

Beyond Ethnic Whiteness

*Bildungsroman, Jewishness, and Denationalized
Asian American Subjectivity in Gish Jen's Mona in the
Promised Land*

Christian Ravela

Abstract. This article explores the political possibilities in the “morphing” of Asian American identity from an excluded racial category into an assimilable ethnicity by turning to Gish Jen’s second novel, *Mona in the Promised Land* (*Mona*). In contrast to Asian American studies’ more common radical accounts, *Mona* elevates upper-middle-class Jewishness, the paradigmatic white ethnic identity, by placing it at the center of Asian American identity. In doing so, I argue that *Mona*’s bildungsroman form pushes the identification of Asian American as the “New Jews” beyond its reification in model minority discourse toward a rediscovery of diasporic consciousness. Specifically, through a recursive narrative logic that combines the marriage plot and the mother-daughter romance via Asian ethnic and Jewish romantic suitors as *Mona*’s objects of desire, the novel rediscovers a diasporic consciousness that extends the social and political horizon of ethnicized Asian American identity beyond nation-states (both US and Asian nation-als) and toward a geopolitical order rooted in counter-discourses and Jewish traditions of exile. Of course, this exilic foundation to Asian American ethnicity offers no political guarantees. It does, however, disrupt the presumption that the morphing of race into ethnicity for Asian American identity necessarily leads to the reproduction of white hegemony.

The relation between Asian Americans and whiteness has, from the very beginning of Asian American identity, been a major source of anxiety for the Asian American left. Perhaps never more so than in the post-civil rights era when, as Susan Koshy asserts in her provocative essay “Morphing Race to Ethnicity,” Asian American identity is “morphing” from a racially excluded category into an assimilable ethnicity.¹ Indeed, Koshy contends that new Asian immigrant groups and model minorities are key agents in shoring up white hegemony by re-articulating white privilege as color-blind meritocracy. Yet Colleen Lye notes in passing that Koshy’s argument has not been taken up thoroughly by scholars, since it challenges the outsider rhetoric of Asian American identity.² If not disavowing Koshy’s provocative claim, how would those committed to the project of Asian American studies contend with this structural transformation without abandoning the value of Asian American identity altogether? Does such morphing condemn Asian Americans to always be junior partners in white hegemony? Or can such morphing be accelerated beyond white hegemony’s stranglehold?

This article pursues these questions by turning to Gish Jen’s second novel, *Mona in the Promised Land* (*Mona*).³ In contrast to Asian American studies’ more common accounts that place the civil rights movement, Black radicalism, and third worldism at the center of Asian American identity formation,⁴ *Mona* elevates upper-middle-class Jewishness, the paradigmatic white ethnic identity, by placing it at the center of its *bildung* plot and, by extension, Asian American identity. In doing so, I argue that *Mona*’s bildungsroman form pushes the identification of Asian American as the “New Jews” beyond its reification in model minority discourse toward a rediscovery of diasporic consciousness. Specifically, following the Anglo-American conventions of the marriage plot, the novel relies upon Asian ethnic and Jewish romantic suitors as narrative tropes to figure the problematic of race and ethnicity in Asian American identity. Indeed, the very developmental and recursive narrative ordering of these romances work through the possibility of non-assimilable ethnicity for Asian American identity.

For this precise reason, *Mona* notably amends the marriage plot by incorporating the Asian American mother-daughter romance as its dénouement. In this manner, the novel rigorously pursues both the marriage plot and the Asian American mother-daughter romance to their respective conclusions in *bildung* but ends up reconstituting its social horizon away from the nation-state toward what Lisa Lowe calls the “international within the national.”⁵ Put differently, the novel’s rediscovery of a diasporic consciousness extends the social and political horizon of ethnicized Asian American identity beyond nation-states (both US and Asian nationals) and toward a geopolitical order rooted in counter-discourses and Jewish traditions of exile. Of course, this exilic foundation to Asian American ethnicity offers no political guarantees. It does, however, disrupt the presumption

that the morphing of race into ethnicity for Asian American identity necessarily leads to their participation in the reproduction of white hegemony.

RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF ASIAN AMERICAN BILDUNGSROMANS

Though set in 1968, *Mona* is very much a product of the post-racial multicultural euphoria of the 1990s. As literary scholar Wendy Alison Lee notes, positive reception of *Mona* “frames it both as liberal redefinition of the terms of American belonging and as a utopian narrative that uses its historical setting to imagine the 1990s and multicultural discourse as continuous with a nostalgic and progressive vision of the late 1960s.”⁶ Such a reading is not unwarranted. As a sequel to Jen’s first novel, *Typical American*,⁷ *Mona in the Promised Land* follows the development of the titular Chinese American character Mona from adolescence to adulthood in the late 1960s. The crux of this bildungsroman plot turns on Mona’s conversion to Judaism as the mechanism for her entry into adulthood and the wider racial and ethnic order of US society. As such, much literary criticism has focused on her cultural hybridity, which is articulated through the surname “Changowitz” and embodied by her mixed-race daughter, lo, at the end.⁸ In this, the novel exemplifies the hallmarks of US multiculturalism. Its linear, developmental plot allegorizes the formation of Asian American subjectivity as a culturally hybrid but nonetheless American identity in the age of globalization in the 1990s.

Yet, as scholars have shown, this sunny and optimistic reading is not consistent, and, in fact, is contradicted by key elements of the novel.⁹ Indeed, as Lee herself persuasively shows at a formal level, the consistent use of nonlinear narrative devices reframes the novel’s progressive temporality as a parody of 1990s national fantasies of multicultural family values.¹⁰ My reading is deeply indebted to the acumen of these critical and formal analyses. Thus, I seek to build upon their arguments about the novel’s insights on the cultural politics of the 1990s. However, what I find generative in the novel is less its critique of US liberal multiculturalism than its unintended construction of an alternative to it. I say “unintended” because, like Lee, my focus on narrative form brackets the question of authorial intent. But while she finds the novel’s form to parody the progressive temporality of national fantasy, I find it to exceed the narrow social horizon of the nation-state.¹¹

A detour through bildungsroman theory is necessary at this point. Criticism has long understood the bildungsroman as deeply imbricated with both the rise

of capitalism and nationalism.¹² In the context of Asian American studies, Lisa Lowe's account is paradigmatic of this line of argument. In her chapter "Decolonization, Displacement, Disidentification: Writing and the Question of History" in *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe finds the bildungsroman to be the primary narrative form of print culture that interpolates a reading public into the imagined community of the nation. As she writes, "it elicits the reader's identification with the bildung narrative of ethical formation, itself a narrative of the individual's relinquishing of particularity and difference through identification with an idealized 'national' form of subjectivity."¹³ This normative power of the bildungsroman has led Lowe and others to find that bildungsromans written by nonnormative national subjects register their historical and material distance from, and contradiction with, an "idealized 'national' form of subjectivity" through formal deviations and innovations of the bildungsroman form.

Patricia Chu's seminal *Assimilating Asians* is exemplary of this approach.¹⁴ Chu argues that assimilation has been central to definitions of *bildung* in Asian American bildungsromans since the material, legal, cultural, and psychic structures and forces are so determinative of the ideal alignment of individual desire and social regulation characterizing *bildung*.¹⁵ Given, then, the history of exclusion and racialization of Asians as alien outsiders of the nation, *bildung* has been a fraught concept for Asian American writers. In the absence of the presumption of social inclusion into the United States, Chu asserts that Asian American writers had to imagine *bildung* through two distinct literary strategies: first, by asserting claims to American citizenship through critiques of American society; and second, by reimagining ethnic heritage and history as a resource for enduring life in American society.¹⁶ Chu's argument and others like it have been essential to understanding not only the role that literary culture has played in shoring up the nation-state, but also the way nonnormative writers have challenged such strictures at the level of form.

However, such criticism perhaps attributes more uniformity and power to the bildungsroman than it deserves. Put differently, such accounts take for granted the substantial coherence and reality of the nation from which the conventional emplotment and narrative devices of the bildungsroman come to register and express. Methodologically, such arguments place heavy emphasis on notions of linear narrative structures and endings to evaluate the extent to which a bildungsroman either conforms to or challenges an ideal national subjectivity.

