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Skew(er)ing Identities:
The Assertion of Self in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* and Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*

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Dedicated to

João

AGRADECIMENTOS

Thank you,

To my daughter, Kiara, who lovingly shared in my anguish without ever allowing me to wallow in self-pity and doubt;

To my son, Ricardo from whom I have had to ‘steal’ precious hours of together-time, but whose loving support has been invaluable;

To my husband, João, who has always believed in me …

Many thanks, too, to Professor Doctor Teresa Botelho for her steadfast guidance and commitment

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Identidade, auto-asserção, determinismo hegemónico

RESUMO: Através duma leitura pormenorizada dos textos em epígrafe e à luz da história norte-americana de opressão racial, a minha investigação destina-se a determinar em que medida Gish Jen e Colson Whitehead se sentem prezos do 'nós' das suas identidades étnicas, ou se por ventura, as suas obras são posições auto assertivos contra o determinismo hegemónico percepcionado de prescrição do papel artístico. Fulcral a este trabalho é uma investigação do conceito de identidade e da auto multiplicidade.

KEYWORDS: Identity, self-assertion, hegemonic determinism

ABSTRACT: Through a close reading of the above texts and in the light of America's history of racial oppression, my research is aimed at establishing to what extent Gish Jen and Colson Whitehead feel bound to the 'we' of their ethnic identities; or whether, perhaps, their works are self-assertive stances against the perceived hegemonic determinism of artistic role prescription. Elemental to this work is an investigation of the concept of identity and the multiplicity of self.

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Introduction

In approaching this work, my primary focus on self assertion stems from my interest in identity and the composite factors which inform that identity. Whilst many and varied are the definitions of identity, it is commonly understood to be a term which relates to the self and the individual's awareness of self as independent and unique (Louw et. al., 1998; Moshman, 2005). Although identity development is a life-long process, the profound changes which occur physically, cognitively, socially and morally throughout the teenage years provide "the greatest degree of identity development" (Louw et. al.,1998:425). These changes are often seen as a threat to the adolescent whose childhood self is, in psychological terms, essentially a foreclosed identity[1] in that his/her identity construct is generally based on the external expectations of parents or other significant others. Nonetheless, as the child matures, s/he becomes aware of his/her self as independent and the accompanying introspection and experimentation with identities that takes place towards a greater understanding of that self as a distinct and unique being, is best captured in the bildungsroman. Coupled together with my interest in literature, language and the written word, I have thus chosen to investigate the theme of identity within this literary genre.

Whilst the bildungsroman provides fertile terrain for a study of this nature, the vast landscape of converging racial and ethnic identities and the subsequent struggles faced by individuals negotiating this conflux is further found in the ongoing history of America and her peoples and offers additional scope for my work on identity. For it is within this milieu of elemental difference, and in contrast to the normative 'white' standard of American identity, that we find individuals of ethnic backgrounds

[1] James Marcia (1980) distinguished between four identity statuses, namely **identity foreclosure**, **identity diffusion**, **identity moratorium** and ultimately **identity achievement**. Identity foreclosure is typical in young children but many adolescents' identity development might be arrested at this stage of development in which they never question true personal values but commit to others' expectations for them. Identity diffusion occurs when the individual does not commit to anything and does not attempt to develop any commitment. Identity moratorium is typical in adolescence and is a stage of active investigation of alternatives. Identity achievement is reached when the individual has developed a relatively strong commitment to a set of beliefs or value system.

struggling with the additional aspect of a racial/ethnic[2] identity in comprehending the self.

I have thus chosen to focus my work on novels written by two American writers who might be perceived as carrying the burden of representation, and in using the language of social didactics might be labelled as 'representative'[3] of ethnic minorities in the larger (white) field of American society and literature. *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Jen, and *Sag Harbor* by Colson Whitehead are written by a Chinese-American and an African-American respectively. Essentially a bildungsroman, *Mona in the Promised Land* takes the protagonist through to adulthood revealing the outcome of years of introspection and self appraisal. Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* does not demarcate the protagonist's entire journey through adolescence, nonetheless, his first person narrator provides the adult insight necessary for the developmental associations of a 'coming of age' story.

Erik Erikson (1968) was the first to provide a framework for the formation of identity through the construct of crises in which individuals are lead to define who they are, what is important to them, and what direction they want their lives to take. This is typically accompanied by a temporary phase of exploration and experimentation in which a personal and social identity is developed and this aspect of identity status work will be addressed in my work where I analyse this experimental phase of the characters' development. Western society is understanding of the adolescent in this psychosocial stage of 'confusion' on his/her journey of self discovery and makes allowances for those working at developing a sense of self and experiencing, what Erikson refers to as, the "psychosocial moratorium". This is often not understood in more traditional cultures, and the trans-cultural scope of these works is elemental in my investigation. Erikson's ultimate view was that adolescent

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[2] In referring to ethnicity, I use Schermerhorn's definition of an ethnic group which he defines as "a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood" (Schermerhorn apud Sollors, 1996:xii). I, however, use these words interchangeably, there being no significant distinction to be made in their definition, for the purpose of this work.

[3] Referring to works and their artists as 'representative' of any given ethnic group is contentious. Yet it is a trend which appears difficult to discard and against which artists continue to rebel. For this reason it is a word I use both cautiously yet deliberately as I will be exploring the arguments both for and against 'representation', especially with regards to agency and personal identity.

exploration of alternatives would ideally result in the individual's realisation of his/her own uniqueness, an experience of continuity across time, a commitment to ideals and an understanding of his/her role in society.

Yet the changes occurring within the individual and their questioning, exploring and experimenting do not happen in a vacuum. Interpersonal relationships such as with parents and peers, as well as the wider social context play an important role in identity development. In societies where a dominant culture sets the standard for all aspects of social interaction, the identity of an individual from a contrasting ethnic background will necessarily be informed by this disparity. Phinney and Rosenthal (1992) claim that the process of identity formation for adolescents from ethnic minority groups,

> has an added dimension due to their exposure to alternative sources of identification, their own ethnic group and the mainstream of dominant culture. Growing up in a society where the mainstream culture may differ significantly in values and beliefs from their culture of origin, these youth face the task of achieving a satisfactory and satisfying integration of ethnic identity into a self-identity. The ease, or difficulty, with which this task is accomplished depends on a number of factors ... In particular, minority adolescents may have to confront issues of prejudice and discrimination, structural barriers which limit their aspirations and hinder their achievements, and other features of the mainstream society that differentiate them from the majority. If minority youth are to construct a strong, positive, and stable self-identity, then they must be able to incorporate into that sense of self a positively valued ethnic identity (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992:145).

Whilst many have built on Erikson's theory of identity formation, not the least being James Marcia[4], and efforts in the fields of psychology and philosophy continue in an attempt to redefine the meaning of identity, for the purposes of this work I join the ranks of those who propose that identity is an explicit theory of self, because it lies beyond the scope of mere behavioural elucidation, but is a theory known to the individual (Moshman, 2005).

> This is not to deny that a person's identity is deeply interconnected with a variety of implicit assumptions, unconscious dispositions, and socially imposed

[4] See footnote on p.1

> roles. These assumptions, dispositions, and roles may even be considered part of the person's identity, in a broad, Eriksonian sense of that term. Unless there is an explicit theory of self at the core, however, such assumptions, dispositions, and roles do not constitute an identity (ibid, p.87).

Thus said, understanding one's identity as "an explicit theory of oneself *as a person* (original emphasis) is to say it is a theory that construes the self as a *rational agent* (ibidem), with 'agency' providing the action and rationality the 'reason' for autonomy, and true assertion of self. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1969) phrases it thus:

> To be a rational agent is to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to e somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them. This is a least part of what I mean when I say that I am rational, and that it is my reason that distinguishes me as a human being from the rest of the world. I wish, above all, to be conscious or myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes (Berlin, 1969:131).

Rational agency is particularly important to this study in which, through a close reading of the two novels, I will try to show how identity is determined "by a complex interaction of inner and outer realities" (Moshman, 2005:102) and in which I hope thus to assess whether forces from without, be they prescriptive or interpretative, can be perceived to acknowledge individual agency or whether, in fact, they can be construed as determinative hegemony.

Significant to identity development and the individual's formation of "an explicit theory of oneself as a person" (Moshman, 2005: 85) are the various groups to which the individual is in some way affiliated and which provide the collective or social identities to which individuals belong. Of great importance to the development of Jen and Whitehead's protagonists are not only their ethnic/cultural identities, to which I have already intimated, but their identities as family members and members of their social and greater societal network. Membership of these collectives is often a source of discomfort and unease as the characters struggle with the inner and outer circles of

belonging; otherness and even the pretence of otherness, being issues explored by the authors. To this end, a closer look at the conceptual notion of collective identity will hopefully shed some light on the extent to which group identity either superimposes or is subservient to individual identity in the shaping of the characters and the views of their respective authors. For whilst “fiction does not mirror reality, it offers a discourse by which we construct our versions of reality” (Hutcheon, 1988:40). By addressing issues common to the bildungsroman genre Jen and Whitehead are possibly joining the ranks of authors who have, to a greater or lesser degree, exposed some sort of auto-biographical mindset in tackling issues of identity. They have chosen to tell their stories by focusing on protagonists who mirror their respective selves in both ethnicity and gender. Perhaps this is merely to aid verisimilitude by way of tapping into a known intimate world of experience, or perhaps it is indeed, the portraiture of self veiled within the pages of fiction. Nonetheless, “the author’s choice of genre must have some bearing on how s/he conceptualizes ethnicity” (Japtok, 2005:21), and through an exposé of the text in conjunction with comments by the authors themselves, I hope to perhaps uncover authorial self assertion.

It is important, however, to recognise literature’s space within the realm of art and to be aware that the flawed nature of representation, however faithful to reality it strives to be will, by virtue of its perceived position within an identity collective, plays a role on the demands often placed on artists who are seen as representative of that collective. Past claims on black artists have stipulated that “all art is propaganda and ever must be” (Du Bois apud Sollors, 1996:103). Whilst the Black Arts Movement in America of the 1960s sought to give voice to Black artists and indeed, is widely acknowledged to having been instrumental in paving the way for artists of other ethnicities, the role assigned artists remains controversial. In contrast to Du Bois’s propagandist stance (and there are others), Chappelle’s argument has, perhaps, a more modern ring. “Only through complete artistic freedom can any artist discover and present his or her own truth” (Chappelle apud Toure 2011:58). In “Skew(er)ing Identity: The Assertion of Self in Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* and Colson Whitehead’s *Sag Harbor”* I hope to reveal whether role assignment can be perceived as hegemonic determinism and whether through characterization Jen and Whitehead cater to or defy society’s prescriptive roles.

I have organised my work into two main chapters. The first chapter deals with the development of both the personal and the collective identity of the individual, and the private worlds of Jen and Whitehead's protagonists are dealt with in the first sub-chapter. I address three key motives for identity performance in the second section of this chapter and have divided this sub-chapter into a further three sub-divisions in which I discuss each of these performances.

Chapter II addresses the individual's right to assertion in a chapter entitled "Dibs: The Supremacy of Definition and Choice". Here I look at the ways in which the respective authors depict the importance of individual definition and personal choice in constructing an identity, and I tackle the issues which affect the individual's assertion of self. I begin this chapter by addressing the oft-times unwitting performance of those who find themselves acting to someone else's direction which is evident in both books and which I discuss in a sub-chapter entitled "Someone Else's Experiment". External prescriptive performances often lead to revolt, and I discuss rebellion in a second sub-chapter where we witness the characters seeking to loosen themselves from the stronghold of authority. In order to assert oneself it is necessary to commit to an ideal and I thus look at the differences between involvement and commitment in a third sub-chapter. Finally, the assertion of self is enacted through staking claim to an identity and I will look at the way the characters, if at all, achieve this end.

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Chapter I: Getting Flipped – Identity, Performance and Belonging

Jen's Mona and Whitehead's Benji, the protagonists of *Mona in the Promised Land* and *Sag Harbor* respectively, are in full adolescent swing, trying to deal with life's challenges as best they can, and getting flipped in the process. It is in Jen's opening chapter aptly entitled, "Mona Gets Flipped" that Mona finds herself "sprawling through the late afternoon, a flailing confusion of soft human parts such as had no idea where the ground was" (MPL, p.21). This sense of groundless existence or at best this perceived moving, changeable and unstable reality, provide the backdrop for both of these novels. For not only are Mona and Benji getting flipped by peers who are themselves looking for answers, but they are getting flipped by life's experiences. In a moment of lax freedom Whitehead's young adult first person narrator describes how he "found nothing more peaceful" (SH, p.64) than floating on his back in the sea:

> Letting my body go, as if I didn't have a body at all and there was no barrier between me and the sea, while waiting for one of my friends to flip me over or pull me under, because that's what friends do, but if I could get a few minutes alone out of the world I was happy" (ibidem).

Herein rests the symbolism of the volatility of their particular positions – mere novices attempting to navigate life's path yet finding that the road that stretches out before them happens to be the same road that "sooner or later skinned [them]" (ibid, p.1).

I.1 Private Worlds: Mona and Benji's Inner Realities and Emerging Individuality

Central to Mona and Benji's conception of how best to plot life's course, is their perception of self, and common to both characters is an awareness of their racialized bodies. As they try to "identify those potentials that correspond to the 'true self'" (Waterman apud Moshman, 1992:50) typical in adolescent identity work, their ethnic minority status forces them to confront issues of difference which might not be readily felt but which are nonetheless bestowed on them by the gaze of the other. This is evident in an incident in *Mona in the Promised Land* when Mona is welcomed as a newcomer to the Temple Youth Group by a newcomer herself, Eloise Ingle. The irony of the situation is that Mona is not a newcomer to the Jewish community and yet

Eloise singles her out feeling “less pressed to extend her welcome to anyone else in the class” (MPL, p.56). Seeing only her ethnicity, Eloise is oblivious to Mona’s newfound identity which leads us to question the elective nature of identity and the freedom to claim a new identity status, which I will address later, and what Sollors refers to as the “unmeltable” (Sollors, 2006:36) properties of ethnicity.

