carter can she “get on with… life” and become a “proper” member of society, a.k.a white. Ilka’s contention that she needs to “meet people” again implies that she needs to meet more people like her: white people. Carter introduces Ilka to countless people, so it seems merely a matter of meeting the “proper” people. As Carter begs her to join him in Connecticut, Ilka again resists, saying, “I’m going to look for a real job,” implying that her current menial job is not “real” (Segal 164). In reality, or rather, in the reality imagined by
the white majority, menial jobs are, in fact, reserved for blacks. Ilka, having internalized the racial meaning of whiteness as the “superior opposite” to blackness, knows that she must aim higher than her current job in order to fulfill that socially-recognized definition of whiteness. Ilka, however, has not entirely succumbed to her consciousness of mainstream racism, and so she eventually joins Carter at the summer house. Her desire to disentangle herself from him, though, is ever-present. When she tells Carter that she must leave the house, she again stresses that, “I must find myself a proper job and meet new people. Mustn’t I, Carter, get on with my life?” (194). Ilka once again invokes her need for skilled employment and a fresh crowd of people. She must emerge from marginality and enact her whiteness through obtaining a “proper job,” one more fit for a white person, and by associating with “new people,” white people. Despite Ilka’s feelings for Carter, she has become realistic about the impracticality of their future. Having internalized American racism, Ilka views blackness as a destructive force in her life. If she does not wish to encounter the societal “rage” and “hatred,” like that which she experienced on the train from Washington, she must eliminate Otherness from her life, in the form of the cyclically dejected Carter, and embrace her whiteness.

Although Ilka gradually internalizes America’s divisive racial semiotics, she does make a few attempts to evade the notion of difference. Her love for Carter generates a “desire to diminish the difference between them,” and this desire manifests itself in a few instances during which Ilka attempts to conceal the separateness between herself and Carter in terms of their group histories (Segal 150). When Ilka’s mother is finally found after being missing for years after the Holocaust, she comes to live with Ilka and Fishgoppel in New York. Carter asks to meet Ilka’s mother, and Ilka begs her mother to be silent about her experiences in the Holocaust. She says, “They have their own stories, Mutti. They don’t need our nightmares” (151). Ilka’s words suggest a shared experience of racial horror, that both blacks and Jews have nightmares of past trauma. She hopes to repress and gloss over her distinct story of ethnic suffering and would rather point toward a commonality between herself and Carter’s people and their narrative. Rather than address her own history, she allows Carter’s racial past to serve as a surrogate for her untold stories. Black and Jewish memories of suffering are thus figured as almost interchangeable. Ilka’s conflation of black “stories” and Jewish “nightmares” into one shared narrative of pain is an attempt to efface any differences between Ilka and Carter’s ancestries and experiences of oppression and their current statuses in America. Later, Ilka witnesses an
argument between her black friend Ebony (whom she met through Carter, of course) and Fishgoppel about these differences:

Fishgoppel said, ‘Jews care enough about their children to give them an education.’

Ebony said, ‘Negroes were lynched if they learned the alphabet.’

‘We had pogroms,’ said Fishgoppel.

‘Slavery,’ said Ebony.

‘Holocaust!’ cried Fishgoppel. (273)

Each woman attempts to validate her own group’s history as more significant than the other’s, thus emphasizing that, though both groups have suffered oppression and violence based on supposed racial differences, each sees her own history as singular. Ilka interrupts them, shouting, “Are there no griefs that aren’t racist or anti-Semitic!” (273). As Ethan Goffman notes, “This outburst attempts to establish a common humanity, to shock the adversaries away from exclusive preoccupation with their own victimhood. Such avoidance of historical confrontation allows for universality, but drains the reality of difference” (189). Ilka once again attempts to gloss over the distinctiveness of each history and force a “common humanity” between blacks and Jews. This time, unlike with the silencing of her mother, Ilka cannot force a commonality as Fishgoppel and Ebony storm away from their fight in “different directions” (Segal 273). Their inability to reconcile highlights the growing divergence between blacks and Jews in America. The incident suggests that, though they share histories of victimhood, the “reality of difference” in 1950s America, a black and white difference, will keep the two groups apart. Ilka cannot avoid the powerful racial divide that will inevitably distance her from Carter. She learns that the “universality” she seeks to establish between blacks and Jews is not possible. Just as Fishgoppel and Ebony end up heading in “different directions,” Ilka and Carter’s differences will eventually send them in opposite directions as well.

