

MULTICULTURAL OPTIMISM OR THE POTENTIAL JOYS OF OTHERNESS

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ABSTRACT

The essay focuses on the literary reflection of the changing discourse on ethnicity and race in the second half of the twentieth century. It analyzes two novels of the 1990s that address the issue of ethnic identity from a humorous point of view. In both Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) and Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich's co-authored novel *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) ethnic identity is no longer a tragic burden but a mask to be used or discarded, explored, embraced, or modified. Both novels are delightful and hilarious ways of addressing and challenging serious personal, ethnic, cultural and historical issues and thus they well document the paradigmatic shift in the acceptance of ethnicity and the re-interpretations of centrality and marginality in American culture.

KEYWORDS

twentieth-century American novel; ethnicity; postmodernism; Philip Roth; Gish Jen; Mourning Dove; Michael Dorris; Louise Erdrich

American literature demonstrates that the roads to American national identity have passed through an uneasy process of coming to terms with ethnic heritage. . . . Ethnicity and cultural pluralism will undoubtedly remain specific features of American culture and literature.

—Josef Jařab¹

Throughout the history of American literature, the issue of race, ethnicity and identity has been explored in numerous ways. Very often, literary works discussing these issues have been, to varying degrees, serious in tone, tragic in their plot resolutions, or, as Sanford Pinsker puts it, “identity has become one of those words full of sound and fury. . . .”² One does not have to look hard for examples as they are abundant. However, with the changing discourse on ethnicity and race in the second half of the last century, several works appeared that address these issues from a humorous point of view. In these works identity, especially ethnic identity, is no longer a tragic burden but it rather serves as a mask to be used or discarded, explored, embraced, or modified. The protagonists of these works have, to borrow David McCrone's

1. Josef Jařab, “Etnický faktor v americké literární historii a současnosti,” *Svět literatury*, no. 1 (1991): 34. My translation.

2. Sanford Pinsker, “Thinking about What the ‘Other’ Was, and Now Is,” *Tikkun* 1, no. 16 (2001): 51.

phrase, a kind of “pick’n’mix identity”³ which they consciously claim in the typically American manner of self-creation and self-identification. On one hand, these characters work hard at creating and promoting their own ethnic and cultural identity; on the other hand they “wear [their] identities lightly and change them according to circumstances.”⁴ My aim is to discuss two novels from the 1990s that deal with ethnic identity in precisely this manner.

“GOING JEWISH”

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, one of the many groups clearly perceived as different, as the (potentially dangerous) Other, were Jewish Americans. However, over time, Jewishness has developed from a sign of marginalized status to the mainstream. Not only are “American Jews no longer the American Other”⁵ but Jewishness has even turned into something desirable, something to be envied, a fashionable identity. This shift is interestingly depicted in literature.

Philip Roth’s novels can be taken as a good example. In *The Plot Against America* Roth imagines a gloomy, dystopic picture of an anti-Semitic 1940s America where being Jewish is dangerous. The Jewish characters are turned into lesser, or second-class, citizens as they are reminded that “Christian character is the true basis of real Americanism.”⁶ Gaining wide public support, the novel’s fascist-like government “gradually initiates projects designed to strengthen American patriotism and to cleanse America of disturbing, non-American elements.”⁷ The novel’s juvenile protagonist Philip witnesses his father being repeatedly called “a loudmouth Jew”; he is threatened by a passerby: “I’d give anything to slap his face,”⁸ and even experiences actual violence: “Shots, screaming, shouting, sirens—the pogrom had begun.”⁹ Although the novel is a dystopian warning, an imagined alternative to real history, it is soundly based on the prevailing anti-Semitic feelings of a large portion of the American population in the years preceding American involvement in the Second World War.

On the other hand, Coleman Silk, the black protagonist of Philip Roth’s novel *The Human Stain* (2000) in an attempted refusal “to let race define who he was or could be”¹⁰ passes as a white man and quite happily allows his university colleagues and students to assume he is Jewish, as being

3. David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 195.

4. McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 195.

5. Pinsker, “Thinking,” 52.

6. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 265.