“The very emergence of the stress on ethnicity and the unmeltable ethnics was directly influenced by the black civil rights movement and strengthened by its radicalization in the 1960s ...” (ibidem), and by setting her novel in this era, Jen brings to life a period in US history when rising from the “discrediting of traditional Americanism” (Gleason, 1983) following the Vietnam War, America faced a racial crisis, and by extension an identity crisis, of her own. The ethnic revival that came about is that “which has had the most enduring effect on the usage of the term identity” (ibidem) and is necessarily relevant to these works under scrutiny. Yet such a focus is not without its problems.

In his study on the manifestation of ethnic traits in a multi-cultural society in *Beyond Ethnicity – Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), Sollors outlines the debate surrounding ethnicity as a concept. On the one hand it is seen as a natural process ‘descending’ or being passed down from generation to generation; and on the other hand it is seen as a definitive choice made by individuals or, in other words, an affirmation of ‘consent’. Consensual ethnicity and its achieved, self-determinant independence cuts to the very heart of American identity where the freedom to self expression or assertion is self-evident in the American Dream. Yet when faced with physical racial signifiers, the question remains whether “American means being whatever you want” (MPL, p.49).

Erika Lin in her work entitled “Mona on the phone: the performative body and racial identity in *Mona in the Promised Land*” (2003) claims that “Mona’s adolescent angst takes the form of anxiety about her body, but what distinguishes this anxiety is its intimate relationship to issues of race” (ibid, p.47). The extent to which Mona’s adolescent angst is manifest in bodily anxiety is obviously debatable. Nonetheless, it is fair to say, as I have already intimated and as will become further evident throughout this study, that her perception of difference most evident in her ethnic physiognomy largely dictates the perceptions of others, if not readily her own:

> Mona tries to imagine what it would be like to forget she's Chinese, which is easy and hard. It is easy because by her lonesome she in fact often does. Out in the world of other people, though Mona has people like Miss Feeble to keep the subject shiny (ibid, p.32).

Mona's ability to forget her racialized body is indicative of her assimilation of her wider culture. Yet Eloise and Miss Feeble's contributions imply that America has some way to go before accepting her own.

At the start of Jen's tale, Mona, her sister Callie and their Chinese immigrant[5] parents have recently moved to the suburbs from a less affluent neighbourhood of New York where the girls were regularly confronted with racial prejudice. Their parents, Helen and Ralph Chang, have been successful in their business endeavours and with their pancake house doing well and another in the pipeline, Scarshill, a fictitious suburb of upper middle class comfort and a place that offers schools with a "golden student-teacher ratio" (MPL, p.4), is where they have chosen to live. Yet in this world of manicured lawns and relative affluence Mona's life is far from typical, her cultural background jarring with that of American suburbia.

"If [Mona] could, she'd switch everything to be different" (ibid, p.23). As a member of the only Chinese-American family in her predominantly white neighbourhood she knows she's different and not only because of her obvious Asian appearance. Her friend Barbara is allowed the liberty of choosing what she wants to do with her own hard-earned cash, not to mention whether she wants to take up rock-climbing or any other sport perceived by her mother to be unsuitable for girls, whilst Mona has her mother spelling out in no uncertain terms that she did not "sign[] up ... for her children to become big-mouthed separate accounting units ..." (ibid, p.48). Markus and Kitayama (1991:224) have noted that,

> People in different cultures have strikingly different construals (sic) of the self, of others, and of [their] interdependence.... These construals can influence, and in many cases determine, the very nature of individual experience, including cognition, emotion, and motivation. Many Asian cultures have distinct

[5] Not made clear in this book, but explained in Jen's previous novel entitled *Typical American*, the prequel to *Mona in the Promised Land*, Mona's parents Ralph and Helen are not, in fact, immigrants to America but political refugees.

> conceptions of individuality that insist on the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other. The emphasis is on attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them. American culture neither assumes nor values such an overt connectedness among individuals. In contrast, individuals seek to maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique inner attributes.

Thus Mona's sense of self stems from this double consciousness – the convergence of her parents' culture with the wider American culture. She desperately wants to be able to "attend[] to the self" (ibidem) in her own unique way but recognises the incongruence of "the Chinese way versus everyone else's way" (MPL, p.48).

Such sentiments reveal the distance she feels from her parents' culture and a frustration with this dissimilitude. Unlike other immigrant families where the successful suppression of an ethnic identity is often plausible, even if potentially tragic[6], because of her evident physical difference, Mona does not share this recourse. Unable to claim a common identity with her peers, Mona initially accepts the "Chinese" label attributed her. She becomes an authority on all things Chinese which on the arrival of a new Japanese student to her school extends to the expertise of all things Oriental. Her friendship with Sherman Matsumoto offers a forum for an in-depth look into her ethnic identity and what it means to be an American. Mona's faith in the consensual nature of ethnicity and Sherman's stereotypical construct of an American "that looks like John Wayne" (ibid, p. 14) subtly introduces the reader to another of the concepts to be addressed in the book, that of American identity. "Is she American?" (ibidem), questions Sherman. Mona's quick response is "Sure I'm American. Everybody who's born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before. You could become American ... I *could* become Jewish, if I wanted to. I'd just have to switch, that's all" (ibidem). Yet the question remains, is Mona perceived to be American?

Despite her confidence in identity sanction and self assertion, she has been raised to understand her place in the family as hierarchically insignificant. "Helen is the

[6] "To appreciate the tragic predicament in which some of the sons [of] immigrants found themselves, it suffices to point out that the more intensely they despised their ethnic heritage the more conscious they were of their ethnic identity. The more ashamed they were of this past, and ever of their parents, the more they were aware of their ethnic background. For ... by suppressing ethnicity the sons also rebelled against parts of themselves" (Erikson H. Erikson apud Sollors, p.273).

mother, and Mona is the daughter which means that Helen knows what is a good idea and what isn't" (MPL:50) in every area of Mona's life from deciding how to spend her free time to choosing what coat to wear.

Family life in the Chang household is less than perfect. Her parents' relationship is strained on account of Ralph's mismanagement of the family business. Helen becomes involved in the running of the restaurant but remains obtuse, convinced of Ralph's ineptitude at taking care of her – "wasn't that what a husband was for? (ibid, p.46) Mona's mother had undergone "what amounted to a personality transformation" (ibidem), learning to be more assertive, but the rift or "icy split" (MPL, p. 47) that runs through their marriage is

> blue and wide and deep, and cold enough, Mona's sure, to freeze a child or two to death, though thankfully there are ways of skipping right over it. It's just a matter of watching where you put your feet, and keeping a certain spring to your step, and figuring a crack's a crack (ibidem).

And, most of the time, a spring in her step is what Mona achieves as she brings a humorously light-hearted approach to her experiences, despite the constant reminders of her fundamental relatedness"[7] – "You are Daughter" (ibid, p.45). The apparent deficiency of this label along with its demands – "Children are supposed to listen to parents" (ibid, p.49), clash with her growing sense of independent self.

Benji, in *Sag Harbor* is also confronted with a double consciousness which, on the face of it, stems from his minority group status in the larger white American society. Like Mona he lives in an affluent neighbourhood of New York and, which in like manner happens to be heavily Jewish. Although he is well integrated in his predominately white private school, he suffers humiliations which, whilst centring on his pubescent awkwardness as much as on racial awareness, draw him in to an early confrontation with difference, albeit benign. "I was used to being the only black kid in the room" (SH, p.7), he says. Yet noticing the innocuous looks in his direction as bearer of the only "yarmulke hovering on [an] Afro" (ibidem) at his friends' bar mitzvahs incites in him the need to want to "sort[] out bona-fide persecution from perceived persecution, the this-is-actually-happening from the mere paranoid manifestation"

[7] See Markus and Kitayama on my pp.9-10.

(ibid). It would, thus, seem that for Benji too, “comprehending the source of all [his] woes ... lay in the strange dualism into which [he] had been born” (Hansen, 1938).

Whilst Mona’s emerging sense of self comes from her diverging cultural path, Benji’s begins with a growing sense of himself as distinctive from his younger brother, Reggie, to whom he has always been tied through proximity in age. Although “it was nice to have a team” (SH, p.6) severing the ties of twin-hood has brought Benji a newfound autonomy through independence from his brother and “it was to that little corner of difference that [they] truly aspired” (ibid, p.5). However, in redefining his persona, Benji has learnt that following the “Just be yourself” (ibid, p.23) dictum, is not the most opportune way to stamp his mark on the world, recognising that by “just being myself ... I was just being avoided” (ibid, p.24). Later, in re-examining his youth, Benji’s adult self recognises that his “constant state of being” (ibid, p.227) in those days was equivalent to the “slight pressure” (ibidem) he experienced from his freshly tightened braces. His self-deprecating manner in seeing himself as “the person you made out with to make someone pity you” (ibid, p.250) and that his joining the line “made it the slow line” (ibidem), fuelled his metaphorical “fear of going off the map” (ibid, p.98). “I had the pox on the outside like everyone else, but inside too, where no one could see” (ibid, p.227). From where does Benji’s angst arise?

Like Mona, Benji’s family has been prescriptively influential in forming his ideas. He, too, understands his role in the family as secondary to the family as a unit, and he is offered no latitude to experiment with modern black iconology, which might give off the wrong impression about who they were. “Not that it ever would’ve occurred to me to get a gold chain” (ibid, p.87), but the consequences were a given – “My father would’ve kicked me out of the house ...” (ibidem).

The Cooper’s face to the world was modelled on the Cosby family, the 1980s sitcom which offered the world a close-up of how a ‘real’ successful black family operated. “We were the Cosby Family, good on paper. That was the lingo. Father a doctor, mother a lawyer. Three kids, prep-schooled, with clean fingernails and nice manners” (ibid, p.160). Yet the reality of family life was something more sinister. Yes they were a “made-for-TV family” (ibid, p.173), but sitting in front of the television set simply ensured “that they wouldn’t have to talk to one another” (ibidem).

Benji knew that what happened in the family was to stay in the family, taking great efforts to seal off familial strife by closing windows, literal and figurative, to the outside world. He "was wired not to let other people know [their] business. What happened in the house stayed in the house, caroming off the walls and furniture and us, until it was absorbed or forgotten" (ibid, p. 77). In contrast to the picture-perfect Cosby family, his family "knew itself as kicks in the shin and elbows in the stomach" (ibid, p.173). Indeed much of Benji's negative self-worth comes from the latent effects of his dysfunctional family. Not even the family meals offer he and his brother a chance to engage with their parents, "attention [being] a rare element in [their] household" (ibid, p.5-6), and Benji and Reggie are left to the administrations of the television set "while [their] parents ate in the living room" (ibid, p.104).

Benji's family take their annual holidays at the coastal town of Sag Harbor[8] under the premise that their parents, who work in the city during the week, will join them for the weekend. This seldom happens and when it does is fraught with innuendos of familial dissention. Benji's mother, herself a "Sag Harbor Baby" (ibid, p.244) having spent her childhood summers in Sag Harbor, is the driving force behind this ritual. Says Benji of his mother,

> Always this magic happened: as the summer went on, she got younger and younger. The sun tanned her skin to a strong, vital brown, and her thin crow's feet disappeared, ushering an impish twinkle in her eyes. ... Out there she was a different person. ... Sag Harbor worked on her in a way I'd never seen it do other people. There was a part of her that only existed out there (ibid, p.169).

However, in contrast to Mona's mother who had come to forge a new identity in the face of adversity, Benji's mother is portrayed as losing her sense of identity as her self esteem is slowly eroded away by her husband's obnoxious ways. "This was how my mother disappeared" (ibid, p.190), says Benji.

[8] The town of Sag Harbor, a port on Long Island, New York, was traditionally a whaling village but shares demographics with The Hamptons, a collection of elite holiday hamlets. African Americans began buying holiday homes in Sag Harbor in the early part of the twentieth century. Says Whitehead's Benji, "That first generation claimed and settled on Sag Harbor Bay because the south side was off-limits – the white people owned the coastline, South Hampton, Bridgehampton, East Hampton. And the Jersey Shore, and every other sandy stretch of vista-full property in the tristate area, the natural places of escape from city life. No Negroes, please" (SH, p.51). Despite this, stereotypical thought still believes that there are no blacks in Sag Harbor. Says Benji, "Once in a while in the city, I'll come across a white person, and Sag Harbor will come up and they'll say, "Oh, I didn't know black people went out there"" (ibid, p.109).

Much of Benji's layered double consciousness comes from his father. Whilst cursing "whitey" with one breath and singing along to The Carpenters with the next, this man rails against the "Street" as a 'shade' of black to be reviled.

> The Street in my father's mind was a vast, abstract plane of black pathology. He'd grown up poor, fighting his way home every day off Lenox Avenue, and any hint that he hadn't escaped, that all his suffering had been for naught, kindled his temper and his deep fear that aspiration was an illusion and the Street a labyrinth without exit, a mess of connecting alleys and avenues always leading back into itself" (ibid, p.87).

Benji's father's demons of the past play out in the way he confronts the world and in his vices. He drinks too heavily which Benji perceives to be the cause of "the chemical reaction in his brain that said, Let's get this hate in gear" (ibid, p.172). As with the "parade of shifting masks" (ibid, p.180) on the television, his father fluctuates between a past image and current notion of himself. Whilst reneging the Street, he nurtures the familiarity of his identity as a 'dark' Negro creating an inner circle of 'dark' compatriots, "She was *dark"*, he says of one of the old ladies at Sag Harbor, "That's why she was always nice to me ..." (ibid, p.183). He feels at odds with the privileged Sag Harbor second-generation types, of which his wife is one, "the light-skinned pussies they got out here" (ibid, p.183).