As Ilka continues her gradual acknowledgement and internalization of these differences, she begins her opposite journey toward whiteness. Ilka eventually leaves the summer home, and, though she continues her relationship with Carter upon his return to the city, it is a much less intense romance due to his repeated hospitalizations (for alcoholism) and Ilka’s continual pulling away. Ilka invites Carter to a Passover seder but “hoped [he] would not come” (Segal 253). It seems that Ilka does not want to be embarrassed by Carter now
that she has realized what he is in the eyes of others. The white Jews at her seder are the “new people” with whom she keeps telling Carter she must begin to associate, and she does not want Carter’s destructive presence to spoil her progress in that world. Ilka also finds her much-desired “proper job” working for the ACLU and is naturalized as a “brand-new American” (272). As Ilka’s status advances socially, professionally, and legally, she is finally able to cut romantic ties with Carter. After ending their intimate relationship, Ilka progresses even further and marries a white Jewish man and has a child with him, thus embarking on the respectable, domestic, and fruitful life of whiteness that she never could have had with the Carter. Ilka remains in friendly contact with Carter over the years, but, for the most part, she leads a life that is the “superior opposite” of his; she is, in Morrison’s terms: “free,” “licensed,” and “progressive,” while he remains “enslaved,” to stereotypical black dejection, “helpless” in the face of his insistent alcoholism, and regressive in his perpetual failures.

Upon Carter’s death, Ilka learns a final, definitive lesson on the rigid nature of the divide between black and white in America. She attends Carter’s UN memorial service, and, upon expressing her desire to attend an additional memorial ‘read-in’ being organized by Carter’s graduate students, she is told that she will be an unwelcome guest: “They think you will write a book about him. They want to write the book about Carter. They want the book about Carter to be a black book” (Segal 286). Just as in Big Man, when Mack Davis laments that white journalists profit from appropriating his (black) story, here the black students worry that Ilka will commodify a black story for white interests. They want narratives of blackness to remain within the black community, thus maintaining an entirely group-centric attitude and rejecting the universality that Ilka had previously sought. After all of the white prejudices that Ilka has internalized, this is her first encounter with a hostile black community. The black students refuse to acknowledge the fact that Carter’s story might be intertwined with Ilka’s, that the stories of whiteness and blackness could converge. Their refusal to legitimize Carter’s relationship with Ilka mirrors the way in which the white world has too often turned a blind eye to Carter’s potential for white success. Ilka tries to relate to the graduate students by telling them that Carter used to say that her last name, Weissnix, “meant ‘Notwhite,’ because I am a Jew” (287). She suggests that she, too, is less-than-white, but this notion of a “not-white” kinship between blacks and Jews is ultimately foreclosed. The graduate students are not willing to acknowledge anything other than whiteness in Ilka. They merely stare at her politely and then “turned back into their circle and went on with what they had been going to say before
Ilka interrupted” (287). Jewish or not Jewish, Ilka is a member of the oppressive white majority. She is not allowed in this exclusively black “circle,” and she does not merit response as she is merely a temporary interruption to the black world. Likewise, Carter’s fleeting success is no more than a brief disruption of the white world. Once Carter falls back into predictable “black” behavior, the disruption ends. Society, unfortunately, does not acknowledge the “multiple nature of identity—that it can have many guises, changing to suit the context; that each such identity has its validity” (Goffman 191). Both white and black societies refuse to recognize the multifaceted Carter and Ilka. To white society, Carter is no more than a typical troublesome black drunk who somehow, through incredible but irregular talent, achieves a bit of success in the white world before ultimately and predictably falling into black wretchedness. To black society, Ilka is no more than an exploitative, opportunistic white woman who uses Carter and throws him away. It is thus not only the white majority’s racial semiotics that bar Ilka from belonging in Carter’s ethnic world; racial barriers are affirmed by both blacks and whites alike. From the black perspective, Ilka’s ethnicity will always be eclipsed by privileged whiteness, just as, from the white perspective, Carter can never embody whiteness because his brilliance will always be obscured by the presence of an insistent, destructive blackness.

