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# Possessive White Male Nostalgia: Louis Begley's About Schmidt

Tim Engles



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# White Male Nostalgia

in Contemporary North  
American Literature



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White Male Nostalgia  
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## Possessive White Male Nostalgia: Louis Begley's *About Schmidt*

Louis Begley is a Jewish American Holocaust survivor who emigrated from Poland to the United States in 1947 at the age of fourteen. As an adult, Begley worked his way through anti-Semitic barriers into Harvard College and then into a successful career in a top-tier (or “white shoe”) New York City law firm.<sup>1</sup> While doing so, Begley undoubtedly found it necessary to carefully scrutinize the ways and mores of the northeastern white elite, especially those of the men who primarily formed his clients, colleagues, and competitors. Given the barriers faced by mid-twentieth-century Jewish professionals and the acumen regarding human psychology and behavior required to overcome them, who better than a successful and literarily inclined Jewish American professional to dramatize the subtle attitudes and feelings of those whose ranks he successfully fought to join? Born in 1933 as Ludwik Begleiter, Begley did not begin publishing fiction until the age of fifty-seven. His first novel (with Alfred E. Knopf, which has published nearly all of his subsequent novels), the award-winning *Wartime Lies* (1991), describes a young Holocaust survivor who avoids Nazi persecution by pretending to be Catholic, a story that echoes Begley’s own early travails. Begley has since turned primarily to American scenes and characters, and his fourth novel, *About Schmidt* (published in 1996 and the basis for Alexander Payne’s eponymous 2002 film), which examines the late-life crisis of a retired lawyer who self-identifies as a WASP, is an acute, deeply observed portrait of privileged, late-twentieth-century white masculinity in crisis. Begley’s novel thus joins the ranks of numerous besieged-white-male narratives of

the 1990s, yet, like DeLillo's *Underworld*, it crucially distinguishes itself from most of them by exposing the emotional states commonly inculcated by the construction of whiteness typically depicted in this brand of fiction as reactionary rather than justified. Thus, the novel can be read as a counternarrative to the era's more standard depictions of white masculinity as a normative yet besieged status since it reveals instead the costs to self and others of the obdurate persistence with which many middle-aged men clung to outmoded codes for white masculine behavior. More to the point of this chapter, the protagonist's persistent enactment of a received script for proper WASP masculinity reflects a steady undercurrent of longing for an earlier era, a social setting in which entitled, grasping, competitive behavior was conducted at the expense, and with the seemingly subservient acquiescence, of gendered and ethnoracially subordinated others.

Some of Albert Schmidt's depicted internal states, which other white-male narratives of the time also illustrate ad nauseam, include anger, grief, and despair, emotions often felt by the privileged when confronted with a changing social order. As Sally Robinson explains in *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, her landmark study of an array of '80s and '90s novels written by white American men, such narratives gave voice to an emerging conviction that the rise of identity politics among disempowered groups, and the consequent highlighting of hegemonic white masculinity, constituted an unwarranted attack on white men. Such responses coalesced into a new "identity politics of the dominant," as expressed by such cultural narrative producers as literary authors, filmmakers, TV show writers, and politicians, all of whom frequently cast the supposedly "disenfranchised white man" as a "symbol for the decline of the American way."<sup>2</sup> This widely reiterated narrative ironically appropriated the liberationist claims of the minoritized, reformulating "what had once been an unquestioned privilege ... into a liability" and casting the average white male in essentialist terms as a newly restrained repository of imminently and justifiably violent sexual energy.<sup>3</sup> One common reaction among the era's white men, including fictional portrayals created by white men, was to continue feeling and behaving in abusive ways that were once more condoned and even encouraged. A contingent reaction was to reflect nostalgically not only on the actions and apparent virility of younger versions of themselves but also on earlier times and settings, in which their hegemonic status and their possessive prerogatives did not seem under fire.

Writing amidst the popularity of such narratives as a Jewish American achiever of elite access and stature, Begley critiques in *About Schmidt* a particular sector of the white masculine collective, the entitled leaders among those who (as explained in Chapter 2) once openly declared themselves White Anglo-Saxons but who by the late twentieth century had largely been subsumed into less ethnoracially self-conscious whiteness. This chapter examines Begley's psychological appraisal of his protagonist, Albert Schmidt, as a figure who displays emblematic feelings and reactions commonly induced by a salient white supremacist legacy in the era's empowered denizens of insular elite enclaves. Aside from depicting xenophobic and paranoid responses to ethnic and racialized others perceived as intruding into previously exclusive WASP spaces, Begley dramatizes more submerged feelings, including ethnoracially inflected sensations of repression and entitled possessiveness.

As noted in previous chapters, any era's manifestations of racial whiteness are formed and shaped by both regional and national influences. In *About Schmidt*, elite workplaces, families, and neighborhoods receive insightful and at times satiric scrutiny, particularly the legal profession and one of the depicted region's most exclusive districts of respite and social interaction, the Hamptons on New York's Long Island. These locations, along with broader sociohistorical contexts, comprise the extant yet changing structures that encourage Schmidt in new ways to repress many of his emotions and, when they resurface, to channel them into gendered and ethnoracialized reactions and behaviors. My analysis is thus aligned with Jonathan Flatley's study of depictions in earlier modernist literature of potentially productive melancholic states, a scholarly effort to map sociohistorical forces that shape emotions in order to better grasp "the lived, affective and very unfixed, half-articulated way that most of us experience our lives most of the time."<sup>4</sup> Socially constructed whiteness and masculinity are, of course, two such intertwined shaping forces, and reading *About Schmidt* as a diagnostic portrait of a particular, historically contextualized form of whitened masculine subjectivity can illuminate the emotionally driven reactions of such privileged people, who often feel beleaguered by growing numbers and demands of racial or ethnic others (or both) and by the increasing insistence of women to equitable treatment and access. Schmidt ultimately does achieve release from forces that he perceives as being arrayed against himself, in part by reviving a sense of himself that reflects nostalgically glorified memories of his younger days. However, discerning readers can see that his personal

losses, including that of his daughter's affection, are greater than he realizes. Begley portrays his protagonist's liberation not as the inevitable and legitimate result of undeserved impositions on elite white men like Schmidt but rather as another destructive symptom of a gendered, sociopolitically situated whiteness—the obstinate elite, northeastern, white masculinity that influences and prompts Schmidt's revanchist reveries and thus his current psychological and emotional reactions.

### ENTITLED WHITE MASCULINITY

In interviews and much of his non-fiction work, Begley has expressed admiration for the themes and methods of various modernist writers, many of whom deployed deeply psychological modes of storytelling and character development.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, *About Schmidt's* third-person narrative relates events from deep inside the perspective of its protagonist, Albert Schmidt, a sixty-year-old man who instructs seemingly everyone but his daughter to call him by the ironically suggestive diminutive "Schmidtie" but whom the third-person narrator simply calls Schmidt. As the novel opens, Schmidt has recently retired from corporate finance work for Wood & King Associates, and his wife Mary, a relatively high-profile fiction editor, has died several months earlier.<sup>6</sup> Having sold off a large Manhattan apartment, Schmidt now lives in a Bridgehampton house that is technically owned by his deceased wife—more soon on how that important financial arrangement came about. His daughter, Charlotte, who lives in New York City, has recently informed him of her plans to marry Jon Riker, a young Jewish American lawyer at Schmidt's former firm. In a conventionally restrained white Anglo-Saxon Protestant manner, Schmidt recoils from such a supposedly mixed union. Upon meeting Jon's parents, Schmidt recoils further, hastening his plans to flee from the house that Charlotte and Jon had hoped to share with him on their weekends and vacations and pursuing a relationship with Carrie (or, as we later learn, Caridad Gorchuk), a half-Puerto Rican waitress who is one third Schmidt's age. Other significant characters include Jewish American Gil Blackman, who is Schmidt's former Harvard College roommate, current confidant, and lifelong best friend (at least in Schmidt's mind), and Mr. Wilson, or "the man," as Schmidt continually calls him, even after learning his name. This character is a wildly animated homeless white man who, doppelgänger-like, repeatedly shadows and pesters Schmidt.