Yet, more recent bildungsroman scholarship provides an alternative methodological approach and literary history to the bildungsroman without losing sight of the genre's place in the development of nationalism. Specifically, in his book *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman*, Tobias Boes offers what he calls a "performative" account of the bildungsroman.¹⁷

This account does not understand the genre to register a preexisting normative national consciousness; instead, it performatively creates one. That is, the genre actively “produces a national form” by synchronizing the flux of events, activities, and process at all levels (i.e., psychological, familial, collective, global, etc.) into an organic temporal-spatial order through its “mimetic capacities [and] direct rhetorical address to the reader.”¹⁸

This focus on the narrative organization of varied temporalities leads Boes to claim that:

Novels of formation differ from previous realist novels primarily in the ways in which they give a poetic shape to a world that is newly felt to be in flux, and in which events succeed one another in empty homogenous time. To do this, the *Bildungsroman* pioneered a wealth of literary techniques whose . . . narrative logic of *Bildung* is organic rather than mechanical in nature, which means among other things that experiences and insights from early points in the hero’s life tend to resurface in modified shapes at later stages of the formative process. Historical time in the *Bildungsroman* thus acquires iterative as well as sequential character, and the resulting asynchronicities undermine simplistic narratives about national consciousness and its putative quest for closure in the normative regime of the nation-state.¹⁹

Methodologically, Boes’s performative account helpfully dislodges the excessive focus on ending scenes and themes of linear progress and harmony in much bildungsroman criticism, whether critical or not. Such temporally mechanical themes and narrative tropes are, of course, not excluded from analytical consideration, but instead are balanced among the “wealth of literary techniques” that seek to give an organic and “poetic shape in a world newly felt in flux.”²⁰

At stake in this performative account are not only a widening of analytical concerns beyond those that have traditionally defined bildungsroman criticism, but, most importantly, a critical recognition of the internally multitudinous, complex, and contradictory temporal and ideological character of the bildungsroman itself. In this way, Boes’s performative account of the bildungsroman fruitfully acknowledges the imbrication of the literary and the political while not collapsing the former into the latter. Put simply, the bildungsroman is most definitely bound historically and ideologically to nationalism, but such imbrication does not, and cannot, completely exhaust the bildungsroman’s meaning. Hence, Boes argues:

The Bildungsroman is a genre connected more than any other to the rise of modern nationalism. But repeatedly and consistently, the knot that ties literature to politics comes undone in precisely those cases where the stakes are the highest. . . . Yet despite the fact that harmony and teleology are among the most-often enumerated qualities of traditional Bildungsromane, none . . . ultimately succeed in giving a definitive form to the collective experience that they articulate. There is always some kind of remainder, some identity claim that resists nationalism's aim for closure in what . . . we can identify as the normative regime of the nation-state. These remainders are the novels' "cosmopolitan" elements.²¹

To the extent that the bildungsroman "tr[ies] to give . . . a 'national form' to the narrative trajector[y] of the . . . protagonist,"²² it fails to fully synchronize the flux of historical time into the "homogenous, empty time" of the nation.²³ As a result of this effort, the bildungsroman ends up generating asynchronicities that cannot be folded back into national time. For Boes, those asynchronicities—"remainders" of national time—do more than just undermine the bildungsroman's performative construction of national consciousness; they make alternative "identity claim[s]" that form the "cosmopolitan" element of the bildungsroman.

In the case of *Mona*, Boes's performative account of the bildungsroman points to key directions to take in unpacking the significance of its form with respect to the construction of an Asian American subjectivity. This alternative theory of the bildungsroman is perhaps especially important for not only Asian American studies but also all ethnic studies projects, since it undermines the coherence of what Long Le-Khac calls a "bildungsroman hermeneutic" that dominates post-civil rights political culture.²⁴ As he rightly points out, the bildungsroman is a narrative form not about "atomistic individualism but [about] a social vision centered on the individual."²⁵ Its narrow social vision, he argues, delimits the scope of social policy shaping minority life chances. This performative theory of the bildungsroman, therefore, breaks open the solidity of that social vision without dispensing inquiry of the genre altogether. More specifically, at a methodological level, it directs one to consider not only the sequential dimension of its narrative (i.e., linear and progressive development) but also its iterative qualities (i.e., the recursiveness and retrospective narrative elements). Furthermore, it asks one to consider the relation and contradictions between them as the bildungsroman seeks to mimetically create a compelling world. Second, and more substantively, it asks us to interpret the contradictions and asynchronicities of the bildungsroman as not only "resist[ing] nationalism's

aim for closure” but also as posing other Asian American (or other ethnic) identity claims that exceed the ideological orbit of the nation—one, in fact, that Boes calls “cosmopolitan.”²⁶ Such is the case, as I will argue, that in excess of *Mona*’s decidedly domestic bildung plot resides a cosmopolitan one.

MODELING MINORITIES IN MONA’S BILDUNG

Mona is striking for the ways its narrative is structured less as Chu’s account of the Asian American female bildungsroman and more as a very conventional marriage plot.²⁷ *Mona* cycles through a series of romantic partners—from Sherman to Seth, to Seth who pretends to be Sherman, and back to Seth. (As I will discuss later, even though Seth is a single character and becomes *Mona*’s primary romantic partner, he symbolically embodies different others from which *Mona* develops *bildung*.) In tandem with this will they–won’t they romance, the novel tracks *Mona*’s Oedipal struggle with her mother, Helen, over the influence of these romances on her identity and direction in life. Such conventional emplotment is unsurprising from a historical perspective. If, as Chu observed, the Anglo-American conventions of *bildung* (i.e., the marriage plot) were untenable for Asian American writers due to exclusionary laws, policies, and norms, then with their dissolution and waning strength, the Anglo-American narrative conventions become more readily available to Asian Americans to imagine *bildung*.

Of course, even with the end of formal exclusion and the waning strength of its normative regime, assimilation and, by extension, imagining *bildung* continue to be fraught propositions for Asian Americans. The history and continued strength of model minority discourse and its “racist love” deeply troubles the marriage plot’s balance of individual desire and social constraint in figuring *bildung*.²⁸ Appropriately, this fraught historical legacy and renewed social reality in the post-civil rights era thus becomes the symbolic content of *Mona* and helps to explain how its marriage plot is not without complexity. Specifically, it clues us to the symbolic importance of the novel’s incorporation of the narrative conventions of the Asian American female bildungsroman. Even though the mother-daughter romance does not form the primary narrative architecture of the novel, its defining elements are prominent in the story, especially at the end. *Mona* certainly exemplifies Chu’s Asian American “domestic woman.” The novel consistently attributes to *Mona* a sly humor and wit in keeping with the charms of the bildungsroman heroine. In fact, early on, the novel goes out of its way to highlight how *Mona*’s boisterous and loudmouth personality undercuts the Orientalist stereotype of the demure and diminutive Asian woman. At the

same time, she displays the “traditional virtue of loyalty to family” through her deep and abiding attachment to her mother Helen,²⁹ which the novel underscores by the tepid relationship that Helen has with her other daughter, Callie. Besides this typical characterization, *Mona* embeds scenes of tension, fissure, and reunion between Mona and Helen—which is to say, the narrative tropes of the Asian American mother-daughter romance plot. It not only serves as a subplot of the novel but also crucially converges with the marriage plot’s ending. Indeed, as I will discuss more extensively later, the reunion between Mona and Helen is rendered as a marriage, fully witnessed and officiated by Mona’s mixed-race daughter, Io.

Importantly, *Mona*’s fusing of the marriage plot and the mother-daughter romance does not undercut the symbolic aim towards *bildung* for either narrative. In fact, as I will show, the novel’s cultural intervention in the problem of whiteness and Asian American identity rests on pursuing their symbolic logic quite faithfully. It does so, however, to surface another Asian American identity claim within and asynchronous to the one that naturalize Asian American identity’s morphing from race into ethnicity vis-à-vis model minority discourse. Following Wendy Lee, this “untimely development” presages possibilities immanent to an ethnicized Asian American identity.³⁰

The novel establishes this intervention early on when the narrator proleptically announces, “In another ten years, there’ll be so many Orientals [in Scarshill] they’ll turn into Asians.”³¹ Of course, the events of the novel span precisely this ten-year window, defining the arc of Mona’s life as her transformation from Oriental to Asian. But what exactly does this transformation of racial identity mean? What social experience and political import does it bear? Does it simply signal the common story of 1960s racial politics—the move from subordinated racial ascription to empowered racial self-consciousness? The novel clues the reader to the answer early on, when the narrator explains:

For they’re the New Jews, after all, a model minority and Great American Success. They know they belong in the promised land. / Or do they? In fact, it’s only 1968; the blushing dawn of ethnic awareness has yet to pink up their inky suburban night. They have an idea about the Blacks because of poor Martin Luther King. More distantly perceived is that the Jews have become The Jews, on account of the Six Day War, much less that they, the Changs, are The New Jews.³²

Here, the novel explicitly aligns the formation of Asian American identity with Jewish American identity via the moniker “The New Jews.”³³ However,

through the subsequent equivocating question “Or do they?” the novel undercuts this automatic and naturalizing identification to instead locate it historically in 1968 with the “blushing dawn of ethnic awareness.” Thus, the novel neither naturalizes identification between Jewishness and Asianness nor dismisses it entirely, but instead stages it as a historically overdetermined problematic framing the story of *Mona’s bildung* as representative of an emergent Asian American subjectivity. In other words, *Mona* situates the alignment of Jewishness and Asianness in a period when both terms have not yet been reified via model minority discourse and when the coordinates of US racial formation are themselves in flux. In so doing, the novel opens up the very term “model minority,” dislodging its meaning from an exclusive reference to minority socioeconomic success and recasting it as a term to describe the relation that other racialized and ethnic identities had in shaping the formation of an Asian American subjectivity.