Like Ilka, Carter’s experiences are consistently overshadowed by an intrusive knowledge of the social definition of blackness as naturally inferior to whiteness, a definition typically constructed as “lazy, ignorant, lascivious, and criminal” and “enslaved,” “repulsive,” and “helpless.” Carter’s “white” side, marked by his intellect, sophistication, and numerous achievements, consistently defy that social construction, but he perpetually self-destructs by succumbing to his “black” side. Carter’s dysfunction is evident during his first encounter with Ilka at the whistle stop bar. He tells Ilka that he is going to New York for a “brand-new start,” which implies that his prior “start” was met with failure. Whatever he started in California obviously ended so catastrophically that Carter requires not only a new start, but a new geographical location three thousand miles from the original. Carter’s alcoholism, which is presumably what destroyed him in California, also immediately threatens his attempts to start over in New York. He admits that he is in Nevada for “one last, big bender,” thus implying that countless drinking binges have preceded this “one last, big” one. Carter’s addiction is so intense that he requires alcohol even while “en route” to his so-called “brand-new start.” He commences his return from ruin by doing the very thing that ruined him in the first place (and in a “big” way) thus
foreshadowing his inability to overcome the habit later on. Despite the mention of his past failures and the obviousness of his unyielding alcoholism, Carter still exudes a measure of intelligence and sophistication. As the white barman rants about the unfairness of people who can get rich by receiving “a lump sum in compensation” from automobile accidents and the like, Carter mockingly replies, “I can introduce [your idea] for you in the next session of the United Nations, or were you thinking in terms of an amendment to the Bill of Rights?” (Segal 11, 12). Here we learn that Carter is some sort of ambassador or somehow connected to the United Nations, that he is educated and witty, and that he speaks properly and articulately. The opposition between Carter and the barman serves both to highlight Carter’s urbanity and stage an almost alternative reality. Here in “Noplace, Nevada,” the white man serves and the black man patronizes. Utopian overtones are suggested as it is not the black man, but the white man who butchers the English language: the barman uses crude slang referring, for instance, to a lawyer as “this pip of a shyster” (10) and making common grammatical errors as with statements like “you don’t got a opportunity” and “I ain’t prejudiced” (12). Unlike the urban landscape, which is filled with black servants, here in this imaginary place it is the white man who is the simple, low-class servant. The black man is knowledgeable, refined and employed with the United Nations. He is cosmopolitan, like Ilka, and their shared worldliness allows for this romantic, almost fantastical solidarity to arise in Nevada. The stereotypical roles have been reversed here to emphasize Carter’s “white” side. The shadow of alcoholism and failure, however, looms ominously over his temporary kinship with Ilka and his sharp, sophisticated side, making for a faltering existence. Sure enough, when Ilka tries to reach Carter at his hotel upon her return to New York, she is informed by a worker that he is “in the bughouse” (25). The revelation that Carter has been institutionalized, presumably for his drinking problem, suggests that Carter is fighting a losing battle from the outset. The two sides of Carter that first appear before Ilka at the bar in Nevada—the confused, struggling, drunk (stereotypically “black”) side and the smart, scholarly, productive (stereotypically “white”) side—are at odds throughout Her First American, but it is the “black” Carter who continually triumphs.

