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The Politics of Identity: Cultural Appropriation and Black-Jewish Relations in Zoe Heller's *The Believers*

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**Abstract**

This essay offers an allegorical reading of Zoe Heller's novel *The Believers* (2008), situating the novel in terms of the history of Black-Jewish relations in the US and in terms of recent debates about identity politics and cultural appropriation. Set primarily in the context of post-9/11 New York in 2002, the novel centres on the fractious relationships between the immediate and extended family of a radical left-wing lawyer, Joel Litvinoff, as they struggle to come to terms with the sudden stroke that leaves him in a coma, and with the complex legacy that he leaves behind. The essay begins by considering the implications of the ambivalent critical reception of the novel and ends by suggesting that *The Believers* can be read as both a critique (of certain kinds) and an implicit defence (of certain other kinds) of cultural appropriation.

**Keywords:** Zoe Heller; *The Believers*; Jewish fiction; Black-Jewish relations; cultural appropriation; identity politics; post-9/11 fiction

This essay offers an allegorical reading of Zoe Heller's novel *The Believers*, situating the novel in terms of the history of Black-Jewish relations in the US and in terms of recent debates about identity politics and cultural appropriation. Set primarily in the context of post-9/11 New York in 2002, the novel focuses on the fractious relationships between the immediate and extended family of a radical left-wing lawyer, Joel Litvinoff, as they struggle to come to terms with the sudden stroke that leaves him in a coma, and with the complex legacy that he leaves behind.<sup>1</sup> Although Joel

disappears from the action of the novel early on, he remains its centre of gravity, both symbolically, with the other characters orbiting around him, straining to break free of his field of influence, and literally, in the sense that they are drawn back, repeatedly, to what becomes his death-bed. All the other main characters in the novel — Audrey, his English-born, secular Jewish wife; Berenice, his African-American lover and the father of his illegitimate child, Jamil; Rosa, his radical-turned-Orthodox Jewish religious daughter; Karla, his other unassuming, neglected daughter; and Lenny, his adopted son and the black sheep of the family — are defined, and define themselves, not just in relation to his patriarchal authority but in terms of their engagement with his politics.<sup>2</sup>

*The Believers*, Heller's third novel, was published in 2008 to mostly enthusiastic reviews, although there were a number of dissenting voices, notably that of Anita Brookner, a fellow Anglo-Jewish novelist, who complained that the novel 'was completely Americanised, not only in its setting but also in its locution, so that the reader must constantly adjust to different idioms, different references'.<sup>3</sup> This, allied to the fact its characters were 'unlikeable' and 'universally charmless', created an 'alienating' effect, Brookner claimed.<sup>4</sup> There were echoes of Brookner's objections to the characters in a number of other reviews<sup>5</sup>, which led to a spate of pieces in the press about whether it is necessary or desirable for literary characters to be 'likeable'.<sup>6</sup> But it is the allegation of 'Americanisation' that I want to interrogate here. Why should Heller not write about American characters in American settings? Would Brookner have made the same objection about *On Beauty* (2005), for example, in which Zadie Smith, who, like Heller, grew up in North London, writes primarily about American characters? Why does Brookner construct the implied reader of the novel as British? And why does she overlook the fact that one of its main characters, Audrey Howard, is an Anglo-Jewish expatriate who, in spite of spending most of her adult life in New York, speaks in a distinctively, unapologetically British idiom throughout the novel? To answer these questions, we need to consider the way in which Heller's novel engages with the history of black-Jewish relations

in post-war America, critiquing acts of cultural appropriation that are motivated by parochial identity politics while itself performing an audacious act of artistic cultural appropriation.

At first glance, Brookner's objections to Heller's novel might seem at best idiosyncratic, at worst mean-spirited and parochial. Yet Brookner was not the only reviewer to draw attention to the transatlantic nature both of Heller's novel and of its author's own life. Heller McAlpin begins his review by announcing that 'For the first time, Heller, a native Londoner, has set her fiction in her adoptive New York City' before going on to praise her 'gimlet expatriate eye'; the anonymous author of a review in the *Kirkus Review* refers to her as a 'British-born transplant to New York'; Michiko Kakutani identifies what she calls 'a *native-born* Brit's radar for class and status distinctions' at work in the novel; Jill Abramson refers to Heller as 'an interesting hybrid' on the basis that '[s]he grew up in England but now lives in New York City'; Ron Charles claims that Heller is 'quickly becoming one of the sharpest novelists in America' before lamenting that 'we only have her on long-term loan from England', while Holly Kyte, conversely, argues that, though she 'may have gone transatlantic ... Heller should surely be guarded a little jealously as one of our finest home-grown talents'.<sup>7</sup> Most strikingly, in an otherwise glowing and sensitive review, Lionel Shriver suggests that the 'Britishness' of the novel's central character, herself an expatriate English woman living in New York, 'may provide an entry point for Heller into a cast and landscape otherwise entirely American' before going on to identify this as evidence of an authorial insecurity:

But she could surely have pulled off the foreigners without the security blanket of one British character. Having gone to university at Columbia and now resident in Manhattan with her American husband, this north-Londoner knows her New Yorkers through and through.<sup>8</sup>

One might see these comments in the context of Shriver's attack on the notion of 'cultural appropriation' in her keynote speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival in September 2016, when she denounced the ways in which 'those who embrace a vast range of "identities" – ethnicities, nationalities, races, sexual and gender categories, classes of economic under-privilege and disability – are now encouraged to be possessive of their experience and to regard other peoples' attempts to participate in their lives and traditions, either actively or imaginatively, as a form of theft'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Shriver might be read here as gently chiding Heller for not having the courage of her convictions - for resorting to the 'safety net' of Audrey's Britishness rather than writing exclusively about native New Yorkers, who are implicitly coded here as ethnically as well as nationally other. Yet it seems to me that there is another issue that lies behind the obsessive interest in Heller's transatlantic status, and in particular both Brookner's suggestion that Heller's novel is thoroughly 'Americanised' and Shriver's implication that it is not quite thoroughly American enough: namely, the Jewishness of Heller and of the family at the centre of *The Believers*. Although Heller is not Jewish at all by orthodox definitions of the term — her father 'was Jewish by birth' and she herself 'was raised as an atheist in North London' — she has mentioned her Jewish ancestry in a number of interviews, recalling for example how her grandmother, 'a German Jew who spent time in Spain during the Civil War', once told her: "'There's only one way you could disappoint me — by becoming a Tory or a nun.'"<sup>10</sup> This is, I think, what Shriver is alluding to when she refers to Heller as a 'north-Londoner' who 'knows her New Yorkers through and through' and it is the unnamed objective correlative that explains Brookner's distaste at what she calls (in terms that recall some of the infamous responses of Jewish reviewers to Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*) the 'unlovely, graphic in the worst sense' language used by the Litvinoff family at the centre of the novel.<sup>11</sup>

If Brookner and Shriver tiptoe uncomfortably around the question of the novel's representation of Jewishness, most reviewers of *The Believers* only mention it in the context of the struggle of one of its central characters, Rosa, to reconcile a new interest in Orthodox Judaism with

her long-standing Marxist convictions. Similarly, most reviewers don't engage at all with the novel's representation of blackness, except to mention in passing the revelation that Joel, Audrey's husband, had had a long-term African-American lover, Berenice, a character whom Jill Adamson dismisses as a 'caricature'.<sup>12</sup> In this essay, however, I will argue that black-Jewish relations are at the heart of the novel and that it can in fact be read, allegorically, as an account of the fluctuations in those relations in post-war America, and of the marginal role played in those fluctuations by British Jews.

*The Believers* begins with a brief prologue set in London in 1962. At a party Audrey Howard, a young woman whose studied 'aloofness' belies an acute sense of her lack of sophistication, meets Joel Litvinoff, a lawyer a decade older than she, who is in London to brief the Labour Party on the American Civil Rights movement. When Audrey first spots Joel, across the proverbial crowded room, she speculates about his age: 'Casting about in the exotic territory of old age, she had placed him in his early thirties'.<sup>13</sup> It soon turns out that his exoticism extends beyond his age. Noticing that she is eyeing him up, another woman at the party approaches Audrey and tells her that 'He's an American ... A lawyer ... His name's Joel Litvinoff', before adding, *sotto voce*, that he is 'from New York', 'frightfully clever,' and then, 'lower[ing] her eyelids confidentially', 'A Jew, you know.'<sup>14</sup> This stealthy, sly approach to the revelation of his ethnicity (via his nationality and profession, his status as a New Yorker and finally his cleverness) - which mirrors the apparent reluctance of the reviewers of Heller's novel to broach the issue of her own Jewishness - prompts the revelation (itself withheld until this moment) that Audrey herself is Jewish:

There was a time when she would have lingered to hear what amusing or sinister characteristic the woman attributed to the man's Jewishness - what business acumen or frugality or neurosis or pushiness she assigned to his tribe - and then, when she had let the

incriminating words be spoken, she would have gently informed the woman that she was Jewish herself.<sup>15</sup>

Instead of bonding over their common ethnicity, however, Joel and Audrey find common ground in their admiration for the African-American singer, actor and civil rights activist, Paul Robeson.

When Joel hails Robeson ‘as the hero of the American Communist movement’ and Audrey’s date, Martin Sedge, dismisses him as ‘basically a minstrel figure’, the battle lines are clearly drawn, with Audrey expressing her sympathy for Robeson on the grounds that he has ‘suffered so much’.<sup>16</sup>

Robeson signifies here on a number of different levels: Joel reveres him for his political convictions; for Martin, Robeson owes his cultural prominence to his performance of a racial stereotype; to Audrey, his personal history dignifies and ennobles him. However, he is also, crucially, a figure who symbolises the possibility of a transatlanticism that transcends cultural and national differences, since at the height of his fame, in the 1920s and 30s, Robeson divided his time between New York and London, buying a house in Hampstead and starring in several landmark West End theatre productions.