7. Josef Jařab, “Výstražná hra s přepisováním dějin,” *Lidové noviny*, March 4, 2006: Orientace vi. My translation.

8. Roth, *The Plot Against America*, 65.

9. Roth, *The Plot Against America*, 298.

10. Pinsker, “Thinking,” 53.

a Jewish intellectual has become, in the post-WWII years, a desirable identity. Ironically, his less fortunate colleagues describe Silk's bold and progressive university management as something "Jews do"¹¹ and after the initial meeting, even the novel's narrator Nathan Zuckerman describes Silk as "the small-nosed Jewish type," "one of those crimped-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation."¹² Silk is identified by his surroundings as a Jew partially because of his name (although Zuckerman points out that it could be a black name as well) but mostly because he is educated, successful and holds an important office. This reflects what Jonathan Freedman calls "a Golden Age of American Jewish social and cultural achievement, one marked by a remarkable success of Jews in the public sphere."¹³

The desirability and attraction of Jewishness is also depicted in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), which, according to Freedman, "offers a delightfully comic series of riffs on the Asians-as-the-New Jews topos."¹⁴ In the opening scene, a newly prosperous Chinese immigrant family, the Changs, is moving into a neighborhood that the realtor implicitly describes as "rich and Jewish."¹⁵ For the Changs, a Jewish neighborhood is a desirable place and moving into it is a sign of upward social mobility. They have no doubts whether they belong, because "they're the New Jews, after all, a model minority and Great American Success" (MPL 3).

Although Mona, a second-generation Chinese American teenager, feels at first that in the new home she is seen as a "permanent exchange student" (MPL 6), constantly consulted on the specifics of Chinese cuisine, she soon realizes that her otherness makes her interesting and special:

Once a friend said to Mona that everybody is valued for something. . . . *You could be just glad*, she said, *that you have something people value*. She said it was like having a special talent, like being good at ice-skating, or opera-singing. She said, *You could probably make a career out of it*. (MPL 8)

And in fact, amongst her upper-middle-class Jewish peer group, Mona learns to make a career out of being Chinese.¹⁶ Yet, this is not the end of her quest for identity as she gradually becomes frustrated by experiencing her Chineseness as a constant failure to live up to other people's expectations. While often feeling too Chinese for the surrounding non-Asian world, she is not Chinese enough for her parents. For example, in one conversation Mona's mother announces that in the event of her daughter having a relationship with a black man, she would kill herself. Mona protests: "But Mom, that's so racist."

11. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000; London: Vintage, 2005), 9.

12. Roth, *The Human Stain*, 15.

13. Jonathan Freedman, "'Who's Jewish?' Some Asian-American Writers and the Jewish-American Literary Canon," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 234.

14. Freedman, "Who's Jewish," 240.

15. Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 3. Hereafter cited in text as *MPL*.

16. See Reshmi J. Hebbbar, *Modeling Minority Women: Heroines in African and Asian American Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 113.

Surprisingly, Mona's mother responds: "Only an American girl would think about her mother killing herself and say oh, that's so racist. A Chinese girl would think whether she should kill herself too" (MPL 221).

Frustrated by the often conflicting demands of the American and the Chinese parts of her identity, Mona begins to explore what would happen if she took the common saying that Asian Americans are the New Jews at face value. Begoña Simal Gonzáles points out that to be a Chinese Jew might not, after all, "be so paradoxical" as there is "a notable historical parallelism between the Jewish and Chinese people, and between the Jewish and Chinese diasporas. In the United States, the Chinese are called 'New Jews,' because they seem to be the living proof of the American Dream, the 'model minority.'"¹⁷ Both groups value education and hard work, both are similarly stereotyped and have frequently served as scapegoats in interethnic tensions and riots. Jen herself admits that she was partially inspired by the sympathy she sees between the Jewish and Chinese cultures.¹⁸