Just as his witty sophistication in the bar is darkened by the suggestion of alcoholism and earlier tragedy, blackness continues to obscure the “white” side of Carter Bayoux. Intimations of a refined, eloquent, well-connected white Carter are overshadowed by his sinister, insistent “black” side, manifestations of which
exist both within and around Carter. Externally, black figures consistently pop up to threaten his prominence. These figures, in detailing the ubiquitous presence of servile, lower-class blacks in the urban landscape, suggest the tenuousness of his success. When Carter takes Ilka to a wedding, “a black maid received their coats,” the bartender is “a black man about Carter’s age,” and a “colored maid had to carry the plates of canapés” (Segal 28, 29, 30). Carter is a guest at a fancy, mostly-white wedding, but the other blacks in attendance are servants. At his hotel, in the elevator, there is a “black operator,” in the lobby, there is a “black bellboy,” and, in his room, “the maid” is “black” (47, 53, 59). Once again, although Carter is a hotel guest, all others of his race are servants. This attention to the race of the staff is a deliberate comment on Carter himself. Carter is one of the few black people in the first few sections of the novel who is not a service employee. He is surrounded by reminders of what society expects from people of his race. The black workers speak volumes despite their habitual silence. Their mere presence is menacing, as it tells the story of what Carter could have and likely should have become had he not somehow transcended racial discrimination to cross over into the white world of education and privilege. Their ubiquitous, haunting presence, though, suggests that Carter’s “whiteness” is fleeting and artificial, and that, as a black man, his true place of belonging is with them, the poor, silenced, subservient blacks, rather than with the genteel white guests of weddings and hotels. These black ghosts almost mock Carter and reveal him to be an imposter. Their presence disputes his place in society, and insinuates that his time in this white world of academia and refinement is ill-fated. Carter is indeed conscious of this menacing presence and its implications. When he and Ilka are in the park, she points out “a man in cardboard shoes, picking a butt off the ground” and says, “Look, Carter, at that man.” Carter replies, “I don’t want to look. How far, do you think, I am from that man?” (143). This utterly dejected homeless vagabond represents, for Carter, the embodiment of himself as seen through the racist lens of society. Through this lens, Carter is a worthless, desolate, downtrodden black man, and this man in the park is the incarnation of that stereotype. Carter understands that his “black” self is slowly overwhelming him, and that, despite his accomplishments and intellectual aptitude, he will always be plagued by the dismal stereotype of the insignificant, destitute African American.