Primary questions driving the novel's plot include just who "the man" is; whether Schmidt will settle into amicable relations with his daughter and future in-laws; why he reacts as he does to his new situation and to the people he knows; and whether Schmidt will change enough to accept and embrace the life that could be his, that of a respected, successfully retired professional and proud, supportive, and loved father. In a reaction to the 2002 film version of his novel published in the *New York Times*, Begley summarized his novel's intended themes: "Schmidt's frightful and, I believe, lifelong loneliness; the devastating realization that we can botch a relationship that matters to us above all others—in the event, that between Schmidt and his daughter—even though we have worked hard to make it succeed and believe with some reason that we have done a good job; [and] the way in which our fears of the Other and prejudices against the Other imprison us."<sup>7</sup> I would add that Begley also offers an insightful analysis in fictional form of psycho-sociohistorical forces that shape, confine, and guide a representative character's emotions and memories, and thus his self-serving and often abusive treatment of others.

In the novel's opening section, Schmidt struggles with his daughter's engagement announcement and with new living arrangements in the Bridgehampton house. These early domestic scenes establish this protagonist as a geographically and sociohistorically situated exemplar of certain white masculine feelings and proclivities, particularly a presumptive sense of ownership. Sherrow O. Pinder points out that "At the beginning of American history, the distinction between who could *have* property and who could *be* property was paramount."<sup>8</sup> As many other historians have also explained, the social script for respectable, successfully performed white American masculinity long called for property ownership, in terms of both land and people. The latter included not only slaves but also wives and children. Although people are no longer a legally sanctioned form of property, remnants of the perceived perquisites of paternal ownership linger in the habits and feelings of a self-declared WASP like Schmidt, who clearly views his daughter's impending marriage to a Jewish American in terms of loss—the loss of "his" daughter—instead of as a gain of more family members.

On the novel's first page, Charlotte tells her father during breakfast of her decision to get married. At this news, Schmidt openly sheds tears, something he remembers not having done since learning of another imminent loss, that of his wife Mary several months earlier to

cancer. As Charlotte strokes his hand, Schmidt tells her that he cannot explain his uncharacteristically emotional display and then attributes it to “happiness. Or because you are so grownup. I’ll stop now, I promise.”<sup>9</sup> Schmidt’s embarrassment about a momentary release from emotional restraint evinces an ethnoracial context. By the time Schmidt had become a successful lawyer for Wood & King, the term “WASP” had gained widespread currency as a descriptor for white Anglo-Saxon protestants. Prior to the twentieth century, “Anglo-Saxon” and “white Anglo-Saxon” had been self-declarations of a dominant ethnic group that harkened back explicitly to English lineage, culture, and traditions. In the early twentieth century, with its influx of increasingly varied European immigrants, the term WASP gained salience, describing less people of Anglo-Saxon descent and more those in the northeastern United States who were not, especially, Catholic or Jewish. By the mid-twentieth century, with the ascent of Dwight D. Eisenhower, a man of German descent, to the presidency, WASP increasingly became a descriptor, largely used by those outside the group, and largely in a disparaging sense, for those who still took pride in having come from, and in still possessing, “old money.”

By the dictates and mores of this demographic, crying and other open displays of emotion were rarely acceptable forms of behavior, and the emotions that provoke them were to be squelched or hidden when they arose. As Tad Friend writes in *Cheerful Money: Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor* (2009), his probing memoir about his own declining WASP family, “I am fiercely but privately emotional.... I ended up spending my inheritance and then some on psychoanalysis. I was in trouble, but it was nearly impossible for anyone who didn’t know me well to tell, and I made it nearly impossible for anyone to know me well” (13–14).<sup>10</sup> At one point, Schmidt explicitly self-identifies as a WASP, and it occurs during another emotionally vulnerable moment involving Jon’s mother, Renata. As Schmidt writes a diary entry included in the novel about a day that he spent lying sick in bed, he recalls admitting to Renata, “I love my daughter,” and then adds in an aside to his diary, “I keep all note of pathos out of my voice. It helps to be the last of the Wasps” (AS, 143). As Schmidt processes his daughter’s news of her decision to wed, his professed confusion about his emotions may seem sincere. However, as the novel progresses, Begley gradually suggests that the array of conflicted feelings prompting Schmidt’s outburst have their roots in common WASP conceptions not only of the supposed value of

suppressed emotional display but also of an admirable man's superordinate relations to others. In particular, these mores dictated that the primary mark of male propriety is a relationally heightened level of success, and the primary mark of heightened success is possession, not only of material property but also of people.

As Charlotte enters the kitchen, Schmidt is immersed in figures listed in the *New York Times* related to his financial holdings. Upon hearing Charlotte's announcement, Schmidt "put aside the paper [and] looked at his daughter, so tall and, it seemed to him, painfully desirable in her sweat-soaked running clothes..." (*AS*, 2). For a daughter to seem not only desirable to her own father but "painfully" so strikes an odd note, but Schmidt's twinge of desire for a far younger woman becomes more characteristic of him as the novel progresses. In a particularly perceptive review of this novel, Thomas R. Edwards makes a relevant point about the similarity of the names of three young women whom Schmidt finds desirable: "'Charlotte' sounds just a little like 'Corinne,' the name of the French-Asian *au pair* girl with whom he went to bed [during his forties], and quite a lot like 'Carrie,' the young woman he gets deeply involved with as the book goes on."<sup>11</sup> Although Begley may seem to be depicting with these three "C's" a latent incestuous desire on Schmidt's part, this opening moment, with its conjunction of Schmidt's money, "his" daughter, and perceived threats to both, establishes him more pointedly as a protagonist whose very identity is grounded in an ethno-racially informed, masculine possessiveness. And, of course, the younger and more conventionally attractive the possessed woman, the more the possessive man feels that those features reflect similarly on himself. These are the terms in which the impending "loss" of Charlotte to marriage means losing instead of gaining for Schmidt, making him feel a self-affirming possessiveness that prompts something akin to unrequited lust. Possession itself, Begley suggests, is a source of excitement for Schmidt, one with a resemblance to sexual excitement that becomes more apparent when that to which Schmidt feels a proprietary right is a woman.

