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## IS PHILIP ROTH AGAINST ‘POLITICAL CORRECTNESS’? ‘WHITENESS’ AS DESIRED NORM AND INVISIBLE TERROR IN *THE HUMAN STAIN*

### Abstract

Many critics state that “political correctness” is a central theme of *The Human Stain*. This paper first asks if a definition of “political correctness” is possible and compares the use of political correctness” to the phrase “appropriate” in the novel. Then it addresses the persecution of the protagonist for using the word “spooks” and asks if the novel considers condemning stigmatizing language as acceptable censorship and whether the anti-racism crusade is taken here to such an extreme that it turned into a witch hunt. The most important question addressed is how extreme the anti-racist theme of the novel is. When “political correctness” is equated with extreme anti-racism, the novel would be for “political correctness” since Coleman is condemned for racism in supporting abstract liberalism; using “white” racist language and believing the unconscious master signifier “Whiteness” promises wholeness. Since “White” terror is not acknowledged by the white public, racism continues.

### Key words

*The Human Stain*; *Philip Roth*; *political correctness*; *Whiteness Studies*; *free speech*

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### 1. Introduction

Harold Bloom, an influential American critic, argued that Philip Roth had failed to win the Nobel Prize for literature because Roth is “not terribly politically correct”. Jennifer Senior (2000: 135), the author of the populist article that contains this quote by Bloom, equates “political correctness” with multiculturalism and feminism:

Indeed, as long as multicultural and feminist concerns prevail in Stockholm, most of his supporters remain sceptical. “Whether I will ever persuade the Nobel Prize people – and I have tried – I don’t know,” sighs Harold Bloom. “He’s not terribly politically correct, you know. And they are.”

Many reviewers, critics and serious academics had used the phrase “against political correctness” to describe the content of *The Human Stain* (Roth 2000). This phrase was combined with derogatory words, such as “the politically correct inquisitors” (Wood 2000: 74); “faculty’s politically correct commissars” (Adams 2000: 56); “a politically correct mob” (Charles 2000: 18); “a political-correctness soap opera” (Romano 2000: 53) and “zealots of political correctness” (St John 2000). This implies agreement with the denunciation of the “political correctness” these critics think to have found in the novel. All this entails that “political correctness”, which could be identified with multiculturalism and feminism, is condemned in the novel. The implication that the Philip Roth of *The Human Stain* could be against multiculturalism and feminism intrigued me since it was contrary to my poststructuralist reading of the novel as a deeply ethical, philosophical and daring questioning of issues surrounding free speech, racism and feminism. In order to explore this discrepancy between my interpretation of the novel and the oft-repeated statement that *The Human Stain* was “against political correctness”, I had to undertake a serious exploration of the history, the definitions, uses and political functions of the phrase “political correctness”. The focus of this article is however only on those possible meanings of “political correctness” that are relevant to an interpretation of *The Human Stain*. I therefore decided to re-examine the central theme of racism in the light of the populist attack on anti-racism which is associated with “being against political correctness”. I will briefly explore what is meant by “political correctness”; then ask how the novel *The Human Stain* could be said to be against or for “political correctness” and lastly I will examine how different approaches to combating racism are explored in the novel, especially taking into account “Whiteness” as category.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Definitions and uses of “political correctness”

I have never met anyone who admitted to being “politically correct”. Nor have I ever encountered anyone who thought his or her political views were totally wrong. I know people who are proud of being “politically incorrect”. Obviously “political correctness” means something other than “political” plus “correctness”. I have long been fascinated by the term “political correctness” and how it has evolved over the years as shown by the following discussion of three representative quotes by American politicians.

President George Bush Senior (1991) used the phrase as a synonym for leftist censorship in a commencement address at the University of Michigan in 1991:

Ironically, on the 200th anniversary of our Bill of Rights, we find free speech under assault throughout the United States, including on some college campuses. The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expression off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits.

As an unanswerable form of ridicule, the accusation of “political correctness” could prevent a discussion of real issues, as recognised by President Barack Obama (2008) in a speech:

Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

The third quote comes from Donald Trump who had said, “A big problem this country has is being politically correct.” In a national survey conducted in October 2015 by Fairleigh Dickinson University (Jenkins 2015) 62 percent of Democrats agreed with this statement when unattributed. When the pollsters prefaced the statement with “Donald Trump said recently,” the percentage of Democrats agreeing dropped to 36 percent. This result showed how politically loaded the term “political correctness” has become and also how confusing it is since Democrats (those supporting Obama) are willing to contemplate its truthfulness more when it is not attributed to the Right. Donald Trump had made the statement used in the survey during a Republican Party debate in August 2015 in answer to a challenge by Megan Kelly of Fox News about disparaging remarks, such as “fat pigs” that Trump had made about women (Chavez et al. 2016). Trump said he did not have time for “total political correctness”. Political correctness for Trump would therefore seem to include what many people see as civility in political discourse or respect for women. Indeed, political *incorrectness* won political votes in 2016. It is clear that “political correctness” is a rhetorical weapon that is constantly evolving.