Indeed, this resignified model minority gets formalized through the narrative logic of the novel’s marriage plot, as every romantic partner figures and thematizes how an Asian American identity can be “modeled” on another racial and ethnic minority. Importantly, the formal narrative logic of the identities of *Mona’s* suitors is both linear and iterative, both progressive and recursive, and both developmental and declension. That is to say, the succeeding romantic relationships are never quite a clean break from prior ones in both their characterization and their symbolic significance. Such contradictory and asynchronous temporal orders demonstrate not only what Lee aptly describes as a “drag” upon the national fantasies of progress³⁴—of which one is the morphing of race into ethnicity—but also surfaces how that same national fantasy itself is haunted by other possibilities.

MONA’S *BILDUNG* AND “JAPANESE KNOW HOW TO GO”

Sherman Matsumoto occupies the initial model minority for *Mona’s bildung*. However, he does not enter her world in a vacuum. The cultural space and racialized social dynamic of Scarshill—a fictionalized version of the affluent New York suburb Scarsdale—establishes the catalyst for *Mona’s bildung* and thus the process for developing an Asian American subjectivity. As the narrator explains: “Scarshill is a liberal place, not like their old town, where the Whitman Road Gang used to throw crab-apple mash at Callie and *Mona*, and tell them it would make their eyes stick shut. Here they’re like permanent exchange students.”³⁵ The contrast in *Mona’s* and *Callie’s* treatment between the two neighborhoods

could not be more dramatic. "Their old town" was a place of racialized stigma, hostility, and bullying. Relative to that kind of treatment, "liberal" Scarshill is very much a "promised land." Yet this characterization of Scarshill is laden with irony since it is far from a place of uncomplicated social acceptance. The descriptor "permanent exchange students" figures Mona's and her family's contradictory status as both belonging to the neighborhood (the "permanent" dimension) and set apart from it (the "exchange student"). Further on, the novel clarifies the precise character of this inclusionary subordination when the narrator explains, "they're not so much accepted as embraced."³⁶ In other words, the cost of social inclusion into liberal Scarshill is to become an object of white fascination.

Sherman thus enters liberal Scarshill and the Chang family within this tangled pressure of desires, ethnicity, and race. In fact, Mona's and Sherman's introduction to each other is the result of this racial logic. Sherman's mother requests that he be placed in a class with "any other Orientals in his grade,"³⁷ while Mona's friend Barbara prods her to desire Sherman for similar reasons. This pressure turns genuine as Mona ponders the possibility of romance. As their budding relationship develops, it stages competing solutions to the problem of racial inclusion in liberal Scarshill, with Mona offering an assimilationist answer while Sherman offers a separatist one. In an early conversation, Sherman asks whether Mona is American or not. She responds affirmatively, asserting that anyone can become American by "learning some rules and speeches."³⁸ Sherman, on the other hand, disagrees; he can never "switch." Later, he elaborates on his claim by drawing a series of pictures. On one side of a piece of paper, he draws a John Wayne-like figure and witch-like figure facing an American flag, while on the other side, he draws two figures that look like himself but only one is facing a Japanese flag.

Sherman's drawing thus illustrates the racial basis of US national identity and belonging. Sherman cannot "switch" because he is not white and, equally important, he is "Oriental," and specifically Japanese. Mona's view of "switching" suggests an assimilationist, creedal national vision of the United States, while Sherman's perspective offers an ethnic/racial national one. Sherman's drawing poses this conflict for Mona when he asserts that the "Chinese lost in depart-o-ment-o store," "Japanese know how to go."³⁹ Of course, the alternative to both of their visions is found in the figure of the Jew. Hence, it is notable that Jews have exemplary status in both Mona's and Sherman's vision of US national identity and belonging. In Mona's civic national vision, Jews are paradigmatic of both the form and content of US national identity. That is, Mona not only likens the assimilationist form of US national identity to religious conversion but also defines the virtues of US national identity by the freedom to convert: "American means being whatever you want."⁴⁰ In Sherman's vision, the whiteness of the

figures foregrounds the racial basis of the ethnic national belonging and, via anti-Semitic renderings of the Jew, underscores the racialized differential and hierarchical forms of belonging.

In the end, Sherman can neither fulfill Mona's budding sexual desires—he judo flips her when her advances catch him off guard—nor provide an adequate model minority for Asian American subjectivity. Yet his impact reverberates throughout the rest of the novel as subsequent romances circle back to him both descriptively and symbolically. He voices and figures a non-US national form of belonging that Mona returns to over and over again in every romantic relationship onward, to such an extent that it simultaneously marks both an advance and regression of *bildung*.

ON THE LIMITS OF THE “AUTHENTIC INAUTHENTIC JEW”

Sherman's ethnic nationalism offers Mona a clear direction for a non-Orientalist identity. However, it rejects outright the possibility of minority belonging in the United States. Thus, it is insufficient as a model minority for the formation of an Asian American subjectivity. Yet it does offer an insight that is unavailable to Mona's idealized creedal, nationalist vision of the United States—namely, that the universalizing scope of creedal nationalism is predicated on a particular racial embodiment. This truth must be incorporated into the formation of an Asian American subjectivity. One possibility is found in Sherman's diagram—the figure of the Jew. It retains the contradictions as a racialized figure (as seen in its anti-Semitic depiction as “Wicked Witch of the West”) but can also be incorporated into US national identity. Of course, as Cathy Schlund-Vials shows, Asian Americans and Jewish Americans have long been seen as analogous model minorities whose immigrant acts have negotiated the political, economic, and cultural structures of US citizenship.⁴¹ Yet she also carefully shows the limits of this analogy, as her own reading of *Mona* demonstrates the extent to which the book recalls the utopian promise of ethnic assimilation in its literary predecessor, Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, but ends up demonstrating assimilation's dystopian limits in racial difference.⁴²

My own reading of *Mona*'s Jewish American and Asian American analogy draws upon Schlund-Vials's insight on the racial limits of ethnic assimilation. However, by locating this analogy as one among others in the narrative, I suggest the novel pushes Asian American and Jewish American identity beyond the assimilationist paradigm, even as it inhabits this paradigm at the same time. To

that end, the novel figures the Jewish American and Asian American analogy through the trope of conversion.⁴³ Even though this act is a religious one, the narrative primarily focuses on the social universe that conversion opened to Mona, which recalls her prior reference to “switching.” From the temple sessions to conversations with Rabbi Horowitz to volunteering at the hot line, the novel tracks Mona’s entry into and participation in the social and cultural institutions and practices of Jewish life in Scarshill.

Hence, when Mona begins really getting to know Seth, he embodies this ethnic definition of Jewishness, which is explicitly announced in his introduction of himself: “I am afraid I am an authentic inauthentic Jew. . . . More ethnic than religious.”⁴⁴ As a model minority for Mona’s *bildung*, this Jewishness analogizes Mona’s included but fetishized status in Scarshill with Jewishness’s probationary inclusion into Wasp society as white ethnic. Both describe ambivalent forms of social belonging; the difference lies in historical tradition in addressing this problem. As the narrator explains: “The Changs don’t have their [Jewish] friends’ instincts, or reflexes. They don’t have their ready alert. They don’t have their friends’ institutions, or their ways of reminding themselves who they are, that they might not be lulled by a day in the sun.”⁴⁵ These instincts, reflexes, reminders, and institutions are more than mechanisms for maintaining Jewish ethnic identity against the forces of cultural assimilation and stereotyping. They are mechanisms for asserting agency against the stereotypes ascribed to Jews by dominant culture.