Schmidt's possessive conception of his daughter is further established as a manifestation of an animating disposition when he feels resentment over not having been asked by Charlotte's fiancé for her hand in marriage: "couldn't Riker have gone to the trouble of coming to Charlotte's father to ask for her hand?" (*AS*, 10). Schmidt feels disrespected as a father because he wishes for enactment of a ritual that would have struck most Americans of Charlotte and Jon's generation, if they had even

thought of it, as archaic. Indeed, Schmidt's unrequited expectation actually does resonate historically and, in terms of gender and ethnicity, by echoing a particularly Anglo-Saxon tradition of marriage. In the medieval era, these mores dictated that a daughter's prospective husband approach her father in a courtly manner and request the daughter's "hand" in marriage. The request was not merely an effort on the suitor's part to seek paternal approval of himself; it was also a financial transaction since a daughter was a form of paternal property destined to become another man's property, as a wife. As Carl Holliday noted in 1919, in his study of Anglo-Saxon marital customs, "The etymology of the very name 'wedding' betrays the character of the second stage in the development of matrimony. The 'wed' was the money, horses, cattle, or ornaments given as security by the Saxon groom and held by trustees as a pledge and as proof of the purchase of the bride from her father.... [A] handsome daughter has always been considered a decidedly marketable product."<sup>12</sup> Recalling these mores is not to deny, of course, that many other cultures have also treated daughters as transferable property in marriage rituals. Rather, in this particular tradition, and as Schmidt's feelings illustrate, remnants of the Anglo-Saxon conception of impending marriage as a masculinized exchange of property lingered with greater-than-average salience among the entrenched American elite, given their occupancy in the upper realms of a social hierarchy that resembled feudal English stratification in more ways than one. Here and elsewhere, then, Begley depicts the WASP masculinity of his era as a lingering, increasingly besieged ideology with myriad status-related manifestations, including nostalgic yearnings for the restoration of marital traditions that have become outmoded because they strike most people as absurdly patriarchal.

Throughout the novel, Schmidt's latent anti-Semitism functions similarly, as an anxious effort to maintain a pure, entitled sense of class-inflected WASP ethnicity, for himself as well as for his future progeny. Accordingly, certain thoughts and feelings on Schmidt's part suggest that he resents what he sees as an impending loss of his daughter not only to another man but also to a Jewish man and to his Jewish family. Schmidt falsely believes that he succeeds in keeping such feelings to himself. While other characters indicate at times their awareness of Schmidt's genteel bigotry, only his daughter eventually becomes fed up enough to confront him about it directly. In her study of attitudes and mores among the members of exclusive country clubs in the northeastern United States, sociologist Jessica Holden Sherwood notes, "Polite

indirection is characteristic of the WASP style of interacting..."<sup>13</sup> In her discussion of Jewish experiences in WASP-led "white shoe" law firms, Martha C. Nussbaum relays the reported preference of a young lawyer for work in a Jewish-led firm: "I went to a Jewish firm partly because I like people who are straightforward and do not hide their emotions.... People used to say, that if you did something wrong in a Jewish firm the partner would jump up and down and scream at you whereas in a white shoe firm they would treat you very nicely and after 7 or 8 years deny you a partnership with no warning."<sup>14</sup> Begley's portrayal of Schmidt's obstinate denial of his own anti-Semitism goes further, suggesting that evasive indirection may even be characteristic of the WASP style of interacting internally *with oneself*, especially about one's own less-than-admirable traits. Although Begley depicts Schmidt interacting with many other characters, he spends most of the narrative on his protagonist's internal divagations and avoidances. As Sherwood also notes of wealthy, northeastern elite values, "a family is conventionally expected to be ethnically homogenous," and a persistent thorn in Schmidt's psyche is his daughter's impending marriage to Jon Riker.<sup>15</sup> Again, a WASP of Schmidt's generation was likely to feel such a union as the "loss" of a daughter, and an attendant feeling is that since she must be released into adulthood, she should at least marry someone "like us," or as Sloan Wilson describes WASPs in the mildly ironic title of a novel in which he attempted to assess them as a demographic, *All the Best People* (1971).<sup>16</sup>

Schmidt's declared identity as "the last of the Wasps" is a grudging recognition that in terms of race and ethnicity, his insular, monochromatic milieu has changed (*AS*, 143). One irony of the novel is that with a name like Schmidt, his own family's entrée into White Anglo-Saxonism is technically tenuous as well as quite recent (as is his wealth). Indeed, although Schmidt has thoroughly adopted the WASP masculine mores of his younger days, his claim to Anglo-Saxonism ultimately proves little more genuine than claims to such a status by a Jewish American would be. Nevertheless, although Schmidt has worked extensively with Jewish colleagues, his daughter's impending marriage still *feels* like an incursion, and Schmidt doesn't quite know why. "Decidedly there was nothing wrong with Jon Riker," the narrator says at one point in Schmidt's internal voice but without directly stating that Schmidt somehow senses the marriage is wrong (*AS*, 10). Rather than admit, even to himself, that his feelings are both anti-Semitic and paternally possessive, Schmidt instead focuses on certain characteristics he remembers being displayed by Jon.

In effect, his nearly unconscious efforts to revive dominant ethnic mores function to reassert his fading sense both of possessive ethnic privilege and of his masculine virility, which feels under attack because of his recent retirement and merely because of his advanced age.

Recollection of actual Jewish American forays into elite northeastern United States settings reveals that although Schmidt thinks he is judging Jon's candidacy for son-in-law by a list of objective criteria, what he actually manages to resuscitate are stereotypes that entrenched elites had come to associate with Jewish Americans, especially the men who worked their way into spaces traditionally owned, both literally and figuratively, by the white Anglo-Saxon protestant elite. These stereotypes constituted an exclusionary strategy of WASP entitlement as it reproduced itself within institutional structures. As Karen Brodtkin explains in her study of Jewish American assimilation, exclusive colleges and universities of the mid-twentieth century were converting from finishing schools and sites of social connection for the elite to a "newer professional training mission": "Pressures for change were beginning to transform the curriculum and to reorient college from a gentleman's bastion to a training ground for middle-class professionals needed by an industrial economy."<sup>17</sup> As Begley illustrates in his later novel *Matters of Honor* (2007), which traces the adulthood path of a professionally successful Jewish immigrant much like himself, competing well academically became a viable mode of advancement for Jewish Americans (particularly those of Ashkenazi descent and thus lighter-skinned), who lacked the generationally transferred social capital of elite whites and often as well the nuanced manners, interests, vocabulary, and other markers of insider status. An attendant and greater barrier was the prevailing perception of Jewish people; as Brodtkin writes, "The Protestant elite complained that Jews were unwashed, uncouth, unrefined, loud, and pushy."<sup>18</sup> As Nussbaum writes, in addition to laughing out loud and telling jokes, "Above all, [Jewish men] were more emotional about everything, and they simply did not comprehend that emotion, like humor, is itself vulgar and must be carefully concealed, particularly at the dinner table, in order that society should roll on smoothly."<sup>19</sup> Such perceptions of a Jewish other led to de facto forms of discrimination in educational institutions, including admissions applications that asked for religious affiliation as well as "a fixed class size, a chapel requirement, and preference for children of alumni..."<sup>20</sup> In the face of such barriers, doing all that one could do to develop and prove one's suitability for a professional field, especially

in academic terms, was a common strategy on the part of ambitious Jewish students. An unfortunate consequence was that such hard work reinforced the elite white perception of Jewish people as fundamentally different—as “pushy” but also as too driven and too narrowly focused to fit in well with the more “well-rounded” Protestant elites.

Begley spends several early pages depicting Schmidt's efforts to sort out his feelings against Jon. His protagonist's rationalizations reflect with finely grained precision several preconceptions that were commonly held against Jews by northeastern white elites during the mid- to late-twentieth century, dramatizing in the process ways in which hegemonic whiteness has become normalized for most of its bearers as a set of proper, practical mores and values. Accordingly, Schmidt's thoughts and feelings on this matter often demonstrate a common lack of self-awareness regarding one's own ethnoracial biases, which white Americans often characterize instead as reasonable, supposedly accurate perceptions of mere differences from an unspecified (though, actually, specifically white) norm. At the same time, the reactions of other characters to Schmidt's obstinate bigotry help to demonstrate, again, that he deploys it in the service of a particularly WASP male sense of entitled possessiveness that has been outmoded for decades.

