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Conundrums of Assimilation – rethinking the world presented in Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith" and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

Abstract: This article presents a comparative reading of Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith" and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." The purpose of this article is to analyze the conundrums of assimilation in both stories, the main characters' state of being, "not-at-home," and their representation as ethnic Others, in order to point to the Biblical terrain of interpretation of the two stories. "Defender of the Faith" and "Everyday Use" skilfully explore the theme of Biblical redemption and present versions of a wise son and a mocking child from the Biblical Book of Proverbs. By deploying these metaphors they embrace larger issues such as the clash between ethnic/cultural authenticity and forged identity, individuality and conformity, tradition and modernity.

Keywords: ethnic Other, assimilation, redemption, "not-at-home-ness," masquerade, identity.

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith" address the problems individuals have to face when trying to construct their ethno-racial identity under the pressure of assimilation. The aim of this article is to indicate a linkage between these short stories and to propose a comparative reading of Jewish and African American literature with regard to the assimilation experiences of the characters in the stories, and the characters' representation as ethnic Others. I would like to look at "Everyday Use" and "Defender of the Faith" through the prism of postcolonial theory, which perceives the world "in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007: 19), and to focus on the important distinction of the colonizer/the colonized. I will also examine the main characters' state of being displaced, "not-at-home", in order to point to the Biblical terrain of interpretation of the two stories. "Defender of the Faith" and "Everyday Use" skilfully explore the theme of Biblical redemption and present versions of a wise son and a mocking from the Biblical Book of Proverbs. By deploying these metaphors they embrace larger issues such as the clash between ethnic/cultural authenticity and forged identity, individuality and conformity, tradition and modernity. The likeness between the two stories is found in the way they represent their ethnic characters as distinctly different, as outcasts and strangers taking part in a kind of ethno-racial masquerade.

However, juxtaposing Jewish literature with African American literature may be considered risky because there has been a certain kind of abrasiveness between Jews and African Americans since the 1960s. The tensions and complexities in relations between these two groups have been discussed by Karen Brodtkin, who states that "analyses of minstrelsy and working-class immigrant whitening expand the argument that inventing blackness and speaking for African or Indian America has been a conventional way that immigrants and working class whites have made themselves white and American 'on the backs of blacks,' as Morrison put it" (Brodtkin 1998: 152). Although the experiences of African American and Jewish assimilation vary, one can find more arguments for an affinity between these

experiences through a close examination of the world presented in both Roth's and Walker's stories.

James Duban underlines the fact that Roth resembles Bellow and Malamud, as stated by Roth himself, in "transcending the immediate parochialism of [our] Jewish background" (qtd. in Duban 2011: 44). Duban suggests that Roth is "comfortable enough in his Judaism to use his characters, their religion, and their dilemmas as points of departure to arrive at universal truths about human nature and its dilemmas" (2011: 43). Reading Roth's "Defender of the Faith" with Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a way of finding a new ray of light to shine on the current discussion about these short stories, a way of revising "the hallowed process of Jewish assimilation" through a striking juxtaposition of this experience with the African American one (Freedman 2008: 184). Roth has already pushed the limits and reshaped the understanding of Jewishness and the African American experience through his revisionary portrayal of Coleman Silk, a light-skinned African American passing for a white Jew in *The Human Stain*. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these two stories adheres to Emily Budick's binding representation of Jews and blacks as groups declaring their separateness, homelessness and strangeness. Budick notes in *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* that

the African American becomes a nostalgic marker of what, as Jews, they feel themselves to have lost in their acceptance into the American mainstream. At the same time the black character signifies the incorruptible and indestructible vessel of their own Jewish ethnicity. [...] the African American who becomes a metaphor for their [Jewish American writers'] own commitment. And it is lasting: the image of the American black further reassures Jews that their difference, albeit moral rather than physical, will no more rub off from them than colour from black people. (Budick 1998: 121-122)

While Roth's "Defender of the Faith" is a good example of the short story in which the moral difference/ethics of Jews is discussed, "the incorruptible and indestructible vessel of [...] Jewish ethnicity" is mirrored in Walker's black characters Mama and Maggie, who are ardent "indestructible" pillars of African American ethnic culture.