Many philosophers[9] subscribe to the notion that the self is that which is contrasted to all else, or essentially the antithesis of 'other'. Bertens (2003) posits that "... our identity is always at least partly defined through what it is not" (l. 3731-32). As we will later find in the formation of a group identity, in constructing self the negation of 'other' is inevitable. Yet in negating 'other' significant personal stress is likewise inevitable if the designated 'other' has formerly been part of one's composite self-construct and is now to be divorced from the self. Effectively repressed it will remain a constant source of conflict. This is Mr Cooper's struggle as he attempts to drown his self doubt and fear of intangible aspirations.

He is, however, part of the Sag Harbor set now; if not part of the inner circle of Sag Harbor descendants, a part of the larger racial group identity. Rejecting the

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[9] Heidegger and Nietzsche are amongst those that propound this notion of self. http://asu.academia.edu/RonBroglio/Papers/826043/Heideggers_Shepherd_of_Being_and_Nietzsches_Satyr

"corner nigger" (SH, p.162) stereotype he has opted to share in the Cosby family sitcom fantasy (ibid, p.160). His rejection of an identity related to his past reveals the elective nature of identity and is what Straub refers to as the "essentially *retrospective*" (Straub, 2001:66) act of identity formation.

> Not only reflexive, conscious and preconscious synthetic acts of identity formation are retrospective, but also the unconscious process of 'ego synthesis' emphasized by psychology. The realisation that no one simply has an identity, but that identity must be created and maintained in the light of new experiences and expectations by means of restructuring, means not least that a person's identity is a construct (ibid).

Benji's father, "by progressive adjustments ... construct[s] an identity ..." (Henry, 2001:84) which negates his past. Yet in so doing he remains besieged by feelings of inadequacy, perceiving rejection from an inner circle to which he does not belong.

It is to this figure that can be pinned Benji's construal of the message "Don't be afraid of getting hit" (SH, p. 136) as "No one can hurt you more than I can" (ibidem), and which becomes instrumental in forming Benji's "laundry list of psychic injuries" (ibid, p. 168) and his "premature apprehension of the deep dread-of-existence" (ibid, p.5).

Whilst Mona and Benji face adolescent growth with contrasting battles, their status within their respective families is comparably precarious. Benji's family life is almost non-existent whilst Mona's has become a battleground of will. Through their ethnic ties with family, Mona from the vestiges of "Fort Chang" (MPL, p.269) and Benji, cut off from the world by his own need to insulate familial strife from the world at large, are placed at odds with society. And yet through their societal ties they are denigrated by family. Mona comes to realise that to claim familial group status means having to abdicate all other associations and avoid the ravages of adjustment by "put[ing] up that brick wall" (MPL, p.23). Both Benji and Mona recognise their family units as insular and seek out acceptance in group identity.

I.2 Performing Identities

A key image in performance is the masquerade which in and of itself may suggest pretence and perhaps even deception. The figure of Sherman Matsumoto, a Japanese exchange student who befriends Mona in the first chapter of *Mona in the Promised Land* becomes a central part of the artifice that is played out in Jen's novel. Whilst Mona's relationship with Sherman is relatively brief, his identity shifts and emerges throughout the story as his mask is worn and manipulated by various players. I wish to discuss three reasons for performance which are apparent both in this story and in *Sag Harbor*.

At a basic level Mona's friendship with Sherman symbolises a time in her life when she had value – the value of symbolic ethnicity which opened the doors to acceptance by catering to her peers' imaginative appetites. Mona engages in a performance with Sherman as it offers her a means to belong. To belong to those "who have someone to kiss" (MPL, p.5). *"You just want to have boyfriend to become popular"* (MPL, p. 21), accuses Sherman and later Mona understands the truth in these words as she desperately tries to make amends in her next encounter with him. Yet in this encounter she finds herself unwittingly participating in a series of phone conversations with a second Sherman who is actually a disguised Andy Kaplan. Her innocent participation continues to aid her need to belong. Belonging, then, is the first motive for performance that I will address. There are a further two motives which I will be discussing. Firstly, as a means to explore or experiment with an identity, the ideal end to which is to provide an encounter with self, and secondly to aid a political identity or an identity which has political-type agenda. An example of someone performing for a political purpose is found in the character of Seth, the final player to manipulate Sherman's mask. After the break-up of their relationship Seth uses the disguise to get close to Mona and to prove his commitment. But many other are the players and performances and I return now to the performance of belonging.

I.2.1 Belonging

Accompanying Mona's newfound sentiments of emerging independent self, distinct and seemingly disparate from her cultural/ethnic identity, is an overwhelming

desire to belong. Her initial acceptance of an “oriental” identity bestowed on her by her peers, offered her acceptance from a novelty aspect, she could “prove that she does not need to use deodorant” (MPL, p.6), but provided no sense of true belonging. Mona’s friend, Barbara Gugelstein, undergoing her own adolescent journey of self discovery has decided to connect with her Jewish roots and thus affects a Jewish persona. Mona, then, soon finds herself tagging along to the temple.

Getting involved in the numerous Youth Group activities at the temple, Mona quickly becomes established as the Temple Youth Group “official mascot” (MPL, p.32), which, once again, offers her group acceptance but with no real status of belonging. Aided by the ministrations of observant others – “Don’t you have a home?” (ibid, p.33), she is forced to see herself as a “stranger in a strange land” (ibidem). This instigates, for Mona, a succession of talks that she has with the temple Rabbi. In this forum she wrestles with issues of identity which she plays out at length with Rabbi Horowitz. Assimilation, minority status and its implications, protest and the assertion of rights, cultural tradition, and the descent of ethnicity are all thrashed out in Mona’s one apparent true space of freedom, the temple – Mona’s perceived Promised Land. For here she is free to question, ask and assert. “We can’t just accept everything the way they did in China”, she says. “We can’t just go along” (ibid, p.53). The attraction of a new Jewish identity soon beckons with the realisation that with it comes the freedom to “ask, ask, instead of obey, obey” (ibid, p.34).

With the evident acceptance of her peers, the Temple Youth Group appears to provide Mona with a haven of belonging which is, above all, what she desires. This is most evident in Jen’s evocative description of Mona’s inner thoughts.

> Mona once went to an exhibit on Chinese portraiture, in which only the faces of monks were depicted in all their idiosyncratic detail. Members of society were depicted in terms of their activities and their clothes, which was to say their rank. For these clothes were not about self-expression; these were closer to uniforms. And that was what mattered – not these people’s inner selves, but their place in society. At least to the artists who drew them. But what about to the subjects? Mona was with a friend that day, who thought that if the people portrayed had drawn the pictures, they would have presented themselves very differently. Mona wasn’t so sure, though. Mona thought they would have liked to be seen in those beautiful gowns and high-status silks. For she understood what mattered most to the people in the pictures as if it still mattered most to

> her: not that the world would know them for themselves – they would never dare to dream of any such thing – but that they might know that they belonged and where (MPL, pp.122-123).

The assimilation of her Chinese heritage, does not allow Mona the 'insolence' to assert an identity of her own making, finding her space in the world becoming merely a quest to belong. However, when Mona joins the TYG (Temple Youth Group) hotline, despite an initial feeling of belonging and discovering that she is "suddenly friends with all manner of people" (ibid, p.55), including the "distinctly higher likes of Danielle Meyers" (ibidem), she is eventually forced to question whether there is "hidden within the circle to which they've been admitted, another, smaller circle?" (ibid, p.62). Thus in this apparent safe-hold of peer solidarity she comes to realise that group identity does not safeguard her against the insecurity of acceptance; acceptance and the feeling of belonging, symbolic in the Chinese portraiture, equating to her sense of worth and social identity. The assumed threat or incongruity with the group with which she now identifies renders her social identity weak, her group identity being ephemerally grounded in the collective consensus which is elemental in Assmann's definition of a collective identity:

> We understand a *collective* or *We-identity* as the image that a collective constructs of itself, and with which its members identify. Collective identity is a question of *identification* on the part of the participating individuals. It does not exist "in itself", but only to the extent that certain individuals profess it. It is strong or weak insofar as it lives in the thought and action of the group members and can motivate their thoughts and actions. (Assmann, 1992:132).

Whilst Baron et.al contend that "[o]ur social identity combines our self-concept and the various groupings of people with which we identify" (Baron and Byrne, 1993:174), we find that Mona's chosen social, collective or We-identity becomes threatened by her uncertainty of the identity of the 'other'. For, as previously mentioned, in constructing an identity, collective or singular, there is necessarily a deposing of the 'other'[10]. Mona faces the threat of being her group's inner-circle other.

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[10] See my p.14.

Benji in *Sag Harbor* is faced with a similar threat with the 'thoughts and actions' (Assmann, op.cit) of his Sag Harbor group rendering his successful inclusion potentially precarious. For inclusivity necessarily evokes exclusivity as purported by Friese in his definition of a collective identity.

> The terms 'social identity' or 'collective identity' [...] refer to conceptions of sameness or similarity with others. [This] sameness within an – imagined – 'group' include[s] a notion of being different from others, from those who don't belong (Friese, 2001:1-2).

Hailing from a white world in which his difference is highlighted in a daily confrontation with 'other', Benji seeks out acceptance in racial group belonging on his annual summer retreat to Sag Harbor. "[I]n mass society" says Glazer "there is the need in the individual for some kind of identity – smaller than the State, larger than the family, something akin to familistic (sic) allegiance" (apud Sollors, 1996:xvi). Benji finds this allegiance with his friends in Sag Harbor. Friendship with fellow African-Americans in Sag Harbor, where the black settlement there is steeped in tradition and its collective identity is maintained by these traditions, in contrast to his Manhattan friendships, allows him to "fit in" (SH, p.5).

"There was summer and then there was the rest of the time" (ibid, p.4), and Sag Harbor spelt out "pure pinned joy" (ibid, p.1). Drawn together by their parents'/grandparents' expressions of conquest and group solidarity in a prejudiced world, "The others [the rest of the black community] were necessary" (ibid, p.2), both for there to be a summer season of standard fare and to provide Benji with a sense of identity, of anchoring him to the planet.

Summer in Sag Harbor also allows Benji to "dream of reinvention" (ibid, p.23). "All over the world the teenage millions searched for routes out of their dank, personal labyrinths" (ibid) and Benji's dream is no different. Yet his reinvention, as Mona has also discovered, is conditioned by the other, and in Sag Harbor both the community and his friends prescribe the conditions.

> We had been doing this for years, making adjustments at the beginning of the summer, fine-tuning, to get used to each other again after nine months stuck in our different corners of the city. Figuring out the next version of each other.

> Somebody was coming with the stuff from their neighbourhood, the other guy was bringing the stuff from his neighbourhood, and they collided. By the end of the summer we were all on the same page" (SH, p.68).

Rejoining his friends in Sag Harbor at the start of summer, Benji's allocated summer-long appraisal of them in lieu of the obligatory "fine-tuning" (ibidem) is thwarted by the ease with which his brother, Reggie, has adopted black cultural signifiers. On their first day out, Benji notices that Reggie is wearing the same white Fila shoes that NP, one of their gang who hails from the Bronx and has the 'advantage' of 'truly' living his black identity, wears. "Hanging out with NP was to start catching up on nine months of black slang and other sundry soulful artefacts I'd missed out on in my predominately white private school" (ibid, p.29). Reggie, it would appear, has a head start. Taken aback by his brother's inner-circle infiltration, Benji meets the same challenges as Jen's Mona. He is aware that he has to conform to the group code.

> Keeping my eyes open, gathering data, more and more facts, because if I had enough information I might know how to be. Listening and watching, taking notes for something that might one day be a diagram for an invention, a working self with moving parts (ibid, p.68)

Benji's identity construct, in much the same way as Mona's, becomes coupled with his desire to belong, translating into a procedural identity construct prescribed by the group. Henry describes this schematic process of identity formation taking into account the individual's unique set of experiences:

> By progressive adjustments all individuals construct an identity for themselves ... a procedural notion of identity ... performances that have an identifying function form a complex of acquired skills, a set of synthetic, communicative and reflexive capabilities that allow individuals to unify and endow their own experiences with intelligible meanings (Henry, 2001:84)

Yet the much-desired Negro identity is not without its problems. Benji becomes aware of two types of 'black' – shades, so to speak, that render his understanding of the group decidedly problematic. "There were no street niggers in *Sag Harbor*. ... But we all had cousins who ... you know" (SH, p.31). The nuance of a certain level of black exclusion confers on Benji another layer of consciousness. The awareness of a clearly

defined choice having to be made in respect of identity alignment, even within his chosen circle, adds to Benji's unease as the rigid lines of definition jar with Benji's "taste for nuance" (SH, p.203).

Thus ownership of this decidedly black identity does not always sit comfortably with Benji, there being "pot-holes of double consciousness" (ibid, p.14) with which to contend. The gaps in his knowledge of black history as a result of his white-oriented schooling, coupled with his father's sociopathic feelings about race, leave him vacillating between "ease and disquiet" (ibid, p.15). "Switch off this, switch on that" (ibid, p.30) is how Benji learns to survive – parleying the dividing line of group membership, which if looked at from a position of inadequacy, seemed to reveal circles within circles concomitant with Mona's.