Schmidt's first ethnoracially tinged demurral regarding Jon is that although he is certainly “an excellent young lawyer, almost certain to become a partner ... he works much too hard” (*AS*, 10). After discerning what amounts to a perception of Jewish pushiness, Schmidt dwells further on this supposed characteristic of his future son-in-law, recalling that when he and Jon traveled together for their firm, Jon continued working during night flights while Schmidt “struggle[d]” to stay awake over “some contraband belles lettres” (*AS*, 13). Schmidt often finds time for classic European novels but he does so more dutifully than enthusiastically; the suggestion is that Schmidt regards the habit of reading literature as a distinguishing mark of a conventionally genteel, polished man like himself. Accordingly, Jon's apparent uninterest in such supposedly edifying and broadening fare constitutes a mark against him, and Schmidt recalls Jon reading only one book, “the first volume of Kissinger's memoirs” (*AS*, 13). As the noteworthiness for Schmidt of Henry Kissinger's surname suggests, what clearly makes this supposed uninterest in the arts more risible for Schmidt, and even noticeable, is Jon's Jewishness; because he sees Jon primarily in terms of his ethnicity, especially since Jon has been dating his daughter, his feelings against the

young man's encroachment upon Schmidt's familial property of sorts are channeled through the lens of anti-Semitic sentiment. At other points, Schmidt recalls himself having worked excessively hard to achieve prominence in his profession, and the long hours he spent working away from home are identified as another source of estrangement from his daughter; given this contrast to his judgment of Jon's apparent work habits, readers can easily imagine Schmidt ironically overlooking or even embracing such traits in a non-Jewish suitor.

Consideration of the broader context of the legal profession helps to discern the more nuanced details of Begley's portrait of these inclinations in Schmidt. By the late twentieth century, with law firms like Schmidt's former employer of Wood & King having (according to him) "filled up with Jews since the day he had himself gone to work there," elite resistance to Jewish incursions into educational, professional, and social spaces had greatly lessened (*AS*, 14). In a study of the rise and fall of exclusionary WASP law firms and of Jewish firms that arose in response, Eli Wald shows that widespread anti-Semitism was quickly jettisoned in the northeastern legal profession, largely in response to the unprofitable loss of young talent and of clients, Jewish or otherwise, who resented anti-Semitism.<sup>21</sup> As Nussbaum writes of the effects of Jewish success in legal settings, by the 1970s, common Jewish cultural mores had heavily influenced those of WASP-led legal firms and might even be said to have supplanted them:

what happened was not the triumph of assimilationist WASP manners. It was, instead, the marginalization, indeed the virtual disappearance of those manners. Nobody thinks, any longer, that the behavior of the 1950s country club is formative for law firm success. Guts, emotion, robust humor, talking loudly, using the hands—all these are normal or even normative. It wasn't a merger, not at all. It was a hostile takeover.<sup>22</sup>

Such changes in the ethnic makeup and mores of the legal profession, which occurred during Schmidt's career, render his prejudicial judgments of Jon remarkably old-fashioned. Other moments suggest that although he appears to have harbored bigotry toward Jewish colleagues throughout his career, it lessened over time in response to such changes; he currently thinks, for example, in a rather muted mode: "To the best of his recollection, no matter how deeply or far he looked, Schmidt was sure he had not once in his life stood in the way of a Jew" (*AS*, 13). As a



self-professed adherent to a fading WASP heritage as well as a man who now feels that his masculinity is flagging, Schmidt appears to become more anti-Semitic in response to his daughter's impending marriage as he focuses more sharply on the seemingly Jewish traits of not only Jon but also Jon's mother, who tries to cajole Schmidt into embracing new family members. Schmidt is a self-conscious adherent to an elite though faded WASP status and ideology, a man who feels the slipping away of possessions that mark his status; consequently, resurgent anti-Semitism becomes a weapon of sorts in his battle to reassert that status.

Nevertheless, Schmidt can never fully admit, even to himself, that he harbors these culturally instilled prejudicial feelings. His anti-Semitism becomes less genteel as the novel progresses, and his denial of these feelings leads not only to the severance of relationships that could have been positive for him but also to the channeling of those feelings into other possessive, ultimately injurious relationships, all in an effort to restore a sense of individualistic, independent masculinity.

### SOVEREIGN WASP MASCULINITY

The complexities of Schmidt's possessive stake in the Bridgehampton house, or his technical lack thereof, are worth spelling out since they serve to flesh out another vestigial sector amidst his socially structured feelings—a long-standing white American male sense that one should stand alone, unencumbered by others, despite needing markedly subordinate others to help establish that status. Early in the novel, having initially sorted through his resentment against Jon as he strolls about the house's yard and ending up little more than angry in the process, Schmidt descends into the cellar, where he makes a momentous decision. A long-standing aggravation has been the fact that this house does not technically belong to Schmidt. Rather, his wife Mary inherited it from an aunt, who had to be persuaded against leaving it to Charlotte, who was only four years old at the time. The aunt nevertheless instructed Mary to leave it to Charlotte when Mary died. As a result, Mary left Schmidt a "life estate" in the house, meaning that when he died, Charlotte would then legally inherit it (*AS*, 18–19). This decision was reached because Charlotte would not be able to afford taxes incurred by inheriting the house but would be able to pay them with money inherited from him when he dies. The upshot for Schmidt of this convoluted plan is the expectation that he continue living in the house and maintaining it,

“a slave to a house that would never be his own” (*AS*, 19). While brooding in the cellar and feeling that he cannot quite be his own man without owning his own home, Schmidt decides to move out and set up his own, smaller “shack” in Sag Harbor. He makes this dubious domestic decision with Charlotte and Jon continually in mind, despite the emotional distance from them it would inevitably create and despite fears of financial insecurity due to the loss not only of a large amount he would pay for Charlotte’s gift taxes but also of the annual interest income from that money and of the money to be spent on a new home.

Schmidt goes through these tortuous financial and residential calculations for two reasons, both resulting from his self-perceived declining status as a member of a dominant, elite, and thus extensively propertied, ethnoracial group. The first reason is, again, that Schmidt resents the intrusion into his family life of a Jewish man as well as the expectation that he and his daughter form a marital union with a Jewish family. The second is that Schmidt considers such a situation even less tolerable because he cannot commandeer it from the ground base of a home that he himself actually owns:

Damn the taxes and the loss of income. He would give the house to Charlotte and move out. Living under the same roof with Jon Riker married to Charlotte during vacations, all summer weekends, and however many other weekends in the year they would want to use it might have been contemplated if it were on his own terrain, in a house that was really his, where he made the rules. But never in a fake commune, where he felt the obligation to consult those two about calling the plumber, repainting the house blue, or ripping out a hedge! (*AS*, 23)

Schmidt attributes his feelings to the potential living situation, which he disparages as a “fake commune,” but what he also exhibits is an instantiation of his locale’s lingering dominant ethnoracial habitus. To own one’s home outright upon retirement has, of course, been a long-standing and central component of the (United States) American Dream, for people of all races and ethnicities. Nevertheless, Schmidt’s feelings and decision here also reflect the shaping influences of a lengthy history of class-bound ethnoracial formation that exacerbates such common possessive white male presumptions.