Would academics and writers know better than politicians what the term means? As would be expected, the history, definition, use and function of the term “political correctness” would itself be controversial and inevitably political in some way. Here is an example of a definition by a right-wing writer, Edward Dutton (2006: 459) who uses the term “political correctness” almost interchangeably with multiculturalism, but also includes secularism, anti-sexism and anti-homophobia in his application of the term. Dutton (2006: 480) even speaks of a politically correct ideology:

But what they are effectively advocating is a complete break-down of the world order such that everybody is equal and there is no poverty. Again, this would appear to be congruous with the ideology of Political Correctness.

A left-wing academic, such as George Lakoff (2006: 135) who wrote the influential book *Moral Politics: How liberals and Conservatives think*, identifies “PC” with the same issues, but assigns the use of the term to right-wing conservatives in his later book *Whose Freedom*:

Conservatives have politicized populism. Conservatism identifies the ordinary person as an ordinary American, a conservative patriot with conservative values (strict father morality). And they have identified the elite as the liberal elite, with liberal political and social values: feminism, gay rights, environmentalism, peace, protection, safety, anti-death penalty, high culture. Liberals are portrayed not just as effete social snobs, but as political snobs who tell people what to believe about politics – what is politically correct or PC.

Note that Lakoff did not include multiculturalism in the list of values the conservative would identify with liberal “political correctness”. From these and many other sources I have studied, I have concluded that it is impossible to define “political correctness” in terms of a coherent ideology that would include definitions and uses from both the Left (in a defensive way) and the Right (accusatory). I would agree with Richard Feldstein (1997: 183) who wrote in *Political Correctness. A response from the cultural left* that left-wing cultural critics should not accept the “politically correct” label that “neo-conservatives have fabricated to stigmatize them”, but should rather analyse these right-wing strategies using poststructuralist methods such as seeing “political correctness” as a way in which the Right uses paranoid projection as described by Freud and Lacan to discredit multiculturalist and feminist critics. Feldstein (1997: 184) adds that “there is a grain of truth in right-wing exaggerations” and that few academics would think they are infallible or that their views are the only acceptable interpretations. It is no surprise that the Left could be as guilty of over-zealous application of ethical rules as the Right or the religious establishment. We find this theme constantly in satirical campus novels.

Just as “political correctness” is a protean term which is used as a collective noun or insult for everything that the commentator finds wrong, so Coleman uses the words “appropriate” and “propriety” in *The Human Stain* to refer to everything that he feels suppresses him. He classifies the following under the tyranny of propriety: de-virilizing pulpit virtue-mongering, boobism, Mormism, American Puritanism, America’s core values, civic responsibility, WASP dignity, women’s rights, black pride, ethnic allegiance and emotion-laden Jewish ethical sensitivity (153).<sup>2</sup> Coleman therefore condemns both the Left (women’s rights) and the Right (Reagan), something that Posnock (2006: xvii) calls “the virtue-mongering on the right and the left”. Purity and righteousness is the betrayal of the personal and the individual for Coleman and Zuckerman. “Political correctness” however has more connotations, as would become clear in this article, than just this synonym for hypocrisy and delusions of infallibility, self-righteousness and moral virtue.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Stigmatizing language in *The Human Stain*

Martha C. Nussbaum (2000: 485) is one of the very few public intellectuals who talks approvingly of “political correctness” which she links to Stoic philosophical ideals:

Recognizing the cogency of the Stoic view of passions gives us a duty: for it tells us that we have great power over racism, sexism, and other divisive passions that militate against cosmopolitan humanism, if we will only devote enough attention to the cognitive moral development of the young. It is this noble Stoic idea that I believe to be at the heart of the much-maligned American interest in “political correctness,” by which is meant the careful scrutiny of the imagery and the speech we use when we talk about those whom we are in the habit of regarding as unequally human.

It is exactly this “careful scrutiny of the imagery and the speech” used to describe some groups that draw the most criticism from those who condemn “political correctness”, from George Bush Senior who views it as censorship, to Donald Trump, who claims the right to say anything he likes.<sup>2</sup> The novel, *The Human Stain*, gives the reader a textbook example of the debate surrounding speech we use to describe other groups and would provide an opportunity to observe what happens when the term “political correctness” is applied to a concrete situation.

“Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?”(6)

These are the words that lie at the heart of the claim that the novel *The Human Stain* is about “political correctness”. The professor, Coleman Silk, thought he knew what he meant by the use of the word “spooks”. He meant it to refer to ghosts, because the students had not been to class for five weeks and he wondered out loud whether these students actually existed. He knew he did not use the word “spooks” to refer to the race of the students, although he knew this dictionary meaning. The author’s acknowledgements at the start of the novel refer the reader to “*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1973, p. 1375)”, in which the word “spook” is defined as, among other things, a ghost, a spy and a black person (derogatory).

