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“How do I get out?” – Transcultural Places as Sanctuary in The Human Stain

1 Introduction

Philip Roth’s novel The Human Stain is the final installment of his “America Trilogy”. It is expansive in its focus, covering a wide spectrum of contemporary topics. The following examination of the role of transcultural places in the novel draws on Hubert Zapf’s concept of “Literature as Cultural Ecology” as an interpretive framework. This introduction is followed by an outline of Zapf’s triadic model and an analysis of the novel which concentrates on transcultural aspects and aims to integrate the analytical concept of place with a cultural-ecological reading.

The opening paragraph of the novel firmly anchors the narrative in the summer of 1998 and introduces a central plot element, the affair between a cleaning woman, Faunia Farley, and a professor of classics, Coleman Silk. The focus then turns to the place where this affair began,

[a] rural post office, a small gray clapboard shack that looked as if it might have sheltered an Okie family from the winds of the Dust Bowl back in the 1930s and that, sitting alone and forlorn across from the gas station and the general store, flies its American flag at the junction of the two roads that mark the commercial center of this mountainside town. (1)

This description taps into American cultural memory, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, but also situates the narrative in a decidedly physical American context, or better, space. Referring to the concept of the small town with its typical elements like the “gas station”, the “general store,” not to mention the “American flag,” the initial setting and the space in which most of the action will take place is deftly delineated. At the same time, the remoteness of this “commercial center” is evidenced in the fact that it is a mere “crossroads” in a “mountainside town”.

As a number of critics have pointed out, the characters who interact in this space all go through some kind of identity crisis (cf. Kral). These crises, I would argue, can be better understood if one looks at the spatial concepts underlying the structure of the novel. Interestingly, the majority of the novel’s main characters can be shown to transcend or fluctuate between different cultural spaces. In the following, Hubert Zapf’s conception of Literature as Cultural Ecology will serve as an interpretive framework. According to Zapf,
Literature has always been the medium of a ‘cultural ecology’ in the sense that it has staged and explored, in ever new scenarios, the relationship of prevailing cultural systems to the needs and manifestations of human and nonhuman ‘nature’. (Zapf, “Remarks” 3)

In this view, the study of place in literature is especially promising as it provides a particularly useful concept well-suited for an analysis of the interactions between human and non-human ‘nature.’ Place is both a social construct and a part of the natural world. (Buell, Writing 60) A similar point is made by Carter, Donald, and Squires, who define place as “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (qtd. in Buell, Future 63).

Two places in the novel will be analyzed with special attention to the way they influence identity-formation: the Audubon Society at Seeley Falls which is instrumental for the concept of identity developed by Faunia Farley and the urban space of New York City’s Greenwich Village – the environment in which Coleman Silk leaves behind his African-American roots and creates his new Jewish self.

2  Literature as Cultural Ecology

The notion of “Literature as Cultural Ecology” as put forward by Zapf draws on the literary anthropology of Wolfgang Iser on the one hand, and new developments in ecocriticism on the other hand, in particular Peter Finke’s project of an “Evolutionary Cultural Ecology,” which builds on a tradition of ecological thinking in cultural contexts starting with Julian Steward, and later elaborated by Gregory Bateson and others: “It explains culture as an ecosystemsatically organized product of overall evolutionary processes. Therefore, the core of the new approach consists of a theory of so-called cultural ecosystems” (Finke 175).

Zapf’s adaptation of this concept to literature is guided by the thesis that imaginative literature in particular “acts like an ecological principle or an ecological energy within the larger system of cultural discourses.” (Zapf, “State” 55)

In this view, literature has two main functions. Firstly, it serves as a source of cultural creativity and in this way constantly renews language, perception and communication. Secondly, literature serves as a diagnostic sensorium by pointing out deficits and short-comings of the cultural system. Literature can be characterized by analogies between aesthetic and ecological processes. For one, Zapf sees literature as a depragmatized sphere in which the first ecological principle “Everything is connected to everything else” becomes a structuring feature of texts. Further characteristics of both aesthetic and ecological processes include their processual and relational nature, as well as their complexity.

For the analysis of literary works Zapf proposes a triadic functional model of literature as “cultural-critical metadiscourse,” “imaginative counterdiscourse,” and “reintegrative interdiscourse.” As a cultural-critical meta-
discourse, literature functions as a “representation of typical deficits, blind spots, imbalances, deformations, and contradictions within dominant systems of civilizational power” (Zapf, “State” 62). Such systems prevent the individual from developing freely and force them to comply with authoritative sets of rules. As a consequence the diversity of life is reduced and streamlined to ideologically determined models of development and conduct. The conflicts and traumas which arise from such oppression lead to a variety of severe consequences for the individual, which are often symbolically expressed in literature through images like death-in-life, the waste land or animal-in-the-cage (cf. Zapf 64). To cite one of Zapf’s examples, the beginning of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* with its bleak description of puritan society, and its description of a prison can be seen as constituting a (part of the) cultural-critical metadiscourse.