Finally, Mona's interest in the desirable Jewishness intensifies to the point of wanting to convert to Judaism. When she eventually receives her optional mikvah, "she becomes Mona-also-known-as-Ruth, a more or less genuine Catholic Chinese Jew" (MPL 44). Although she "good-humoredly allows her peers to call her 'Most honorable Miss Changowitz,'"¹⁹ she paradoxically feels that her conversion makes her more aware of her own heritage. Thus she wonders why it is that "now that she's Jewish, she feels like more of a Chinese than ever" (MPL 66). From a "permanent exchange student" she proceeds to being considered "a phenomenon" and "a regular Yoko Ono" (MPL 63).

Surprisingly, while there are many explicit conversations about issues of race and identity, about Americanness, Chineseness and Jewishness, the reasons for Mona's decision to become Jewish are just implied. At one moment, Mona asserts that it is important to remember that her family are not Wasps, that they are a minority. Her parents refute the idea because, according to their logic, "they were never a minority when they were in China, why should they be a minority here" (MPL 52). But Mona protests, suggesting that contrary to her parents' desire to be a Wasp, she needs to realize she is a minority, "like it or not" and she sees Jews as a role model: "If you want to be a minority, there's nobody better at it than the Jews" (MPL 53). Thus Mona reveals her disappointment at how easily her parents left behind their native language and most of their Chinese heritage. Like many first-generation Americans, Mona's parents worked hard to assimilate into the American mainstream, to turn as quickly as possible from *greenhorns* into *alrightniks*.

17. Begoña Simal Gonzáles, "The (Re)birth of Mona Changowitz: Rituals and Ceremonies of Cultural Conversion and Self-Making in *Mona in the Promised Land*," *MELUS* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 228.

18. See Simal Gonzáles, "The (Re)birth of Mona Changowitz," 231.

19. Hebbbar, *Modeling Minority Women*, 113.

Mona defends her right to religious freedom, and thus establishes herself firmly in the tradition of American self-created characters. Quite naturally, she is reproached by her mother: “How can you be Jewish? Chinese people don’t do such things” (*MPL* 45). It is ironic that during the conversation an old cuckoo clock strikes the hour, but in “the place of the long-broken cuckoo bird is a glued-on Statue of Liberty pencil sharpener” (*MPL* 45). Mona tries to explain that her choice of identity is nothing against her parents:

“You are the one who brought us up to speak English. . . . You said we weren’t pure Chinese anymore, the parents had to accept we would be something else.”

“American, not Jewish.” . . .

“Jewish is American,” Mona says. “American means being whatever you want, and I just happened to pick being Jewish.”

“Since when do children pick this, pick that?” (*MPL* 49)

Yet on a different occasion, Mona’s mother Helen explains why they have no problems celebrating Christmas: “Oh, well, we are still Buddhist after we are baptized. We are Buddhist, and Taoist, and Catholic. We do however we want” (*MPL* 42). But when it comes to her daughter, Helen is far more reluctant to grant her the same right to do whatever she wants. When Mona constantly brings up the fact that they live in a free country, in America, Helen finally decides that perhaps America is outside, but in her house “no such thing,” her house is China (*MPL* 250). Trying to make Mona accept her opinion that turning Jewish is absurd, Helen argues:

“Tomorrow you’ll come home and tell me you want to be black.”

“How can I turn black? That’s a race, not a religion.” (*MPL* 49)

However, Mona soon realizes how slippery the slope of identity is when she “confronts her own sense of inhabiting a racialized body.”²⁰ In a series of conversations with her parents’ African American employees, she becomes aware that to the outside world she does not look Jewish: “Grow your nose! Grow your nose! Once you grow your nose [you will be] a nice Jew-girl indeed” (*MPL* 137). The whole scene is turned into a joke when the black cook Alfred responds to Mona’s accusation that he is stereotyping: “Typing? Stereo? I’ve never heard of no stereo that could type” (*MPL* 137). Nevertheless, as Freedman points out, Mona “begins to think about her nose, skin color, and breasts as ethnic markers.”²¹ Ironically, it is Alfred who challenges Mona’s ideas about ethnicity and race when he tells her:

“White is white, man. Everything else is black. Half and half is black.”