In this way, for Mona, her turn to ethnic Jewishness as a “model minority” centers on learning agency over the terms of her social inclusion in the United States. However, its parameters are structurally bound by its relation to other racial categories and groups—namely whiteness (i.e. Waspdom) and Blackness. The tensions between agency and structure over her identity form the driving issues in the events and actions surrounding Mona’s initial romance with Seth. Indeed, even before they meet, this exact problematic gets telegraphed to the reader in an early dialogue between Mona and Rabbi Horowitz. Recounting a disagreement with her mother over the meaning of minority, Mona explains:

[Mona] “First of all, [my parents] don’t like the word *minority*. . . . They say they were never a minority when they were in China, why should they be a minority here.”

[Rabbi Horowitz] “But there are few of them, and many of everyone else.”

[Mona] “That’s what I said. They said they’re just as good as anybody, why should they ask for help? Also they do not want to have to riot. I told them they don’t have to riot if they don’t want to. I told them they can just march in parades and protest. Or else, if they don’t want to go outside, they can write letters, like the Jews. I told them that was one of the reasons I turned Jewish.”⁴⁶

Rabbi Horowitz goes on to side with Mona’s position by suggesting that “your parents want to be Wasps. They are the only ones who do not have to make themselves heard. That is because they do the hearing. And how is that possible?”⁴⁷ Mona then reaffirms her identification with Jewishness as the ideal model minority for her: “Anyway, I said, we are a minority, like it or not, and if you want to know how to be a minority, there’s nobody better at it than the Jews. I said it’s our job to ask questions now. We can’t just accept everything the way they did in China. We can’t just go along.”⁴⁸

The dialogue nicely distills the promised agency that Mona finds in Jewishness. It extends well beyond controlling the terms of self-definition toward political action in reshaping society. For Mona, Jews are endowed with the moral imperative to question and change society precisely because of their marginal position in it. This imperative stems from the recognition that minority positionality is not simply a quantitative demographic matter but, more importantly, a political one too. Hence, the dialogue explicitly and implicitly acknowledges how this agency is relationally constituted and structured. Rabbi Horowitz’s retort plainly evinces this matter. Wasp hegemony means that Wasps have no need to entreat anyone for their rights and interests. Theirs are assumed. Thus, in lieu of making demands, they must be pleaded with to recognize the rights and interests of others.

However, according to the dialogue, if this agency forms as a response to Wasp hegemony, it also forms in response to Black demand, though not acknowledged as such. It is quite telling how, unlike Wasps, Black people are simultaneously evoked but not explicitly identified throughout the exchange. They are implicitly referenced as those who riot, and Black protest is the negative image of ethnic Jewish agency under Wasp hegemony. Specifically, through the communication metaphor of speech, writing, and hearing throughout the dialogue, the scene suggests that, as socially marginal as Jews may be under Wasp hegemony, Jews are still within the sphere of Wasp political recognition as white ethnic. Put within the passage’s organizing metaphors, their letters may not be read by Wasp elites, but those Jewish letters are written in the same language. In contrast, Black protest, which is cast as rioting, is beyond the intelligibility of

polite political speech.⁴⁹ Thus, the promised agency of Jewishness is a form of white ethnicity structured not only by its marginality to and kinship with Wasp hegemony but also by its distance from and disavowal of Blackness and Black demands.

Unsurprisingly, as the model minority for Mona, white ethnicity's internal contradictions and inadequacy for Mona's *bildung* animate the drama of her experiment as a "self-made Jew" and her romance with Seth.⁵⁰ The novel explores the problems of its structural relation to whiteness and Blackness through two minor characters: Eloise Ingles, a classmate of Mona, and Alfred Knickerbocker, a Black cook who works in her parents' restaurant. Eloise is offered as an object lesson on both the porous borders between Jewishness as white ethnic and Waspdom and the tenuous nature of Jewishness's promised agency. Naturally, the novel introduces Eloise at the same time as Mona begins her conversion to Judaism and thus positions her as a foil. Like Mona, Eloise begins attending temple to become Jewish. However, while Mona seeks to convert, Eloise is prompted by the sudden discovery that her deceased birth mother was Jewish, and thus wants to connect to her maternal Jewish roots. But Eloise's participation ends as abruptly as it began. As the narrator explains, she ended her exploration of her Jewish roots "having decided to go back to being a Wasp."⁵¹ Thus, through her position as a stepdaughter in the Ingles family and through her mixed ethnic background, Eloise embodies the liminal position of Jewishness as white ethnic within Wasp society.

As a foil to Mona, Eloise highlights the profound limitations of Mona's desire for agency via white ethnicity. Nowhere are the privileges and limitations of this on fuller display than in chapter 9, "The Expressers in Rhode Island." The chapter finds Mona visiting Callie and her roommate Naomi at a seaside resort where they are working for the summer. The job, however, turns out to be more than just work—it also becomes an ethnographic study concocted by Callie and Naomi to document the "manners and mores of the [Wasp] people at the inn."⁵² Mona is quickly drafted into the project and begins to jot down her observations of the guests. By sheer chance, Mona runs into Eloise as her family checks into the resort and, through Eloise's invitation, tags along on the Ingles family vacation. Mona thus happens to infiltrate the rarified and leisurely world of Waspdom, observing their "manners and mores,"⁵³ as she witnesses the Ingles play, argue, and dine with one another. Mona, however, cannot stay a complete bystander at these events. She is swept up into the argument between Eloise and her stepmother and becomes herself an awkward topic of dinner conversation for the Ingles. The simmering tensions beneath the surface of polite conversation between Eloise and her family boil over with her leaving them to stay with Mona, Callie, and Naomi in the workers' quarters. However, much like her participation

at temple, her act of defiance is short-lived, with Mr. Ingles quickly finding her and commanding her to return.

Like the aims of Callie's and Naomi's project, the chapter's focus on the Ingle family vacation operates as a detailed ethnographic case study of WASP life. From the passive-aggressive family bickering, to Mr. Ingle's dictums on law, social order, and "*know[ing] how the game is played*,"⁵⁴ to the asceticism of dining and the arcane rituals of polite dinner conversations, the chapter elucidates both the opulent and rarified world of WASPdom and its suffocating norms of etiquette. However, the chapter does more than satirize WASP culture; by centering on Eloise throughout, it underlines both the privileges and limitations of her agency as a junior partner within it. Her brief rebellion is a case in point. As a privileged member, Eloise is protected by the full institutional force of WASP society, as Naomi states plainly: "If Eloise disappears, every policeman on the East Coast is going to be out search for her."⁵⁵ At the same time, she is bound by the normative strictures of WASP culture, as illustrated by Eloise's quick compliance with her father's stern demand to return.⁵⁶

Allegorically, then, these events underscore the very real limitation of the promised agency of Jewishness as white ethnicity. Indeed, when Eloise, Mona, Callie, and Naomi reflect on Eloise's situation, their thoughts are strikingly applicable to the broader situation of ethnic Jewishness: "Manners, reticence, class. They discuss self-hatred, which Mona doesn't exactly understand; also something called antagonistic cooperation, which seems to be a kind of dance you can't stop dancing even if you hate your partner as much as you hate yourself."⁵⁷ Surely, "manner, reticence, [and] class" describe both the kinship and friction between ethnic Jewishness and WASPdom, while the notion of "antagonistic cooperation" names their asymmetrical relationship and social dynamic. To make the point of the tenuous position of ethnic Jewishness even clearer, the Ingles dinner scene notably includes a moment when Mr. Ingles receives an ominous phone call, which is later revealed to be a clue that he was centrally involved in the firing of Mr. Gugelstein, Barbara's father, from their brokerage firm. Thus, even though the chapter centers on the domestic drama of a family vacation, it points to the large social and political stakes of this tenuous agency under WASPdom.