On Detour

Sam Whitsitt notes, with regard to the home in Walker's story, that "there must be a certain detour, a departure; one must leave home in order to become aware of the home, even though this departure holds no guarantee of a return" (2000: 447- 448). The statement perfectly lends its meaning equally to both Roth's and Walker's stories. Roth's character Marx supposedly reiterates the stereotype of a Jew who has broken with ethnic tradition, lost his/her connection with the family home, and is portrayed as a person deprived of the so-called "collective identity." There are no references in the text to suggest that he has any contact with his family home or Jewish community. He seems to be displaced and "not-at-home" with his Jewishness. He appears to be presented as one who has lost his "sense of Jewishness" (Roth 1994: 642). However, Marx unconsciously embarks on a spiritual journey within himself, rebuilding his Jewish identity through dealings with his manipulative recruit, Grossbart. This spiritual journey in the story is associated with the quest for identity, as Nathan Marx remarks "in search of more of me, I found myself following Grossbart's track to Chapel no. 3 where the Jewish services were being held" (Roth 1994: 640). In other words, Roth's story becomes a story of self-rediscovery after a long period of "detour" as Marx rediscovers his "sense of Jewishness," which has been lost because of war troubles: "I came to what I suddenly remembered was myself" (Roth 1994: 640). That identity transformation, the assumption of a

"new-old" Jewish identity is signalled in the opening paragraph of the story when Marx states that "there was an inertia of the spirit that told me we were flying to a new front" (Roth 1994: 634). The "new front" is an indicator of a new stage in Marx's life, the stage of coming to terms with his Jewishness. His subordinate Grossbart's invitation to the "shul" and his "singing a doubletime cadence" brings to Marx's mind many sweet memories of his childhood and home:

I was remembering the shrill sounds of a Bronx playground, where, years ago, beside the Grand Concourse, I had played on long spring evenings such as this. ... It was a pleasant memory for a young man so far from peace and home, and it brought so many recollections with it that I began to grow exceedingly tender about myself. In fact, I indulged myself in a reverie so strong that I felt as though a hand were reaching down inside me. It had to reach me so very far to touch me! (Roth 1994: 640)

Marx recognizes that he is not only physically far away from his home, but that this statement acknowledges his being spiritually far away from his Jewish tradition. He interprets Grossbart's Yiddish expressions as "rumour of home and past time" which become a catalyst of change in his attitude toward his Jewishness (Roth 1994: 640).

Walker's story begins with Mama and Maggie Johnson waiting outside their new house. But their "departure" had started earlier. Although the Johnsons now have a new house "in a pasture" Mama and Maggie still tend to occupy the yard, which is "an extended living room" where "anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree" (Walker 1993: 371). Mama admits that she has consciously turned her back on the new house, indicating that it bears a similarity to a ship: "there are no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship" (Walker 1993: 373). This ship imagery is an obvious allusion to a slave ship with little windows for light and ventilation. The fact that Maggie and Mama occupy the territory around the house is indicative of their metaphorical displacement. Dislocation is derived from Heidegger's "*umheimlich* or *unheimlichkeit* – literally 'unhousedness' or 'not-at-home-ness' – and is a marker of 'colonial hegemonic practices'" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007: 65). By deliberately choosing to occupy the yard Mama demonstrates that she understands the dominant practices of neo-colonialism by identifying the origin of her dislocation within the practice of slavery. The old house seems to be an allegory of the homeland, Africa, which explains why Mama is so sentimental about "the old house". A new house is a symbol of oppressive America, which is portrayed as a hermetic, homogenizing space where "breezes never come" (Walker 1993: 371). Mama's reluctance to occupy that space signifies her resistance to the position assigned to her by racist America. Mama's mode of behaviour is a way of decolonizing her world.