"I wanted to know the origin of Reggie's behaviour. Why Filas? Who told him about using ammonia?" (ibid, p.23). Benji struggles with his brother's insider knowledge of black iconology. And as he witnesses the new and intricate choreography of the in-group handshakes, undermined by his "strong dork constitution" (ibid, p.43), he, too, begins to feel that he is on the outside looking in, his social outlook having more in common with the stoners' moral code (ibid, p.123) of cool/uncool. "I liked uncool because it meant there was a code that everyone agreed on. The rules didn't change – everything in the universe was either cool or uncool, no confusion" (ibidem). "I lost my taste for nuance when I became a teenager" (ibid, p.203), confesses Benji. "Nuance got you nowhere. Either/or was where it was at" (ibidem).

Thus left to struggle with ambivalent postures and desperate to hold on to a group identity, Benji and his friends subscribe to a performance. They "heard the voices of the constant damning chorus that told [them they] lived false, and [they] decided to be otherwise" (ibid, p.147). – "We talked one way in school, one way in our homes, and another way to each other" (ibidem). And failing to recognise in themselves "a minimum continuity and consistency of attitudes, ways of thinking and modes of behaviour" (Henry apud Friese, 2001:84), it seems they fail to "achieve identity with [themselves]" (ibidem), self assertion eluding them.

I have shown in this sub-chapter the dynamics of Mona and Benji's group belonging but many are the examples which Jen and Whitehead provide which

advocate performance as a means to belong. In *Mona in the Promised Land,* group identity is never more succinct as it is in Jen's description of Alfred's group of friends. Alfred is Mona's father's cook at the pancake house and going on appearances alone, his group of friends is anything but composite. "They are Afro-proud and close-cropped, shiny-faced and gnarled, bearded and clean-shaven – yet there's a relatedness to the way they move ... They've grouped themselves so palpably that a person could almost touch their brotherhood" (MPL, p.191). On closer inspection, however, it appears that they are each, in their own way and in the same manner of negation of self peculiar to Benji's father in *Sag Harbor*, clinging to this brotherhood at the expense of self.

Professor Estimator "the brain of the group" (ibid, p.197), working his way through law school, is spending his summer hanging out with the crew to "stem speculation that he's getting too uppity to run with his people anymore" (ibidem). Big Benson and Ray are Vietnam War veterans who have their own war-related hang-ups and needs for group solidarity. Luther the Race Man, who has the lightest skin of the group, needs to prove how 'dark' he is by wearing his identity on his sleeve. He dresses in "Afro tricolours", living to the title of "phenomenon with a theme. As for the theme, that goes race, race, race" (ibid, p.198).

The wearing of masks or, in other words, subscribing to a performance becomes a means of buying one's way in to the exclusive realm of in-group membership. On a small scale many are the incidents where the suggestion is that 'fitting in' or staking claim to group membership requires the performance of certain identities. This is evident when Mona, on joining the eighth grade at her new school in Scarshill, understands the significance of her performance as the token Asian person as giving her ownership of "*something* [that] *people value*" (MPL, p. 8) – a symbolic performance. Later she wants to be considered 'cool' by having a boyfriend. This performance reaps its reward when her friendship with Danielle Meyers is reinstated.

Thus typically, adolescent identity takes root in "solidarity with a group's ideals" (Erikson 1968:208) due to its very nature as a *psychosocial* stage of human development. When Mona falls from grace with Danielle Meyers, her friend Barbara steps in to "teach[] Mona to be cool" (ibid, p.58), thus propagating, in true adolescent fashion, the supremacy of group ideals and the necessity to conform.

I.2.2 Exploration/Experimentation

Newly affiliated to the Temple Youth Group, Mona's time is juggled between volunteering at the TYG Hotline and stints at her parents' pancake house. Grotevant (1987) speaks of the importance of "two key processes involved in identity formation: *exploration* of alternatives and *commitment* to choices" (Grotevant apud Moshman, 2005:94). This exploration necessarily involves performance yet as Mona performs her Jewish identity, "she feels more of a Chinese than ever" (MPL, p.66). Brought up in a family of "the type to adjust" (ibid, p.4) and having felt the pull of assimilation, self assertion remains a remote possibility for Mona as she struggles with Hegelian relational issues[11]. "Is she a proper best friend? A proper sister, a proper daughter, a proper student? None of these things" (ibid, pp.109-110).

It is only in her moment of lovemaking that she truly experiences the selfish nature of her humanity, the intrinsic essence of self, and can cast off her cultural over-voice to appreciate the tailoring of an identity which needs no adjustments.

> [S]he finds that she owns a whole self inside the self that she knows, someone sharing her skin". ... She did not realise how wholly she fit the word *female*, just as she did not realize how partly she fit other words. How she's had to take them up, like the clothes in department stores. ... all that matters is how they'll fit after she fixes them. ... Between her and other people there has always been a moat of explaining, work and explaining, until now (ibidem).

It is the relational aspect of her identity, which has kept Mona from discovering the essence of who she is. By losing herself to the experience of lovemaking she connects with this person, the essence of her-'self', for the first time. Yet Mona is still some distance from claiming this self.

Barbara, her best friend, and Seth, her soon-to-be boyfriend (who before going off to college wishes to establish whether college is a "socializing force to which he can submit" (MPL, p.62)), also help at the hotline. Seth, it transpires, is on a mission to break away from "the small-minded bourgeois thinking of his father" (ibid, p.63). "Mr Authentic Self" (ibid, p.121), as Mona comes to refer to him, claims to live by the

[11] The premise of Hegelian thought is that the self is more truly determined by an intrinsic essence rather through the dependence on a relation to other things.

adage that "between the inside person and the outside person there should be no difference" (ibidem). Thus, for the large part he has disposed of manners in favour of the hard truth.

Yet Mona deduces that Seth's persona is a performance of sorts as she discovers that his desire for authenticity comes at the expense of true introspection. He fills his head with the theories of philosophers and other great thinkers at the expense of self knowledge and Mona comes to believe that his anti-establishment ways have more to do with the resentment of an over-bearing step-mother "who assigns her guests chores like cleaning up their own bathroom" (ibid, p.121), than true commitment to an identity. Seth, nonetheless, reveals himself to be Grotevant's classic explorer[12] as he experiments with an identity of his choosing. However, Mona "not interested in being a phenomenon" (MPL, p.64), is wary of his advances seeing in them a "feeble excuse for a love affair" (ibidem) and surmising his goal to be simply to make of her "a world-spanner! – a regular Yoko Ono" (ibid, p.63). This bears much relevance to my later discussion on performing to someone else's expectations, which I will address in Chapter II.

Mona and Seth, in time, develop an intimate relationship which proceeds from the re-enactment of an attack scene in which Seth comes to Mona's rescue. The significance of this scene as a self-assertive act will receive further attention later in this discussion. Mona, Seth and Barbara who "more than ever too, ... seems to be considering who she is, picking out her personality" (ibid, p.127) thus continue in their exploration of identity.

Mona finds herself testing her new Jewish identity and decides to put her Jewish social awareness and charity into action. Following a discussion about race and identity where the friends establish that "it's generally an advantage to look more like Archie Bunker than like Malcolm X" (ibid, p.140) she condescends to offer Alfred, recently evicted from his girlfriend's house, a place to stay at Barbara's house whilst her parents are away. The stage is set for what will become a true experiment in ideals. The question remains to be asked, however, as to whose ideals and at whose expense?

[12] See my p.23

Characteristically, many of Mona and Benji's friends and peers struggle with their individual identity issues and to a greater or lesser degree seek out acceptance or try to find themselves through exploration of different identities and through a performance. Before addressing Whitehead's treatment of this aspect of performance, I wish first to turn my attention to Mona's sister, Callie.

The full cycle of Grotevant's identity status work is depicted in the figure of Callie, who at the start of the novel declares that she is "sick of being Chinese" (ibid, p.29). Her rejection of a foreclosed identity model[13] stems from her feelings of inadequacy and confrontation with 'the other' but which, in contrast to Mona's acceptance-driven assimilation, has left her on the outside. Also, and in a similar way to Whitehead's Benji whose childhood was one of emotional neglect, Callie "grew up by night" (ibid, p.253) in the sense that she was her mother Helen's least favoured child.

Membership of the family collective and indeed acceptance has for her, as for Mona, entailed conforming to a prescriptive filial code and its associative sense of the abdication of self to the will of her parents. "For example, if one of [the girls] gets their father a bowl of rice before he asks for it, everyone approves. *She knows her father's mind,* say the parents. But if they know their own minds instead, watch out" (ibid, p.29). With this backdrop of suppressed individualism, her degree of contempt for her ethnic roots appears warranted, which makes for her conversion to an 'authentic' Chinese identity seem all the more radical and improbable.

Callie has gone away to college where she has befriended an African-American girl called Naomi. Under Naomi's tutelage, Callie learns that she can choose her own ancestors, of which her parents need not be a part. Perhaps guided by a perception of the "unmeltable" descent qualities of ethnicity[14] or perhaps simply as a means of gaining the acceptance of a welcoming in-group who, as members of the "coloured" community (Mona is surprised to hear that she is "yellow" given that she is "not exactly a text book primary" (Ibid, p.170)), seem "involuntarily stuck to one another by a special invisible but all-weather glue" (ibidem) Callie explores this new identity. "Consent and descent may not only be embodied by different characters", says Sollors,

[13] See footnote on p.1.
[14] See my p.8.

"but may also be at odds with each other in one personality. Many ethnic writers have sketched the divided interiors of ethnic rooms. But what interior is more fascinating than the inside of a divided self?" (Sollors,1986:168). I will return to other aspects of Callie's performance in my final chapter but significant to note here is that in light of her initial denunciation of her ethnicity, Callie's acceptance and to a large extent creation of a new ethnic identity ties her not only to the descent concept of ethnicity, but to the consensual camp of Sollors' debate.

Conversely, Benji's friend Bobby in *Sag Harbor,* takes defiant strides to negate his upbringing by experimenting with a militant persona. Whitehead's adult narrator reflects,

> "Black boys with beach houses. It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort. And if it messed with your head, got under your brown skin, there were some typical and well-know remedies. ... [T]he most popular brands were Militant or Street, Militant being the opposite of bourgie capitulation to The Man, and Street being the antidote to Upper Middle Class emasculation". (SH, p.58).

Bobby, like Benji's father, models a 'We-identity'[15] on the 'other', this being on a perceived negative which he deliberately chooses to exclude from his collective identity. Yet the danger lies in the fact that "constructions of identity are the more compact as well as potentially aggressive the more they erect boundaries against the imagined outside" (Friese, 2001:12). This is seen in social theory where Insider doctrine attempts to turn the tide of racial stigma:

> What the Insider doctrine of the most militant blacks proposes on the level of social structure is to adopt the salience of racial identity in every sort of role and situation, a pattern so long imposed upon the American Negro, and to make that identity a total commitment issuing from within the group rather than one imposed upon it from without. By thus affirming the universal saliency of race as an abiding source of pride rather than stigma, the Insider doctrine in effect models itself after doctrine long maintained by white racists (Merton, 1972).

Bobby's militancy whilst affirming group solidarity, is founded on the negation of self stemming from his pampered upbringing, and the performance of which can takes its

[15] See reference to Assmann on my page 18.

toll by turning into self-hatred, a side-effect present in Benji's father. Bobby "rebelled against his genes, the Caucasian DNA in his veins square-dancing in there with strong African DNA" (SH, p.59) and it was his successful mother who "bore the brunt of his misguided rage" (ibidem).

Although offering Bobby a sense of belonging, Bobby's identity anchored within insider doctrine becomes restrictively prescriptive and potentially aggressive – his "real lookin' gun allowed him to indulge his hard-rock fantasies and bury his deep prep-school weakness. Hide his grandfather's soft features in the scowl of a thug, the thug of his inverted Westchester fantasies. A kind of blackface" (ibid, p.126). Thus disturbingly, "A strong – and inclusive – sense of belonging to one group can in many ways carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups. Within-group solidarity can help feed between-group discord" (Sen, 2006:p.1), says Sen and we find the boys jealously staking claim to the waterfront – "any infiltration had to be checked out" (SH, p.34) and thwarted.

The wearing of masks in group dynamics becomes, essentially, a theme in its own right as individuals in both these novels struggle to retain group membership. In the same way that Bobby prescribes to insider doctrine and also due to the perceived in-group prejudice against his lighter skin, Luther one of Arthur's friends in *Mona in the Promised Land*, fights his personal battle against any such negative associations. He does this by attending rallies which pump up his 'blackness', "always [having] to be out protesting and organizing to prove how much blacker he was than you" (MPL, p.142). The constant recourse of those who lie on the borders of an 'in-group' to buff their 'We-ness' to the detriment of the other is addressed by Anne Anlin Cheng in her study of race and identity in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief.* In this work she states that there is a "fundamental paradox" (Cheng: 2001:411) in relying on such a limited view of identity for "*identity* is the very ground upon which [both] progress and discrimination are made" (Cheng: 2001:411). Yet, she claims that due to the subjective nature of perception such uni-focal identity constructs contain the power of bigotry. Benji's response to the benign act of partying, illustrates the power of bigotry as it does the subjective nature of perception.

> Half the fun of having a party, it seemed, – and I speak as someone who was not invited to parties, and thus had an outsider's perspective – was in excluding people, especially your neighbours, who would be forced to listen to the music and laughter, closing their windows to keep noise out as some closed windows to keep noise in (SH, p.80).

The propagation of in-group and, in Luther and Bobby's case racial sentiments, whilst arguably nurturing an environment of acceptance for those within its boundaries, foments the constant striving for that acceptance and can set individuals at odds with society. "Harping on difference brings trouble" (MPL, p.222), says Barbara's mother and this is expressed in Whitehead's novel too. In *Sag Harbor,* the narrator tells of "the selfish tug of ownership when they saw strangers – ie. white people" (ibid, p.35-36) and concludes "Get a bunch of kids together who felt punked out in various ways and the collective mind sought ways to punk out others" (ibidem). For as Sollors quite rightly perceives, "If we construct an identity without ethnicity (in the sense of historical continuity ...) we may feel 'dead' but if we define ourselves exclusively in ethnic terms we are equally in trouble" (Sollors, 1996:xx). Both Sen and Cheng claim that outer-group other-ing from the confines of the prescriptive in-group fuel miscreant behaviour, yet other-ing from the outer group equally foments hostility.