As numerous historians of racial formation have explained, the sense of achievement that white American men have felt in owning their own

home and land has arisen within a gendered, racialized national context. In terms of material property, early contact between Native Americans and those who later dubbed themselves “white Anglo-Saxons” soon melded with religious conceptions of humanity’s responsibility for using what they saw as the God-given gifts of land, flora, and fauna to form colonial conceptions of proper usage of land as just that—usage, via farming especially, a practice which white elites and other “settlers” accused Native Americans of failing to perform (despite abundant evidence to the contrary).<sup>23</sup> White appropriation of land thus became a collective racial responsibility. As Cheryl Harris notes in her groundbreaking work on whiteness as itself a form of property, “being white automatically ensured higher economic returns in the short term, as well as greater economic, political, and social security in the long run.”<sup>24</sup> As George Lipsitz and others have demonstrated, numerous subsequent methods of limiting land and other forms of ownership primarily to white men has resulted in vast racial disparities in terms of material and financial possession.<sup>25</sup> In the 1800s, generationally transferred ownership of real estate became a distinguishing hallmark of white Anglo-Saxons, an affiliation that took on salience greater than mere whiteness, as an exclusionary nationalized identity, when waves of non-British European immigrants arrived, most of whom had to work their way gradually into whiteness. In the early 1900s, atomized homeownership became a naturalized ideology, and whether a family rented property, or lived in newly available public housing, or whether one could eventually afford it, in one’s own home, became key markers not only of class difference but also of ethnic differences within the hierarchized category of whiteness.<sup>26</sup> A marker of elite Anglo-Saxon masculinity was, of course, a purposefully impressive “estate,” consisting of not only a large house and extensive grounds but also enough “help” in the form of hired, decidedly non-Anglo-Saxon people to maintain them.

The century-long fading of an overtly dominant, white Anglo-Saxon ethnicity gradually muted direct expectations of rightful occupancy among what amounted to the nation’s self-appointed version of England’s landed gentry. However, as Begley’s depiction of Schmidt’s feelings about the Bridgehampton house illustrate, long-standing white Anglo-Saxon male conceptions and feelings about oneself in relation to significant real estate ownership have lingered.

A broader, contributing factor is that few contemporary white Americans feel disturbed by ongoing racial disparities in home

ownership, let alone by their resonant historical roots. One reason that those who possess especially disproportionate amounts of unearned or more easily gained property fail to perceive such disparities as unjust is that ownership of land and housing, and the relative lack of such ownership by non-white Americans, still seems and feels right to them. In Shannon Sullivan's study of "whiteness as possession," she examines "the possessiveness of unconscious habits of white privilege," noting that such ownership habits "manifest an 'appropriate' relationship to the earth, including the people and things that are a part of it":

The appropriate relationship is one of appropriation: taking land, people and the fruits of others' labor and creativity as one's own. Failure to embody this proper relationship with the world marks one as a subperson, as a quasi-thing that is then legitimately available for, seen in need of, appropriation by full persons.... Whiteness as possession describes not just the act of owning, but also the obsessive psychosomatic state of white owners.... The benefits accrued to white people through this process include not merely economic gain, but also increased ontological security and satisfaction of unconscious desires.<sup>27</sup>

In historical terms, what's of course missing from Sullivan's otherwise helpful analysis is the masculinity of such white people—very few women have been able to occupy the status of such "white owners."

As I will explain, several of Schmidt's possessive "unconscious desires" do indeed come to be satisfied, including that of "ontological security," and the structured racial order in which he lives helps focus his desires toward ultimately damaging pursuits. In the novel's early description of Schmidt's thoughts on the Bridgehampton house, he demonstrates more pointedly the desire for what geographer Steven D. Farough terms "the dominant standpoint of white men, sovereign individuality."<sup>28</sup> This perspective includes a sense of self in terms of socio-geographic spaces that seems to its bearers independent and non-racial: "To be sovereign, or free, means that only those who are in positions of privilege or 'supreme rank or power' may possess a consistent sense of self-determination. The outcome of sovereignty is a subjective sense of 'complete independence,' a distinct separation between the individual and the social world, where the person is self-governing and autonomous."<sup>29</sup> Yet to be a sovereign individual is not to be truly independent, because the very concept depends on self-defining conceptions of others, including, in the case of

elite white American men, the conception of oneself as an owner of that which others—usually darker or ethnic others as well as women—do not own, as well as conceptions of other types of people living in less desirable spaces. In this identity-forming dynamic, and as Schmidt goes on to demonstrate, perceiving the egalitarian demands or incursions (or both) of subordinated others can constitute an anxiety-inducing challenge to one's own ontological security, bound up as it is with status, and thus induce a nostalgic longing and grasping for conditions and relationships that seem to resemble those of the past.

In this novel's socio-geographic setting, some of these other people leave their own places of residence in such communities as Sag Harbor to work for people like Schmidt. During his stroll around what amounts to an almost feudally conceived estate, Schmidt notes with satisfaction the "chattering Ecuadoreans" he has hired for yard work (*AS*, 6). Later, he repeatedly refers to a group of women who arrive for weekly housecleaning with the terms "Polish" and "Polacks," and as he ventures outside of the house's grounds, he continually surmises the apparent ethnicities of other people as well. Again, as a more or less landed, self-identified WASP, Schmidt's attention to ethnicity and to its seemingly appropriate residential locations as far from his own establishes the classed and raced differences of such others from himself, thereby asserting his own difference, and supposed superiority, in the process. Begley's attention to Schmidt's conception of hierarchically indicative geographical arrangements furthers the portrait of Schmidt's historically resonant, representatively elevated self-conception.

Schmidt enjoys his house's expansive yard because its meticulous orderliness strikes him as aesthetically pleasing but also because its size provides "the feeling of open space" (*AS*, 5). This feeling of owned openness enhances Schmidt's sense of achieved individualism, but again this is a "sovereign" individualism because his open space exists primarily as such for him not merely because it is relatively empty, but also because that expansive and expensive emptiness constitutes a barrier between himself and other, supposedly lesser people. When Schmidt recalls, for instance, that his neighbor might sell some land for subdivisions and that developers could "put up two or three houses," thereby destroying his feeling of open space, he soon hits upon a solution for maintaining his individualized sense of spatial isolation: "it would not be difficult to plant out whatever monstrosities they might build" (*AS*, 5). As cultural geographers Nancy and Jack Duncan point out,

“aesthetic appreciation of residential landscapes is an issue that primarily preoccupies the affluent.”<sup>30</sup> However, such appreciation is not merely a matter of aesthetics: “A seemingly innocent pleasure in the aesthetic appreciation of landscapes and efforts to maintain and protect them can act as subtle but highly effective excluding mechanisms for reaffirming class and race identities.”<sup>31</sup> In sum, Begley’s interiorized portrait of Schmidt dramatizes how keeping other, lesser people out of one’s residential space and sightlines is a common, largely unconscious elite white male desire, a sense of landed possessiveness that indicates habitual conceptions of others in subordinated relation to oneself, and thereby one’s own vaunted, supposedly independent self-conception as well.