The imaginative counterdiscourse “can be described as a counterdiscursive staging and semiotic empowering of that which is marginalized, neglected or repressed in the dominant cultural reality system” (Zapf, “State” 63). This empowering of the formerly excluded leads to confrontation with neglected questions and thus undermines dominant structures. In a monolithic and restrictive system, the return of the marginalized offers alternatives and a wider context for reassessments of the system. The “other” is also the source of creativity for the production of literature – the formerly marginalized becomes aesthetically marked. (cf. Zapf 65) An example of this complex process is the scarlet letter on Hester’s breast, which becomes the symbol of the culturally repressed, as well as the starting point for a semiosis which puts the letter in a wide range of different contexts, transcending the originally intended meaning “adulteress”.

Finally, the reintegrative interdiscourse “can be described as the reintegration of the excluded with the cultural reality system, through which literature contributes to the constant renewal of the cultural center from its margins.” (Zapf, “State” 64) This reintegration does not just offer simple solutions, but points to alternatives. Literature draws its emotional and cognitive intensity from the combination of formerly disparate spheres, among which culture and nature are the most basic. The reintegration of the repressed with the dominant system leads to moments of regeneration and a regaining of lost creativity. The end of a death-in-life state is often translated into imagery of new beginnings and rebirth. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale’s burst of creativity after the reunion with Hester and Pearl in the forest (cf. Zapf 82) can be analyzed as part of the reintegrative interdiscourse.

These discourses are constituted in the metaphoric language and the imagery of the text: their distribution in any literary work must necessarily be specific to the respective texts. Different genres may vary in their emphasis on one of the three discourses and in different periods, one or the other discourse may become predominant. Zapf asserts that, in principle, all three discourses are inherent to literature, which in this way fulfills an important function within the ecology of a wider culture.
3 Philip Roth's The Human Stain

Philip Roth is hardly known for nature writing or the ecological focus of his novels, but a survey of his major texts shows that a closer examination from an ecocritical perspective might yield interesting results. It is worth considering for a moment to what extent the classical theme of city and countryside – as discussed in the studies by Leo Marx and Raymond Williams – can be found in Roth's works. In the majority of Roth's novel the urban centre is Newark, New Jersey. In his first novella Goodbye, Columbus the green and affluent suburb of Short Hills serves as contrast to downtown Newark, where the protagonist Neil Klugman hopes that Brenda Patimkin, who lives in Short Hills will help him climb the "lousy hundred and eighty feet" (Goodbye, Columbus 18) of physical altitude and socio-economic status that lie between Newark and its wealthy suburb. Later, Roth thematized this tension between city and suburb in American Pastoral: the protagonist Seymour "Swede" Levov moves to Rimrock when Newark goes into decline. In suburban Rimrock Levov enacts his pastoral fantasy, living in a house dating back to the American Revolution and feeling like Johnny Appleseed. (cf. 315) This dynamic continues with Marcus Messner, the protagonist of Roth's latest novel Indignation, who escapes his over-protective father and leaves Newark to continue his education at Winesburg College, Ohio, which of evokes Sherwood Anderson's eponymous book and its descriptions of rural small-town life.

The Human Stain can be added to this list for a variety of reasons: Nathan Zuckerman, the protagonist and narrator, is well known from a series of earlier novels and is probably the most prominent literary recluse in contemporary American literature. From The Ghost Writer in 1979, where he visited his idol I.E. Lonoff on a secluded mountaintop to his latest, probably final appearance in Exit Ghost, Zuckerman has been oscillating between participating in the stream of life and isolation from it. The very first sentence of Exit Ghost draws attention to this oscillation: "I hadn't been in New York in eleven years" (1). The different spaces of New York City, Newark and the Berkshires are an important part of the last Zuckerman novel, yet The Human Stain goes further in the treatment of ecological themes than Roth's other works.

The novel's title, "The Human Stain," has a number of possible meanings, among them the tainting of a pristine natural state through human and cultural interference. Seen in this light, passages like the ending of the novel with its pastoral imagery become problematic:

Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America (361).
While the image of water “constantly turning over” is striking in its harmony, the tableau is not devoid of irony: the solitary man in the tableau is Lester Farley, a psychopath and supposed murderer, in some sense a personification of the “human stain.”