From the outset, then, Joel and Audrey’s relationship is facilitated by their shared investment in a liberal ideology. Yet Audrey’s understanding of that ideology is severely circumscribed by her circumstances. When Joel tells her that ‘Negroes are the most disenfranchised people in America,’ and describe[s] his ‘work with the Freedom Riders in Georgia and Mississippi’, boasting of his connections with Martin Luther King, Audrey knows enough to know that she should be impressed, but not enough to know precisely what she should be impressed by.<sup>17</sup> Her ignorance of the history of African Americans — ‘[s]he did not know ... what the word ‘disenfranchised’ meant’ and ‘[s]he had never met a Negro’<sup>18</sup> — is matched by her romantic visions of a future with Joel in which this would be remedied:



They would live together in an ‘apartment’. In a skyscraper, perhaps. They would be comrades in the fight against injustice, sharing the action and passion of their time. They would go on marches and hold cocktail parties attended by all their Negro friends...<sup>19</sup>

The juxtaposition here of bourgeois aspiration (the apartment in the skyscraper, the cocktail parties) and political idealism (the fight against injustice, implicitly legitimised by the presence of ‘Negro friends’) is presented satirically, as the product of Audrey’s naivety. However, the idea of African-Americans as symbolic guarantors of left-wing political authenticity, particularly for secular, liberal Jew, is a potent one that extends well beyond the fantasies of a jejune English girl. In fact, notions of cultural appropriation —of blackness but also of different kinds of Jewishness — are at the heart of the novel.

Again, these acts of appropriation begin with Audrey and Joel’s brief courtship in London. After their first meeting at the party, Joel asks his English friend, Tom: ‘Is she one of mine?’ and when Tom affects not to understand the question, he clarifies ‘Is she Jewish?’ (7).<sup>20</sup> On the face of it, this is an odd question to ask for Joel, an aggressively secular Jew who prides himself on returning invitations to Barmitzvahs with ‘THERE IS NO GOD scrawled rudely across their engraved lettering’.<sup>21</sup> However, the ambiguity of the inquiry — the possessive ‘mine’ suggesting a desire for, and an anticipation of, ownership, as well as referring to Audrey’s ethnicity — implies that what is at stake here is not any concern with religious or cultural compatibility but rather the identification of an amorous acquisition. This suggestion is reinforced by the elliptical exchange in which the new lovers agree to elope: ‘I think I should take you back to New York with me,’ he announced ... ‘Take me,’ she said quietly.<sup>22</sup> Joel’s proprietorial tone here is, admittedly, partly prompted by his unease at Audrey’s apparent self-possession after they have had sex in his hotel room, but it confirms a profound truth about him: that he is a collector - of people, as well as of causes.

The opening of the main narrative - set in New York in 2002, forty years after the prologue in London and a year after the 9/11 attacks - picks up on these hints of cultural appropriation. The glamorous apartment that Audrey had pictured turns out to be a ‘creaking house in Greenwich village’ which is adorned not with art but with ‘artefacts ... of their political involvements’, such as ‘an ANC flag signed by Oliver Tambo; a framed portrait, executed in muddy oils by a veteran of the Attica riots; a kilim depicting scenes from the Palestinian struggle’.<sup>23</sup> These iconic mementos are the material evidence that testifies to the Litvinoffs’ radical credentials and they are supplemented by the similarly iconic figures with whom they have associated. These include not just Martin Luther King, but Abbie Hoffman, Daniel Ortega, Jessie Jackson (who visits Joel on his death-bed after he suffers a sudden, catastrophic stroke) and the rapper Chuck D (who performs ‘Fight the Power’ at Joel’s funeral). Whereas the allusions to King and Hoffman invoke the black/Jewish alliances that thrived in the heyday of civil rights in the 1960s, Jackson (whose reference to New York as ‘Hymietown’ and close association with Louis Farrakhan alienated many Jews) and Chuck D (whose bandmate in Public Enemy, Richard Griffin, aka Professor Griff, made a series of anti-Semitic remarks in a notorious interview in 1989) serve as symbolic reminders of the fracturing of that alliance during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Their friendship with Joel, his support of the ‘Palestinian struggle’, and his legal defence of Mohammed Hassani — a member of a fictional group of Arab Americans accused of planning acts of terrorism — as well as that of an Arab man accused of the murder of a fictional Chasid Rabbi Kosse<sup>24</sup> all implicitly raise the big political questions that have complicated and at times polarised black/Jewish relations not just in America but in Britain and elsewhere.

Crucially, however, *The Believers* does not simply gesture towards these issues; it dramatises them, in two of the main strands of its narrative. In one of these Rosa (Audrey and Joel’s daughter), increasingly disillusioned with her work, providing after-school and vacation activities for disadvantaged children in Harlem, and increasingly drawn towards Orthodox Judaism, finds

herself having to navigate her way through a minefield of prejudices, including her own. During an educational visit to the home of her would-be mentor, Rabbi Reinman, Rosa is deflated by the domestic banality she encounters: ‘She had imagined Rabbi Reinman’s house as a humble, cosy *Fiddler on the Roof* sort of place, filled with boisterous children and plates of kugel and at least one feisty old grandma telling stories from the shtetl; instead, she found herself in a harem of suburban prisses analysing soft furnishings’.<sup>25</sup> Rosa’s idealised fantasy - based on a notoriously kitschified version of Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye stories - echoes Audrey’s fantasy of fraternising with ‘negro friends’ earlier in the novel in its recourse to sentimental myths that are themselves dependent on racial stereotypes.