'We-identity' adherence is further shown to strip away individual identity. Following the disappearance of a silver flask from Barbara's house in *Mona in the Promised Land*, where an accusation is levelled at Alfred's friends, the Estimator who has previously conducted himself as an independent thinker, turns face. Suspected of "stealing along with my black brothers" (MPL, p.205) he discards his role of "distinguished thinker" (ibidem) by retaliating with the performance of the "Representative Black Man" (ibidem). The history of common experience prescribes group support and anything less becomes evidence of negating group solidarity.

The above incidents show that both the groups with which one identifies (in-groups) and those of the other (out-groups), through their use of stereo-type tend to strip one of the freedom to be self assertive. In separating herself from her family, Mona, too, is perceived to be rejecting them. For "to embrace what [they] embraced was to love; and to embrace something else was to betray" (Jen, 1986). How then to avoid the "catch-22" (MPL, p.184)? "The stereotype stuff was hard, no joke, no matter

where you came from" (SH, p.88), says Benji, for although the assumption is that we have a variety of flavours at our disposal in the ice cream parlour of life, "[t]he freedom of choosing our identities in the eyes of others can be extraordinarily limited" (Sen, 2006:31).

This is represented in Benji's narrative of the racial code of his black community to which they were obliged to adhere:

> You didn't, for example, walk down Main Street with a water-melon under your arm. Even if you had a pretty good reason. Like, you were going to a potluck and each person had to bring an item and your item just happened to be a watermelon, luck of the draw, and you wrote this on a sign so everyone would understand the context, and as you walked down Main Street you held the sign in one hand and the explained watermelon in the other, all casual, perhaps nodding between the watermelon and the sign for extra emphasis if you made eye contact. This would not happen. We were on display. You'd add cover purchases, as if you were buying haemorrhoid cream or something, throw some apples into the basket, a carton of milk, butter, some fucking saltines, and all smiles at the register (p.88).

I will address the performance of roles directed by someone else and for which one has not auditioned in Chapter II. However, I now wish to discuss my third and final motivation for performance.

I.2.3 Political Performance

At the beginning of Whitehead's novel, Benji's adult narrator describes his life as a string of bar mitzvah attendances as, in fact, many of his fellow classmates are Jewish. But there was one girl, Liza Finkelstein, whose parents denied her this traditional Jewish rite of passage. The narrator says that the Finkelsteins "respected all races, colors, and creeds, unless that creed was their own" (SH, p.7), and later continues:

> Mr Finkelstein always seemed glad to have me around. Sending their daughter to a fancy private school was a betrayal of core values, paying tuition when you were supposed to support local public schools being in traitorous equivalence with eating grapes when you were supposed to boycott grapes. Those days, every nonunionized grape was a tear squeezed out of the eye of a migrant

> worker's child ... The fact that Mr Finkelstein's daughter had a bona fide black friend mitigated the situation a bit (ibid, p.8).

Whilst the observations of Whitehead's narrator highlight Cheng's paradox of progress and discrimination in a subversive way[16], more importantly the perception of the Finkelstein's identity alignment cannot be divorced from their political stance. Says Gans (1979), "Symbolic Ethnicity [...] takes political forms". Whitehead's tongue-in-cheek portrayal of the Finkelstein's self-admonition of their own creed highlights the fact that whilst their sentiments might be genuine, their performance, ties their identities to the symbolic. And in a similar way, Seth's experimentation with anti-establishment behaviour in *Mona in the Promised Land* and Bobby's foray with guns in *Sag Harbor* are also experimental. The statements thus made become forever tied to their "symbolically and socio-culturally mediated, meaning-structured and meaning-creating actions" (Straub apud Friese 2001:67).

Naomi, Callie's college friend is a prime example of someone who has constructed her identity on the symbolic. She has adopted as ancestors prominent civil rights activists such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth as well as less political figures but, nonetheless key cultural figures, such as the African American musician, Roberta Flack. Espousing a consensual ethnicity from which she borrows cultural symbolism serves her political voice and provides her with a sense of historical continuity (descent). Thus she also accepts her ethnicity as a "construct evocative of blood, nature and descent" (Sollors, 1986:151).

Yet she does not define herself exclusively in these terms merely borrowing from the symbols of her black cultural heritage as befits her political purpose. Indeed, says Gans, "Symbolic ethnicity does not need a practiced culture, even if the symbols are borrowed from it ... Symbolic culture is as much culture as practiced culture, but the latter persists only to supply symbols to the former" (Gans, 1979). Naomi takes equal liberty in borrowing Chinese symbolism – "She chants, and drinks tea, and makes kites" (MPL, p.169). By asserting a decidedly foreign self, she takes a political stance, rejecting cultural homogenization and negating the directive to melt, unaccounted for, into the American social pot. She enjoys "scrabble, film noir, stargazing, soccer"

[16] See my p.27

(ibidem). “She is in short, a statistical outlier” (ibidem) and whilst also an “overcompensator” (ibidem), it is this quality which redeems her from the foreclosure of being a mere political entity. Her inner-descent self is married to the outer-consent being, making of her a true “Renaissance woman” (ibidem).

Yet political performance can signify a performance for personal gain. Hailing from a culture where familial allegiance is esteemed, Mona’s parents willingly, if unwittingly, participate in the identity performance of their head chef, Cedric. Cedric is depicted as a master of deception, masking his performance with true symbolic ethnicity. He aligns himself with Ralph and Helen, even claiming inter-marital ties with Ralph’s family in China. Tellingly, “his pronunciation got noticeably better after he got his green card” (MPL, p.86) and the two children, wife and parents that he has left back in China all become part of the facade. Also, perhaps, unwittingly Mona provides him with the cultural and historical symbolism to be able to work on Ralph and Helen’s sensibilities, “describ[ing] to him the goriest, grossest things and ask[ing] him if the Red Guards would do that” (ibid, p.86). This has stood him in good stead as Helen and Ralph “know who he is” (ibid, p.118) and can thus bestow on him alone the privilege of trust, an appreciation of which Mona deduces has more to do with racist tendencies. As Helen and Ralph play to Cedric’s direction, the curtains open on the prescriptions and restrictions of being involved in someone else’s experiment.

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Chapter II: Dibs – The Supremacy of Definition and Choice

II.1 Someone Else's Experiment

Being a part of someone else's experiment, and specifically one's parents' experiment, is something against which most of the teenagers in both *Mona in the Promised Land* and *Sag Harbor* rebel. In *Sag Harbor* Liza Finkelstein, a school friend of Benji's who I mentioned in the previous chapter, and for whom pride in her parents' social action was a significant part of her identity, eventually comes to reject this foreclosed identity by turning her pride into derision. Her scornful testimony to her parents' March on Washington in the 1960s affords her the distinction of self-assertiveness. "She was a teenager in that moment" (SH, p.8).

Similarly, Mona's friend Barbara in *Mona in the Promised Land* defies her mother's attempts to steer her away from an excess of Jewish sentiment. That Barbara eventually aligns herself with her mother's beliefs, does not attest to a foreclosed identity, but rather to the successful achievement of an identity in the wake of her exploration of other avenues. The narrator affirms that Barbara develops into a self-assured individual who is "unfazed by discount clothes stores where everybody shares one big dressing room" (MPL, p.196). Not to be felt by her are the sentiments of prudish timidity of an unchallenged identity. "For she is who she is, as she'll tell you; she never pretended to be a size two" (ibidem).

Yet what allows her to assert herself in this way is the relative latitude she is granted to find her own path. Seth's mother, Bea, understands the importance of this more than anyone. "It's how he's becoming his own person ..." (ibid, p.258), she says of Seth's experiments. But for Mona and Benji the struggle to break out of the confines of someone else's experiment proves more of a challenge. Yet, ironically, they too enlist the performance of others who play a part in their experiments.

I mentioned in my last chapter (my p.24) that with the arrival of Albert the cook at Barbara's house, the scene was set for an experiment of sorts, but that what was elemental to the perspectives of the individuals involved was the agency of that experiment; for as the dynamics at Camp Gugelstein (as Barbara's house comes to be called) alter, each character struggles with feelings of subjection to someone else's experiment.

Alfred’s instalment at Barbara’s is essentially Mona’s experiment in social action. Concerned with Alfred’s personal problems and aware that his social status offers him fewer chances in life, she attempts to turn her concerns into action as determined by her new Jewish faith and in counter-position to what her parents would do. For them, anything reaching beyond the extent of familial allegiances is considered to be none of their concern. Thus Alfred becomes Mona’s cause and by extension Barbara’s cause too. At Barbara’s house all Alfred’s immediate needs are met. Apart from the requisite roof over his head, he has at his disposal all the privileges of a home in the suburbs. Nonetheless, he begins to feel imprisoned unable to shake off the feeling that he is being kept by ‘the white man’ – At Barbara’s house he has to play by Barbara’s rules or leave.

Eventually Alfred does resist the stricture of life under Barbara’s terms and, after accidentally meeting and subsequently getting involved with Barbara’s cousin Evie, he establishes himself comfortably into the home, soon inviting his friends around to help him pass the time. When Barbara and Mona discover Alfred’s deceit Mona is the first to understand his motives. “You didn’t want to be in someone else’s experiment” (MPL, p.194), she says to Alfred. “It was your experiment instead of ours” (ibidem).

Alfred has, effectively, turned the tables on Barbara and Mona’s charitable cause. His promotion from “pet” (MPL, p.195) status and the inclusion of his friends at Camp Gugelstein soon provide a different flavour for the social proceedings with what was originally Barbara and Mona’s cause, and more recently Alfred’s emancipation, turning into Seth’s experiment on radicalization and anti-bourgeois living.

In a parallel situation Mona, too, “begins life as a cause” (MPL, p.173) when she finds herself in Eloise Ingle’s experiment. For a week or two in summer, Mona visits her sister at a seaside resort in Rhode Island where Callie has a summer job. Here Mona bumps into her classmate Eloise, who with her family is holidaying there, and Eloise condescends to Mona’s plight as member of a ‘fated minority’. She thus seeks “to find diversions for Mona, to brighten up her cheerless little life” (MPL, pp.173-174). Mona’s unwitting acceptance of her role as “statement” (MPL, p.175) encourages her to quickly forget “what it was that she didn’t like about Eloise back at temple” (MPL,

p.176). Through their participation in someone else's experiment, both Mona and Alfred are effectively robbed of the performance of their own volition.

It is only back at Barbara's house when Camp Gugelstein falls apart, that Mona recognises her performance as being to someone else's direction. She sees that "[her] experiment has turned into [Seth's] experiment" (MPL, p.223), the recognition of which soon leads to their break up. "All you wanted was for me to be a radical" (Ibid, p.222), she tells Seth. Experimenting with Judaism and its charitable causes was Mona's attempt to "determin[e] who [she] is and ... deciding who [she] will be" (Moshman, 2005:75). Yet in exploring her alternatives and experimenting with different notions of herself, she inadvertently finds herself propositioned for Seth's experiment on radicalization. "He really thought her more radical than she realized, a kind of Jewish Yoko Ono. But how convenient of him to believe that" (ibidem). By pigeon-holing Mona, she serves his purpose.

Slowly Mona realises that this has been the problem from the start. All along, through her various performances, "[s]he was trying to find herself" (ibid, p.220), only to discover that she has been playing roles for which she didn't audition. She tries to explain this to her mother but is met with the response that "[d]aughter's job is to listen, not to tell mother her big-shot opinion" (ibid, p.221).

In *Sag Harbor*, we find in the figure of Benji's uncle someone who, in a similar way to Mona, struggles with assigned prescriptive behaviour. Benji and his friend, Bobby, cross paths with Uncle Nelson one afternoon and offer him a ride. In looking back at the incident, the adult Benji is able to recognise Uncle Nelson's resistance to a paradigm "in line with the standard Sag Harbor alignment" (SH, p.205) which had condemned him to a lifetime of exclusion and strained family ties. For it was all about the "extension of the brand" (ibid, p.208), the narrator reflects, and aligning yourself with the "founding fathers ... and their ideas of how proper black people should act" (ibid, p.221), following in the footsteps of "people like [Benji's] grandfather working hard to make something for his family, and passing it down to [the next] generation" (ibid, p.200). Uncle Nelson rebels against the stereotype.

In a descriptively discerning yet critical rendition of mankind and his foibles, the adult Benji places a spotlight on the hegemony of stereotypical thought as a sort of lip-service to someone else's experiment and the perception of freedom of choice. He

describes the ice-cream parlour where he worked over the summer depicting it as the great social equalizer and debunker of stereotypes. From every walk of life "they came through the doors of Jonni Waffle like all the rest, like all of us" (SH, p. 113). His critical appraisal of social difference takes the form of a stark portrayal of every possible variant of white-holiday maker from the "tasselled loafer" (ibid, p. 109) wearers, to "weekend hoboes (ibid, p. 113), to the "creatures of such affluence that I cannot even speculate about their day-to-day" (ibid). However, "We didn't discriminate, we scooped. For the burnouts, the flotsam, the human tumbleweeds who were all of us but for our choices" (ibid, p.111).

In a subversive way Whitehead, whilst lifting the lid on the stereotypical model, appears to be endorsing the plurality of identity through his acknowledgement of the plurality of race. In referring to our common humanity whilst at the same time conceding individual difference within a group from which he is vetoed by virtue of his ethnicity, he shows how "counter-hegemony functions ... on the same terrain [but] differently" (Layoun apud Japtok, 2005:25). The statement he makes appears to be that "man's functionally relevant dissimilarity from all others is what makes him human: similar to others precisely through his high degree of differentiation" (Devereux, 1975).