At a closer look, it becomes clear that The Human Stain might be considered, if not a transcultural novel, at least transcultural in focus. As will be shown below, the novel is concerned with the construction of identity across different forms of culture, e.g. African-American and Jewish-American or French vs. American. Furthermore we can consider the novel a hybrid in form and content, a mix of different genres closely associated with the heyday of various cultures: it is primarily a novel, but as critics like Mark Shechner have pointed out, The Human Stain could pass perfectly as a Hawthornian Romance, a decidedly American genre, while it is structurally reminiscent of Greek tragedy with its five parts. Preceded by an epigraph from Sophocles’ Oedipus the King and containing chapter headings like “The Purifying Ritual,” these analogies cannot be overlooked. They are supported by a large amount of intertextual references to Greek but also to Shakespearian Tragedy, adding another layer of cultural reference To pick just one specific reference, the names of characters are drawn from Roman and Greek mythology and tragedy, while the plays of Shakespeare, especially Julius Caesar serve as an intermediary: there is Coleman “Brutus,” and Ernestine “Calpurnia” Silk. Faunia Farley and even less important figures have names like “Primus” and Vietnam veteran Lester, or “Les” Farley is brought into connection with Achilles.

Another transcultural element in the novel is its setting in academia. The college that employs Silk is called Athena, yet it is far from a place of enlightenment in the classical sense. Among its faculty we find Delphine Roux, a young French professor of literature, whose education at the École Normale Supérieure and Yale turns out to be a mixed blessing: while it boosted her application, it also sets her apart from her colleagues and she feels out of place at Athena. She thinks of herself as “a displaced person, a misplaced person.” (276) What resonates in the term “displaced” is that she tries to step out of the shadow of her overpowering family and basically flees France only to realize, that she does not belong in American society, that cultural integration takes more than just mastering the language. She comes to recognize that despite “all her fluency she is not fluent” (275). This culture shock also comes in the form of a clash of academic “cultures”. Her proficiency in French theory does not fare well with the settled “humanists,” her colleagues in the department, who make fun of her “little French aura” (271). She is not the only character trying to construct an identity between and across cultures: Coleman Silk, the protagonist, does so in a much more dramatic way.

Famously, The Human Stain is a novel about the phenomenon of passing and about negotiating life in different cultures: Coleman Silk is born into an African-American family and realizes as a teenager that his light skin allows him to pass as white. He renounces his family, takes on a Jewish identity and
becomes a Professor of Classics at Athena College. Eventually, he has to resign in the wake of allegations of racism by African-American students. The irony here is that Silk decided to pass as white to avoid the impact of racism in the first place. However, the decision to distance himself from his family generates new constraints, such as having to lie to his wife and children. The initial sense of triumph about the fact that “[a]s a heretofore unknown amalgam of the most unalike of America’s historic undesirables, he now made sense” (132) soon gives way to the realization that his new identity comes at the price of isolation and fear of being found out. Only after the death of his wife and in a new relationship to a cleaning woman does he find a way to break out of this situation, which by now amounts to a death-in-life state.

The Human Stain, as a novel, centers on the identity crises of its protagonists. Using the triadic model, we can roughly say that the cultural-critical metadiscourse of the novel with its main themes of racism and extreme forms of individualism and political correctness informs much of Coleman’s life, his youth and the time of his passing at Athena College. After the scandal leading to his resignation, Silk experiences a rebirth of sorts in a passionate love affair with Faunia Farley, who is part of the imaginative counterdiscourse of the novel. Throughout she is closely associated with the natural sphere (as evidenced in her first name) and subverts societal categories, for example by pretending to be illiterate. As a consequence, she is able to accept Coleman Silk, who, like her, often lives beyond conventions of society. Finally, the reintegrative interdiscourse in the novel cannot be separated from the character of Nathan Zuckerman. As the narrator figure of the novel, he is in control of narration and much of the novel is actually his conjecture about the inner life of the other protagonists.

Zuckerman, who had languished in the Berkshires following prostate surgery benefits from the positive energies of Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley. The rebirth of Coleman Silk is followed by the rebirth of his friend Nathan Zuckerman, as he himself points out: “Coleman danced me right back to life” (45). The two develop a deep friendship which leads Zuckerman to research the circumstances of Silk’s death and publish “Spooks” – essentially a diegetic version of The Human Stain – in order to defend the reputation of his friend. In this way, the genesis of the novel, as explained on the diegetic level, can be traced to the invigorating influence of Coleman and Faunia on Nathan Zuckerman. This is the structuring device of the novel, in which imaginative counterdiscourse and cultural-critical metadiscourse are brought together, contrasted and finally reintegrated.