Whether the average person knows the word “spooks” to refer to African-Americans is however not of importance, since Coleman admits that he knew this meaning, but adds two caveats, namely that he had forgotten it and that he had known it fifty years ago. It is as if the white man whose voice Coleman has borrowed in “passing” has forgotten the derogatory meaning of the word. Coleman’s defence sounds entirely reasonable. When a word has more than one meaning, you use the context to ascertain the meaning intended:

“Consider the context. Do they exist or are they spooks? The charge of racism is spurious.” (7)

Besides that, Coleman did not know that the two absent students were black and so could not have used the word “spooks” to refer to their skin-colour. The third defence Coleman gives, is that he has been taught to be very precise with his words and that if he wanted to refer to black students, he would have used a more accurate sentence (84–85).

Neither Zuckerman nor Coleman ever uses the words “politically correct”, but the context is clear. The leftist academics at Athena College believe that lecturers who use pejorative terms should be sanctioned in some way because they value leftist ideals such as anti-racism more highly than freedom of speech. Even Coleman himself seems to accept this ideal of anti-racism since he says that he is “totally meticulous regarding student sensibilities” (6) and therefore would not have used a pejorative word. Shostak (2004: 156) accepts that Coleman acted incorrectly by using the word “spooks”:

In the academic climate in which Coleman teaches, where everyone is terribly sensitized to the possible racialized significations of their language, Coleman cannot with impunity presume to use such a burdened term innocently.

Coleman is however not sacked, but resigns before an official hearing can take place and thus in the view of Delphine Roux, had essentially confessed to his malicious intent. He is angry because he had been misunderstood and because he believes the controversy led to the death of his wife.

The position that “political correctness” is a new form of censorship is most clearly articulated by Ernestine, Coleman’s sister. Like Coleman, she does not believe that he would have said “spooks” if he had meant to be racist. She also believes that it is a trivial offense and that those academics who were against Coleman, were “reactionary” (329). She thinks it is a travesty of the First Amendment of the US constitution, which reads like this:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Ernestine does not even consider the question of whether racial abuse (such as saying “nigger”) should be allowed under freedom of speech. She connects this abolition of the right of free speech with a general condemnation of the standard of teaching in schools and universities and the destruction of communities in cities because of urban renewal. Ernestine’s rejection of Black History Month also implies that she would be against affirmative action policies and would not

like people to be given privileges or advantages because of the colour of their skin, a policy usually associated with identity politics of the Left. Browne (2006: 16) sees Black History Month as an example of the promotion of re-education which he sees as one of the hallmarks of "political correctness". Putting this in the mouth of a black character (both Ernestine and in some way, Coleman) makes it more difficult to argue against it. In one of the very few negative reviews of the novel, James Wood (2000: 74) finds that Roth's ploy of making the character accused of racism, actually black, is a cheap novelistic ploy made in order "to rig the argument in favor of Coleman against the politically correct inquisitors". Yet one can argue that being black does not stop one from hating being black. Here Ernestine's language betrays her in that she uses the word "throwback" (320) to describe the horror of white-skinned people having a dark-skinned child. This word is "a regressed or inferior group-inappropriate" term for a proud and confident black woman to use in 1998 (Scherr 2007: 96).

The irony is that the story Ernestine tells, is not factually correct. Ernestine claims that a black doctor, Dr. Charles Drew, who had discovered how to prevent blood from clotting so it could be banked, was refused medical attention by a white hospital because he was black and therefore bled to death (333), but this is not historically true. What does it mean when a black character argues against emphasizing black experience and achievement in a month specifically dedicated to black history by saying that black achievement can be celebrated as such anytime in the school calendar, but then gives a false example? Scherr (2007: 99) sees it as a joke on the reader:

Roth employs the stories of Henson and Drew as weapons in his arsenal for ridiculing "political correctness" and African Americans' naive distortion of the truth. If readers are too ignorant to laugh with Roth at Ernestine's exasperating insistence on her "politically incorrect" position while she simultaneously expounds "politically correct" dogma, he will take mordant pleasure in laughing at his credulous readers.

This implies that Roth ridicules both "political correctness" and those like Ernestine who insist on being "politically incorrect". We cannot ignore the satirical element of the novel, but we should not assume that it is satire only aimed at the Left.