This fundamental belief that culture/race and ultimately identity cannot be confined into "stark and separated boxes" (Sen, 2006:103) is supported by many who propose that generalizations or stereotyping "present astonishingly limited and bleak understandings of the characteristics of the human being involved (ibidem). The Post-Black aesthetic prompted by Thelma Golden[17] and others who sought to broaden the definition of "black art" is just such an example of resistance to social, cultural and racial pigeon-holing. Touré, a supporter of the Post-Black perspective, in his book entitled *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* also rejects the narrow description or single notion of blackness to which many supporters of 'ethnic pride', or as he refers to it

[17] Thelma Golden, the Curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, first coined the term Post-Black to describe a movement in contemporary art. In the catalogue for the 2001 Freestyle Exhibition she says that Post-black artists are "adamant about not being labelled as black artists" but that their work entails "redefining complex notions of blackness". Says Taylor, "Having been born, for the most part, after the 1950-60's civil rights movement, these artists experience race differently from their predecessors ... [and] balk at the traditional meanings and burdens of Black Art and The Black Artist; but he or she has also learned to play on and with these meanings" (Taylor:2007:626).

"racial fundamentalism" (Touré, 2011:154) subscribe. Such a departure is not to deny that who we are is very much tied up with our origins or cultural heritage and can, indeed, be a source of comfort. Group membership is important to the healthy existence of humanity, for it is in bonding with people similar to ourselves that we forge meaningful relationships. Yet even though our cultural background "can influence our sense of identity and our perception of affiliation with groups of which we see ourselves as members" (Sen, 2006:112) the extent to which ethnic allegiance is felt can only be determined by individual experience and is fundamentally unique to the individual. Further similarity is not restricted to these groups and as adult Benji affirms you eventually gather people around you because "there's affinity, stuff you share in common and things you seek out in other people" (SH, p.263), not limited to these racial boundaries.

The focus of Benji's appraisal of the "human tumbleweed" (SH, p.86) that walked through the doors of the ice cream parlour is that we are all alike and it is our choices that differentiate us from each other. The primacy of choice, then, becomes elemental. Yet the "freedom served as you like it" (ibidem), whilst advocating a consensual view of identity, takes on the derisive tones of scepticism for the question begs to be asked whether this choice is real or pre-ordained – mapped out on faces as on those of the marauding crowd at the ice-cream parlour whose "inner was written on the outer" (SH, p.100). "Stuck", like Benji, "whether we wanted to admit it or not" (ibid, p.88).

"You got to know what people were going to order as soon as they walked in the door" (ibidem), says Benji suggesting that often choice is a pretence. Thus the "show of considering other flavours" (ibidem) becomes mere spectacle – a performance for someone else's benefit. "What was the point?" reflects Benji. "Move. Don't move. Act. Don't act. The results were the same. This was my labyrinth" (ibid, p.106).

Young Benji also struggles with prescriptive behavioural standards advocated by his parents. On a practical and judicious level, Benji recognises the wisdom in his mother's warning to be wary of the treacherous ocean currents – "[it] wasn't such a bad philosophy, really, applicable to most situations in a metaphorical sense but", he contends that he "hated being so conditioned" (ibid, p.55) It is this express desire to

exert an influence on his own life and be the determiner of his own fate which reveals the assertion of self concomitant with Moshmann and Kallen's definition of adolescent identity as experimental and volitional. Yet as Benji attempts to step out of the shadows of parental governance he is also confronted with restrictions from his peers.

His desire to change his name to Ben is thwarted time and time again by his peers. He eventually concedes, "I knew I wasn't going to get out from under my name" (ibid, p.85), highlighting the difficulty of stepping out from the confines of established norms and once again emphasizing the limitations of freedom as suggested by Sen[18]. Ironically the weight of censorship is felt most by those from within his group. Benji and his friends all have nicknames for each other which, with the passage of time, were near-to-impossible to shrug. "We called them by the old nicknames after all this time because it kept them in our clutches no matter how they struggled. They were branded by their pasts as much as we were" (ibid, p.20).

The labelling comes to reflect more on the pathologies of the group than that of the individual to whom the nomenclature is applied and points to a narcissistic drive in the act of labelling. This is explicit in the adult narrator's understanding of their friend Marcus being "a key player" (ibid, p.42) in their social hierarchy, for Marcus "reassured [them] that there was someone more unfortunate than [them]selves" (ibid). Thus Marcus becomes instrumental in everyone's experiment. Advocating group identity for Benji and his friends also becomes indicative of a group held hostage to their double consciousness "forcing [them] to say "Fuckin' rednecks"" (SH, p.82) whenever they passed "the truck with the Confederate-flag bumper sticker" (ibidem).

The frustration and despair which they experience at having to participate in an ongoing experiment stems as much from the perceived confrontation with prejudice as it does from the demands of group expectations. "... The long war over what white culture was acceptable and what was not" (ibid, p.63) was just one of their many battlegrounds. For example, Benji liked to spend money on "music for moping" (ibidem), having most of his other music provided for him by his sister's record collection. His sentiments naturally ran along the lines that "Rap was a natural resource, might as well pay for sunlight ..." (ibidem). However, his friends do not subscribe to his viewpoint perceiving his attitude as a rejection of black culture. As

[18] See my p.27

menacing as the truck, the pressure is placed on him to conform. Nonethess, the rules were constantly changing:

> We redrew the maps feverishly, throwing out our agreements and concessions. This week surf wear was in, and we claimed Ocean Pacific T-shirts and Maui shorts as our own. Next year, Lacoste was out in enemy territory again, reclaimed by the diligent forces of segregation (ibidem).

The incessant demand for re-alignment within Benji's group does little to accommodate individual self assertion as the boys perform to the ad-hoc rules of teenage whim. Benji is all too familiar with someone else's direction surmising that "we delivered our lines in the darkness ... until one day you realise you have a fucked-up haircut and you get a new one ..." (ibid, p.194). So whilst stereotyping or role-casting is so often perceived as emanating from 'other', both Whitehead and Jen proffer germane examples of behavioural prescription from the confines of group belonging which inevitably diminish the right to self assert. There is an undeniable sense, then, in adolescence that lives lived until this pivotal psychosocial developmental phase of self-questioning have been enacted to someone else's direction. Whether it be "watching[ing] out for the undertow" (SH, p.55) which threatens life's stability or whether it comes in the form of a father's signature haircut, the conditioning or lack of choice is inherent.

Benji's haircut is truly symbolic of artifice. It represents parental nurture and care, "the sound of the long, thin blades sniping against each other was the sound of [his father's] undivided attention" (SH, p.162). And despite the fact that this attention was laced with vaporised curses, "when it was done it was perfect" (SH, p.163). Yet within a few hours all "tucks and pats and proddings were undone ... the underlying principles revealed as counterfeit" (ibidem).

Recognising the artifice in living by someone else's standards, both Benji and Mona strive to find that identity within which lies the essence of their respective selves. Yet it is only in the freedom found beyond the limits of someone else's experiment that they can discover that to which they want to commit, thereby placing 'dibs' on their choices and claiming selfhood.

II.2 Rebellion

Several characters in Gish Jen's and Colson Whitehead's respective novels have revealed a desire to break free from the hegemonic roles placed on them from without. I have shown how the prescriptive demands of group membership are played out in each novel and how the obstacles to Mona's and Benji's self assertion have proven manifold. Further, I have intimated that to claim selfhood supports both an exploration of and experimentation with identities, as well as a commitment to choices concomitant with Grotevant's identity status work. Yet exploration in defiance of a prescriptive standard signifies rebellion.

In the interest of fairness and by way of keeping the peace amongst brothers, Benji and his brother Reggie have been raised with the principles of "even Stephen" (SH, p.272) – a principle which advocates pure and simple equality. In this quasi-unionist relationship choice is fundamental as the brothers vie to stake their claim. – "Dibs was all" (ibid, p.5). Yet the freedom to choose which bed to sleep in or which chore to do is not always practicable as the brothers' fifty-fifty reign occasionally gets compromised. Incidents such as the pot which, as a result of their mother's distraction, gets left to putrefy, neither Reggie or Benji willing to take responsibility for it, whilst amusing both serves to underpin a possible fallacy in the perception of freedom of choice, as well as to highlight the primacy of choice.

"As a former twin [Benji] liked things separate" (ibid, p. 18) and his desire to claim a new identity as Ben has been the start of his attempt at self-assertion. "Your style, your vibe, was all you had" (ibid, p.61). Yet, as we have seen, he has floundered in social trenches dug by group dominance. Even the music he enjoys is called into question. In pointing out to his friends the influences that the German band Kraftwerk has had on Afrika Bambaataa's music, Benji was not expecting to have to face the firing squad. He is met with a scornful "I forgot you like that white music" (ibid, p.62). Yet "I wasn't "trying to rag on Afrika" (ibidem), he explains to the reader, "but salute his oddball achievement. His paradox"(ibidem).

But paradox does not sit well with the status quo as Rabbi Horowitz, in *Mona in the Promised* Land, also discovers. A proponent of free choice and instrumental in Mona's self discovery he gets fired by those intent on making him dance to their tune.

"It's not fair to have had to pay the price for love", he says, "and yet I'm richer for it. A paradox" (MPL, p.268).

Having "been signed up for the family project" (MPL, p.100), a project which is prescriptive to the nth degree, Mona finds that she is living with a sense of helplessness. "Perhaps this is why Mona allied herself with the Jews, with their booming belief in doing right, with their calling and their crying out. *Justice!*" (ibid, p.254). She wants to find justice in the mere manner of doing things her way, the American way – "I can remember what I want, I can be what I want, I can –" (ibid, p.248). And when Mona awakens to the "self inside the self" (MPL, p.109) in her lovemaking scene (see my pp. 21-22), it follows an express act of self assertion. Finding "someone sharing her skin" (ibidem), who 'fits' without adjustments arises from an incident in which she is rendered helpless – a victim. In the dark, struggling with a man whose strength emaciates her own, Seth comes to her rescue. But it is in staking claim to this event and avenging her attacker, by re-living the experience with Seth that she connects with her inner self. In talking "about what the man felt like, and what he did, and what she did, and how she felt (MPL, p.110) and in being assertive by saying "stop when she wants" (ibidem), she takes control of a helpless situation, throws off the deterministic stricture of her learned helplessness, and makes it her experiment.

"Where does it comes from, the will to make yourself into something more than your endowment? (ibid, p.237) wonders Mona. She has fallen out with her mother and run away from home, finding herself "at the pointy start of time. Behind her, no history. Before her – everything" (ibid, p.255). And in the same way that she staked a claim to her individuality by avenging her attacker, she now leaves home in an attempt to forge her own path.

> [s]he sees herself in perspective, she feels, quite unexpectedly, as though she stands in the Garden of Eden. Just for a moment. The wind of apprehension, as always, will blow. But between gusts, she feels it – not even that she is standing in, but as though she is herself the Garden of Eden. A place that will remain a place of sun even after the poor forked whatever have been banished. She feels as though she stands at the pointy start of time. Behind her, no history. Before her – everything. ... Mona feels it – something opening within herself, big as the train station, streaming with sappy light (ibid, p.255).

This is Mona's awakening, an awakening to herself as a singular being in possession of her own identity[19]. But she is plagued with guilt. She imagines her mother's cry: "How arrogant! *As if you have no mother! As if you come out of thin air!"* (ibid). Nonetheless, in regarding herself without history she can divorce herself from the relational aspect of her identity and simply be an intrinsic 'self'. SHE IS, with no relational qualifier. SHE IS, in the absence of group consenters. For even though she has been reminded time and time again that "Chinese people don't do such things" (MPL, p. 45), she no longer worries about her list of 'nots' – "not Wasp, and not black, and not as Jewish as Jewish can be; and not from China town" (MPL, p.231). Awake to her uniqueness, her necessary otherness, she becomes free to choose that which she would be. But to what consequence? By the end of Jen's novel Mona has indeed re-defined herself, but has become estranged from her mother. Is this the price she has to pay for freedom?

At the close of *Sag Harbor* Benji pins his hopes on a new start with the accompanying expectancy of forging new paths and creating new dreams at the dawn of the school year. Not for him a re-tracing of the wornout paths that others have trekked. "As if we weren't jealous of someone who just didn't give a fuck" (ibid, p. 270). Yet his path has been marked by the perception of the futility of trying to re-create a new self. On the night of the power failure at the ice-cream parlour on one of Benji's late night stints, he experiences a sense of powerlessness, similar to Mona's, as he takes stock of life's injustices.

It begins with a sense of guilt at having replaced Gabe's tuck shop (a place where he and his mates previously hung out) with the ice cream parlour as a place to "kill a chunk of summer" (ibid, p.130). Scooping away for Everyman he feels revolted by the impatience of customers who "juggled condescension and confusion" (ibid, p. 112) in a bid to keep him in his place. He faces the grim conclusion that "we [are] ... all kept by this place in some way" (ibidem), and ruminating in the dark he becomes overwhelmed with the disappointment of dashed hopes. He had wanted to hook up with Meg, a girl he had taken a fancy to – "There was a moment in the dark when I had pictured her giving me a ride home ... and then various things occurring" (ibid, p. 116).

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[19] "To say one's identity is an explicit theory of oneself *as a person* (original emphasis) is to say it is a theory that construes the self as a *rational agent*. To see oneself as a rational agent, moreover, is to see oneself as *singular* and *continuous* (Moshman, 2005:87)

That was not to be. He ponders his disdain of the manager, Bert, who makes “a good show of being upright when Martine was about, but once the boss left he spent half the shift in the bathroom, shivering in hangover (ibid, p. 96), and he wryly considers NP’s commandeering of free ice cream. Benji makes a choice that night and revolts. He revolts against the mere injustice of it all.