### NOSTALGIC WHITE WORLD-TRAVELING

Prior to depicting Schmidt in full flight from his daughter and future in-laws and toward a self-involved and ultimately numbing relationship with sexually abused, twenty-year-old Carrie, Begley further cements the elite, white male underpinnings of the sociohistorical and geographically resonant context in which Schmidt is situated by temporarily sending him into an allegorical idyll of privileged, pampered exile. After spending Thanksgiving and another evening with Charlotte, Jon, and his parents, Schmidt declines an invitation to spend Christmas with them, falsely indicating that it feels too soon after the death of his wife to spend a family holiday with anyone but himself. He then visits best friend, Gil, and his wife, Elaine, who help him decide how to spend the holidays. They hit upon the idea of sending Schmidt to “our Amazon island,” a small patch of ground in Brazil containing an air strip, a guest house, and “silent” native servants who move “like polite shadows” (*AS*, 156–57). What all three characters demonstrate in this conversation, and by their visits to this island, is described well by Sullivan as a racially informed “ontological expansiveness,” the same presumptive feeling in regard to physical space displayed by Shields’s protagonist, Jack Bowman: “As ontologically expansive, white people consider all spaces as rightly available for their inhabitation of them.”<sup>32</sup> Sullivan elsewhere describes a specific example of this unconscious white way of being and acting as “white world-traveling,” an entitled sense not only that all spaces should be entirely available for one’s touristic consumption but also that the inhabitants of non-white communities should be hospitably adaptive to white middle-class ways of being, rather than the reverse.<sup>33</sup>

Readers are prompted to think of Schmidt's Brazilian idyll in allegorical terms when Gil twice refers mistakenly to the German ex-patriot who oversees the island—a man whose name Elaine says is “something like Oskar Lang”—as “Herr Schmidt.” “My Doppelganger,” Schmidt replies in a metanarrative mode (*AS*, 158). As I will explain, another character, Mr. Wilson, or “the man,” better fills the novelistic role of Schmidt's ontologically suggestive double; nevertheless, when Schmidt later arrives and settles into the house as the island's only guest, the parallels between “Oskar Lang” and Schmidt become significant. According to Elaine, Lang has an unnamed “native” wife whom he appreciates with a paternalistic combination of sexism and racism. “He kept on pointing out to Gil that white women's breasts fall as they get older,” Elaine says, “while his Indian woman has boobs that stayed small and hard. Like *mein* fist, only nice, so nice and small, was how he put it!” (*AS*, 158). Schmidt has also been engaging in increasingly vigorous appreciation of a darker woman, the half-Puerto Rican waitress Carrie, whom he too finds especially alluring because of the racialized differences between her body and those of most of the (white) women he has known.

Schmidt, Gil, and Elaine clearly share a collective ideology that structures their conceptions of themselves in relation to racialized others, both those who live in their environs and nation and, in a more nostalgic sense, some others who live elsewhere. Because white supremacy has largely morphed into a hegemonic ideology, they register no understanding of how their privileged ability to enjoy such a vacation is enabled by their positioning within an ongoing colonialist set of relations, between people who became “white” and in many settings “white Anglo-Saxon” and those whom they declared inferior and exploitable because of their darker differences. These hierarchical relations are echoed by the very arrangement of this island and its “Caboclo servants, very silent, moving like polite shadows. You only see them when you want something, and they seem to know it without being called” (*AS*, 157). That such people would have other lives apart from their work for wealthy white people, and would likely understand much about such visitors because they need to watch them carefully, never seems to occur to these three people, the sort who would likely label themselves “Americans,” thereby placing themselves at an empowered, normalized center and ignoring the fact of other Americas. Upon arrival in Brazil, Schmidt does make some effort to assess the local context of his vacation by reaching into a more overtly colonial past for Joseph Conrad's novel *Nostramo* (1904) “since

he decided that if he were going to South America he might as well test his theory that Conrad had fixed in it completely and forever the essence of that continent ..." (*AS*, 173). Aside from fatuously believing that anyone, let alone a Westerner, could capture some singular "essence" of such a highly variegated continent, Schmidt never considers consulting the insights of South American authors. His attempts to analyze the place (though not his own current relation to it) via Conrad apparently fail; as he basks in the sun on the island house's deck, his concentration on the book wanes because he "has been overcome by intense, rather stupid happiness. He feels good all over.... Nature is beautiful and good..." (*AS*, 173).

In spite of this stupefying comfort, and like in other moments in the narrative, pangs of something like privileged, Western white guilt also arise here for Schmidt, along with a twinge of interest in probing within himself for the source of that guilt. Earlier, on the way to a Thanksgiving dinner with Jon's parents, such feelings also arise when Schmidt stops at the exclusive Harvard Club, where he makes his way to a restroom, adjusts his hair and clothing, and then leaves for the Rikers' apartment. As he approaches their home, Schmidt has no particular conscious reason for stopping at the club. That this WASP male has an underlying need to bolster himself, precisely as a racially sanctioned member of the Ivy League-educated elite (one who at the moment resents the paternal loss threatened by the incursion into his family and world of Jewish people), is suggested by his self-assessing pause in front of the restroom mirror. The mirror tells him that he "looked worse than even the sour person wearing his own clothes he had glimpsed returning his own stare from a Fifth Avenue window" (*AS*, 91). Of course, time changes everyone fortunate enough to reach Schmidt's age of sixty, but this brief Harvard Club visit itself and what drives Schmidt to make it suggest just how this man does not know himself. Since readers know by this point that Schmidt looks down, as it were, on the Rikers merely because they are Jewish, he clearly pauses at this bastion of elite privilege not to partake of its amenities but rather to reassert his position in relation to the Rikers as a member of the WASP elite who once in effect owned elite northeastern culture and spaces.

That Schmidt's continual need to shore up his self-conception is the point here, and that it is ever ironically relational in a sense that became fixed in him decades earlier, become more evident when thoughts of less privileged others very briefly occur to him: "There's enough fancy



stuff on me to lodge and feed a homeless family for a month" (AS, 93). Another pang of this sort arises as Schmidt basks in his stupor of "happiness" on the Amazonian island when he idly imagines "barefoot, brown boys and girls tirelessly playing soccer in the village perhaps half a mile away with a bundle of rags tied with a string [who] will never get to kick a leather ball or learn to read" (AS, 173).<sup>34</sup> At these moments, such thoughts, not only of perceived others but also of his highly privileged positioning in relation to them, subside quickly, as Schmidt performs habitual internal retreats from a better understanding of his social positionality and from his emotions (in this case, something like sympathy) into a numbed, isolated distance from others. Accustomed to thinking of his subordinated others, especially women and ethnic or darker people, in an increasingly archaic sense, as the emotional ones and thus of himself as rational and controlled, Schmidt continually retreats from the possibility of a more mature understanding of his own highly raced and gendered emotions. He instead pursues internal numbness, especially during encounters in which he is confronted with those he persistently perceives as vaguely threatening or inferior others or both, through such palliatives as a pampered vacation, alcohol, and, later in the novel, sex and money.

### THE WHITE MANCHILD

Since Begley depicts his protagonist as a representative white male who lacks self-awareness, Schmidt serves as an ostensibly respectable, successful insider who in a sense is not yet a fully mature adult. Not only does he make remarkably selfish and immature choices in his relationships, he does so because the broader structures of feeling in which he operates, and in which he has been raised, have stunted his emotional capacities and responses.<sup>35</sup> As with other aspects of his psyche, his obstinate adherence to early relational constructions of white masculine identity account for much of this problem. As white men developed their collective self-conception in relation to others, a European claim of limited emotional capacities in non-white people arose. In these terms, *About Schmidt* initially reads as a sort of late-life bildungsroman, and it's worth noting that this term is commonly understood as having two primary components: a "novel that recounts the development (psychological and sometimes spiritual) of an individual from childhood to maturity, to the point at which the protagonist recognizes his or her place in the world."<sup>36</sup> A key

character in this regard is the seemingly minor figure of a person whom Schmidt continually refers to as “the man” even after learning his name. Deployed by Begley as Schmidt’s doppelgänger, this person represents the “darker” racialized and sexualized aspects of Schmidt’s psyche, and he also functions, like other traditional doppelgängers, as the potential bearer of a message to Schmidt about these deleterious sides of himself. That Schmidt ultimately fails to receive this message, and thus to mature emotionally, has much to do with his self-conception as the “last of the Wasps” (*AS*, 143).