If the figure of Eloise highlights limitations of the promised agency of ethnic Jewishness, then the character of Alfred underscores its privileges and naïveté through its proximity to whiteness. First introduced as the handsome Black cook at Mona's family restaurant, Alfred becomes the object of Mona's, Seth's, and Barbara's "social action" project,⁵⁸ which entails secretly housing him in Barbara's home after he is kicked out of his apartment by his ex-girlfriend. Even though Barbara's parents are out of town, Alfred's presence in the home must be kept hidden since Barbara's cousin, Evie, is also staying there. From the

outset, the novel casts humorous doubt on the project's intentions and eventual outcome: it arose from a hazy, weed-filled discussion on the comparative moral weight of the historical and present-day tragedies and harms experienced by Jews, Chinese, and African Americans. From this "comparative-tragedy project" they arrive at the conclusion that "it's generally an advantage to look more like Archie Bunker than like Malcolm X."⁵⁹ Though such comedic rendering is clearly a mark of their teenage naïveté, the resulting "social action" project should also be understood as demonstrating the Jewish agency that Mona was so enamored with in her earlier discussion with Rabbi Horowitz.⁶⁰

In particular, the entire event illustrates its narrowness, its delimited vision of justice, and its unacknowledged set of priorities by virtue of its proximity to Waspdom as white ethnic. The entire "social action" project itself underscores these points,⁶¹ for it entails more than the act of housing Alfred; it also involves, as Caroline Rody asserts, the creation in miniature of a utopian intercultural space of cross-race and cross-class community building, dubbed Camp Gugelstein.⁶² Its formation occurred after Barbara, Seth, and Mona discover that Evie, Alfred, and his friends had been partying together in Barbara's home for a while. Their early attempt to hide Alfred's presence from Evie had failed. However, instead of disclosing this fact, Alfred and Evie pretended as if they did not know of each other's presence in front of Barbara, Seth, and Mona. After Evie and Alfred's ruse is exposed, they persuade Barbara to allow Alfred to continue staying at the house. With Alfred and Evie's secret parties out in the open, Barbara, Seth, and Mona join the fun. Soon all are conversing together, practicing yoga together, smoking weed together, meditating together, and holding hands together. However, this camaraderie is quickly sundered when Barbara discovers that a flask is missing. This news leads Barbara, Seth, and Mona to awkwardly accuse Alfred's friends of stealing the flask, which results in them taking great offense, charging Barbara, Seth, and Mona of racism, and storming out of the house in protest. The following day Alfred moves out, marking the end of Camp Gugelstein. In its wake, Barbara, Mona, and Seth rationalize its conclusion as the successful completion of their "social action" project, since Alfred has a place of his own now. Of course, the ending of Camp Gugelstein is crushing, especially for Seth, who states, "They considered me a racist bastard, and I considered them my friends."⁶³

Camp Gugelstein is the novel's case study of Jewish agency, and its end reveals a host of unstated and assumed psychic investments and normative expectations. It operated as an act of charity, undergirded by tremendous class inequalities (the absurd Gugelstein estate that turns out to be leased) and laden with asymmetries of both power (the set of rules and restrictions that Alfred

and his friends must abide) and virtue (the moral standing that they achieve by dint of their generosity in a socially unjust world). Mona acknowledges all this early when, after Evie and Alfred confess to their initial deception, Mona responds with “*Que sera, sera*, right? . . . Only it was your experiment instead of ours. You didn’t want to be in someone else’s experiment.”⁶⁴ Though initially referring to the “experiment” of housing Alfred in secrecy, it plainly applies to the failed “experiment” of Camp Gugelstein. Accordingly, Mona’s recognition of power differences between being the experimenter and being experimented on equally applies to Camp Gugelstein, undercutting its utopian rendering of cross-racial and cross-class friendship as universally shared by all participants.

Furthermore, the language of experiment deliberately links together not only the events of the preceding chapter but also Mona’s romance with Seth. For instance, when Eloise is swiftly brought back into Waspdom by her father, Naomi concludes that “Eloise was not brought up to participate in someone else’s experiment.”⁶⁵ And when Mona breaks up with Seth, she invokes nearly the same language that she used to describe Alfred’s frustration at the rules of secrecy: “she is [a self-made Jew]; but that somehow her experiment has turn into [Seth’s] experiment.”⁶⁶ When read together, Eloise’s short-lived rebellion, Camp Gugelstein, and Mona’s romance with Seth are not just experiments centered on new experiences and identities but also, more significant with respect to the narrative arc of the novel, failed experiments from asymmetries of agency and power between who experiments and gets experimented on. Eloise’s failed experiment at rebellion against Waspdom and the failed experiment of cross-racial and cross-class community are both object lessons in Mona’s failed experiment as a self-made Jew.

However, each yields different lessons: Eloise’s case foregrounds the constraints of Jewish agency as white ethnic under the centripetal force of Wasp hegemony, while the failure of Camp Gugelstein points toward privileged positions under Wasp hegemony. In the end, both cases underscore that Mona’s experiment as a “self-made Jew” as the means to achieving *bildung* moves beyond her control, since the terms of her self-making end up being those of white ethnicity, whose limits are founded in racial difference. As a model of ethnicized Asian American identity, these episodes illustrate how an assimilable ethnic identity never quite achieves escape velocity from the gravitational force of race but can, as the next section shows, prompt a different kind of thinking about their relation.

“AN INAUTHENTIC INAUTHENTIC JEW” BY WAY OF ORIENTALISM

The dinner with the Ingleses and the fiasco of Camp Gugelstein highlight the problem of what Seth called the “authentic inauthentic Jew” (i.e., white ethnicity) as a model minority for Mona’s *bildung*. Each event underscores dimensions that do and do not fit both her social experiences and her desires. Symbolically, then, it is notable that immediately after these events, Mona breaks up with Seth, signifying the necessity to develop an alternative model minority. Yet, of course, Mona ends up getting back together with Seth, which prompts questions on their reunion’s significance in formulating Mona’s *bildung* if it is not a return to white ethnicity. Returning to Seth’s self-description offers a helpful answer: “I am afraid I am an authentic inauthentic Jew,” he says. “More ethnic than religious. However, in the process of becoming an inauthentic inauthentic Jew.”⁶⁷ Like Mona, Seth, too, pursues his own *bildung* and thus the meaning of Jewishness itself is in a state of flux throughout the novel. If an “authentic inauthentic Jew” describes Jewishness as white ethnic identity, then what does an “inauthentic inauthentic Jew” name? Clearly, it would be one unbounded by the dictates of ethnicity itself. But such an answer only leads to further questions as to what a non-ethnic formulation of Jewishness would amount to.

The novel fleshes out this notion of the “inauthentic inauthentic Jew” through Seth’s act of pretending to be Sherman. More than just a comedic plot device, the narrative trope of mistaken identity literalizes the notion of switching as discussed by Mona and the actual Sherman in the beginning of the novel. That is, on a literal level, Seth switches with Sherman, but, more symbolically significant, the switch offers a miniature *bildung* plot that meditates on the interrelation of race, nation, and ethnicity.⁶⁸ Hence, Seth remarks that his ruse leads to genuine discoveries about himself: “However, through all of this, he’s begun to feel, actually, sort of Japanese. Or at least, that the Japanese manner corresponds to something in him.”⁶⁹ Seth’s claim on his “Japanese manner” should not be interpreted as some sort of deep immersion in Japanese culture. The novel makes sure to undercut such a reading by noting the assortment of stereotypical items that Seth picks up to inhabit this manner—everything from eating with chopsticks to sleeping on tatami mats, but also to non-Japanese items like wearing Nehru jackets and listening to sitar tapes.⁷⁰ Such a hodgepodge of items illustrates a hippie countercultural fascination with Eastern cultures.

Even though Seth’s Orientalist preoccupations undercut claims of actually “switching,” they do not necessarily undermine the insights about Mona’s and Seth’s complicated relation to race and ethnicity. In other words, Seth’s insight

about his “Japanese manner” can be usefully understood as akin to what Bill Mullen calls “Afro-Orientalism,” which he describes as “a counterdiscourse that at times shares with its dominant namesake certain features but primarily constitutes an independent critical trajectory of thought on the practice and ideological weight of Orientalism in the Western world.”⁷¹ I say akin because, while Mullen finds Afro-Orientalism speaking to US practices of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalist empire, Seth’s Orientalism points toward the more modest ambition of “becoming an inauthentic inauthentic Jew,” which is to say to break out of the problematic of ethnicity, race, and nation.

Indeed, Seth’s Orientalism is elaborated during an early conversation between Mona and Seth/Sherman over the phone. Mona confides to him “what it’s like to be not Wasp, and not Black, and not as Jewish as Jewish can be; and not from Chinatown, either.”⁷² Seth/Sherman responds by saying, “You are a sore thumb,” “Sticking out by yourself” (231). Mona, then, concurs by stating, “I’m never at home.”⁷³ This dialogue nicely articulates the novel’s preoccupation with how the pursuit of *bildung* butts up against an existing racial and ethnic order in the United States. It also recalls an early scene in the novel when the actual Sherman draws a picture to illustrate that US racial and ethnic order. At that time, the actual Sherman asserts that the “Chinese lost in depart-o-ment-o store,” aptly describing Mona’s estrangement from the available social categories of recognition.⁷⁴ Mona now no longer expresses any confidence that she can find a “home” in the United States by “switching.” Her conversion to Judaism and her romance with Seth have shown that her belief that “American means being whatever you want” is far from true.⁷⁵ She is never fully recognized as Jewish. More significantly, white ethnicity as a “model minority” for Mona has proven to be inadequate to her *bildung*. Indeed, Mona herself acknowledges that it and the other racial and ethnic identities have not allowed her to be “at home” in the world.⁷⁶

However, unlike the actual Sherman, Seth/Sherman does not offer ethnic nationalism as a solution to Mona’s distress: “Japanese know how to go.”⁷⁷ In place of that option, he offers a telling reflection on social boundaries, kinship, and normative expectations and conduct in both American and Japanese culture. He explains that American culture elevates civic duty to such an extent that it blurs social distinctions between private, familial, and civic to the point of incomprehension. On the other hand, Japanese culture moves in the opposite direction, where “everything is circles.”⁷⁸ According to Seth/Sherman, these circles of concern determine the nature of one’s relationship to others, including the level of one’s intimacy, one’s conduct, and one’s indifference. Their scope increases in predictable increments, from the family to work to school to towns.