#### **4. Enlightenment turning into repression**

When someone uses racist language and is censured, that is "political correctness" and it has its own detractors. But when someone obviously does not mean to be racist, but is wilfully understood to be so, this is when ethical behaviour (being against racism and racist language) turns into the worst excesses of "political correctness". This is usually what is meant by taking leftist ideas to such extremes that they seem absurd or repressive. The whole situation is an example of what is



commonly called “political correctness gone mad”. Dorothy Smith discusses the use of the term “political correctness” in a Canadian television programme and shows how the viewers are instructed to find each episode an example of political correctness and how the episode is then structured to correspond to those instructions (Smith 1995: 37). In this way many episodes are shown to have the same structure of an instance of the repressive working of political correctness, even if they are so far apart as a self-declared schizophrenic demonstrating against a comedy which he thinks demeans the mentally ill or a student newspaper having an editorial policy refusing the publication of material inciting violence or hatred against disadvantaged groups (Smith 1995: 34). Thus the viewer is shown how to recognise instances when enlightenment (being in favour of human rights) turns into repression (limiting the free speech of others). In this way people criticized for using racist or sexist language, can turn the table on their opponents by calling them “politically correct” (Smith 1995: 47).

Coleman obviously did not mean to be racist, but was wilfully understood to be a racist. One would also not expect Delphine, a French citizen, to know this slang meaning of the word “spooks”. Yet the two students knew and they brought a charge of racism against Coleman. Delphine, the new dean of the faculty, decided to investigate these charges. The narrator explains that the dean is unreasonable because of university politics. Coleman had made enemies when he had been a dean and he only realised how many when he counted all the people who wanted to believe that he had used a pejorative racial term (10). This incident is also used by people who want more power in order to have more black students and professors at the university. As Primus, the lawyer, puts it, the academics are “elitist egalitarians who hide their ambition behind high-minded ideals” (80).

Coleman is classified as a “racist” and this epithet frightens and forces even the cleverest people to avoid supporting him. Even saying something racist once, means one is condemned for it forever. Even worse, saying something racist means one has been uncovered for being racist and implies one has always been a racist (228). As such, this incident is a textbook example of “political correctness” as defined by Hughes (2010: 295) in *Political correctness: A history of semantics and culture*:

Political correctness has introduced new positive value terms such as alternative, multicultural, and diversity, as well as their stigmatizing opposites. Those who criticize these goals or use the wrong language do so at their risk. Thus a person may lead a life of complete probity and intellectual rigor, but be destroyed socially and professionally by being denounced for simply using “politically incorrect” language and thus labelled as *a racist, sexist, homophobe, or fascist*, despite the fact that these terms are problematic both in definition and specific application.

How can doing one thing wrong once be used to condemn someone’s whole life? A favourite narrative of the discourse (Smith 1995: 47) surrounding “political

correctness” is that some leftists take the fight against sexism and racism so far that it turns into a witch hunt against men, in general, and white men, in particular (see Hughes 2010: 295 and Browne 2006: 40). White men then become seen as the victims of a new political elite, an elite especially active at universities. *The Human Stain*, which also qualifies as a campus novel, appeared in 2000 when “political correctness” had been a talking point in the US for about ten years.

In a highly unusual intervention of a novelist in the reception history of his novel, Philip Roth wrote an open letter in 2012 in “The New Yorker” to “Wikipedia” in which he confessed that the spooks incident was based on the experience of his friend, the sociologist, Melvin Tumin, who had said the exact words Roth had given to Coleman at Princeton in 1985. After a “witch hunt” (Roth 2012) Tumin was eventually declared innocent of the charge of hate speech. Although one cannot dismiss the psychological harm done by such accusations, it is important to note that justice had eventually prevailed in this case since Tumin was found innocent. This is often the case in events reported as attacks made by the Left because of “political correctness”. Another similar case is that of a Harvard professor, Stephan Thernstrom, who was apparently called a “racist”. This anecdote was however just dramatic license by the writer of a populist article (see Hellerstein 2016 for a full discussion). The annual list of populist articles about secularists banning Christmas is exemplary of this kind of incorrect reporting about “political correctness” and can easily be refuted by facts (see Stourton 2008: 200).

Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator, draws a parallel in equating the condemnation of Coleman as a racist and a misogynist to the McCarthy witch-hunt of communists in the 1950s (290), generally condemned by the Left and liberals in America. This especially earned *The Human Stain* the praise of neoconservative critics like Podhoretz (2000: 39):

By ridiculing the prevailing tyrannies of political correctness on the issues of both race and sex, Roth shows that McCarthyism – which he surveyed with an unqualifiedly orthodox liberal eye in *I Married a Communist* has now migrated to the Left; and in this, so far as I am concerned, he is on the side of the angels.