Later, over dinner, she is cross-examined by Reinman’s father-in-law, Mr Riskin, about her job:

‘You’re looking after, what, black children?’

‘Most of the children are African American, yes.’

... ‘For me, a person should look to help his own community before he starts helping others.’

‘Well, these girls *are* my community ... They’re New Yorkers, just like I am.’<sup>26</sup>

Confronted with Riskin’s parochial ‘charity-begins-at-home’ philosophy, Rosa initially responds with pedantic defensiveness (correcting Riskin’s usage of ‘black’ and introducing the qualification ‘most of’) before proposing a more positive, inclusive definition of ‘community’, based not on ethnicity or religious beliefs but on a shared geographical space. However, this assertion of commonality comes under pressure as the novel proceeds, as Rosa becomes increasingly alienated from the girls for whom she cares.

There are two episodes, in particular, that precipitate Rosa’s eventual departure from the programme. The first concerns a dance performance that Rosa and her co-worker, Raphael, allow Chianti, a troubled and troublesome young teenager, to lead, as a way of trying to engage her. When

she sees, on the day of the performance, that the girls had substituted an ‘obscene rap song’ for the ‘sugary pop anthem’ that Rosa had suggested, and that ‘every one of the more provocative moves that she had personally excised from the routine during rehearsals had been reinserted’ (278), she abruptly leaves before the performance finishes, prompting a furious row with Raphael, which ends with him telling Rosa that ‘These girls deserve better. There are plenty of people who’d be thrilled to have your job and wouldn’t spend the whole time bringing everyone down with their shitty attitude ... Just fuck off. You don’t belong here.’<sup>27</sup> It is testimony to Heller’s skill as a novelist that it is equally possible to sympathise with Raphael and Rosa at this juncture. And this moral ambiguity is deepened by the recognition that this incident - and Raphael’s language - echoes an earlier disagreement between the two, in which Rosa had complained of the limited effect that their work has on the fate of the girls: “‘Maybe we keep them off drugs for a while, and maybe we defer pregnancy for a few years, but they still have shitty parents and they still go to shitty schools and they’re still going to end up with shitty jobs, or no jobs. Their ... class destiny is still going to be the same.’”<sup>28</sup> Here Rosa’s disillusionment comes dangerously close to cynicism; a cynicism which, while it is couched in the language of economic determinism (‘class destiny’), seems to equate class with race. Rosa’s characterisation of the ‘shitty’ familial, educational and employment prospects of the young black women with whom she works implicitly reinforces the rupture between (middle-class) Jews and (working-class) blacks which has so marred black-Jewish relations in the US since the 1960s.

This discussion marks the start of the process of dislocation that ends with Rosa and Raphael’s recognition that she does not ‘belong’ in the community that she had proudly claimed to Riskin she was a part of. However, the point of no return is signalled by a subsequent incident prompted by a debate between Chianti and Rosa about the dance routine. When they reach an impasse over whether or not to ‘tone down’ some of their ‘slutty’ moves (Rosa’s language), Rosa tells the girl that she has to leave and that they can continue to talk the next day, at which point

Raphael, angered by what he sees as Rosa's prudishness and meanness of spirit, asks sardonically if Rosa is heading off to the synagogue (his hostility ironically echoes that of Audrey, who repeatedly sneers at what she sees as Rosa's latest fad, referring for example to her 'poncing about with her new, Jewy friends').<sup>29</sup> This prompts one of the girls to ask what a synagogue is and then who Jews are. Chianti informs her peers that

'Jews the people who killed Jesus.'

Rosa wagged her finger reprovingly. 'That's not quite right, Chianti. Jesus *was* a Jew, you know. And, strictly speaking, it was the Romans who killed him.'

'That ain't what I heard,' Chianti said ...

As she left the room, Chianti muttered something under her breath and everyone, including Raphael, started to laugh.<sup>30</sup>

The implication of this scene is that Rosa has effectively been excluded from the 'community' even before Raphael tells her that she does not 'belong' there. Moreover, that exclusion has emerged from the old antisemitic slander of Jewish deicide.