Biblical analogies

Apart from the main characters of the two stories, who seem to be metaphorically displaced, or 'not-at-home', both stories can be paralleled through their exploration of the Biblical theme of redemption. Sam Whitsitt, in his comment on Walker's story, remarks that at the outset of the story Maggie and Mama "are waiting for redemption", and that

in Walker's writing, redemption will take one away and bring one back in a perhaps humbling but empowering way, to something close to home. This form of redemption takes place as an epiphany: You realize that what can save you isn't out there, but has been nearby all along, beside you, even in you, but never noticed, never heard, or never given a second thought. (2000: 447)

In the story Mama's daydream is a kind of prelude to the epiphany before Mama and Maggie are redeemed, before the value of their black existence is acknowledged through the recognition of their art of stitching quilts. In her dream Mama visualizes herself as "lighter" and better-looking, despite the fact that in real life she looks completely different. Mama's and Maggie's knowing self-identification of their codified slow-wittedness and ugliness is proven by Mama rhetorically asking, "who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue", and by comparing Maggie's brain to "an elephant's brain" (Walker 1993: 372, 377). She recognizes their social assignment – the re-inscribed codification of African Americans as unintelligent. Mama and Maggie are longing for a change, for freedom and salvation from the re-inscribed codification of African Americans. Mama's dream is an evident expression of that wish. Although in Walker's story the dream seems unrealistic and has a bitter undertone, the story itself ends with a kind of awakening for Mama. The story ends on a positive note. The redemption for the years of social exclusion of the African American experience and art/culture comes just after Dee announces her willingness to take the quilts. Mama states that she "promised to give the quilts to Maggie when she marries John Thomas" (Walker 1993: 378). Her daughter replies that her sister "can't appreciate these quilts", and "she would probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use" (378). Mama is surprised by Dee's request since she remembers how Dee was offered to take the quilts in the past and refused to do so as she considered them to be "old-fashioned" (378). Although Dee changes her mind by deciding to make use of the quilts right now, she declares that she "would hang them" as "that was the only thing you could do with them" (378). Mama perceives Dee's superficial interest in the quilts, as well as her recognition only of their artistic, decorative merit, as reflecting Dee's disingenuous investment in the African American tradition and her shallow re-Africanization. Quilts seem to function in the story as a spiritual galvanizing element between the past and the present, the compilation of the knowledge and experiences of the African-American ancestors. Mama ultimately realizes that what matters in their lives is African American practicality, the "discredited knowledge" of black people, as Toni Morrison (1986: 342) calls it. "The discredited knowledge" in Walker's story is the ability to make quilts or "whittle it [a churn top] out of a tree", and the knowledge of their ancestors on how to put these objects to "everyday use" (Walker 1993: 376). The knowledge of their ancestors is what can redeem Mama and Maggie, and give them a meaningful existence in an oppressive America. Mama's and Maggie's ability to make the quilts is a symbol of their redemption for social injustice.

In "Defender of the Faith," all of Grossbart's tricks, as well as his conscious hints dropped with regard to Yiddish tradition and language, become a catalyst for Marx's change of orders. This change of orders constitutes a form of redeeming injustice. All soldiers, including Halpern and Fishbein, are supposed to be shipped to the Pacific, except for Grossbart, who is to be deployed to New Jersey. Marx changes the orders by asking Sergeant Bob Wright to allow Grossbart to be sent with the rest of his Jewish friends to the Pacific. When his trainee comes demanding an explanation Sergeant tells Sheldon that he is "the one who owes explanations. (...) To me. (...) Mostly to Fishbein and Halpern" (Roth 1994: 659). Marx believes that the change of orders is a way of implementing justice and moral rules which have been perverted by Grossbart, who has constantly been asking for special treatment. Giving special privileges to Grossbart may have given him a bad reputation by creating the suspicion that he is a biased superior. Marx's riposte, calling Grossbart "a regular Messiah", finally backfires by casting Marx as a kind of Saviour figure, the Messianic archetype who defends the integrity of Jews (Roth 1994: 648). Marx bears a collective

responsibility for the fate of Halpern and Fishbein, who have been used by Grossbart for his own selfish purposes. Marx's change of orders might be considered to be a means of atonement for his past sin of jettisoning the Jewish tradition, thus redemption.