## 5. Against and for “Political correctness”

If “political correctness” is seen to be the moral certainty with which someone condemns racism or sexism, then it acts in a similar way in which “appropriate” and “propriety” are used in the novel. Roth would then be “against political correctness” in the same way that everyone is against hypocrisy. If “political correctness” is taken to mean the denunciation of racist language only, then Coleman, who as central spokesman in the novel represents the novel as a whole when he declares himself “meticulous regarding student sensibilities” (6), would not use

racist language and as such, according to this very limited definition of “political correctness” (a definition used by Nussbaum) would be “politically correct”. The novel however shows how accusations of racism, whether proven or not, are used politically by some academics to advance their cause of identity politics. In this way they take something reasonable (the ideal of non-racist language) to such an extreme that it begins to feel like repression. (Since Coleman was not actually fired, but resigned, the description of “feels like” and not “is” is appropriate). This is condemned by Coleman, Zuckerman and the novel as a whole. If “political correctness” is taken to be ways in which anti-racism policies are implemented in the US, the position becomes more complicated. Ernestine’s position on censorship (a common position for those “against political correctness”) is not shared by the novel as a whole since Coleman is sensitive about using language appropriately. Her rejection of black history month, a position common to those against “political correctness”, is complicated by her false example, which could imply that a black character would not necessarily know how to fight racism. “Political correctness” is usually associated with extremes of anti-racism activism of the Left and it is therefore first necessary to examine the issue of racism as theme in the novel, before returning to the topic of “political correctness”.

## 6. Racism

When Mark Lawson asked Philip Roth in a radio interview (BBC Front Row: Philip Roth – the American Authors Collection 16:04) if he feared labels such as “racist” or “anti-Semitic”, Roth responded:

My book *The Human Stain* was thought to be anti-black by a few black writers. These are screwy misreadings. But yes, you mean it is referring in a way to political correctness.

This implies that a “politically correct” person could find the novel anti-black, here used as a euphemism for racist, but that would be wrong. Coleman pretends to be a Jew, but is actually a black person who has “gone white” in denying his black background and living the life of a white person in America, something that is called “passing” in the US. Passing has often been seen as an immoral act of someone trying to escape his or her “blackness”, but whether that is fair to individuals who made difficult choices in racist times or whether this criticism implies a coherent subject indistinguishable from a communal whole, is part of a difficult debate involving identity politics and post-structuralist critiques of the coherence of the subject (see Toth (2008)) that I cannot address here. The rejection of being black is ethically potentially much worse than using a suspect word, like “spooks” or “nigger” to describe black people. Would rejecting his black heritage make Coleman a racist? Podhoretz (2000: 39), a prominent neoconservative writer, thinks so, but he wonders if Roth understands this angle since he

cannot see that the repudiation of Jewishness by Jews can be seen as a form of anti-Semitism.

### **6.1 *Abstract liberalism***

Both Coleman and Walter, his brother, are against racism, but while Walter believes in fighting for justice for his fellow-blacks through the civil rights movement (327), Coleman, according to Walter, "was never fighting for anything other than himself" (324). Coleman, very much the individualist, espouses the kind of abstract liberalism that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006: 28) identifies as a central frame of colour-blind racism in his book *Racism without racists*. When using ideas, such as equal opportunity and individualism, associated with political and economic liberalism in "an abstract manner to explain racial matters", whites can appear moral (to be against racism) while opposing practical approaches such as affirmative-action policies that could deal with *de facto* racial inequality. Coleman, an academic genius, believes that he rose to the top of his profession because of meritocracy and that he appointed black and female lecturers on merit. Walter (his brother, a head teacher), Delphine (the feminist academic) and Lisa (his daughter, a teacher) specifically try to help minorities to overcome discrimination in the belief that extra effort is necessary to create an equal playing field for advantaged whites and disadvantaged blacks, whether they are exceptionally talented students or not. Affirmative action programmes are often fought by the Right and some libertarians in the US.

Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator who mostly approves or understands Coleman's individualism, accuses Coleman of murdering his mother (138, 335) when he tells her she may never contact him or her grandchildren that would be considered white. This mother could stand for community and solidarity, the values the individualist Coleman rejects, but his brother accepts. Coleman's mother states that he was even disinclined to take her breast and that he had always wanted to escape family (138). This extreme individualism is clearly unacceptable to Nathan. Since Nathan, the narrator and inventor of most of the plot, decided not to imagine the voices of the mother or that of Walter, the brother, the reader is not given much detail about the kind of ideal community-based politics that could be more ethical than the extreme individualism of Coleman. We do not know how this would relate to identity politics, politics organised around racial emancipation, since Nathan does not reach the Silk home to have Sunday dinner with Walter and Ernestine because the novel ends with Nathan talking to a rather menacing Lester whom he fears could possibly kill him.