With the power supply still out the shop closes for the night. Leaving to go their separate ways, NP suddenly remembers his mother’s ice-cream which he has left inside. As he returns to get it something comes over Benji. He “can’t explain what happened” (ibid, p.116) but he “had a fall guy in NP” (ibid, p.117) and so in defiance of a hegemonic world at odds with his own desire for assertion he returns to the dark of the shop and opens the freezers.

> I couldn’t see it, but I pictured the white mist in the darkness spilling out in chilly, ghostly tendrils. The heat and humidity reached inside, brushing their fingertips along the side of the cans and transforming the frost there into beads of water. It was an exchange, the outside coming inside and the inside entering outside, like a tiny darkness that grew and then spread to cover whole towns (ibidem).

Benji’s act, his choice to destroy the boundaries put in place to separate and contain things in their ‘rightful’ places, becomes his cry for assertion. Yet at some level he remains cognisant of the fact that his self assertion may wreak consequences on others.

> From time to time, I think of the freezer and have a vision of the catastrophe. As the night grows long, the containers at the bottom of the pile start to buckle under their burden. What is inside has gone soft and weak. The bottom cans collapse under the weight of their brothers and the ones up high tumble out of the freezer, knocking the doors wide, the lids of the cans popping off. The cans splash out their guts, one after the other. It’s dark, and no one can see it but me, I can see it, the rainbow calamity on the tile, the green mint and bloodred sherbet and other assorted plenty in a cookie-clotted sludge oozing out across the floor, marshmallows floating like broken teeth, all this in a slow and ugly wave, reaching toward me like a hand (ibid, p.119).

As Benji walks home that night he gives a metaphorical tip of his hat to his ancestors. “For a few minutes I was a true son of Eastville, returning with my brothers in the dark down Bay Street and Hempstead Street after a good day’s work” (ibid, p.118). Yet the darkness swallows his gesture and the apprehension remains that this occult recognition of his forebears cannot appease the critics who uphold insider doctrine. For whilst Benji does acknowledge his roots he cannot shake the feeling that “[t]hey never changed so there was no need to appraise them, coo over them honour them in any way” (ibid, p.19). “We were always coming upon paths made by those who had come before us, retracing their discoveries and mistakes” (ibidem). Yet “the slow and ugly wave” (SH, p.119) of disapproval advances and engulfs the narrator’s thoughts and carries with it fear and desperation; yet also a sense of entitlement and desire for assertion. As with the old car that Benji and his friends took delight in destroying, the “red Karmann Ghia, that debased victim of the Rust Gods” (SH, p. 128) whose symbolic subversive existence satisfied “adolescent aesthetics of destruction” (ibidem) as they let rip with their BB guns on its decaying body, the catastrophe at Jonni Waffle becomes the outcry of a teenager who is left with no perceivable alternative. He cannot take to the street with a watermelon, but he can orchestrate his own revolt.

II.3 Involvement versus Commitment

In a conversation Mona has in *Mona in the Promised Land,* she is asked, “What’s the difference between a chicken and a pig at breakfast?” (MPL, p.116). The answer she is given is that “the chicken is involved but the pig is committed” (ibidem), which invites us to take a closer look at this distinction. The fundamental difference would appear to be the degree of self that is brought to the table (no pun intended). As I pointed out in the first part of this chapter, Mona and Benji find themselves ‘involved’ in other people’s experiments but to which they are not truly committed. What, then, is the staying force of commitment?

At the beginning of *Sag Harbor*, Benji causes himself considerable discomfort by committing to a pair of skates that are too small for him. He claims, “I was not the kind of person to ask for the right size after I had committed” (SH, p.9). Whilst this incident seems trivial, and light-hearted, even typical of adolescent choices, it highlights the

degree to which one often does make choices, committing to those choices without due consideration, thus unavoidably succumbing to enacting a part in someone else's experiment. This sort of 'commitment' which is, for the large part a simple act of alignment, is related to Marcia's model of identity foreclosure to which I have already made several references. Dibs have not been claimed and neither has there been a phase or process of exploration and experimentation. Benji's commitment to skates which cause pain is moderated by his underlying feelings of inadequacy in the same way that Mona eventually recognises her involvement in the Temple Youth Group and even her role in Camp Gugelstein as mitigated by her need to belong; true commitment being an affirmation of will.

Towards the end of Jen's novel, Seth reveals to Mona how her telephone conversations with the newly resurrected Sherman have, in fact, been conversations with Seth himself who has been impersonating Sherman. In pleading his case Seth argues that whilst his actions were dishonest they showed *commitment* – "You have to at least give me credit for commitment" (ibid, p.279), he argues. "[T]hings aren't so straightforward. Sometimes deception is necessary. Even Nietzsche says that there is truth through masks" (ibidem).

It is ironic that Seth who has always claimed to have lived by the motto that "between the inside person and the outside person there should be no difference" (ibid, p.121) finds insight through his use of the 'Sherman disguise'. Donning this mask brings about an encounter with himself; for whilst Seth initially tries to live 'authentically' in his teepee of anti-bourgeois design, the farce of this utopian, self-serving world is what proves to be inauthentic. It is only in his guise as an 'authentic deep-thinking Sherman' that he is able to enter Mona's inner world for the first time and make an genuine connection with her, giving credence to his own understanding of Nietzsche's paradox of "truth through masks" (ibid, p.279). It is in wearing Sherman's mask that Seth is able to drop the mask of free-thinking radical and seek out Mona, connecting with her openly and in so doing to meet the real Mona, rather than the radical Yoko Ono of his fantasies. "All you wanted was for me to be a radical" (ibid, p.222) were Mona's words at their break-up when she realised that "somehow her experiment ha[d] turned into his experiment" (ibid, p.223).

Yet equally ironic is that throughout Mona's identity performance with the original Sherman in which the artifice of her performance is exposed by his words "*You just want to have a boyfriend to become popular"* (ibid, p.21), Mona is lead to a greater understanding of authenticity and able to reject Seth's in-authenticity. The real Sherman commits to the real Mona, not her performance, and yet eventually rejects her performance as farcical. Mona only later recognises the truth in Sherman's insight and, thus, throughout the story tries to re-connect with this Sherman.

Commitment concedes choice and demands assertiveness which mere involvement does not. Involvement is often revealed as pretence, a key formula in identity alignment. The pretence of Benji's intricate group handshakes in *Sag Harbor* were revealed to be an "unmistakable" (SH, p.66) fraud, yet Seth's performance comes from a place of sincerity and commitment. On this new ground of authenticity, then, Mona and Seth can claim themselves and each other. At the end of Jen's novel, "Mona the Uncommitted" (MPL, p.297) finally commits, and Mona the eternal explorer reaches identity achievement in accepting the plurality of her being. "She thinks how she could really change her name if she wanted to; and she thinks how at one point in her life that was what mattered more than anything" (ibid, p.303). In the end, however, she finds comfort in acceptance – not acceptance as a means to belong or acceptance in a performance – but acceptance of her singular and authentic self.

II.4 Representation and Plural Identities

In an essay entitled "Performing Identity in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*, Fu Jen Chen claims that there has been a "demise of totalising identification" (Chen, 2007:56) in what she calls the "post-modern-global capitalist regime" (ibidem) of today. This is similar to what Devereux means when he refers to the individual who with a sufficient number of groups to identify becomes equipped with a "tool box" of identities (Devereux, 1975). "When an individual has a sufficient number of sufficiently varied ... identities, each of them becomes a tool and their totality a kind of 'tool box' which both actualize and implement socially his unique pattern of personality" (ibidem). This is what Mona and Benji are offered, and their identity status work can be revealed as complete in the successful merging of these different identities into one

self. At the end of Jen's novel Mona achieves this metaphorical marriage of identities which reaches its symbolic climax in the form of her daughter Io. And, in a sense, so does Benji. Whilst in recognition of his life-long hang-ups he claims that "incomplete children become incomplete adults" (SH, p.264), the adult Benji can, in the end, stand outside that person to claim himself.

> Talking about that summer all this time, sometimes I have to stop and say, I don't know who this Benji kid is, either ... The poor sap. I need him to figure out how I got where I am, and he needs me to reassure him that despite all he knows and has seen and feels, there is more" (ibidem).

This feeling of otherness in self is something which Werner Sollors points out in Mary Antin's "*The Promised Land"* (1912). "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell". (Antin apud Sollors, 1986:32). Both the retrospective[20] and the fluid act of identity are represented here in the concept of evolving selfhood.

Fu Jen Chen states that "the new politics of subjectivity celebrates multiple shifting identifications and free choice to identify with a proliferation of differences" (Chen, 2007:56). Yet, throughout both texts, Jen and Whitehead appear to question this freedom of choice. "How can everybody in the fucking world be Jewish?" asks Alfred, the black cook in *Mona in the Promised Land*.

Historically many are the precursors to the "new politics" to which Chen refers. The mere citing of something 'new' rests on the understanding that something different has gone before. In counterpoise to White Anglo Saxon Protestant America, and heralded by the Civil Rights Movement, minority groups share in the ways in which the dominant group has perceived them, and have had to fight for their say in the nation's dialogue. With America's history of racial oppression, the role of artists has long been relied upon to give voice to a marginalised group. As early as the Harlem Renaissance, W E B Du Bois (1926) was of the opinion that "all art is propaganda and ever must be" (Du Bois apud Sollors, 1996:103), and remained adamant that his artistic purpose was "for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (ibidem). In the light

[20] See my p.15

of the politics of the day this propagandist feature of art is relevant. Yet in today's post-civil rights age does the burden of representation linger?

There are indeed proponents of representation that insist that the historical nature of race and ethnicity require a "reading by ethnicity" (Wong apud Japtok, p.161). Wong argues that it is "a necessary act of tradition – and identity-building for those whose literatures have been rendered invisible by subsumption" (sic) (ibid). Likewise, it becomes apparent that there are those who have suffered at the hands of prejudice and their ethnic identity thus pervades all other aspects of self. In this regard Anne Anlin Cheng speaks of "racial melancholia" which, she states, "denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment" (Cheng, 2001:148), highlighting the often "constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject formation" (ibid, l.62). Those that suffer injury need to empower themselves by "speaking out against that injury" (ibid, l.73), she declares. And indeed, those who purport to upstage a culture or take a political stance should be allowed to do so. But simple affiliation to the group should not make this mandatory. Is not prescriptive representation succumbing to another kind of hegemony – that of the sovereignty of group identity? If 'rum and raisin' has been chosen for the artist before s/he gets to the party, insider doctrine then simply takes over the reins of the hegemonic 'other'.

Surely then the key to selfhood lies in both the acceptance and acknowledgement of Devereux's 'tool box' of plural identities. Sen argues that we are each a composite of multiple identities and that given these plural associations and affiliations relative importance must be assigned accordingly in any given context (Sen, 2006:xiii). It is time to acknowledge this. Chapelle states that "Only through complete artistic freedom can any artist discover and present his or her own truth" (Chappelle apud Toure 2011:58), for although "artists have a special place in the collective mind of the groups that claim them" (ibid), as members of those collectives we need to acknowledge the artists' affiliations to other groups. So where does the tally lie with Jen and Whitehead's views?

What makes *Mona in the Promised Land* and *Sag Harbor* in their broadest sense ethnic is that they are "works written by, about, or for persons who perceived themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups ..." (Sollors, 1986:243). Yet warns Sollors, "the categorization of writers as members of ethnic

groups ... is partial, temporal, and insufficient characterization at best" (ibid, p.15). In revealing the composite factors which have shaped their characters identities, as well as the parleying voices that claim representation, Jen and Whitehead understand the partiality, temporality and insufficiency of such a limited and limiting view of identity. "Assigning names is a technique of conceptual sorting" (Taylor, 2007:630) and, indeed, Gish Jen has come to realise that she has to accept that "either you're categorized or else you're ignored" (Jen, 1993)[21]. Yet this compartmentalising of the creative flow must, nevertheless, jar with what Jen has taken great pains in her novel to resist – the singularity of identity[22]. Jen's Mona and Callie are singular characters with singular histories, as indeed are the other characters in her novel who to some extent could be perceived as representative of their respective ethnic groups. But Jen seems to resist this notion. – "But he's not your representative" (MPL, p.220) says Mona of Alfred's role as cook at the pancake house. "He's your employer" (ibidem).

Like Mona, Jen appears to be making the same assertion as Mona. Indeed she has spoken out against representational service – "It's particularly the concern of a writer [to ask], 'What is my rightful territory? Do I accept limitations placed on me by the mainstream? Do I accept my assigned subjects?' The answer is 'I do not.' It's time to think again about ethnic lit. What is it about? What does it presume to speak on? It doesn't need to be representative to be of value" (Jen, 1996)[23].

Nonetheless the issue remains that "[i]n the complicated American landscape of regional, religious and ethnic affiliations, it could be very difficult to construct the self as an autonomous individual *and* as fated group member" (original emphasis) (Sollors, 1986:173). Yet perhaps it is not as fated group members that Jen and Whitehead wish to assert themselves. They seem to understand Mona's parents' "make sure" policy (MPL, p.118), which is surely the policy of all insider doctrine.

> *Make sure, more sure* – the endless refrain of her parents' lives. Sometimes Mona wants to say to them, You know, the Chinese revolution was a long time

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[21] In an interview with Yuko Matsukawa http://www.questia.com/reader/printPaginator/872

[22] This is not to be confused with being a singular entity. To be a singular entity is to understand oneself as unique whereas the singularity of identity refers to the limited scope of an identity which is defined on one singular aspect.