“Are you telling me I’m black?” Mona says. (*MPL* 155)

Alfred is much more bitter about his position within American society and his obvious otherness: “Nobody’s forgetting we’re a minority . . . we’re black, see. We’re Negroes,” he declares when Mona muses about the importance of not forgetting one’s minority status. Still, as Reshmi Hebbbar points out, the whole

20. Freedman, “Who’s Jewish,” 240.

21. Freedman, “Who’s Jewish,” 240.

subplot involving Alfred “hilariously underscores the complexities of race, religion, class, and nation, in the often futile attempts at ethnic categorization and a cross-ethnic idealism of pluralistic empathy.”²²

Despite the seriousness of the issues involved, Jen maintains a light tone of comedy throughout the novel. In Hebbbar’s words, Mona “shapes her identity by dint of her superior wit and comedic prowess.”²³ Jen uses other means of comedy as well, such as “a hyperbolic language” and “the comedic present tense.”²⁴ The novel also has a typically comic plot resolution as it ends with Mona getting married to Seth Mendel. Again, the complexities of received and chosen identity surface here as Seth is a young Jewish man interested in Eastern religious traditions and for most of the novel he lives in a teepee. There is a joking promise of the issues being carried on by the next generation as the only thing we learn about Mona’s and Seth’s child is that the “favorite cuisine of a child part Jewish, part Chinese” is of course “Italian” (*MPL* 303).

NATIVE AMERICAN “BETWIXT-AND-BETWEEN-NESS”

In Native American fiction, in-between-ness is often represented by mixed-blood characters, i.e. characters of mixed Native American and Euro-American descent. Even the first novel by a Native American woman, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Description of the Great Montana Cattle Range* (1927) by Mourning Dove, centers on a mixed-blood protagonist, Cogewea, the daughter of an Okanogan mother and a white father. The novel uncovers the difficult position of a member of a minority, complicated even more as a mixed-blood person is fully accepted nowhere. She is perceived as a minority both within her tribe and in the mainstream society.

Thus Cogewea says about herself: “I am not a full-blood—only a breed—a *sitkum* Injun” and laments her fate: “Regarded with suspicion by the Indian, shunned by the Caucasian, where was there any place for the despised breed!”²⁵ What the common attitude to people of mixed descent was in Cogewea’s time is clearly expressed in the observation of the novel’s villain Densmore, who, upon seeing a ranch full of people of unrecognizable origins, wonders: “Where were these picturesque Indians . . . ? Instead, he had been lured into a nest of half-blood, whom he had always understood to be the inferior degenerates of two races.”²⁶

For Cogewea the dilemma of her double-faceted identity is presented in the form of a choice between a white and a mixed-blood suitor. Cogewea at first elopes with the white man Densmore, in the false hope that she can become part of the mainstream. Nevertheless, she remains ambiguous about

22. Hebbbar, *Modeling Minority Women*, 118.

23. Hebbbar, *Modeling Minority Women*, 98.

24. Hebbbar, *Modeling Minority Women*, 115.

25. Mourning Dove, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Description of the Great Montana Cattle Range* (1927; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 26.