If Rosa's experience in the novel foregrounds the mutual distrust that has characterised recent Black/Jewish relations in the US then Audrey's experience complicates this narrative. The central revelation of *The Believers* is that Joel Litvinoff had had a long-term affair with an African-American artist and photographer, Berenice Mason, with whom he had a son, Jamil. When Berenice tries to introduce herself to Audrey, she is first ignored<sup>31</sup>, then patronised, insulted and finally threatened. After Berenice retreats, the only aspect of her conduct that Audrey regrets is her threat to call the police, since 'She and Joel had always maintained that privileged white people should not seek the assistance of the police, except in cases of direst emergency' (96).<sup>32</sup> Things then go from bad to worse: when Audrey discovers Berenice visiting Joel on his sick-bed she screams at her 'Get

out, you whore!’ and then physically assaults her. Throughout this ordeal, Berenice maintains an ‘icy composure’.<sup>33</sup>

When Rosa and Karla, Audrey’s other daughter, go (without their mother’s knowledge) to visit Berenice they are upset by her taste in books — ‘gerund-heavy, non-fiction titles: *Mindful Eating, Writing the Body, Understanding Gynocritical Theory, Reading Tarot*’ — and by her explicit photographic self-portraits.<sup>34</sup> Although they manage to maintain a facade of civility, when Karla asks Berenice if a work entitled *Black Cunt # 3* is ‘one of yours?’, Berenice’s response - ‘Yes. My photograph, my vagina’ - as well as asserting her identity as an artist and not simply a model, suggests that she is aware of, and rather enjoys, their discomfiture.<sup>35</sup> It also ironically echoes the question that her lover, Joel, asks his friend about Audrey at their first meeting (‘Is she one of mine?’). After Berenice takes it upon herself to lecture Rosa about what a ‘very, very special spirit’ her father is, Rosa leaves abruptly, practically dragging the pacific Karla with her.<sup>36</sup> As they leave, Rosa can hardly contain her contempt, referring scornfully (and reductively) to Berenice’s book collection as ‘all *How to Read Palms* and diet books’ and dismissing her as ‘a ridiculous woman ... with her revolting photographs and her ... her *peach tea*’ (italics in original) .<sup>37</sup> Again, Heller preserves a delicate moral ambiguity here, highlighting on the one hand Berenice’s pretensions and insensitivity and on the other Rosa’s censoriousness snobbery and refusal to acknowledge Berenice’s status as an artist.

As the novel draws to a close, the likelihood of any rapprochement between Berenice and the Litvinoffs seems remote, but there is a twist in the tale. During her elegy at Joel’s funeral, Audrey abruptly announces to the gathered mourners: ‘I would like to introduce you to a very special member of our tribe: my dear friend, Berenice Mason, who is here today with her son — Joel’s son, *our* son, Jamil ... Berenice? Where are you? Please stand up.’ (301).<sup>38</sup> Again, this passage is replete with rich ambiguity. It echoes two passages earlier in the novel. The first of these occurs when the narrator explains that the Litvinoffs’ decision to adopt a young boy, Lenny, after both his

parents were jailed for terrorist activity, was, according to Joel, ‘no mere act of bourgeois philanthropy ... but a subversive gesture - a vote for an enlightened, “tribal” system of child-rearing that would one day supercede [sic] the repressive nuclear unit altogether’.<sup>39</sup> The second revisits Joel’s advocacy of this communal model of child-rearing sceptically, the narrator observing that ‘Audrey’s attachment to Lenny had been a frequent source of tension in their marriage’ because Joel, ‘for all his talk about ... tribes, deeply resented the idea that Lenny had have succeeded in evoking Audrey’s passion where her “real” children had failed’.<sup>40</sup> The irony here is that while the adoption of Lenny seems to provide irrefutable proof of the sincerity of Joel’s progressive credentials - to demonstrate that he lives by his ideals - it transpires that as a father he reverts to a reactionary hierarchy of values in which Lenny is inherently inferior to his biological children. For Audrey, in contrast, ‘the fact that Lenny was not hers made it easier to love him’, whereas, as ‘the co-author of Karla and Rosa, she could not help but look upon them with the dissatisfied eye of an artist assessing her own flawed handiwork’.<sup>41</sup> This analogy between motherhood and authorship is of course a trope with a long literary history, but in the context of a novel so concerned with the politics of identity it takes on a new resonance. Like Jamil, Lenny is both a member of Audrey’s ‘tribe’ and not; the liminal identity of both young men in relation to the Litvinoff family echoes Audrey’s own marginal status as a British expatriate in America (which may be another reason for her strong identification with Lenny) and reinforces the ambiguous position of the Litvinoffs as Jewish civil rights activists who, as Nathan Abrams puts it in his essay in this volume, ‘are neither fully black nor fully white’.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Audrey’s unexpected speech offers an ironic, belated fulfilment of the young Audrey’s vision of a sophisticated existence in which she would have ‘Negro friends’ who would attend her cocktail parties.<sup>43</sup> Yet ultimately it is unclear whether this is a genuine gesture of reconciliation on Audrey’s part, or a brilliant theatrical coup, a strategic outflanking of any claim that Berenice might have made for public recognition of her connection with Joel - a magnanimous

extension of the family community to include Berenice and Jamil, or an aggressive act of cultural appropriation, signified by the italicised ‘our’ in her phrase ‘our son’ and by the ethnic associations of the word ‘tribe’. In terms of the allegorical reading that I have been proposing, symbolic adoption of Jamil, like her husband’s zealous collaborations with prominent black leaders from King to Jackson, suggests that Jewish participation in the civil rights movement is itself both an act of cultural appropriation and evidence of an emotional empathy that transcends identity politics. In other words, the ending of the novel might either offer tentative optimism for the future of Black/Jewish relations or the bleak prospect of a perpetuation of the unedifying, acrimonious debates about which group has the greater claim to the rights of the historically oppressed; what David Strom in Richard Powers’ novel *The Time of Our Singing* (2004) bitterly calls the game of ‘Who owns pain?’<sup>44</sup>