While employing the Bible as an analytical tool to discuss "Defender of the Faith" and "Everyday Use", one can further elucidate these two narratives. Robert McMahon and Patricia Cane state that "Everyday Use" can be interpreted as a modified version of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and Dee represents the prodigal child, with the important exception that she is not endowed with gifts from her mother as she returns home at the end of the story. Sam Whitsitt points to the Bakers' interpretation of Dee as a kind of "serpent", who intrudes into the rustic garden of the Johnsons (Whitsitt 2000: 449). However, "Everyday Use" is Mama's story; it is not Dee's story; it is narrated in the first person, and she is the one who ultimately faces the dilemma of setting the dispute over the quilts. Mama's conundrum can be paralleled to that of Solomon's determining the true mother in the Bible. Just the same as Solomon, Mama has to determine who is authentic in their motives. Mama's world is a world of polarized values and concepts, it is a world labelled good and bad, false and authentic, foolish and wise. It is a world filtered through the prism of Mama's perspective, and that is why it is not completely reliable. The story also brings to mind the biblical quotation which says: A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not respond to rebukes (Proverbs: 13:1). Dee's figure is close to that of a mocking child who mocks the wisdom of Mama and her ancestors. Dee's character also raises the question of the hierarchy of knowledge. Since the concept of knowledge is subjective, and knowledge itself is a tacit phenomenon, readers are left in a quandary as to whose perception of the world is right: Dee's or Mama's.

In "Defender of the Faith" the readers are also put in the position of the Biblical king Solomon when they are to verify which character represents the world of inauthenticity/duplicity, who is the imposter, and who personifies the good Jew. By using the Biblical Proverbs' terminology the readers are to determine who is the wise son and who is the mocker. Gillian Steinberg argues that "Roth's creation of Grossbart, Marx and Grossbart's two friends, Halpern and Fishbein shows him [Roth] consciously engaging with Midrash and with the textual traditions of religious Judaism" (2005: 9). She draws a parallel between Roth's characters and the characters in the passage in the Haggadah, which "speaks of a wise son, an evil son, a simple son, and one who cannot even ask a question" (Steinberg 2005: 9). But bearing in mind that Roth desires to go beyond the "immediate parochialism of Jewish background," finding biblical resonances in Roth's story offers an interpretative midpoint between the world of traditional Orthodox Jewish values and Roth's humanistic approach. The world in Roth's story is also polarized like Walker's, and polarization of the characters increases from the outset of the story. At the beginning of the story Nathan Marx attempts to unify the resentments of "a goddam" war hero with a stereotypical Jewish "antihero" who assimilates into the American mainstream (Roth 1994: 647). He does not obey Jewish dietary laws because he treats religion as a separate secular institution. He seems to be presented as one who has lost his "sense of Jewishness" (642). However, as the story progresses Marx undergoes a serious change of attitude that accounts for his final decision, and he finally defends his "Jewishness". At the other end of this moral binary opposition one can find Private Sheldon Grossbart, who seems to excel in his religiosity, tries to obey dietary laws, attends Jewish services and speaks out on behalf of the Jewish community. He projects an image of himself as being attached to old-fashioned cultural Jewish morality. Roth entirely deconstructs this dichotomy of characters and values by reversing the roles of the characters. He portrays the characters of Grossbart and Marx in such a way that it becomes apparent that

these two characters do not fit the categorizations they were assigned at the beginning of the story. The religious Jewish private Grossbart turns out to be an unscrupulous man faking his devotion to religion and moral values, while the highly assimilated Jewish Sergeant Marx, showing little interest in maintaining a link with his Jewish heritage, becomes a universalized representative of this ethnic group. Marx is confronted again by his persuasive trainee when Grossbart comes pleading to give him a pass to celebrate a Passover dinner. Unfortunately, Grossbart comes back to request a pass for Fishbein and Halpern, who finally manage to get their leaves. During the next encounter, when Grossbart inquires about the change in the direction of the front, Marx notices that his soldier has brought him a non-kosher Chinese roll as a gift instead of "a piece of that gefilte fish" (Roth 1994: 653). He becomes very much enraged when he finds out that the supposed Seder feast was a lie. His subordinate proves to be a calculating selfish liar. Grossbart's non-kosher Chinese roll epitomizes the world of the inauthentic, the world of mockery. Gillian Steinberg (2005: 15) notes that "his substitution of Chinese food" is a "demonstration of his secularism," of his forged Judaism.