26. Mourning Dove, *Cogewea*, 48.

her decision and reveals how split she feels: "My white blood calls to see the world, even if the Spirit tells me that I am stepping wrong."²⁷

Cogewea finally uncovers her white suitor's wickedness, returns to the reservation, marries the mixed-blood Jim LaGrinder and accidentally comes into a fortune. Louis Owens sees this as an unsatisfactory ending to the novel, with the plot reminiscent of pulp fiction and the main issue postponed till the next generation: "The dilemma of the mixed-blood poised between red and white worlds remains unsolved. The novel ends on a note of stasis, with nothing resolved, none of the many questions answered."²⁸ On the other hand, Arnold Krupat considers the choice of a happy ending as a positive sign of the possibility of a future for people of mixed descent. "It may fairly be said that *Cogewea's* irresolution provides an extraordinarily accurate account of the betwixt-and-between-ness of mixed-bloods in the [time] period."²⁹ Contrary to Owens, Krupat appreciates that Mourning Dove refused to fictionalize the idea of mixed-bloods as a vanishing race. In "holding firm against the advice of her collaborator/mentor, L. V. McWhorter, who recommended a tragic ending" we may see "Mourning Dove's belief in Indian survivance."³⁰ In any case, *Cogewea* clearly named "what was to become the dominant theme in novels by Indian authors: the dilemma of the mixed-blood, the liminal 'breed' seemingly trapped between Indian and white worlds."³¹

Almost seventy years later, two highly acclaimed Native American writers, Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, co-authored *The Crown of Columbus* (1991), "a consciously postmodern novel"³² that accentuates the positive sides to being a mixed-blood and presents it in "an extremely positive view of the confluence of two cultures, the ideal achievement, the new American."³³ The novel does not present much of the "isolation, deprivation, frustration, and anger that many think being Indian is all about."³⁴ By focusing on Native American issues as generally human issues the novel also acknowledges that almost any American is, in one way or another, a mixed-blood, a descendant of many cultures and traditions, often conflicting ones.

The novel brings together two characters from very different cultural backgrounds: Roger Williams, "an upper crust, mildly Episcopalian, Anglo-

27. Mourning Dove, *Cogewea*, 6.

28. Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 48.

29. Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 95.

30. Krupat, *Red Matters*, 88.

31. Owens, *Other Destinies*, 40.

32. Susan Farrell, "Colonizing Columbus: Dorris and Erdrich's Postmodern Novel," *Critique* 40, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 121.

33. Ann Rayson, "Shifting Identity in the Work of Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 31.

34. Peter G. Beidler, review of *The Crown of Columbus*, by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 49.

European”³⁵ scholar and poet from an old New England family, and a mixed-blood character, Vivian Twostar, who characterizes her heritage as “a mixed bag of New and Old Worlds.”³⁶ In the novel, the two characters are brought together both as lovers and as academics sharing a research interest in Christopher Columbus, though, obviously, both from different perspectives. Yet as with Jen’s novel, Dorris and Erdrich’s *The Crown of Columbus* is a “comic story of humor and survival”³⁷ that can be seen as a “lark of a novel with a serious attempt to rationalize, accept, and forgive the European discovery of America by Columbus.”³⁸

While Mona becomes “her own melting pot, her own mosaic,”³⁹ Vivian is the genuine personification of one. She says about herself:

I belong to the lost tribe of mixed bloods, that hodgepodge amalgam of hue and cry that defies easy placement. When the DNA of my various ancestors—Irish and Coeur d’Alene and French and Navajo and God knows what else—combined to form me, the result was not some genteel, undecipherable puree that comes from a Cuisinart. You know what they say on the side of the Bisquick box, under instruction for pancakes? Mix with fork. Leave lumps. That was me. (CC 123)

Just as Mona discovered that her otherness made her special among her peers, more “marketable” and of better value in the social market, as Hebbbar puts it,⁴⁰ Vivian, too, is aware of the potential benefits of her situation. For one, she is the only Native American on the staff of Dartmouth College and her CV bulges in the section of “community service” as she is “a natural double bull’s-eye for every college committee that lack[s] either a woman or a minority” (CC 14). However, she needs more publications in order to get tenure. Her dean strongly encourages her as “it would be no picnic for him to fire the only aboriginal assistant professor” (CC 14). But Vivian sees advantages in her position from a more general perspective as well:

There are advantages to not being this or that. You have a million stories, one for every occasion, and in a way they’re all lies and in another way they’re all true. . . . There are times when I control who I’ll be, and times when I let other people decide. I’m not all anything, but I’m a little bit of a lot. My roots spread in every direction. . . . I’ve read learned anthropological papers written about people like me. We’re called marginal, as if we exist anywhere but on the center of the page. Our territory is the place for asides, for explanatory notes, for editorial notation. . . . But there are advantages to peripheral vision. Out beyond the normal bounds you at least know where you’re not. You escape the claustrophobia of belonging, and what you lack in security you gain by realizing—as those insiders never do—that security is an illusion. (CC 123–24)

35. Farrell, “Colonizing Columbus,” 121.

36. Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, *The Crown of Columbus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 11. Hereafter cited in text as CC.

37. Farrell, “Colonizing Columbus,” 133.

38. Rayson, “Shifting Identity,” 28.

39. Catherine Foster, “A Wacky Mosaic of Teenage Self-Discovery,” review of *Mona in the Promised Land*, by Gish Jen, *Christian Science Monitor*, June 27, 1996: B2.

40. Hebbbar, *Modeling Minority Women*, 113.

In the course of their novel Dorris and Erdrich illustrate this assertion on many levels, uncovering almost any “security” as illusionary, as only one story out of a multitude of possible interpretations. In a similar way Vivian’s son explains the character of Navajo storytelling: “Truth was all in the story, in the way it was told and in who was doing the telling” (CC 362). Just as in the text personal identity is often changeable, never fixed or closed, so is the interpretation of Columbus as a historical figure, or, for that matter, the meaning and implications of the European discovery of America.

BRIDGING THE IN-BETWEEN-NESS

As Farrell points out, “ethnic identity for Dorris and Erdrich is always complicated and shifting because many of their characters play many different roles in the fragmented, postmodern environment they move in.”⁴¹ They “wear their identities lightly,” in which way they may be seen as variations on the Native American trickster topos. It is not, however, an end in itself but rather a means to survival. Contrary to Cogewea, who experienced her position as a mixed-blood as limiting, for Vivian the complex heritage opens many new possibilities and allows for a broader perspective. In an interview, Erdrich states that unstable identities enable one “to pick and choose and keep and discard” cultural values at will and thus one can survive in a world that is so rapidly changing.⁴²

However, as in Jen’s novel, the act that truly changes the hyphen in the character’s identity description from an ambiguous sign into a bridge is the physical act of creation. Vivian’s own complicated and multi-faceted identity is, similarly to Mona’s, transcended in the next generation. Vivian’s and Roger’s daughter is seen as “a bridge of [their] intricate genetic possibilities,” an “ultimate contract” between the New and the Old Worlds (CC 284). Both novels thus claim survivance and end on a hopeful note connected with the future.

In *Mona in the Promised Land*, identities are, on occasions, worn lightly. It is part of the comic scheme, the truly Shakespearean “rapid-fire transformations of costume, identities, and affiliations.”⁴³ As Freedman states, “what Shakespeare does with and to gender, Mona does to ethnicity.”⁴⁴ Yet she is aware of her in-between-ness when she talks about “what it’s like to be not Wasp, and not black, and not as Jewish as Jewish can be; and not from a Chinatown, either” (MPL 231). Amy Ling sees this as a very common theme, typical for ethnic women who are living “between worlds, totally at home nowhere.”⁴⁵ Jen’s novel explores the comic potential of being

41. Farrell, “Colonizing Columbus,” 124.

42. Joseph Bruchac, *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 79.

43. Freedman, “Who’s Jewish,” 241.

44. Freedman, “Who’s Jewish,” 241.

45. Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon, 1990), 105.

in between worlds. *The Crown of Columbus* is also written in a comic tone with occasional strokes of “broad, farcical humor”⁴⁶ and has a typical happy ending. Both novels are delightful and hilarious ways of addressing and challenging serious personal, ethnic, and cultural, as well as historical issues. Both novels illustrate the paradigmatic shift in the acceptance of ethnicity within American culture, the contemporary celebration of it, the more and more fashionable “going ethnic.”

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