In addition to this damaging, external black presence, Carter is also afflicted by his personal, inner darkness, his “black” self, which continually shrouds his air of success and sophistication. Carter’s perpetual
downfall into self-sabotaging, stereotypically “black” behavior mirrors Mack Davis’s. Carter succumbs to alcoholism just as Mack succumbs to gambling. Both seem to almost voluntarily accept their lot in life as members of the “urban underclass” (Massey and Denton viii). Though the idea crosses his mind, Mack does not even attempt to return to college because he feels that, without his athletic scholarship, he will indubitably fail. Though Carter, a Yale graduate and UN correspondent, may appear to have transcended the harmful internalization of inevitable black failure, this transcendence is only temporary. No matter what measure of success he achieves, he inexorably spoils his bouts of achievement by surrendering to his supposedly predetermined “black” self. Professionally, Carter appears to be successful, well-known, and well-connected. When he takes Ilka to a wedding for their first date, for example, he is instantly recognized by a group of admirers. A girl calls out excitedly, “It’s Professor Bayoux!” (Segal 29), and a “small crowd” of “eager” young people quickly forms around Carter (30). The girl’s exclamation reveals that Carter has taught at the university level and that he, as a scholar, is well-known and respected enough to be recognized in public and generate at least “small crowd” of people interested in speaking to him. He addresses the group and begins a story with “Friend of mine at the UN once took me home to a seder” (30). This statement both invokes Carter’s connection to the UN and demonstrates his cultural awareness. He uses the word “seder” without explanation, as though it were a common term, demonstrating his comfort and familiarity with Jewish, and perhaps other, cultures. Within the space of a few sentences, Carter has been established as a worldly college-level professor with comrades at the UN and acquaintances of varying cultures. Despite the appearance of professional success that emerges at this wedding, Carter cannot resist his demons. The moment that he and Ilka arrive at the reception, Carter grabs an entire bottle of scotch off the bar, telling “the astonished bartender… ‘Save you the trouble of serving me is the way for you to think about it’” (Segal 28). The sophisticated Carter risks his status and foregoes the rules of respectability to support his alcoholism. His behavior is so inappropriate that even the lowly black bartender is “astonished” by it. As he gets drunker and drunker, his voice shifts from the strong “tenor pitch” of an admired professor to the “high, complaining tone” of a child (30, 32). Every aspect of Carter, down to his voice, is corrupted by his drinking. The debauchery continues when Carter and Ilka go down to Harris Wharton’s office, a friend of Carter’s, a doctor, and the father of the bride. Carter tells Harris that he has “the granddaddy of insomnias” and asks him to “prescribe me some of those little pills, will you?”
This exchange reveals an added layer of disorder, insomnia, and the possibility of yet another addiction, to sleeping pills. The addiction is confirmed when Harris is called upstairs to cut the cake; Carter takes this opportunity to steal the pills from his office. He then “threw a couple of small capsules into his mouth” and “upended what remained in the Chivas bottle” (34). Carter has now stolen from his supposed friend, recklessly mixed alcohol with sleeping pills, and finished an entire bottle of scotch, disregarding the decorum required of white people, particularly in the setting of a wedding and first date. When he and Ilka rejoin the party, Carter continues to drink glass after glass of champagne and ends up “stagger[ing],” appearing “completely at sea” (35), “demolish[ing]” a former student who stands in his path, and looking “so ill” (36). Carter’s excess has transformed him from an eloquent intellectual to a stumbling, belligerent fool. Clearly, he is already struggling with his “brand-new start,” as Nevada was certainly not his “one last, big bender.” Carter seems to be at the mercy of the meanings attached to blackness. His vulgar, unruly actions merely confirm white society’s definition of blackness and further remove him from white sophistication. The professional success that Carter had exuded earlier in the evening is completely obliterated by his debauched, stereotypically “black,” behavior.

On Carter and Ilka’s second date, the “white,” professionally accomplished Carter resurfaces. He wants to take Ilka to a nice dinner because he has received a “windfall” from a book he wrote called, “Pan-African Power: The Hope of the American Negro” (Segal 43). This fact reaffirms Carter’s intellectualism. He is not only a professor, but a published author of a scholarly text that is notable enough to yield a profit. After dinner, however, his “black” side creeps in; the date becomes less polite as Carter distastefully invites Ilka up to his hotel room for a drink. He now becomes the lascivious alcoholic associated with blackness. Carter’s choice to reside in a hotel is also suspect. It is a living situation that suggests transience, which is incompatible with having a steady job, a family, or any of the stability associated with whiteness. Carter’s professional achievement and earlier air of success is eclipsed by the shadow of blackness demonstrated by his shady behavior and dubious living arrangements. Once inside the hotel room, traces of the “white,” professionally accomplished Carter once again emerge. His room is filled with artwork, highlighting his intellectual side. He gives Ilka a photo album filled with newspaper columns featuring him. One of the accompanying photos is captioned, “Carter Bayoux, Special Adviser on Race Relations to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations” (50). Although Carter’s significant role with the UN is impressive, it is
overshadowed by the ominous fact is that he no longer has that job and the unspoken but likely reason for the loss: his dysfunction and addictions. Ilka also discovers a graduation photo captioned: “Carter, Yale, 1920,” which is yet another reminder of Carter’s incredible intelligence and potential (50). Carter’s current behavior, however, casts a shadow over these remnants of his success in the white world. While Ilka explores his apartment and sifts through his memories, Carter withdraws into the bathroom for so long that she becomes anxious. To bring a woman up to his hotel room and then disappear into the bathroom for an unusually extended period of time is both disturbing and a complete breach of decorum. Finally, Ilka thinks, “The toilet flushed. He was perfectly all right. Ilka heard the opening and closing of bathroom cabinets” (51). The juxtaposition of the images of a younger, thriving, accomplished Carter and this much older, drunk Carter, frantically searching for pills in the bathroom as a twenty-one year old girl waits for him in his hotel room, stages a stark contrast. The younger Carter had achieved a high level of integration into the white world, whereas this Carter cannot resist his dark side. The prosperous Carter of Yale and of the UN exist only in these photos, they are past Carters. The present Carter is drunk and confused, fumbling around desperately for sleeping pills in a hotel room with a girl half his age.