Schmidt first encounters this man after falling asleep on a bus while trying to read another European classic, Trollope’s 1855 novel, *The Warden*.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Schmidt is on his way home after the Thanksgiving dinner at which he has met Jon’s parents for the first time. Jon’s mother, Renata, is a psychiatrist, and she has pulled Schmidt aside for a long, inquisitive chat. As Renata asks Schmidt increasingly personal questions, she warmly takes his hand. Schmidt is unaccustomed to such open intimacy with women, except in sexual encounters. Accordingly, he considers trying to fondle Renata’s breast and then tells her, “I want to kiss you” (*AS*, 117). She rebuffs him, apparently uninterested in sex because her actual goal—acceptance and affection from Schmidt toward her son and his union with Charlotte—occurs at an emotional level, a realm from which Schmidt habitually flees. Having had his masculinity bruised yet again by the rejection, Schmidt abruptly ends the conversation by telling Renata of his plans to give his life estate in the Bridgehampton house to Charlotte as a wedding gift and of moving into his own house, thereby withdrawing, both literally and symbolically, from the newly formed family that would include the Rikers. Schmidt, then, is briefly attracted to Renata not as a friendly and caring future fellow parent-in-law but rather, in a more adolescent manner, as a sexualized and exotified (because of her Jewishness) female. The stage set that is Schmidt’s internal emotional landscape has thus been arranged for the entrance of “the man,” a doppelgänger who immediately emerges as if from Schmidt’s dreaming unconscious.

On an otherwise empty bus that evening, this shambolic white man invades Schmidt’s personal space, and indeed his personhood itself, by sitting right next to him. Both this man and Schmidt have fallen asleep when the latter is awakened by a “stench” (*AS*, 118). In their study of racialized aesthetics in suburban New York settings, geographers Duncan and Duncan note that in such ostensibly tolerant settings, “the Other is

not so different from me as to be an object.... But at the level of practical consciousness they are affectively marked as different.”<sup>38</sup> Because tolerating racial difference (if not embracing it) had become a polite white norm by Schmidt’s time, racial difference is no longer perceived in essentialist terms, and explicitly naming it has become censured as well. An affective result is that members of other racialized groups “threaten to cross over the border of the subject’s identity because discursive consciousness will not name them as completely different.... The face-to-face presence of these others, who do not act as if they have their own ‘place,’ a status to which they are not confined, thus threatens aspects of my basic security system, my basic sense of identity, and I must turn away with disgust and revulsion.”<sup>39</sup> Similar responses in Schmidt are evoked by this man, but in order for him to function more clearly as Schmidt’s abjectified doppelgänger, his difference from Schmidt is marked in terms of class rather than race. As Begley depicts Schmidt confronting the reality of the person slumbering noisily beside him, he underlines the man’s flagrant corporeality to comedic, satiric effect:

He shifted in his seat and broke wind. It was expelled in ample bursts, followed by a liquid rumbling in the stomach.... The cloacal odor was unbearable, but different from the stench that had interrupted Schmidt’s sleep and continued to nauseate him. Was the man hiding a piece of carrion in his pocket, had he a suppurating wound on his feet or somewhere under his clothes? It seemed impossible that an accumulation of dirt and sweat alone could account for such fetor. (*AS*, 119)

Humor arises in this scene, not from the man’s rank corporeality but rather—as emphasized by such recondite vocabulary as *cloacal*, *carrion*, *suppurating*, and *fetor*—from Schmidt’s appalled reaction to it. Again, as an apparent “hobo,” this man is othered with disgust in classist terms, but Schmidt’s revulsion also springs from a literal invasion of himself, via his senses, by humanity abjectified as filth. Schmidt’s rising panic as he awakens the man and tries to get past him is thus a reaction to the breaching of his “basic security system,” and the man also represents a threat to Schmidt’s “basic sense of identity,” a threat that grows as Schmidt repeatedly encounters this character during a time in his life when events and the desires of others seem to be undercutting his possessive masculine WASP sense of himself. Eventually, this man’s blatant violation of genteel WASP decorum renders him a signaling foil for the

novel's protagonist, an indicator, should Schmidt be willing to see "the man" in such self-reflecting terms, of his own refusal to relinquish that which is causing his excessive possessiveness, that is, his internal and thus behavioral "filth."

Begley emphasizes this mirroring possibility of self-recognition by detailing this character's suggestive physical similarities to his protagonist. Schmidt is wearing his dead father's tweed jacket, and this man, who is "as tall" as Schmidt, is "dressed in a threadbare tweed suit of the same shade" (*AS*, 119). Schmidt, a self-declared WASP with a discordantly German name, is also mirrored in his perception of this man's "good English or German face"; the man also wears a tie and carries a cane, with which he swaggers foppishly at other points in the novel, a mocking echo of Schmidt's own rather pompously inflated masculinity and class status.<sup>40</sup> In such ways, this man's seemingly parodic appropriation of genteel masculinity, despite his othered "hobo" status, threatens to disrupt the brittle identity that Schmidt has been trying to shore up. As a traditionally deployed doppelgänger, "the man" represents resurgent sides of Schmidt that he actively represses from his own conscious awareness; accordingly, Schmidt presses past this person with an excuse about having "to go to the can this very minute," takes another seat far from the man, and then scurries to his car and locks himself inside (*AS*, 120).

Schmidt goes on to encounter this person several more times. In one scene, while Schmidt chats with Carrie in O'Henry's, her place of employment, this man appears outside the restaurant's window. He winks at Schmidt, gives him the finger when Schmidt doesn't respond, and then leaves obediently when Carrie shakes her fist and waves him away. At another point, after dining with Gil and Elaine and hearing their suggestion of a trip to Brazil, Schmidt drives home with Gil. As his headlights shine on the house, he notices a figure on the porch, "like a melting snowman, squatting on top of the steps. Its exposed buttocks were fat and exceedingly white" (*AS*, 162). Schmidt recognizes this figure, who pulls up his pants and scurries away, as the same man. What he does not recognize is the symbolic import of that which the man has left literally on his doorstep, "the fruit of the white buttocks" (*AS*, 164). Significantly, Schmidt scoops up the feces, throws it away, and continues to more or less ignore both this person and the question of why he has taken an interest in Schmidt, paralleling his disavowal of all the disturbing clues about himself and his structurally informed emotions that this figure does deliver to alert readers.

Those attuned to common usages of the doppelgänger figure will be primed by these encounters with “the man” to watch for an internal change in Schmidt, which would manifest as him recognizing, and then grappling with, that which this abject figure represents, that is, the unacknowledged content that has backed up, as it were, in his own constipated psyche. These parts of himself—his adamant and antiquated sexist and ethnoracial bigotry—are not components of self that a late-twentieth-century WASP male faced with a changing social order is likely to acknowledge, perhaps even to himself. As Thandeka writes in her analysis of common modes of white shame, “Experiences of shame are self-exposures that lower one’s own sense of personal esteem and respect. They are snapshots of embarrassing features of the self. Looking at these uncomplimentary mug shots, one feels shame, as in the feeling ‘I am unlovable.’”<sup>41</sup> Yet, as Schmidt continually demonstrates, shame, disgust, and other ugly feelings about himself nevertheless arise, provoking his actions in ways that the more conscious and socially sanctioned side of himself guiltily recognizes at times as reprehensible. When interpreted in this light, “the man” represents the man performing behind the social imposture of “Schmidtie,” and whether Schmidt will recognize this mirrored image of himself, thereby advancing in maturity—by dealing better with the egalitarian demands of others and with his own circumstances instead of longing for times in which WASP male perquisites and mores seemed securely ascendant—becomes the novel’s central question.