In this context, it is worth returning to the question of Audrey’s Englishness. One detail that was omitted from most reviews of the novel<sup>45</sup> is that Audrey is in fact the child of Polish-Jewish immigrants, presumably (although the novel leaves this implicit) refugees from the Holocaust, so that her English identity is precarious. If this is indeed the case then it perhaps explains both the alacrity with which she accepts Joel’s semi-facetious invitation to go back to New York with him at the start of the novel and her failure ever fully to assimilate into the culture of her adopted homeland: ‘It was ridiculous, it was so ... *American*, all this talk of reinventing oneself and moving on. She had made her apple-pie bed and now she would have to lie in it’<sup>46</sup> She is in fact a perennial outsider, who is embarrassed by ‘the dowdiness’ of her homeland<sup>47</sup> and yet retains a sense of cultural superiority, ‘still enough of a foreigner to be gratified by real-life sightings of under-dressed Americans grazing on trans-fats while they shopped’<sup>48</sup> Audrey develops a self-conscious strategy of self-representation, ‘carv[ing] out a minor distinction for herself as a “character”: the cute little English girl with the chutzpah and the longshoreman’s mouth.’<sup>49</sup> However, what begins as acerbic wit becomes reflexive cynicism: as time goes on, this performance of a persona hardens into habit



and Audrey finds, to her horror, that she has become a harridan, a caricature of herself. Her only consolation is the fame and kudos by association conferred on her by her marriage to Joel, so that when the revelation of his second family threatens to strip that from her she tries to depersonalise the betrayal by invoking the cliché of the great man whose priapism is an inevitable consequence of his prominence: ‘All powerful men are the same way ... Look at what Jackie Kennedy had to put up with ... It’s like Clinton getting a blow job from that intern, or Marx fucking his maid.’ (167) If the analogy here between Joel and JFK, Clinton and Marx is absurdly self-aggrandising then the implicit analogy between herself and Jackie, Hillary and Marx’s mistress is a rather more ambivalent act of cultural appropriation. Is she casting herself as the tragic widow, the political pragmatist or the unnamed, exploited domestic servant?

*The Believers* is razor-sharp in its deconstruction of all kinds of cultural appropriation. These range from the condescension and narcissism that motivates the sponsorship of under-privileged minorities by white liberals (‘the special good will that middle-aged white liberals reserve for young people of color’), to the ways in which young people appropriate a cultural heritage to which they have no direct connection (Rosa’s conversion begins with the idea that ‘it would be entertaining to see what serious Jews got up to when they prayed’); from the co-opting of 9/11 as evidence of ‘the end of the myth of American exceptionalism’ by left-wing ideologues such as Audrey to its mobilisation by the U.S. government as an excuse for introducing a series of measures in the name of enhancing ‘homeland security’ — or, in Audrey’s hyperbolic version, ‘rounding up every brown-skinned man in America’.<sup>50</sup> Yet if the novel is in one sense a critique of the recklessness, self-interest and opportunism that often motivates such acts of appropriation, it also mounts an implicit defence of cultural appropriation as the novelist’s prerogative; of the aesthetic right — and perhaps ethical obligation — of artists to represent a range of identities and voices beyond their own immediate experience. During the course of the novel, Heller describes - and ventriloquizes - a diverse cast of characters, from hippies in 1960s London to twenty-first century

New York hipsters. Jewish and Black voices are particularly prominent - from the aggressively secular Jews, Audrey and Joel, to their revolutionary-turned-Orthodox-Jew daughter Rosa, to the Rabbi whose guidance she seeks; from deprived black kids and their parents, to the youth workers who help to look after them, to the avant-garde artist Berenice. Yet arguably Heller's boldest move is to make the most sympathetic character in the novel an Egyptian newsagent, Khaled. In first befriending and then becoming the lover of Karla, Rosa's overweight, self-hating sister, Khaled rescues her from a loveless marriage to a sanctimonious, bullying union official, who has married her to exploit the political capital of his association with the Litvinoffs. More than this, he comes to represent symbolically a way of transcending the narrow identity politics that determines so many of the relationships in *The Believers*.