After this date with Ilka, Carter holes up in his room for an unidentified period of time in a sleepless stupor of drunken confusion. He drinks, makes frantic phone calls, passes out, and rouses only to resume the cycle again. He becomes utterly disoriented and loses all sense of time. Throughout this episode, he frenetically asks anyone with whom he speaks to clarify the time: “What day is this?”, “What time is this?”, “Which eleven is this?”, and “Is this the same night? …Is this the same day?” (Segal 58, 60, 67, 69). The “black” side of Carter has totally taken over, trapping him in such stagnant desolation and intoxication that he can no longer comprehend the passage of time. When Carter resurfaces and meets with Ilka, she notes his “violently trembling arm” and is “frightened by the gray pallor around his mouth and chin” (71). His descent into the blackness of his addiction makes him both mentally and physically disordered. After resolving to “snap out of this,” however, Carter seems to revert back to his upbeat, sophisticated, “white” self (75). He takes Ilka out to “listen to good jazz” (86), to a benefit show in Harlem, to meet “the world’s greatest” gospel singer (94), to a performance at Carnegie Hall, to a fashion ball, to the United Nations, and on a business trip to Washington, DC for a UN assignment. Carter seems to be progressing in all aspects of his life: socially,
culturally, professionally, and even romantically, despite the obviously fleeting nature of his relationship with Ilka. This upturn, naturally, is brief. Eventually, alone in his room one night, Carter orders up “a fifth of house bourbon,” and, within a few days, he enters into another prolonged, hazy, incapacitating drinking binge (125). He once again ends up “gray and ill and his arm trembled violently” and later promises, again, to “snap out of this” (141). This time, however, Carter cannot bounce back as easily, and he ends up hospitalized, “back in the bughouse” (162). Rather than working through the recovery process, Carter gets a cousin to sign him out early and rents a summer house in Connecticut with some black and white friends as though it were the surefire cure for his disease. For a time, Carter seems back to being his optimistic, sophisticated self. He declares, “I make the drinks; I don’t drink them” (168). He introduces Ilka to more important people. He tells stories about his mother wanting him to “make something out of” himself and about a time when he “went all over and lectured on race relations in clubs and organizations and churches and universities” (177, 190). The healthy, urbane, “white” Carter seems to have resurfaced. He and Ilka spend their time at the beach house relaxing, eating, swimming, talking, and making love, but the shadow of dejection still looms. One day, Carter asks Ilka to take a walk with him, and she notices that he is “tacking like a sailboat going upwind. He fell over. Ilka helped the big man stand up. He leaned his dead weight on Ilka’s shoulder, walking with a wide, slap-footed gait, and fell over… His temple was bleeding. Carter took a nap and was in time to make drinks for everybody except himself” (214). Carter’s sudden unsteadiness clearly suggests drunkenness. He has unrestricted access to alcohol, mixes drinks daily, and has a deeply problematic history of alcoholism. Although the text does not explicitly explain the temporary loss of balance that Carter somehow manages to sleep off, the obvious implication is that Carter is drunk. Despite the idyllic, rural, almost dreamlike setting at the summer house, in which black and white coexist peacefully under one roof, Carter still cannot inhabit a comfortable fluid identity. Even in an ideal environment for uniting white intellectualism and refinement with black ethnicity and culture, Carter cannot help but descend into stereotypical blackness.