In questioning who is a better "Defender of the Faith" Roth presents religious identity as an element operating separately from Jewish identity. Roth debunks the stereotypical preconceptions of ethno-racial representation by demonstrating how stereotypical categorizations do not always fit the characters presented in the stories. Through an exaggerated portrayal of his characters Roth demonstrates that the world is not solely divided into morally clear-cut and defined copies of walking stereotypes of the Orthodox Jew or the assimilationist-type Jew. Readers seem to be left with no answer as to how to perceive Marx's assimilation because it is this highly assimilated character that saves the integrity of the Jews. Roth's story proves that assimilation may not necessarily be burdened with total dis-identification with the ethnic minority group from which the character originates – just as religion is not always the hallmark of belonging to the Jewish community. I suggest that Roth's story consciously opposes traditional framing and common stereotyping through building upon Jewish stereotypes and playing with them. Through the caricatural depiction of Jews Roth runs the risk of being called an anti-semite. On the other hand, via Nathan Marx's standpoint and his moral dilemmas Roth proclaims the distance from schematized thinking about *Yiddishkeit*. In the past Roth had to repeatedly dispel the charge of being a "self-hating" Jew, especially after the publication of "Defender of the Faith", along with other short stories in *Goodbye, Columbus*, as well as *Portnoy's Complaint*, a novel which generated a lot of controversy.

During the first encounter Grossbart aims to shorten the distance between himself and his first Sergeant by making a witty remark about Marx's surname: "We thought you... Marx, you know, like Karl Marx. The Marx Brothers. Those guys are all... M-a-r-x. Isn't that how you spell it, Sergeant?" (Roth 1994: 636). This joke about Marx's last name becomes a living representation of Grossbart's forged Jewish faith. The reference to Jewish-American comedians has a hidden agenda in that Grossbart's behaviour can be compared to taking part in a kind of masquerade, a comedic performance which can be observed by the reader as the story develops. Marx perceives Grossbart as "entirely strategic", which makes him a kind of player in a game of ethno-religious masquerade (656). Grossbart himself turns into a Jewish caricature at the end of the story. The crafty allusion to the Marx Brothers foreshadows the way in which Grossbart will be unmasked. Grossbart is later exposed by Marx by using the same canny strategy that he uses while confronting his superior.

In fact, in Roth's story the readers are presented with two highly assimilated Jews: Grossbart and Marx. Grossbart puts on the mask of an "unassimilable" dark Oriental Jew of the 19th century, as presented in Johnathan Freedman's *Klezmer America: Jewishness*,

Ethnicity, Modernity (2008), with strange eating habits, when in reality Grossbart is all white, fully Americanized in his white practices, and is caught eating a non-kosher Chinese roll. The fact that Grossbart identifies himself as "different," the Other, casts him as the non-white. This conscious transition from a white to a non-white position suggests a racial degradation which can be best illustrated through the symbolic use of blackface. Although blackface specifically refers to the experience of African-Americans, Grossbart's metaphorical "blacking up" resembles the use of blackface by the main Jewish character, Jakie Rabinowitz, who impersonates an African American jazz singer in the musical *The Jazz Singer*. Stephen Whitfield (drawing on Michel Rogin's arguments about the linkage between Jews and blackface) claims that the blackface metaphor in *The Jazz Singer* "signified a strategy of assimilation", and "that blacking up was the vehicle for becoming white" (1999: 150). I have appropriated the "blackface metaphor" because Grossbart's categorization as the Other possesses a performative quality and may surprisingly be considered as a medium for becoming white. It allows the readers to discover that he is white - fully Americanized despite his temporary suspicious mask of "darkness"- "Otherness." The more "non-white" (Other) Grossbart tries to become, the whiter he appears. It is a startling way of drawing attention to his Americanness/whiteness.

Dee's re-Africanization also resembles a more conscious masquerade, which can figuratively be compared to a minstrel show through the performative quality of her African-Americaness. Although Dee maintains the appearance of appreciating African-American tradition Mama perceives her daughter as a person who undergoes a steady process of dis-identification with her African-American traditions and community by conforming to white standards. Mama emphasises Dee's passive consumerism by stating that "Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit" (Walker 1993: 373). The oddness of Dee's racial performance is marked by Mama's seemingly unimportant allusion to her daughter's dress, which is described as "a dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun." (Walker 1993: 374). Dee becomes an object of suspicion through wearing a dress that seems to be brighter than the sun. It is as if Dee's performed blackness is ridiculed through the lightness of her dress/looks. It is as though Mama states that Dee's blackness is a sophisticated cover for ascribed moral whiteness, Dee's more assimilationist way of being promotes white values and a white viewpoint on African-American tradition.