The main narrative of the novel begins with Joel Litvinoff defending Mohammed Hassani, a member of the fictional 'Schenectady Six, a group of Arab Americans from upstate New York who had visited an Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan during the spring of 1998'.<sup>51</sup> Yet Joel's involvement with the case (and the novel's) ends abruptly when he collapses from a stroke at the start of the proceedings.<sup>52</sup> So we never get to know much about Hassani or the other members of the group, who 'had all made deals with the prosecutors'.<sup>53</sup> Khaled, on the other hand, becomes arguably the most important character outside of the Litvinoff tribe in the novel. In spite of the fact that he 'was oblivious ... to current affairs, domestic or foreign' and 'didn't really read the newspapers', Khaled signifies, politically and culturally, simply by virtue of being an Arab American in the context of this self-consciously post-9/11 novel. His kindness and consideration towards Karla contrast both with the manipulative controlling behaviour of her husband, Mike, and with the carping condescension of Audrey. Whereas they both try to restrict Karla's calorie intake, Khaled enjoys nothing more than indulging with her in culinary treats; whereas they make Karla feel bad about her own body, Khaled takes sensual delight in it. When Karla has to write an autobiographical essay as part of an application to adopt a child - a scheme into which she is

railroaded by Mike - she emphasises that she comes from 'a close-knit family, with a shared interest in political activism and social justice' but in fact the only loving relationship she has in the novel is with the apparently apolitical Khaled.<sup>54</sup> If Khaled's warm-hearted generosity is motivated by a sense of personal connections rather than a political credo, he is figured in terms that identify him with America's image of itself as a nation that welcomes immigrants - an image that was largely eclipsed by the rhetoric of the 'war on terror'. So when he offers Karla flowers, he holds 'the bouquet in his outstretched fist, like the Statue of Liberty with her torch',<sup>55</sup> a simile that implicitly invokes the poem 'The New Colossus' by Emma Lazarus, a Jewish immigrant to the United States, that is to be found on a bronze plaque at the site of the statue, from whose 'beacon-hand/Glows world-wide welcome'.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps the most symbolically-charged episode in this context is the one in which Karla waits for Khaled in a hotel room that he has booked for the two of them. 'Feeling hot and a little breathless', Karla goes to the window to see if it will open and is confronted by 'the site where the World Trade Center had stood' (231).

She had never been to 'Ground Zero' before. The idea of making a special trip downtown to gawk at it from a viewing stand had always seemed to her in very bad taste.<sup>57</sup>

It is at this very moment that Karla's reverie is interrupted by Khaled's arrival. To make 'ground zero' the backdrop to Karla and Khaled's illicit assignation - the prelude to the adulterous love-making of a liberal Jew and a deracinated Arab - is to risk accusations of the very bad taste that alienates Karla. Yet it seems to me that Heller is subtly juxtaposing two versions of cultural appropriation, here: a pernicious, opportunistic kind that seeks to commodify and make political

capital out of the suffering of others and a humanistic kind that offers the hope of genuine cross-cultural connection and sympathy.

*The Believers* is by no means a sentimental and perhaps not even a particularly optimistic book. It offers a clear-sighted and nuanced account of what Lori Harrison-Kahan has called the ‘Black-Jewish imaginary’ through the prism of the trials and tribulations of the Litvinoff tribe.<sup>58</sup> However, it also suggests, through the harmonious alliance of Karla and Khaled (their very names suggesting their compatibility), that, in spite of the divisive rhetoric engendered by the events of 9/11, the politics of identity need not necessarily be defined by identity politics. In so doing it also revisits the notion of cultural appropriation, rejecting both the ‘blackface’ tradition of non-black (often Jewish) performers masquerading as blacks, and the stance of many contemporary cultural commentators, who condemn the representation of any non-white culture by white artists.<sup>59</sup> Instead of these polarised positions, Heller draws on the complex, vexed history of black-Jewish relations in America to propose a new paradigm that is equally alive to the dangers and possibilities of engaging with a culture that is not your own.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As many reviewers noted, Joel is partly based on William Kunstler, a lawyer and civil rights activist best known for defending the Chicago Seven, as well as members of the Black Panthers, the Weathermen and the American Indian movement.

<sup>2</sup> Although this is never acknowledged in the novel, it seems likely to me that the Litvinoff daughters are named after Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, co-founders of the German Communist Party, reinforcing the sense that they are destined to define themselves in terms of their parents' ideological commitments.

<sup>3</sup> Anita Brookner. 'A Crisis of Confidence' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *The Spectator* (Sep 20 2008): <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2008/09/a-crisis-of-confidence/>

<sup>4</sup> Brookner, 'A Crisis of Confidence'.