Yet, when Mona and Seth/Sherman reflect on what happens to others outside of the circle of the nation, the significance takes a surprising shift. He explains:

And what about the circle beyond the town, and beyond the country? Beyond the town, and beyond the country, there is no circle. There is outer space. Nothing to be concerned about—nothing with which anyone has a relationship. Mona and Sherman agree: In outer space there are no rules.⁷⁹

In this line of thinking, the nation establishes the widest reach of concern. Beyond it, others become meaningless. Yet the closing sentiment of this claim takes an ironic turn. Outside the nation, one has no relationship with others, but, at the same time, one is not bound by the normative dictates of national culture: “In outer space there are no rules.”⁸⁰

Seth/Sherman’s musings on Japanese and American culture should not be understood as offering anthropological truths. Like Seth’s adoption of sleeping on tatami mats and wearing Nehru jackets, these claims are Orientalist in their stark opposition between Japanese and American culture. This Orientalist binary forges a counter-discourse to American conceptions of race and ethnicity. Indeed, this is made quite explicit when Seth/Sherman explains that “he is indeed thinking about what it means to be American. He’s thinking about that by thinking about what it means to be Japanese.”⁸¹ Japan is not a point of identification but a position outside of the United States, one that offers critical distance to break out of and observe the normative strictures of race and ethnicity in the United States. Rather than think that supposedly Japanese culture adheres to strict social distinctions in contrast to the high-minded civic ideals of American culture, Seth’s/Sherman’s explanation of “circles” highlights how discourses of US civic culture obscure how US society is equally riven with social distinctions that are defined by lines of race and ethnicity. Surely, Mona’s own experiences with the Ingleses and the fiasco surrounding Camp Gugelstein palpably demonstrate how social distinctions operate in US society. More significantly, this Orientalist language of circles reframes Mona’s estrangement into a critical perspective on race and ethnicity based on an imagined cosmopolitan perspective. Rather than bemoan how Mona cannot find a place within the predominant US language of race and ethnicity (e.g., she is “never at home”), she can find her place in “outer space” where “there are no rules”⁸²—which is to say, find *bildung* outside of the social horizon of US national culture.

Mona’s and Seth’s reunion is different from their initial relationship within the symbolic logic of the novel’s marriage plot. If, in the beginning, the

Jewishness offered by Seth was a form of “white ethnicity” that proved to be an inadequate model minority for Mona’s *bildung*, then Seth’s later Orientalism provided an imaginary cosmopolitanism that reoriented Mona’s *bildung* away from needing model minorities in the first place by abjuring the nation as its proper social horizon. Such a cosmopolitan perspective reenvisioned Mona’s estrangement from the prevailing US categories of race and ethnicity, moving from a sign of national alienation to a critical position that can demystify US mythologies of democracy.

EXILE IN THIS HELEN WHICH IS NOT ONE

As symbolically satisfying as Mona’s and Seth’s reunion may be, it is not the end of the novel. It does, however, mark a kind of end to Mona’s *bildung*. By this, I am referring to the novel’s curious inclusion of an epilogue. Its presence complicates the straightforward reading of Mona’s *bildung* as allegory of Asian American subjectivity that I have been developing. Absent its presence, the novel’s conclusion, with Mona and Helen’s relationship sundered, makes perfect allegorical sense as the necessary Oedipal resolution for the emergence of an Asian American subject.

But, of course, the novel does have an epilogue, an especially significant one at that. Criticism, however, has varied as to how seriously or ironically readers are supposed to take to its melodramatic reunion between Mona and Helen. In the former camp, Susan Stanford Friedman reads the epilogue as the affirmation of a cultural politics of hybridity: “The mother-daughter plot overwhelms the marriage plot as Mona and Helen embrace with a clapping baby *lo* at their side. As a product of cultural and biological mixing, *lo* signifies the new American, the future.”⁸³ In the latter, ironic camp, Wendy Lee reads it as a deconstructive critique of the politics of genre.⁸⁴

The novel thus involves a double sense of closure by resolving both a marriage plot and an intergenerational, immigrant family plot. This sense of two endings not only has implications for the novel’s affective and temporal politics but also suggests a sideways expansion of time that extends the drag and dilation of the novel into and against the linear movement associated with the marriage plot and the intergenerational conflict plot.⁸⁵

In other words, by multiplying generic closures, the epilogue further unsettles rather than secures the generic assumption of linear progress. Lee is most certainly correct about the doubling of narrative closure, which expands time and pulls against the movement toward national futurity.

Yet I would suggest that this doubling of closure does not solely drag on linear time. It also multiplies narrative possibilities, rendering time out of joint with itself, or, in terms of Boes, marks an asynchronicity within the “national form” of the bildungsroman. In this regard, the double closure—both in terms of story proper and the epilogue and its fulfillment (or not) of both the marriage plot and mother-daughter romance—ultimately suggests that national futurity is haunted—not by the past, but by other possible futures and other “identity claim[s].”⁸⁶

Helen figures that doubling, at once embodying a national closure to Mona’s *bildung* and, at the same time, suggesting an exilic alternative to it. In the former, Helen recasts the mother-daughter romance into a drama of recognition between nationally bound, ethnically hybrid identities.⁸⁷ Though the novel consistently positions Mona and Helen as representative of Americanness and Chineseness, respectively, the content of these identities turns out to be quite hybrid, which grants a formal similarity that can serve as the symbolic foundation of their reunion. Mona’s case, at this point, is plainly obvious. Helen, on the other hand, is more complicated since she consistently claims a pure Chinese ethnicity. But the novel repeatedly undercuts the presumption of a stable and uncomplicated ethnic identity. As the narrator points out, Helen “once admitted that China was such a long time ago, a lot of things she can hardly remember,” and so she often “fudges” on specifics.⁸⁸ This is illustrated when Helen fights with Mona about the authenticity of tomatoes in Chinese cuisine, which leads her to proclaim assertively to Mona: “I’m telling you, tomatoes *invented* in China.”⁸⁹

More significant than the inauthenticity of Helen’s claim to a stable Chineseness is the way in which Chinese ethnicity for Helen is not pure. Indeed, during an early argument between Helen and Callie about imperialism and culture, Helen nonchalantly explains, “Oh, well, we are still Buddhist after we are baptized. We are Buddhist, and Taoist, and Catholic. We do however we want.”⁹⁰ Unlike Callie’s anti-imperialist Asian American identity that desires authentic Chinese roots, Helen proclaims no such concern, but instead asserts a hybridized cultural/religious identity. Helen’s proclamations mirror explicitly Mona’s own conversion as “a genuine Catholic Chinese Jew.”⁹¹ Thus, in a mother-daughter romance, Helen’s Chinese ethnicity as a cultural hybrid formation itself finds kinship and national mutuality in Mona’s construction of an Asian American one.

Yet, Helen’s symbolic stability is haunted by another identity claim that exceeds the national hold—both American and Chinese. The novel intimates this

other identity claim in a telling, reflective moment in the epilogue when Mona acknowledges regret over the familial cost that her relationship with Seth has entailed: “Mona wishes that she could open a door and discover, not Sherman turned into Seth, but—to her utter stupefaction and relief—Sherman turned into a woman.”⁹² This woman, as Crystal Parikh notes, refers to Helen, but not the one that Mona thought she knew.⁹³ As the passage makes clear, the Helen that Mona desires (indeed marries) is a Helen that comes from that amalgam Seth/Sherman. The passage thus clues us to a similar recursive narrative logic found in Seth/Sherman but now moving onto the symbolic construction of Helen. In other words, if Seth/Sherman figures an “inauthentic inauthentic Jew” as a cosmopolitan vision beyond the nation, then what does the amalgam figure of Helen/Seth/Sherman signify?