The Stereotypical "Other"

In "Everyday Use" Walker deals with preconceptions about African Americans, their representation as ethnic Others. Sam Whimsitt notes that Dee, who wants to take a picture of the house without herself, aims to "frame the world, define its borders" (2000: 448). He also claims that "this is what the Bakers call Dee's fashionably 'aesthetic' distance from southern expediencies" (2000: 449), which slightly complicates one's understanding of "Everyday Use". Dee's "aesthetic distance", her attempt to take a picture, which is not fully understood by Mama and Maggie, may also have another meaning. Mama notices that Dee "stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included" (375). Mama and Maggie are photographed as if they were exoticized objects, but they are always photographed in the vicinity of the house, they cannot get out of the shadow of the house. Even when Dee takes a photo of a cow Mama states that Dee "snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house" (375). The Johnsons' new house is at the same time the backdrop and the

normative racist framework of the picture. Since the house functions as a metaphor of a racist America Mama and Maggie are left at the very bottom of this white normative framework – they are outcasts. This explains why Mama consciously turned her back on the house. They are exotic objects to be gazed at, but they seem to exist only within the white normative space of America. Mama and Maggie are rendered Others, strange and ugly. Mama describes herself as “a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands,” which is metonymic of black womanhood and the defeminized preconceptions of black women that are present in the dominant white culture (371). Stereotypical values attributed to black women are those of uneducated, masculinely-built super workers. Mama’s perception of African-Americans goes back to the time of slavery. This is especially evident in her portrayal of Maggie, who presents a servile mentality and manner with her “chin on the chest, eyes on the ground, feet in the shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground” (372). Maggie is an African-American whose mind and body tend to be “locked” in the past. Her body not only bears signs of “the burn scars” after the fire of their old house, but her psyche is distorted by the internalization of myths present in a white culture depicting black women as ugly (371). Maggie and Mama are the sufferers and martyrs of the American racist perspective. However, Dee, who receives a replica of Walker’s name – Wangero (the same name Walker is given on her trip to Africa in the late 1960s, as Sam Whimsitt and other critics have pointed out), does not want to fit into the stereotyping normative framework. She never places herself in the picture – in the white normative framework of America – although one can get such a mixed impression when looking at Dee’s playful attempt at re-Africanizing herself, renaming herself.

In “Defender of the Faith” Grossbart tries to project himself as the ethnic Other when he says, “Because I’m a Jew, Sergeant. I am different” (652). This way of “Othering” Grossbart as a Jew is also deeply embedded within common postcolonial discourse. “The construction of the Other is fundamental to the construction of the Self”, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim when analyzing the importance of Spivak’s theory of postcolonialism (156). The process of “Othering” starts with establishing the opposition, by creating the difference between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizer defines himself against the colonized. In this case, the highly assimilated Jew, Marx, takes the position of “a goy” (non-Jew) against the supposedly oppressed Orthodox Jew, Grossbart. Grossbart accuses Marx of being an Anti-Semite when he comes pleading to his superior to give him a pass to celebrate a Passover dinner. When the trainee sees his superior’s reluctance to give him a pass he says that Marx sounds like a “goy” (non-Jew), and that for Grossbart “it’s a hard thing to be a Jew. (...) it’s a harder thing to stay one” (651, 652). Grossbart suggests that he is oppressed and stigmatized because of his ethno-religious identity. Roth’s character Grossbart projects the features of Jonathan Freedman’s “Oriental Jew”, with his “unassimilability, due to his systemic constitutionally nonrational ‘Oriental make-up’” (2008: 263). Roth’s axis of difference in Grossbart’s portrayal is grounded in the character’s religious “Oriental” eating customs and Yiddish language.