### **6.2 "*White*" voices**

Coleman's rejection of his black family is not based on a hatred or disgust of them as black people and as his appointment of black people on merit to the university has shown that he is not a classical racist. Yet "spooks" is not the only

racially suspect word that Coleman had used. Coleman explains his refusal to fight Beau Jack, a black opponent, a few extra rounds to entertain the crowds, with the words “Because I don’t carry no nigger” (117). But who is speaking here? Is it Coleman, a black man who uses a double negative, according to the stereotype of the uneducated black man? But Coleman is, as he immediately says, a “classics major” (117) and grammatically correct use of language is part of his identity. Is it Coleman who identifies as white and refuses to carry the burden of a black identity or is it Coleman as a white using that most virulent of racial signifiers, the word “nigger”, as an insult to put black people in their place or is the whole phrase intentionally ironic, just an echo of the racist speech of his promoter? All are possible. Coleman wants to escape racist classification and racism as such and just be himself, an individual who has a comfortable life. Yet to do that he has to take on a racial identity, that of a white, which necessitates aggression towards blacks shown by his use of the word “nigger”. As Elam (2007: 758) states, Coleman’s liberation occurs “through, not despite, this participation in racism”. Being white makes individualism possible. Coleman is like the crow who has learned to imitate voices and now does not have an authentic voice and is, as Faisst (2006: 126) says, “a black imitator of white voices captured within a racist discourse.” Coleman accuses blacks of being anti-Semitic (16), of blaming white Jews for “black suffering” just as the Germans had blamed Jews, thereby implying that some black people are like German fascists (16). This is similar to the inversion where anti-racists are perceived as fascist and white people feel they are the real victims of black identity politics (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 223, Fraser and Kick 2000: 4, 24). Does being white automatically imply the use of racist discourse or is racist discourse always white? The novel gives an ironic answer to this. Coleman, a black man, uses racist language; therefore racist language can be used by black people. But Coleman pretends to be white and in his pretence, in his mimicry of being white, he uses racist language which implies that racist language is particularly white. As always, passing destabilizes the ideas associated with racial classification. Coleman does not reject being black because he associates black people with negativity. Coleman however wants to be a successful individual (108) and in the racist US in which he grew up, that meant taking on the identity and discourse of a white man.

### 6.3 “White” terror

Yet white bigotry brazenly exists, as is illustrated by Lester Farley, the most racist character in *The Human Stain*. He feels victimized by the government who trained him to be a killer (66) and who gives other racial groups more rights than him (69):

If you’re some Vietnamese, you’re some Chink, you make out, you get a restaurant, you get a market, you get a grocery store, you get a family, you get a good education. But they got fuckall for him. Because they want him dead.

Lester is not only fearsome because he ignores the law since he has “inner reasons” that “justified anything he wanted to do” (315), but also because the law, which is still white, is somehow blind to his misogynist and anti-Semitic crimes of murder and to his war crimes in Vietnam. Zuckerman fails to get the police interested in his allegations against Lester (294–295). Although bell hooks (1992: 170) acknowledges that in certain places Whiteness represents for black people “the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing”, it is a terror that cannot be named within the terms of Whiteness. Despite many instances of documented terror by white men, the representation of Whiteness as terror is excluded from public discourse. Lester’s terror cannot be seen and he gets away with murder.

#### ***6.4 Oedipus and the tragic plot***

The important point is that Coleman is not guilty of the type of explicit racism that Lester exhibits. At most he supports abstract liberalism which in practice strengthens racism in society. The tragedy is then that Coleman was found out to be what he is, namely an individual who used white racist discourse to get ahead in life. All his colleagues denounced him as a racist and even though the accusation was false in detail, it could be true in general, if one views support of abstract liberalism as a form of racism. Like Oedipus, Coleman tried to run away from his fate to be a black person, but could not escape it. He may not have been killed for being black, but his murder is racist in that he was killed for being a Jew, a group often suffering discrimination. Like Oedipus he could not escape his fate, both as a black man and as a possible racist. Yet he does not accept this fate. He and perhaps the narrator, Nathan believe that people have right to decide their identity and life.

Like the play Oedipus Rex, the plot of the novel *The Human Stain* is tragic. Yet the characters believe in heroic self-fashioning. This is the tension at the heart of *The Human Stain*. So while the characters believe it is possible to escape an assigned identity, the novel as a whole denies this possibility not only through the many evocations of Oedipus, but also through the Freudian idea of subconscious desires always showing themselves in some way, as shown by language (“spooks”, “lily-white” and “nigger”) coming from the unconscious. Coleman is therefore the tragic heroic individualist who fails because a disorderly society negates the self-made man. If one takes the Oedipus metaphor further, one can say that Coleman kills his own black father and his black identity and prefers his new fathers, the white Irish and Jewish boxing coaches. This can be seen in the following exchange when Coleman’s father tries to stop Coleman from boxing (92):

“... I was thinking that maybe Mac Machrone ... was your father.”

...

“I see. So who then is your father, if I may ask?”

“You know. You are. You are, Dad.”

“I am? Yes?”

“No!” Coleman shouted. “No, you’re not!”