Transcultural Places as Sanctuaries

As can be seen in the examples of Delphine Roux and Coleman Silk, the identity crises in Roth’s novel can be traced to the difficulties of preserving identity across and between cultures. For Coleman Silk, one place in particular is
central to his constructions of selfhood: between his childhood days in Newark and his new existence as the first Jewish professor at Athena College, Silk lives in New York City’s Greenwich Village. This place plays an important role in the formative years of the protagonist for a variety of reasons: removed from his family in Newark, Silk is no longer determined by family ties and the socially progressive environment offers many possibilities for expressions of his individuality. Since one dominant element of the cultural-critical metadiscourse in the novel is racism, one can argue that the negative effects of racism ultimately lead Coleman to renounce his African-American family and to pass as white. At this time of his life Silk enjoys the fact that his identity can be fluid, that he can decide whether he wants to be perceived as African American or as Jewish; he enjoys “the sliding relationship with everything” (108), as he terms it.

The importance of the spatial separation from his Newark roots can be observed when Silk takes his white girlfriend Steena Palson to Newark in order to introduce her to his family. He had avoided telling her that he is passing as white and consequently the encounter is experienced as shocking both by Silk’s family and his girlfriend. The atmosphere is tense, but the catastrophic outcome of the meeting becomes clear only at the end of the commute back to New York: “Not until the train carrying Coleman and Steena back to New York pulled into Pennsylvania Station early that evening did Steena break down in tears” (125). This traumatic experience eventually leads Silk to denounce his family and to start a new one with his Jewish wife Iris Gittelman. Before these events lead to tragic complications at Athena College, Silk enters a phase of playful experimentation when he meets a new girlfriend, Ellie Magee. She discovers the secret of his passing and as a result he can open himself up to her in ways he could not to Steena Palson. Both enjoy the fact they are often perceived as a mixed-race couple, even “playing the ambiguity of it” (133). Silk particularly enjoys the theatricality of this relationship, and the fact that “he’s always in a scene when he’s out with Ellie” (133). For a while he relishes life in “the four freest square miles in America” (135), as Ellie calls the Village. However, the appeal of a playful, fluid identity does not prove as strong as the yearning for singularity and a stable form of identity.

Therefore, when he finally decides to permanently take on a Jewish identity, his new wife “Iris gives him back his life on the scale he wants to live it” (136). Soon he realizes that the new identity holds its own set of limitations. The births of his children always carry the threat of crisis as no one can guarantee his children will share his light complexion. Upholding his new identity in all circumstances puts a high strain on him and leaves him burned out at the end of his career, languishing in a death-in-life state. In summary, Silk is ultimately looking to accomplish a greater feat than merely changing between two different ethnic identities at will. In a series of scenes the novel shows the problematic side of his decision to pass as white. With an ambition that is reminiscent of tragic hubris Coleman Silk seeks ever greater challeng-
es, first passing as white, then settling for a Jewish identity and eventually becoming the first Jewish professor at Athena College. His position at Athena seems an antithesis to both, his origins in Newark and his student years in Manhattan.

If we turn our attention to an equally important place in the novel, the rooms of the Audubon Society at Seeley Falls, we can see that despite all the apparent differences to Greenwich Village this place serves a similar function in so far as a central character uses it to redefine her identity. The place is far removed from the bustling life of the metropolis, but its quiet and meditative atmosphere even set it apart from the small-town life at Athena College. In this environment Faunia Farley finds refuge when she is most depressed and here the concept of the “human stain,” which gives the novel its title, is developed. Faunia Farley, who has an invigorating effect on Coleman Silk, often visits this place to deal with her severe depressions and begins to develop a relationship with the birds that are kept there in cages.

The most prominent of these birds is a crow named Prince, who shows anthropomorphic character traits acquired in the process of being hand-raised. By identifying with this crow and talking with it, Faunia leaves her outsider’s existence by acknowledging her marginal status in the society of Athena and adopts a new model of identity. Just like her, the crow can be considered an outsider as it is not accepted by other crows. An employee at the Audubon Society states: “He doesn’t have the right voice. He doesn’t know the crow language. They don’t like him out there” (242). Faunia Farley comments, “That’s what comes of hanging around all his life with people like us. The human stain” (242). By affiliating herself with the crow, Faunia stresses her affinity to natural processes and adopts a hybrid identity bridging the spheres of culture and nature.