It is, of course, a diasporic, hybrid vision. However, it is more specific than the terms indicate as abstract concepts. In the same way that the construction of Seth/Sherman’s cosmopolitan vision occurs through Orientalism, Helen/Seth/Sherman’s diasporic, hybrid vision, I suggest, forms through the complicated and conflicted Jewish intellectual traditions on exile, Zionism, and anti-Zionism. As Shaul Magid explains, “From Zionism’s earliest ideological architects, in the late nineteenth century, to its contemporary advocates in the early twenty-first century, this perception of Jewish exile as something degraded and illegitimate has persisted.”⁹⁴ Ironically, this view of exile as a degraded state of Jewish life is also shared by Jewish American anti-Zionist organizations. Zionist thinkers and organizations locate the end of exile through Jewish sovereignty with the creation of the state of Israel; anti-Zionist organizations find the end of exile in American democracy’s protection of Jews as both citizens and members of a religious community in the diaspora.⁹⁵ Thus, both Zionists and anti-Zionists seek the end of exile through a commitment to the nation-state, whether Israeli or American.

Importantly, however, Magid surfaces an alternative Jewish intellectual tradition from both of these Zionist and anti-Zionist visions, one that finds exile necessary as an “operative category of Jewish existence.”⁹⁶ These thinkers range from religious, to secular, to religious and secular traditions, but, as Magid points out, they all “offered non-assimilatory, positive visions of the diaspora, and articulated a vision of exile founded not on divine punishment but, rather, as a constitutive aspect of the Jewish covenant.”⁹⁷ For Magid, these thinkers form an alternative Jewish intellectual tradition of exile that contest “the idea that the Jewish people can, and should, overcome exile through a nationalist state-based project.”⁹⁸

These Jewish intellectual traditions and debates on exile ground and give social and political substance to the diasporic, hybrid vision of Asian American

ethnicity embodied in the figure of Sherman/Seth/Helen. More precisely, they outline the political problematic that a diasporic, hybrid vision of Asian American ethnicity faces: the geopolitical dilemma and persistent allure of nationalist state-based projects, whether Asian nationals (figured in the actual Sherman Matsumoto) or American (figured in the white ethnicity of Seth). At the same time, by providing a “non-assimilatory, positive vision of the diaspora,” Magid’s alternative Jewish intellectual tradition offer a concrete intellectual line of flight out of the impasse of this political problematic.

Indeed, this Jewish problematic of exile is present in the very beginning of the novel, when the narrator states, “More distantly perceived is that the Jews have become The Jews, on account of the Six Day War, much less that they, the Changs, are The New Jews.”⁹⁹ Here, the Six Day War marks or reaffirms the “end of exile” as it redefines American Jewish identity from an assimilationist to a non-assimilationist one as either “The Jews” as ethnic minorities in the United States or “The Jews” as nationals of the state of Israel. Indeed, the same “end of exile” positions are dramatized during a debate on Israel and the Law of Return between Barbara and Alfred and his friends.¹⁰⁰ The novel’s references to Israel do more than create historical verisimilitude in its world building; they articulate Mona’s “blushing dawn of [Asian American] ethnic awareness”¹⁰¹ to the dilemmas of a geopolitical order of competing state-based projects—US and otherwise. However, while this dilemma is “distantly perceived” in the beginning, by the epilogue, it gains greater clarity and takes on growing symbolic importance as the political grounds of Sherman/Seth/Helen as a figure of a diasporic, hybrid vision and thus Asian American subjectivity.

MONA’S MINORITY COSMOPOLITANISM

In concluding, I would like to return to the initial prompting of this essay—the problem of whiteness and ethnicized Asian American identity. As we have seen, *Mona*’s narrative gambit has been to tackle this problem directly; it refutes the fatalism that consigns such identification as hopelessly complicit with white hegemony. By way of Asian Americans’ identification as the “New Jews,” the novel’s *bildung* plot accelerates that identification beyond its limits within a nationalist order of race and ethnicity (neither American nor Asian nationals), and lands upon a denationalized Asian American subjectivity.

Yet we should be wary of reading this conclusion as automatically politically palliative. No critic of Asian American studies is more skeptical about diaspora’s politically salutary potential than Sau-Ling Wong, in her essay, “Denationalization

Reconsidered."¹⁰² Published just a year earlier than *Mona*, the essay warns of the political dangers of an uncritical celebration of denationalization in not just Asian American studies but also Asian American cultural politics. Such carelessness engendered a developmentalist master narrative that positions a minoritarian Asian American subjectivity to be a parochial precursor to a more sophisticated, cosmopolitan Asian American subjectivity. In a way, *Mona* seems to fall straight into the developmental trap of which Wong warns. By juxtaposing the narrative arcs of *Mona* and *Callie*, the novel's bildungsroman form lends itself easily to a developmental reading that uncritically affirms a cosmopolitan Asian American subjectivity against a minoritarian one.¹⁰³

However, as I have shown, the developmental trajectory is pervaded by other identity claims, not so much an "indigenizing mode,"¹⁰⁴ but more what Susan Koshy calls a "minority cosmopolitanism,"¹⁰⁵ which she defines as "translocal affiliations that are grounded in the experience of minority subjects and are marked by a critical awareness of the constraints of primary attachments . . . and by an ethical or imaginative receptivity, orientation, or aspiration to an interconnected or shared world."¹⁰⁶ The shifts in *Mona's* objects of desire index that imaginative "aspiration to [a] . . . shared world" born out of the "constraints of primary attachments" and founded on the "fateful triangle" of race, ethnicity, and nation.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the amalgamated form of *Mona's* objects of desire (Sherman/Seth/Helen) figure the way *Mona's* minority cosmopolitanism "is constituted through a paradoxical relation to cross-cultural contact [between Jewish American and Chinese American], registering the disruptions and asymmetries of [their] intercultural encounter while sustaining an openness to its transformative [Asian American] possibilities."¹⁰⁸ Put differently, an Asian American cosmopolitanism is haunted by other "minority cosmopolitanisms" founded on a "negative dialectic" of Asian Americans as the "New Jews."¹⁰⁹

This negative dialectic is perhaps more relevant now than ever. In reaction to the ongoing student protests of genocide in Gaza, we have witnessed the bipartisan weaponization of anti-Semitism on a scale never seen in my lifetime. Jewish people, especially Jewish students, have been both a central group on the frontlines of these protests and on the receiving end of accusations of anti-Semitism. And yet, through organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now Movement, these students organize as Jews, drawing upon a deep well of Jewish knowledge and tradition of exile to both contest the bad-faith calls of anti-Semitism and generate interracial and transnational networks of solidarity and political action.

To think of these activities and organizing as the reference points for understanding Asian Americans as the "New Jews" provides another political model to address the problematic way that the US state has directed the problem

of anti-Asian violence and racism in the wake of COVID-19 toward increasing policing and carceral capacities and undermining abolitionist projects. Those movements forcefully illustrate that Asian Americans as Asian Americans do not have to tithe their tragedy and pain to the furtherance of ever increasing racialized state violence. This possibility is far from guaranteed; in fact, it can go quite the other way.¹⁰ And yet, like the political problem of whiteness and ethnicized Asian American identity, a radically different articulation of Asian Americans as the “New Jews” shows us that alternative political pathways are not permanently foreclosed.

NOTES

1. Susan Koshy, “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (2001): 153–94.
2. Colleen Lye, “The Afro-Asian Analogy,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1732–36.
3. Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1996).
4. For such historiography, see Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 298–330; Daryl Joji Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
5. Lisa Lowe, “The International within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique,” *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998): 29. For a reading that is similarly attuned to *Mona*’s diasporic and cosmopolitan fissures, see Leah A. Milne, “Choosing Displacement: Scalar Variety, Fictional Memoirs, and the American Dream in *Mona in the Promised Land* and *American Son*,” *South Atlantic Review* 80, nos. 1–2 (2015): 42–61. While we both arrive at similar conclusions of the novel, Milne focuses on the trope of conversion/passing and the reductive biographical reading practices of ethnic literature, while I attend to the novel’s form.
6. Wendy Allison Lee, “Untimely Developments: Genre Drag and Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*,” *MELUS* 44, no. 3 (2019): 42.
7. Gish Jen, *Typical American* (New York: Vintage, 2008).
8. For readings on hybridity and liminality in *Mona*, see Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); B. S. Gonzales, “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 (2001): 225–42.; David Brauner, “‘Nes and Yo’: Race, Ethnicity and Hybridity in Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*, Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* and Richard Powers,” in *Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 107–57.