The irony of course is that Jews, like Italians and even Irish, had been seen in the past as “blacks” in the USA, but have somehow become “white” (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 81), thereby highlighting the instability of race.

### 6.5 “Whiteness” as wholeness

It would however be too simplistic just to assign Coleman the role of killing his father in the Oedipal drama, since he identifies with his father’s humanist ideal man. Mr. Silk loved Shakespeare and correct English (93) and when he died, Coleman mourned for the man “who just with his powers of speech had inadvertently taught Coleman to want to be stupendous” (107). Coleman gave up studying at Howard, a black college, after his father’s death, but he did not give up studying languages and literature. Coleman killed the black father, but not the humanist father. In *Desiring Whiteness, A Lacanian Analysis of Race*, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (2000: 21) argues that desiring “Whiteness” is not the yearning to become Caucasian, but the desire for wholeness promised by the unconscious master signifier “Whiteness”:

Whiteness attempts to signify being, or that aspect of the subject which escapes language.

When the raced subject who is invested in fantasies of wholeness, encounters the historicity of “Whiteness”, which implies it is an effect of language, this produces anxiety (Seshadri-Crooks 2000: 45). Passing exposes this threat to identity. A historicist way of approaching “Whiteness” is to regard it as “the unconscious core” of Eurocentrism, the way humanist Europe made itself universal (Seshadri-Crooks 2000: 45). This re-invention of Europe as “rational, humanist, secular, individualist, progressive” has its roots in classical Greece (Seshadri-Crooks 2000: 45). Humanism is seen as neutral, as the status-quo and hence apolitical. Although Walter accuses Coleman of choosing the whitest college in which to teach the whitest subject, he added significantly that Coleman “is more white than the whites” (336). Race, like gender, does not exist previous to its performance (in reference to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance) and the discourses that constituted it as argued by Jennifer Glaser (2008: 1469) in “The Jew in the Canon”:

Roth suggests that whiteness is a state of being into which his protagonist can be educated by careful ethnographic analysis of white mores and adherence to the cultural standards of white America. In the perverse bildungsroman that is Coleman Silk’s life story, childhood in a predominantly Jewish New Jersey town teaches him a particular brand of white (Jewish) identity. Silk’s flawless performance of this white identity, coupled with his all-out

embrace of Western universal humanism and its masterworks, eventually makes him appear not just white but whiter than many of his colleagues at Athena College.

Coleman wants the phallic position ("Whiteness") as an intellectual European humanist who rises above all racial classification. It is also possible to see the advantages of being white as a form of cultural capital, an idea developed by Pierre Bourdieu to account for how non-economic forms of wealth, such as access to employment, culture and education, are unevenly distributed through society (Garner 2010: 120).

## 7. Conclusion

The phrase "political correctness" is used rhetorically by the Right to describe leftist ideas such as multiculturalism and feminism that they do not agree with and as a stigmatizing term it would be wiser not to use it, but to examine how it has been used in political discourse by the Right to frame the leftist enemy. If one defines "political correctness" in a limited way as the careful use of language in order not to offend, then the novel *The Human Stain* is ambivalent in that it condemns derogatory language, but shows how some leftist anti-racists and feminists abuse such ethical denunciation in such an extreme way that enlightenment (being in favour of human rights and polite language) turns into repression (limiting the free speech of others). To be "against political correctness" would be to unmask such bogus claims of racism. The equation of "political correctness" with leftist ideas of multiculturalism or anti-racism and feminism is more problematical. Do Coleman and his sister, Ernestine, promote racist views or racist language even though they themselves are black?

Abstract liberalism, which is based on individualism, as a solution to racism is problematized in the novel, since it shows that seeing the USA as post-racial (a country where race is irrelevant) is a fantasy where the white authorities are blind to the terrors the white Lesters of the world inflict upon others. The crime of "political correctness", of accusing someone falsely of racism pales into insignificance when compared to the crime of murder because of race. This legitimate discussion of racial injustice cannot be dismissed as "mere political correctness", but is central to a discussion of the terror of white racial domination. If readers only see the novel, *The Human Stain*, as being "against political correctness", they could miss this more radical interpretation of it as an exploration of "white" power. For Garner (2010: 118), terror is the "starting point for understanding whiteness in the American context". He refers to writers such as James Baldwin, bell hooks and Toni Morrison who have identified the terror engendered by the use of violence against Native Americans, enslaved Africans and African-Americans. This violence continues still today. While Whiteness is very visible to those who are not white, Whiteness is invisible to whites themselves, because whites have the power to make Whiteness the norm (a "normal"



identity is white) and because while other racial groups are part of a collective, whites are seen as individuals (Garner 2010: 118).