The reader can find the colonized and the colonizer, respectively, in the figures of Dee and Maggie in Walker’s story, particularly in the way Dee reads to Maggie and Mama. Maggie’s and Mama’s conscious resistance against being more educated and more sophisticated becomes an opposition to white knowledge and practices, which are markers of influence and power in a white dominant culture. The constant imposition of white values is illustrated through the underlying metaphor of Dee’s reading to Maggie and Mama. Mama remarks that Dee:

used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand. (373)

The use of words in this passage is particularly interesting. Verbs such as "pressed", "burned" and "shove away" are signifiers of "epistemic violence" – a term coined by the postcolonialist philosopher Gayatri Spivak. Epistemic violence can be identified as a violent way of instilling knowledge on a group of ethnoracial minorities, and a means of replacing the knowledge of various "Others" with supposedly superior white practices. Mama and Maggie interpret Dee's habit of reading to them as a forceful attempt at whitewashing them. Amircal Cabral notes that:

in the effort to perpetuate exploitation the colonizer not only creates a system to repress the cultural life of the colonized people; he also provokes and develops the cultural alienation of a part of the population, either by so-called assimilation of indigenous people, or by creating a social gap between the indigenous elites and the popular masses. As a result of this process of dividing, or of deepening the divisions in the society, it happens that a considerable part of the population, notably the urban or peasant *petite bourgeoisie* assimilates the colonizer's mentality, considers itself culturally superior to its own people and ignores or looks down upon their cultural values (1994: 57).

In the story it is Dee who "assimilates the colonizer's mentality" and displays a feeling of superiority towards her black roots. Dee is also depicted as one who hated the old house, which burnt down some time ago, and exemplifies a person with a historyless attitude, although she maintains the appearance of just the opposite. Mama states that Dee would "do a dance around the ashes" of the old house, which functions as a symbol of Africa (373).

Roth's setting of the story, Camp Crowder, becomes the conflict site of pre-existing contesting Jewish stereotypes, just as Walker's setting, the Johnsons' pasture, becomes a contested space of contrary viewpoints and stereotypical preconceptions about African American women seen as ugly and not very intelligent. Roth deploys multiple stereotypical representations of a Jew: Marx, who seemingly falls into the category of an assimilationist Jew, and Grossbart, an outwardly Orthodox Jew who turns out to be the scheming Jew, and finally Fishbein, a weak and emasculated Jew. Both Fishbein and Halpern possess traces of a "not only feminized but hystericized Jew" (Freedman 2008: 266). The author of "Defender of the Faith" also builds upon Jewish stereotypes in his portrayal of Grossbart's mother as: "a ballabusta", who "practically sleeps with a dustcloth in her hand" (Roth 1994:647). Also, the stereotypical image of an overprotective Jewish mother adheres to what Karen Brodtkin calls "the image of smothering and emasculating mothers (of their sons)" (1998: 161).

While Marx tries to blur the differences between himself and the white mainstream, Grossbart uses "strategic essentialism" in order to gain personal privileges. Grossbart's rhetoric relies on some defined essentialist claims which attribute certain characteristics to anyone within the Jewish subset of the population. It presupposes the claim that every Jew is a religious person and that Jews as an ethno-religious group should "stick" together. In "Everyday Use" Walker brings forward the practicality of African-American women as an essentialist element of the African-American collective "we." According to Mama the essence of African-American women lies in their performance of everyday activities.

The worlds presented by Walker and Roth in their short stories are not one-dimensional; the readers' preconceptions that accrete around Roth's Jewish characters are

challenged just the same as Mama's dualistic perception of the world is challenged by Walker's conscious choice of Dee's new name. Walker gives Dee the same new name – Wangero – as Walker was given on her trip to Africa in the late 1960s. This fact was not left unnoticed by many scholars, such as by Barbara Christian and Sam Whitsitt. The figure of Dee in Walker's story seems to destabilize the simplistic perception of Mama's world of stereotypical values. However, as a final effect the argument over the quilts is ruminated over by Mama and ultimately enriches Mama's perspective about the value of their African American existence. In Roth's short story the simplified division of the world into good, pious, Orthodox Jews versus evil, secular Jews is threatened by the revelation of the fact that the supposedly Orthodox Grossbart fakes his devotion to Judaism and Jewish customs.

Both the main characters of "Defender of the Faith" and "Everyday Use", Grossbart and Dee, perform a kind of masquerade. They are putting on the mask of the Other, which can be compared to the tradition of minstrelsy. Both Grossbart's and Dee's ethno-racial identities, respectively Jewish and African-American, possess a performative style; they invoke the world of duplicity. By taking on their performer's identity as Jewish or African-American, the characters bring the internal conflicts of American ethnic Others into sharp relief.

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