[23] In an interview with Julie Shiroishi http://asianweek.com/092796/cover.html

> ago; you can get over it now. Okay, you had to hide in the garden and listen to bombs fall out of the sky, also you lost everything you had. And it's true you don't even know what happened to your sisters and brothers and parents, and only wish you could send them some money. But didn't you make it? Aren't you here in America, watching the sale ads, collecting your rain checks? You know what you are now? She wants to say. Now you're smart shoppers. You can forget about *make sure*. But in another way she understands it's like asking the Jews to get over the Holocaust, or like asking the blacks to get over slavery. Once you've lost your house and your family and your country, your devil-may-care is pretty much gone too (ibidem).

Yet now in the twenty-first century, isn't it time to accept the singularity of personal experience? And isn't it thus possible and necessary to embrace the plurality of the individual's identity associations? We can hold on to our histories without letting them hold on to us.

Various selves can coexist, seems to be Jen's message. There can be a difference "between the inside person and the outside person" (ibid, p.121). Yin and yang can cohabitate naturally for, as Seth finally concludes, "without the world of outer politeness, you cannot have a world of inner richness" (ibid, p.237). Says Jen,

> There's a very Western view in which somehow you need to resolve the tension between any two things, to want things to come to a kind of conclusion ... whereas I've been wondering where this whole idea of fluidity comes from, and I think it's because I grew up with an [Eastern] idea of yin/yang, sweet/sour. Opposites don't fight each other, but belong together and can intensify each other, and are simply in the nature of the world"[24]

It would seem then that the biggest hindrance to self assertion might be in allowing the historical cultural past of modern ethnicities to prescribe current attitudes. As Shana Russell states in her paper entitled "The Intellectual Promised Land: Negotiating Racial Hypervisibility in the Cultural Studies Classroom" [25], "The preferred school of thought as it relates to the examination of blackness, was one of suffering" (Russell, p.2). She argues that this is a "recurring message" (ibidem) in *Mona in the Promised Land* and that in Mona's conversion to Judaism, the notion that there

[24] Interview with Julie Shiroishi http://asianweek.com/092796/cover.html

[25] https://www.english.upenn.edu/sites/www.upenn.edu/files/intersections-russell-the_intellectual_promised_land.pdf

is learning involved in being a minority, “suggests that there is a performance associated with being oppressed. That being marginalised is a choice, or a legacy bestowed upon a person at birth. It is a source of pride and inspiration” (ibid, p.5). Thus she concludes that the prescriptive narrative stems from a “mythologized past” (ibidem).

Michael Fischer suggests that the newer works of American ethnic literature promote in a “paradoxical sense” ethnicity as something which is “reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual” (Fischer apud Sollors, 1991:xi). By drawing attention to the past’s prescriptive narrative and in using their adolescent protagonists to rebel against such prescription, Jen and Whitehead appear to be forging new ground. Says Whitehead of Du Boisian double consciousness:

> The double consciousness is about being a human being, an individual in society, and trying to make your way in a world where you are completely separate but wholly a part of it. It applies to every ethnic group, religious group, and on a more personal level, how an individual deals with the problem of being in society.[26]

This reinterpretation of traditional messages is something Paul C. Taylor examines in his paper entitled “Post-Black, Old Black”. In this work he furthers Chen’s “new politics of subjectivity”[27], by eulogising the “gains of multiculturalism and the consequent lifting of the burdens of racial reductionism” (Taylor, 2007:625). He says that “we see this development manifest in the emergence of artists for whom black identity [and, I might venture, racial or ethnic identity] is something to be interrogated, scrutinized, and variously enacted, if enacted at all ...” (ibid). Not for the purpose of denying one’s roots but in so doing to “expan[d] ... the boundaries of the definition” (Taylor, 2007:635).

Mona has expanded these boundaries and, in essence, so has her sister Callie. Callie’s decision to embrace her ethnicity holds the weight of free choice and embraces ethnicity on her own terms and thus broadens her personal boundaries of definition. In choosing her own version of what it means to be Chinese and thus “embracing ... a

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[26] In an interview with Samantha Cracknell – http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/gfx/29colson-whitehead.pdf

[27] See my p.42.

group identity in voluntary defiance [...it] allows [Callie] to steer a Roycean middle course between ancient narrowness and vulgar monotony" (Sollors, 1986:206). Says Sollors, "By creating new, not traditionally anchored group identities and by authenticating them, they may represent individuality and American identity at the same time" (ibidem).

Departing from her parents' code, Callie has edified ethnicity as a consensual act, rejecting theirs, and society's hegemony. Perhaps Callie, the "self-cleaning oven" (MPL, p.67) in learning to "raise [her] own hand" (ibid) has also found her Promised Land. Whilst Callie's newfound identity is shown to be not so much about self-discovery – the unearthing of qualities she did not previously recognise in herself, it is fundamentally about choice. "Callie is indeed sick of being Chinese, but there is being Chinese and being Chinese" (MPL, p.167). Together with Mona she redefines what it means to be Chinese and American.

Despite their parents' acceptance that the girls would need to find redefinition, Mona has to remind them of this, thus revealing the resistance of others when it comes to individual self-assertion. Their cry is joint:

> You are the one who brought us up to speak English. You said you would bend like bamboo instead of acting like you were planted by Bell Telephone. You said we weren't pure Chinese anymore, the parents had to accept we would be something else (MPL, p.49).

In depicting two contrasting sisters with diverse paths, Jen's message appears to be one which celebrates individual uniqueness and in the figure of their mother, Helen, Jen seems to reveal her underlying desire for mother America to become equally accepting of it. At the novel's end, Mona considers marrying her plural selves by claiming ownership of the name Changowitz. But whilst she can attest to her uniqueness in this way, true freedom from prescriptive performance is not really hers to grasp. This can only be granted her by her mother's change of heart. In the same way, Jen seems to be asking America for a change of heart.

And in a similar way, Whitehead's story is about more than just a young black boy whose minority ethnic status challenges his will to assert. Benji is a young boy whose personal home life has meted out unique and singular challenges, and so how

can either Mona or Benji be understood without the acknowledgement of their individual and personal histories?

Both Jen and Whitehead seem to understand that “Identity presupposes the differentiation and maintenance of differences as much as the synthesis or integration of the different” (Straub, 2001:66), but can their audiences?

In an interview with Yuko Matsukawa, to which I have already made reference[28], Jen declares “I was damned if I was going to give them [my readers] the exotic nonsense they thought they wanted” (Jen, 1993). So whilst the racially prescriptive family drink for the Changs might indeed be ginseng “what they really want is a milkshake” (MPL, p.3), and this is what Jen delivers. Through the depiction of Mona’s staged and fabricated oriental identity, Jen skews any preconceptions of Chinese or Oriental ethnicity, and indeed of American identity, that the reader might bring to the table.

Benji and his friends “always fought for real” (SH, p.158), and it might be suggested that Colson Whitehead has armed himself with the weapons of his trade in his fight to assert his unique self. He is reported to have brought “a fresh, original sensibility to American letters” (Selzer, 2008), with his work cutting across culture, genre and media. In what might appear a complete disregard for the eclectic nature of his work, it too has been categorized as African American Literature, perhaps appearing in this canon in much the same way as the firefly that got its name –

> from its fake time, people time, when in fact most of its business went on when people couldn’t see it. Its true life was invisible to us but we called it firefly after its fractions. Knowable and fixed for a few seconds, sharing a short segment of its message before it continued on its real mission, unknowable in its true self and course, outside of reach. It was a bad name because it was incomplete – both parts were true, the bright and the dark, the one we could see and the other one we couldn’t. It was both (SH, p.153)

Says Jefferson, “[w]e may consider each generation as a distinct nation with a right to bind themselves, but none to bind the succeeding generation, more than the inhabitants of another country” (Jefferson apud Sollors, 1986: 209). Whilst Whitehead strives to impress on his craft an autonomous

[28] See my p.48

individuality by questioning “the power of ethnicity” (ibid, p.257) he is “helping to create it anew” (ibidem), thus skewing our definition of African American Literature.

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Conclusion

As mentioned in my introduction, the bildungsroman is the perfect forum for an author to investigate the growing sense of self in the maturing individual. In my first chapter I looked at the various issues which have shaped this development by first addressing the ethnicity of Jen and Whitehead's protagonist's. In *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction,* Martin Japtok explains his key interest in this dual relationship of adolescence and ethnicity. He says:

> I have selected texts that tell coming-of-age stories because in such texts, the protagonist's growing awareness of his/her ethnicity and its social significance, as reflected in the text, can reveal much about the shape and importance a work gives ethnicity because it focuses on the relations of a protagonist with the wider environment. (Japtok, 2005:21)

Whilst Whitehead is wont to classify *Sag Harbor* as a bildungsroman, his novel does to some extent "follow the development of the hero ..., through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick, 2008:35). And so does Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*. The ethnicity of Jen and Whitehead's main characters plays an important role in this journey, but it has not been the only driving force in their identity status work. Thus whilst the "protagonist-centred writing [may] serve as a communication for ethnic writers: on the one hand, [] shar[ing] experiences with other members of the writer's ethnic community; on the other hand, [] communicat[ing] "authentic" views of ethnic life to mainstream readers" (Japtok, 2005:25), I have not wanted my interpretation of these works to become clouded by the limitation of reading the work as ethnic. Indeed, as Horace Kallen points out, "each man in the human family [has] the right to give his life ideal expression" (Kallen apud Sollors, 1986:182), for it is through this ideal expression that we assert a notion of self.

However, asked to defend "the ability of words adequately to represent identity or experience" (2008:398) Whitehead[29] himself claims that "[t]he situation is always hopeless" (ibidem). Nonetheless, the words and language of these novels are the recourse to which both Whitehead and Jen apply in an attempt to claim authorial

[29] In an interview with Linda Selzer

assertion. Indeed, it could be said that Jen and Whitehead have used these novels, representative of ethnic genre to "serve as counterweights to the stereotypical view of ethnicity by the dominant culture" (Japtok, 2005:24). Yet I believe that they also serve as a message to the stereotypical view of representation by their ethnic counterparts.

In Jen's opening sentence, her narrator acknowledges stereotype, "There they are, nice Chinese family" (MPL, p.3), and panders to the reader's expectations of an immigrant story by leading the reader into a false sense of understanding of the essence of the tale – "father, mother, two born-here girls" (ibidem). Standing from a position in time where history has played out, the narrator calls the Changs the "New Jews" (ibidem) and a "model minority" (ibidem) playing with the reader's understanding of these labels, whilst at the same time offering a flippant 'nod' to America's pioneering tradition, "Westward ho! And all that" (MPL, p.4), both suggesting that this is a story of settlement whilst aligning the Changs with a great American tradition. However, using an irreverent style we have witnessed her dissect these notions, tackling issues of assimilation, belonging and identity assertion in the face of inevitable stereotyping. Jen's authorial comment, by Japtok's suggestion, appears to be one of open critique yet with a certain voice of derision which is targeted at all stereotyping. Whitehead, too, offers this mockery beginning his tale on a sarcastic note – "Asking [when did you get out] was showing off, even though anyone you could brag to had received the same gift and had come by it the same way you did" (ibid, p.1).

Whilst Mona in *Mona in the Promised Land* is fictional and not a bygone Jen nor, indeed, Benji in *Sag Harbor* a pre-ordained Whitehead, their stories expose an understanding of identity which seems to advocate the exploration of "otherness in ourselves" (Sollors, 1986:31). At the close of Whitehead's tale, the narrator remarks in a way reminiscent of Mary Antin[30], "I don't know who this Benji kid is" (SH, p. 264). Jen (1993) affirms that "Mona is the person I would have liked to have been"[31] and in so doing advocates her author/character connection.

[30] See my p.46
[31] In an interview with Yuko Matsukawa

Yet is it even necessary to look for this link? "Mona Chang is not representative", says Jen "and we're finally at the point where people don't need to be representative anymore ... enough of that"[32].

"We should just call it all "writing" and be done with labels"[33], states Whitehead. Yet both he and Jen seem to remain skewered to their respective representational literary canons. This should not be seen as a failure in their self-assertiveness, but perhaps a failure in us to concede their freedom of choice. Says Whitehead of using language as empowering, "I am a writer, so that's one of the foundational premises of my job. By finding the right words, I master my world ..."[34].

In his semantic history of identity, Philip Gleason (1983) takes the reader back to the origins of the concept of identity; calls to mind the varied stances that proponents of different theories (psychological or sociological) take; and ultimately urges cultural historians to re-visit these approaches in order to develop the necessary critical approach in both the study and the assessment of cultural works. This is what I have tried to achieve in this work. By returning to the fundamentals of identity in both their individual and collective forms, by revealing the determinacy of historical readings and Jen and Whitehead's resistance to such hegemony, I have hopefully skewed the notion of identity as a clearly defined concept. For if artists are to be truly cosmopolitan and their works to remain relevant, their "obligations [...] stretch beyond to whom [they] are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship" (Appiah, 2007:xv). Yet in placing "obligations" on them and demanding representation, the value of their personal truth is not to be undermined. I believe that the abolishment of reductionist thinking lends this worth, revealing "the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance" (ibidem).

Fundamentally, the degree to which the individual skewers him/herself to an identity whether it be to that of an ethnic identity or, indeed, any other identity needs to be recognised as choice. Perhaps it is we who need to listen more closely to what our artists are saying. As Helen, in Jen's closing scene, confers on Mona the acceptance

[32] In an interview with Julie Shiroishi
[33] In an interview with Linda Selzer
[34] In an interview with Rumpus magazine http://therumpus.net/2009/04/the-rumpus-original-combo-colson.whitehead/

of her uniqueness, perhaps it becomes incumbent of us to accept our artists in their singular pluralities.

"It's a simple thing to keep the two Greedos together in your head if you know how" (SH, p.157).

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