Faunia visits the crow at times of great distress and finds comfort and companionship at the Audubon Society. This seems to touch upon a theme outlined by Benesch: “space in modern literature […] often functions as a site of aesthetic relief and regeneration” (13). As Lawrence Buell points out in *The Future of Ecocriticism*, nature can have a therapeutic function: “one can even speak plausibly of finding a place or ‘home’ in ‘wilderness’ – as a therapeutic refuge, for example” (67). Faunia’s case mirrors this motif, but is different in so far as the Audubon Society cannot be called a wilderness. Buell notes the example of Douglas Peacock’s *Grizzly Years: In Search of the American Wilderness*, which presents an account of the author’s efforts to come to terms with the trauma he suffered in the Vietnam War. Peacock felt numb and isolated after his return to America, struggling with the after-effects of his deployment: “If something wasn’t a matter of life or death, I just wasn’t there anymore.” (25) He discovers that encounters with the few remaining Grizzly Bears in the United States enable him to feel alive again and finds a new calling in protecting these threatened animals. In a sense, the harsh environment of Grizzly country becomes a psychological necessity for him: “I decided to push on. I needed something strong enough to pull me outside myself, a
good dose of wild country maybe. The Navajo or the Wind rivers might do it.” (17) Faunia Farley, who is equally traumatized, voices a similar sentiment: “Who do I talk to? Where do I go and what do I do and how the fuck do I get out? I am a crow. I know it. I know it!” (169) While the underlying motives of escaping from depressive mental states are similar – “to pull me outside of myself” in Peacock’s case and “how the fuck do I get out” in Faunia’s – there is a big difference in the way both experience nature. While Peacock seeks out the relative wilderness of America’s national parks, Faunia finds comfort at the Audubon Society, which offers a decidedly more domesticated and culturally informed access to wildlife.

The crow does not represent pristine nature, its appeal to Faunia lies in its outsider status, in its human traits. In this sense, the Audubon Society is a place, where the boundary between nature and culture is renegotiated; it is therefore a transcultural place in the widest sense. This is an important part of the imaginative counterdiscourse in the novel, as it points out alternative ways of perception and breaks down the discursive constraints of Athena College and its surroundings.

5 Conclusion

This analysis, with its emphasis on only two characters and places remains merely a first step towards analyzing the spatial concept underlying The Human Stain. Its intention was to present two examples of central transcultural places in the novel and to demonstrate their relevance to its entirety. One could argue that Roth’s treatment of setting and places in particular is only ancillary to his characterizations, as George J. Searles does (cf. Searles 123), but research on space and place has always insisted on their connection to identity. Therefore, this argument should not ultimately preclude a closer scrutiny of the function of place in Roth’s works.

A helpful concept for such an analysis is Buell’s understanding of an accumulative sense of place, which he describes as the notion that: “all the places a person has lived that she or he still dreams about sometimes are embedded and responsible for shaping present identity beyond what is consciously realized.” (Writing 69) In The Human Stain, Coleman Silk’s identity can be described as informed by a succession of places, ranging from his childhood in Newark to his life in Athena, with his time in Greenwich Village playing a pivotal role. Indeed both places discussed here seem transcultural in different ways. Coleman Silk thrives on the cosmopolitan and transcultural environment of New York City and Greenwich Village and explores the potential of a fluid identity in his playful passing as white. In the long run, however, his creative act of adopting a Jewish identity proves problematic to say the least. As for Faunia, it is interesting to note that she does not retreat to the absolute wilderness, but to the in-between state of the Audubon Society. The concept of the “human stain” is located on this blurry borderline:
Faunia’s rejection of society is both creatively therapeutic and a gesture of surrender. A comparison between these places also highlights similarities between Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley: both in their own ways try to escape “the persecuting spirit” (2) prevalent in their respective surroundings. The two places serve similar functions insofar as they provide sanctuaries from the dominant discourse the characters seek to evade.

This ambivalence of the transcultural places in the novel derives from the fact that they are sites of a creative renewal which comes at a price. As such these places are part of the cultural-critical metadiscourse as well as the imaginative counterdiscourse. In *The Human Stain*, two characters look for ways of constructing an identity beyond the judgment of their contemporaries. One way to achieve this is offered by the urban center that allows for anonymity, fluid identities and tolerance, while the other option is the nature retreat of the Audubon Society, which invites Faunia to redefine herself in relation to her status in society as well as to her position in the environment. For all the ambivalences and challenges they pose, these liminal, transcultural places function as catalysts for the development of both the characters’ personalities and the plot, and as such should be considered absolutely central to Philip Roth’s novel.
“How do I get out?”

Works Cited