Shortly after returning to the city, Carter is again hospitalized, and he again finds a way to escape without completing his rehabilitation. He tries other means to cure himself: Alcoholics Anonymous, church, and drug therapy, all of which fail him. He goes back to the hospital, this time voluntarily and stays for several months. Upon his release, the “white” Carter resurfaces once again. He obtains a position as a lecturer at
Stanford, which may eventually “be parlayed… into a book” (Segal 279). Although Carter seems to be making impressive professional progress, he eventually, almost perfunctorily, returns to his old ways. He becomes involved with yet another woman half his age who “looked seventeen” (Segal 283). He once again yields to alcoholism, lands himself in the hospital, and, finally, dies. The death of Carter Bayoux represents the death of a blended self for both Carter and Ilka. Carter’s incessant attempts to embody characteristics associated with stereotypical whiteness have to be, at last, put to rest, because there is no place in American society for the existence of such an ambiguous being. Ilka, too, learns, through Carter’s death, that she must finally let go of her attachment to the black world.

Ilka’s journey is both the (superior) opposite and the mirror of Carter’s. While he falls, she rises. She moves closer to white Americanism while he moves further and further away from it. She blossoms, he disintegrates. Both Ilka and Carter, however, are forced to abandon a fleeting, perhaps invented, almost utopian fluid space in favor of an unvarying, socially acceptable space for identity. Carter’s death is the death of identity fluidity; it represents the hopelessness of layering ethnicity and whiteness to create a new, multifaceted American whiteness. As Goffman writes of *Her First American*, “Hybridization should not be romanticized; it is often a painful, haphazard process replete with false starts and dead ends” (191). At the beginning of *Her First American*, Carter’s attempt at hybridization, or perhaps, more accurately, identity fluidity—to comfortably express both stereotypical “white” and “black” attributes without succumbing to the fixed, rigid, destructive “black” identity set forth for him by society—is merely a “false start,” inevitably doomed. Likewise, Ilka’s attempt at fluidity—her desire to spend time in Carter’s more colorful, yet often destructive black world while reaching for “proper” white Americanism—will be met with an equally “dead end.” Their endeavors to traverse the boundaries of whiteness and blackness are bound for failure, because of the insistent, inescapable definitions attached to race which will consistently intrude upon their respective consciousnesses. They learn that, in America, whiteness and blackness are mutually exclusive. In *Her First American*, Lore Segal demonstrates the enduring nature of the desire for identity fluidity rather than rigidity as well as the ultimate impossibility of such fluidity. In 1985, she wrote a 1950s assimilation narrative to highlight the Jewish struggle with American society’s stifling of identities that do not conform to the socially-
recognized definitions. Jews achieved whiteness after World War II, but their struggle to reconcile that whiteness with a sublimated ethnic self remained unresolved for decades to come.
CONCLUSION

Jo Sinclair, Jay Neugeboren, and Lore Segal have brought blackness into texts about Jewish identity. The differences among these texts are stark. *The Changelings* is a third-person narrative focalized through an adolescent girl, *Big Man* is a first-person narrative told through the perspective of an African American man speaking in black dialect, and *Her First American* is a third-person narrative with the focalization balanced between a young immigrant woman and a middle-aged black man. *The Changelings* takes place in Ohio, whereas *Big Man* and *Her First American* are set in New York City (the former in Brooklyn and the latter in Manhattan). *The Changelings* illustrates a friendship between two young girls, *Big Man* focuses on a homosocial, working relationship between two men, and *Her First American* traces a heterosexual romance. *The Changelings* was published in 1955, *Big Man* eleven years later, and *Her First American* nineteen years after that. Three intriguing parallels, however, compelled me to focus my study on these texts: Jewish American authors writing about Jews and blacks in a postwar twentieth century setting.