9. For such readings, see Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *Modeling Citizenship: Jewish and Asian American Writing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); and Crystal Parikh, *An Ethics of Betrayal: The Politics of Otherness in Emergent U.S. Literatures and Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).
10. Lee, "Untimely Developments," 42.
11. For a similar transnational reading, see Milne, "Choosing Displacement."
12. Criticism on the bildungsroman is voluminous. A brief sampling of the standard scholarly literature would include Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Marianne Hirsch, "From Great Expectations to Lost Illusions: The Novel of Formation as Genre," *Genre* 12, no. 3 (1979): 293–311; Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, Elizabeth Langland, eds. *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983); Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism," In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987); Jeffrey L. Sammons, "The Bildungsroman for Nonspecialists: An Attempt at a Clarification," in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* ed. James Hardin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 26–45. Both Milne, "Choosing Displacement," and Lee, "Untimely Developments," acknowledge the importance of the bildungsroman form in *Mona*. However, where they read the novel to be undercutting the ideological subtext of the bildungsroman, I see the novel's construction of the world and its relation to *Mona* as the ethnic protagonist to be, like all other bildungsromans, simultaneously affirming and exceeding the "national form."
13. Lowe, "The International within the National," 98.
14. Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
15. Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 12.
16. See Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 15–21.
17. Tobias Boes, *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).
18. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 28.
19. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 34.
20. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 34.
21. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 2–3.
22. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 2.
23. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso Press), 24.
24. Long Le-Khac, *Giving Form to an Asian and Latinx America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020) 31.

25. Le-Khac, *Giving Form to an Asian and Latinx America*, 32.
26. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 3.
27. For discussion of the Asian American female bildungsroman, see Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 15–21 and 141–68.
28. The term “racist love” was originally coined by Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan in their article by the same name. Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, “Racist Love,” in *Seeing through Shuck*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 65–79. For a further elaboration, see Leslie Bow, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).
29. Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 411.
30. Lee, “Untimely Developments,” 41.
31. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 8.
32. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 3.
33. Much criticism on the novel has examined its rendering of the literary, social, and racial-discursive connection between Jewish and Asian American identity. For such readings, see Andrew Furman, “Immigrant Dreams and Civic Promises: (Con-)Testing Identity in Early Jewish American Literature and Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*,” *MELUS* 25, no. 1 (2000): 209–26; Michele Byers, “Material Bodies and Performative Identities: Mona, Neil, and the Promised Land,” *Philip Roth Studies* 2, no. 2 (2006): 102–20; Caroline Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Schlund-Vials, *Modeling Citizenship*. I build upon such work but push the reading of the novel’s connection between Jewish and Asian American identity as narrative means to work through the problem of (ethnic) whiteness in Asian American cultural politics.
34. Lee, “Untimely Developments,” 43.
35. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 6.
36. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 6.
37. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 10.
38. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 14. Mona’s early assimilationist understanding of race and American identity and belonging as determined by “learning rules and speeches” can be fruitfully understood through Fickle’s incisive theorization of game theory and racialization, particularly her account of ludic Orientalism. For more, see Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
39. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 14.
40. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 49.
41. Schlund-Vials, *Modeling Citizenship*, xiii.
42. Schlund-Vials, *Modeling Citizenship*, 89.

43. For an account of conversion as trope in ethnic American literature, see Madeline Ruth Walker, *The Trouble with Sauling Around: Conversion in Ethnic American Autobiography, 1965–2002* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011).
44. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 112.
45. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 36.
46. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 52–53 (italics in original).
47. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 53.
48. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 53.
49. Indeed, the novel explicitly dramatizes this problematic of race and political recognition during a heated conversation between Barbara and Mona, on the one side, and Alfred and his friends and co-workers, on the other. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 134–38.
50. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 223.
51. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 56.
52. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 170.
53. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 170.
54. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 177 (italics in original).
55. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 185.
56. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 186.
57. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 184.
58. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 124.
59. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 140.
60. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 124.
61. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 124.
62. For a reading that finds the events of Camp Gugelstein as the center of the novel, see Rody, *Interethnic Imagination*.
63. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 207.
64. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 194 (italics in the original).
65. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 186.
66. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 223.
67. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 112.
68. This argument intersects with Erika T. Lin's analysis of the phone; see Erika T. Lin, "Mona on the Phone: The Performative Body and Racial Identity in *Mona in the Promised Land*," *MELUS* 28, no. 2 (2003): 47–57. However, it is more than just deconstructing the racialized body; it reconstructs a different meaning of Jewishness via the Orientalist imaginary.
69. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 278.

70. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 278–79.
71. Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv.
72. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 231.
73. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 231.
74. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 14.
75. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 49.
76. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 231.
77. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 14.
78. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 235.
79. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 236.
80. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 236.
81. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 235.
82. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 236.
83. Friedman, *Mappings*, 186.
84. Others have found the ending ironic; see Milne, “Choosing Displacement”; and Kai Hang Cheang, “Family Discord/ance: Tone and Counter-Mood in Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 53, no. 2 (2018): 217–38.
85. Lee, “Untimely Developments,” 54.
86. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 3. For other readings of haunting in the novel, see Parikh, *An Ethics of Betrayal*.
87. For elaboration of the mother-daughter romance in Asian American bildungsromans, see Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, specifically Chapter 4 “That Was China, That Was Their”: Ethnicity and Agency in *The Joy Luck Club*, 141–168.
88. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 7.
89. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 7 (italics in original).
90. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 42.
91. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 44.
92. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 298.
93. Though the novel implies that the “woman” is a reference to Helen, Crystal Parikh reads this “other woman,” and by extension Helen, as a Levinasian figure of eschatological desire for the infinite alterity of the Other. Parikh, *An Ethics of Betrayal*, 48.
94. Shaul Magid, *The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance* (New York: Ayin Press, 2023). Magid notes that the Zionist-Israeli view of the diasporic Jew as a pale and sickly figure ironically mirrors the anti-Semitic tropes of the time. Magid, *Necessity of Exile*, 263.
95. Magid, *Necessity of Exile*, 264–65.

96. Magid, *Necessity of Exile*, 264.
97. Magid, *Necessity of Exile*, 296.
98. Magid, *Necessity of Exile*, 297
99. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 3. It is also notable that the same passage references the assassination of Martin Luther King. Both the Six Day War and the MLK's assassination are commonly understood as major historical events that catalyze cultural projects for re-defining race and ethnicity into non-assimilationist identities—Jewish American and African American, respectively. Thus, the passage's invocation of them comes to figure different "model minority" pathways for the formation of a non-assimilationist Asian American identity. Callie's story pursues the commonly thought of route through radical Black politics.
100. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 134–35.
101. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 3.
102. Sau-Ling C. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia Journal* 21, nos. 1–2 (1995): 1–28.
103. Callie's narrative trajectory aligns explicitly with the forging of Asian American subjectivity through the encounter of Black radicalism. Indeed, in the epilogue, she announces her pride in being Asian American (Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 301). She goes off to college and is exposed to Black radical thought via her Black roommate Naomi, and, in turn, gains an anti-imperialist and antiracist politics. Out of this encounter, she develops an ethos of ethnic authenticity by changing her name to Kailan, her "Chinese" name, which parallels Mona's "Changowitz." At the same time, in Callie's construction of Asian American identity, the book shows political tension and rivalry between Asian Americans and African Americans when a book publisher finds no interest in Callie's contribution in the book project that she co-developed with Naomi. Callie despondently states, "We are not book material" and that "blacks are the majority minority" (Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 270).
104. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered," 17.
105. Susan Koshy, "Minority Cosmopolitanism," *PMLA*, 126, no. 3 (2011): 592–609. There has been substantial Asian American studies scholarship that has pushed back on Wong's criticism, finding diasporic politics that not only avoid the pitfalls of such developmentalist thinking but also further the political aims of an "indigenizing mode." For a brief sampling, see Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa, *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press); Gaytri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Denise Cruz, *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
106. Koshy, "Minority Cosmopolitanism," 594.

107. The phrase “fateful triangle” comes from Stuart Hall’s reflections on the delimiting articulations across race, ethnicity, and nation. See Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
108. Koshy, “Minority Cosmopolitanism,” 594.
109. Here, I am explicitly invoking Nikhil Pal Singh’s suggestive phrase “negative dialectic of race.” For more, see Nikhil Pal Singh’s *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
110. Dylan Rodriguez, “How the Stop Asian Hate Movement Became Entwined with Zionism, Policing, and Counterinsurgency,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, April 11, 2024. <https://www.criticaletnicstudiesjournal.org/blog/2024/4/10/how-the-stop-asian-hate-movement-became-entwined-with-zionism-policing-and-counterinsurgency>.