Coleman is not rejecting being black, but aspiring to a form of wholeness which in the Western World is linked to Whiteness and a white racial discourse. To be the free individual who chooses his own destiny and has a comfortable life, Coleman felt he had to be white. Seeing Whiteness as the unconscious core of Eurocentrism, is a part of a deconstructive reading of cultural theory and very leftist. When whites start feeling threatened by anti-racist groups that demand the rights normally taken for granted by whites, some whites may start to feel that they are the “victims” of a “politically correct” group that are taking away their individual rights through application of group rights and affirmative action. *The Human Stain* is an important novel because it presents being white both as the desired norm and the invisible terror, but also presents the start of a process of organizing white identity around a sense of victimhood as exemplified by Lester and in a lesser way, by Coleman when he accuses black people of being fascists.

*The Human Stain* at first seems to be firmly against the excesses of a moralistic “political correctness” in that the persecution of Coleman, here obviously innocent, for using a racist word such as “spooks” is a classical example of “political correctness” taken too far. A counter-reading which recognizes the poststructuralist critique (usually associated with radical leftist thought) of liberal humanism and white identity, is however possible. Coleman could be guilty of racism in preferring a white racist identity, supporting abstract liberalism and of using “white” racist language. The tragic plot shows Coleman being punished for being black and for being racist. The novel exposes the complexities of racism in that a black man craves the wholeness promised by the master signifier of “Whiteness” in order to rise above all forms of racial classification.

In the cultural war of the Right (very difficult to define since it may include conservatives, neo-conservatives, libertarians, neo-liberals and even liberals in the US) against the Left (however broadly the Right defines that), it would have been a victory to claim a great novelist such as Philip Roth to be in your camp. Arguing that an author is “against political correctness” means the author would be sympathetic to the right-wing cause or at least agreed that the Left (here anti-racists) had gone too far. I however conclude that this novel, considered to be “against political correctness” lends itself to a surprisingly radical interpretation of racism in terms of Whiteness, a field of racism research that had just begun to flourish in the 1990s and which right-wing opponents of “political correctness” would in their terminology consider to be extremely “politically correct”.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although “political correctness” is also be linked to discussions of feminism and a humanist literary curriculum and both these themes are of great importance in the novel, *The Human Stain*, this paper will for the sake of clarity be limited to an exploration of only the themes of free speech and racism. My postcolonial and poststructuralist approach to “Whiteness”

was inspired by *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (Seshadri-Crooks 2000) and *Black Looks. Race and Representation* (bell hooks 1992). See also Kolchin (2002) for a summary of “Whiteness Studies”. The topic of “political correctness” in *The Human Stain* has often been addressed, especially when comparing it to other campus novels, such as *Disgrace*, *The Blue Angel*, *The Corrections* (See Medin 2005) or *The Groves of Academe* (see Anténe 2015). These articles usually do not interrogate the political use of the phrase “political correctness” as I attempt to do, but assume that the meaning is clear and unproblematic.

<sup>2</sup> All references to the novel *The Human Stain* will only be indicated with a page number.

<sup>3</sup> Lakoff (2016) wrote the following about Trump supporters: “Many of them are poor or middle class and many are white men who see themselves as superior to immigrants, nonwhites, women, nonChristians, gays – and people who rely on public assistance. In other words, they are what liberals would call ‘bigots.’ For many years, such bigotry has not been publicly acceptable, especially as more immigrants have arrived, as the country has become less white, as more women have become educated and moved into the workplace, and as gays have become more visible and gay marriage acceptable. As liberal anti-bigotry organizations have loudly pointed out and made a public issue of the unAmerican nature of such bigotry, those conservatives have felt more and more oppressed by what they call ‘political correctness’ — public pressure against their views and against what they see as ‘free speech.’ This has become exaggerated since 9/11, when anti-Muslim feelings became strong. The election of President Barack Hussein Obama created outrage among those conservatives, and they refused to see him as a legitimate American (as in the birther movement), much less as a legitimate authority, especially as his liberal views contradicted almost everything else they believe as conservatives. Donald Trump expresses out loud everything they feel — with force, aggression, anger, and no shame. All they have to do is support and vote for Trump and they don’t even have to express their ‘politically incorrect’ views, since he does it for them and his victories make those views respectable. He is their champion. He gives them a sense of self-respect, authority, and the possibility of power. Whenever you hear the words ‘political correctness’ remember this.”

<sup>4</sup> My definition of “political correctness” is the following: “Political correctness” is a phrase which because it evokes powerful myths of freedom of thought and speech and individualism, the Right uses to attack leftist ideas such as anti-racism, anti-sexism and multiculturalism, which the Right groups together under the one label of “political correctness”, in order to attract the liberal middle ground to its side. This is done by ridiculing and repeating instances where radical ideas are taken to such an extreme that they seem absurd or repressive. The effect is sometimes to curtail an unemotional discussion of separate issues surrounding racism, sexism, multiculturalism and immigration and sometimes to object to policies of multiculturalism in the name of Western superiority (see Barnard 2014).

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