<sup>5</sup> Even positive reviews invariably mentioned what Holly Kyte described as Heller's 'penchant for unlikeable characters' (Holly Kyte, 'The Believers' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *The Daily Telegraph* (Sep 26 2008), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/3561035/Review-The-Believers-by-Zoe-Heller.html>). In similar vein, Ron Charles hailed Heller as 'the master of unpleasant people', advising readers that 'if you need to like the characters to enjoy a novel, skip right on to something more heartwarming' (Ron Charles, 'A Divine Book of Revelations' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *Washington Post* (March 4, 2009): p.C01, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/03/04/ST2009030401423.html?noredirect=on>). Michiko Kakutani, in a broadly sympathetic review, nonetheless took exception to the 'deeply unpleasant', 'nasty' matriarch, Audrey (Michiko Kakutani, 'Fighting Demons from Left and Right' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *The New York Times* (March 3 2009): C.1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/03/books/03kaku.html>). Some critics, while echoing the view that the novel's characters are unsympathetic, questioned the premise that this constituted a weakness, Maureen Corrigan arguing that 'She may not give us characters here to like, but Heller likes her readers enough to credit us with wider reasons for reading novels than just latching onto characters to identify with' and Brandon Robshaw that 'None of the characters, apart from Karla, is entirely likeable – in fact, they're often pretty horrible – but they are irresistibly interesting to read about.' Maureen Corrigan "'The Believers': Zoe Heller's Scathing Social Satire' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), NPR (March 31 2009). <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102516473>; Brandon Robshaw, 'The Believers' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *The Independent* (June 7, 2009). <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-believers-by-zo235-heller-1696208.html>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mohsin Hamid, 'Are we too concerned that characters be likeable?', *The New York Times* (Sep 4, 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/are-we-too-concerned-that-characters-be-likable.html>

<sup>7</sup> Heller McAlpin. 'The family as sparring partners' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *Los Angeles Times* (March 2, 2009): E.1; Kakutani; Jill Abramson, 'The Tribe of Joel' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *New York Times Book Review* (Mar 8, 2009): BR.9; Charles; Kyte.

<sup>8</sup> Lionel Shriver, 'The Believers' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/3561276/Review-The-Believers-by-Zoe-Heller.html>

<sup>9</sup> Lionel Shriver, 'Fiction and Identity Politics', *The Guardian* (Sep 13 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Cohen, 'Not Much Sympathy for Her Characters, but a Little Understanding', *The New York Times* (Feb 26, 2009): Arts and Entertainment: pC1(L).

<sup>11</sup> It may not be coincidental that this name recalls that of the East End Jewish writer Emanuel Litvinoff, a left-wing radical in his youth and later the author of a television play, *The World in a Room*, which broke new ground in its depiction of a marriage between a white — possibly ethnically Jewish — man and a black woman.

<sup>12</sup> Jill Abramson, 'The Tribe of Joel' (review of Zoe Heller's *The Believers*), *New York Times Book Review* (Mar 8, 2009): BR.9.

<sup>13</sup> Zoe Heller, *The Believers* (London: Penguin, 2009; f.p. 2008), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 5,7, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 10-11, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> In response, protestors 'organized rallies against him and put up posters around New York that said: "Litvinoff: Self-Hating Jew"' (Heller, *The Believers*, 25).

<sup>25</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 107-8.

<sup>27</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 278, 279.

<sup>28</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> The description of this snub — ‘From the other end of the street, a tall, middle-aged black woman was approaching ... Audrey had a sense that she knew her from somewhere, but they passed without any greeting being spoke’ (Heller, *The Believers*, 93) — invokes one of the key tropes of the representation of African-American identity in the post-war period, that of invisibility, as constructed most memorably in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and later appropriated by black cultural theorists, such as Michelle Wallace’s influential work on black feminist theory, *Invisibility Blues* (1990).

<sup>32</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 96.

<sup>33</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 239.

<sup>34</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 261.

<sup>35</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 266.

<sup>37</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 267, 266.

<sup>38</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 301.

<sup>39</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 23-4.

<sup>40</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 135.

<sup>41</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 135.

<sup>42</sup> Nathan Abrams, “‘Jewish Cricket’: Black-Jewish Relations in *Wondrous Oblivion* (2003)’. For further discussions of the precarious, ambiguous ‘whiteness’ of Jews in the US context, see for example Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and what that Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), Matthew Frye, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) and David Brauner, *Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010): 107-157.

<sup>43</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* (London: St Martin’s Press, 2002) , 466.

<sup>45</sup> For a notable exception, see Rachel Cohen, ‘Harridan’ (review of Zoe Heller’s *The Believers*), *London Review of Books* vol. 30 (21): November 6 2008: 35-36.

<sup>46</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 259.

<sup>47</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 140.

<sup>49</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 284, 55, 33, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 19.

<sup>52</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 219.

<sup>55</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 162.

<sup>56</sup> Emma Lazarus, 'The New Colossus', <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus>

<sup>57</sup> Heller, *The Believers*, 231-32.

<sup>58</sup> See Lori Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imaginary* (Rutgers University Press, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> Probably the most (in)famous of all 'blackface' performers was Al Jolson, born Asa Yoelson. Lena Dunham, who has explored questions of (her own) Jewish identity on page and screen, defended those students at Oberlin College, her alma mater, who criticised the 'appropriation' of sushi on campus cafeterias and was roundly condemned for doing so in a number of Jewish publications (see for example Rachel Sukert, 'Lena Dunham Dreams of Sushi', *Tablet* <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/208122/lena-dunham-dreams-of-sushi>; Maia Efrem, 'Does Lena Dunham Think Bad Cafeteria Sushi is Cultural Appropriation?', *Forward*, <https://forward.com/schmooze/344965/does-lena-dunham-think-bad-cafeteria-sushi-is-cultural-appropriation/>

<sup>60</sup> I would like to thank Nathan Abrams and Ruth Gilbert for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.