All three texts examine a relationship between a (whitened) Jew and an African American in postwar America. In *The Changelings*, a young Jewish girl befriends a young black girl, in *Big Man*, a black athlete enters into a business relationship with a Jewish sports columnist, and, in *Her First American*, a twenty-one year-old Jewish immigrant falls in love with a middle-aged black scholar. Blackness serves as an outlet for the Jewish characters, who yearn to break free from rigidified identities and the compulsory homogeneity of whiteness. In *The Changelings*, Clara enables Vincent’s exploration of identity fluidity in terms of both race and gender. In *Big Man*, the working-class Mack is a means through which the proper and intellectual Ben Rosen can find release for his repressed masculinity and inclinations toward “manly” violence In *Her First American*, Carter, as an ever-migrating figure of displacement and un-belonging with a history of victimization, serves as a comforting mirror for Ilka, the new arrival and Holocaust survivor.

Although the ending of *The Changelings* is somewhat more ambiguous, all three texts end with the Jewish characters retreating into whiteness and escaping the blackness that they had previously desired. In *The Changelings*, Vincent runs happily alongside her white friend as they are enveloped in the beautiful, comfortable whiteness of snow, never reaching the highly anticipated union between black and white. In *Big Man*, Ben Rosen abandons Mack Davis’s story and his cause, withdrawing back into his safe world of
domestic stability and white propriety. In *Her First American*, Ilka escapes Carter’s narrative of racial decline to embrace the progress and fruitfulness associated with (white) Americanness. Despite the Jewish characters’ initial desire for certain aspects of blackness, they ultimately want to escape it. Though blackness may offer some respite from the propriety and homogeneity of the white world, it is ultimately a menacing presence. The social and economic immobility and dispossession irrevocably tied to blackness are absolutely not desired. The Jewish characters’ flights from blackness suggest that the Jews’ own history of racialization and marginalization consistently intrudes upon their desires for ethnic distinction. The desire to distance themselves from that history compels them to abide the uniformity of white world, lest they allow blackness to contaminate their social and economic status and security.

Although the Jews in these texts eventually retreat into the comfort of whiteness, the fact that authors have continued to re-narrate the postwar “moment” of whitening suggests an enduring resistance and ambivalence to that whitening process. The endings of these novels are by no means happy or satisfying. *The Changelings* ends with the young Vincent’s dream of cross-racial harmony just out of reach, thus suggesting the impermanence of her fluid identity. *Big Man* ends with Mack Davis’s dreams of playing professional basketball once again shattered as he is left in a state of immobility and hopelessness. *Her First American* ends with Carter’s death from having finally succumbed to his debilitating alcoholism and Ilka’s exclusion from participating in one of his memorial services. These ominous, unsettled conclusions suggest the unresolved nature of the Jewish desire to reconcile the success and prominence of the white world with the ethnic vibrancy of the racial world. These texts imply that whiteness and an ethnically distinct Jewishness are ultimately mutually exclusive, and that, as Karen Brodkin feared, “one couldn’t be both at the same time.” Jews may temporarily turn to blacks to engage in a more colorful world of cultural freedom within which they can express their lost ethnic vitality, but they will be compelled, eventually, through the rigidity of American identity categories, to abandon blackness and return to their safe, homogenous worlds of whiteness. Sinclair, Neugeboren, and Segal have created fictional worlds that, in displaying the Jews’ inability to escape the boundaries of whiteness and the inevitable degradation of blacks, trace and critique the inflexible, limiting ways in which Americans imagine race.
WORKS CITED