### REPPRESSED WHITE MALE SHAME

After discarding the mess on his porch, Schmidt enters the house with Gil and tells him about having seen the same man at O’Henry’s and about odd feelings that this man has repeatedly triggered in him, including “revulsion,” “panic,” and a suspicion that this man is trying to “terrorize” him (*AS*, 168). After Gil leaves, Schmidt, who often imbibes heavily, pours himself another drink as he ponders what to do about the man and the odd feelings that this person inspires. “Shame and paralysis!” he thinks, as he ponders whether to call the police (*AS*, 168). Were Schmidt to analyze his strong yet confused reactions to the man more fully, he might wonder why these feelings arise. Readers, of course, are invited to perform this analysis themselves. Given the hints here of connections made in traditional psychoanalysis between abject bodily functions and shame, as well as the probing conversations that Schmidt twice

endures with Jon's psychiatrist mother, Renata, an interpretation of "the man" as the bearer of a message about the denied parts of Schmidt's self—his bigotry, possessiveness, and misdirected, exotifying sexual desire, especially—becomes appropriate. In rather traditional Freudian terms that resemble those deployed by Wright in *Savage Holiday*, qualities and behavior displayed by "the man" function symbolically as the return of Schmidt's repressed. Schmidt has spent a lifetime denying to both himself and others his own destructive, possessive feelings and characteristics. That he may well continue to ignore his occasional, resultant shame is suggested here, and elsewhere, by his habit of anesthetizing himself whenever budding sensitivity arises within him, in this case with alcohol, which clouds and diverts his thoughts about "the man" onto other subjects. Schmidt also turns to sex and money for similar reasons, reasons that inspire in him falsely restorative modes of nostalgia.

A more direct connection between Schmidt and this man arises one night when Carrie unexpectedly arrives at Schmidt's house for the first time. As Schmidt begins a sexual relationship with her, Carrie reveals that she met the apparently homeless man when she was fourteen years old and that he has been following her ever since. The topic arises when Schmidt asks Carrie who the love of her life is, and she reveals that this man was once a chemistry teacher named Mr. Wilson: "An old guy like you. He broke me in" (AS, 212). Mr. Wilson (we never learn his first name) began having sex with Carrie after he walked in on her during a sexual encounter with a fellow student in a classroom. Whether Carrie is attracted to Schmidt because she now simply prefers "old guys" or because, like many people who have been sexually abused, she unconsciously seeks reminders and repetition of her abuse is a question the novel does not answer.<sup>42</sup>

Within the framework of Begley's anatomization of Schmidt's culturally induced and outmoded inclinations, it is significant that Schmidt never questions Carrie's attraction to himself. He has pursued her for several months by dining at O'Henry's, where Carrie always serves him, and now that she has arrived literally at his doorstep—the same place where Mr. Wilson left his abjectified message of sorts for Schmidt—he instead revels in the feeling that he now possesses her. When Carrie asks what he likes about her, he replies, "It's what you said, you belong to me" (AS, 199). Begley underlines how strongly the urge to possess drives his representative WASP male protagonist when Schmidt also ponders to himself at this moment how his life has changed: "Here was an

aspect of unemployment and nearly total loneliness he had not previously examined, let alone apprehended: they set one free! ... There was [only] Charlotte's wedding reception to be held in June, and the need, which was turning into a wish, to move into another house" (*AS*, 198). The "need" Schmidt had felt to move into another house, and away from one that he did not technically own, is weakening into a "wish" because he now feels that he possesses Carrie. This feeling compensates for the possessive lack Schmidt had felt before as he considered the looming "loss" of his daughter and the expectations that he live in and be "a slave to a house that would never be his own" (*AS*, 19).

Begley's primary point about the culturally induced inclinations and feelings instilled long ago in Schmidt because of his social positionality as an older, unregenerate WASP male is that his clinging to them steers him toward further loss and destruction. At this point in the narrative, because at this stage in his life he especially objects to "losing" his daughter to a Jewish husband, Schmidt is gradually alienating and driving away both his daughter and his future in-laws. Similarly, the satisfaction he now takes in believing that he possesses Carrie, while concurrently feeling a rejuvenated sense of domineering masculinity, blinds him not only to what he really sees in her—an objectified entity for him to "own"—but also to who she is and to the significance of who else she shares her life with, especially Bryan, a young man who lives in nearby Sag Harbor: "I've kind of been with him since I got this job [at O'Henry's]" (*AS*, 210). This news "[goes] through Schmidt like an icicle," but he ignores how this relationship may well be more significant to her than the one she has with Schmidt, continuing to insist that she still "belongs" to him: "Nothing mattered. He had to keep her body. She said she belonged to him" (*AS*, 210). Indulging this narcissistic desire distracts Schmidt from thinking about what Bryan really means to Carrie and thus about what he himself could mean to her.

Nevertheless, Schmidt's relationship with Carrie is not portrayed as an entirely negative manifestation of his self-absorbed WASP male possessiveness, and Begley clearly does not cast a disapproving authorial eye merely because of the socially inappropriate age gap. To the contrary, Begley has stated that he meant for the union to represent a possibility for Schmidt to break out of his numbed loneliness. In his commentary on the film based on his novel, Begley writes of the filmmakers' decision not to include Carrie: "I missed the theme of the redemptive and regenerative power of Eros, embodied in my novel by Carrie, the personage

I care for most among all that I have created.... her love for Schmidt, and the torrid sex between them, ripen him and open the possibility that he will become a freer and wiser man.”<sup>43</sup> By emphasizing here both a pent-up sexual force in his protagonist and the potential of a sexist, one-dimensional caricature of a conveniently available female to provide release, Begley would seem to echo in this regard other American “male liberationist” writers of his time. As Robinson notes, these writers typically portrayed a dominant white masculinity in crisis, in the form of central characters who are “wounded by their power, their responsibilities, and indeed, by patriarchy itself.”<sup>44</sup> A problem with many such texts is that, unlike Begley in *About Schmidt*, their authors lose sight of how social relations nevertheless both influence and empower white men. Schmidt does revel in sexual release with Carrie, and he does become temporarily enlivened by it, but his primary interest in her—ego-boosting, possessive sex—soon becomes but another palliative, which both numbs him and distracts him, especially from the impending severance of any positive connection with his daughter Charlotte.

As a representative middle-aged male WASP who continually represses powerful feelings, Schmidt has battened down the complex emotions provoked by the loss of his wife Mary and by Charlotte’s engagement. Begley highlights Schmidt’s anesthetic use of both alcohol and Carrie during a telephone conversation with Charlotte about her wedding plans, including the expected services of a rabbi. Carrie has quietly situated herself in his lap, but as Schmidt struggles to express his objections to a Jewish wedding and as his emotions rise accordingly, he notices that the warm glow of sex and a nap is fading: “The novocaine was wearing off. He nudged Carrie off his lap” (*AS*, 203). Carrie then prepares a drink for Schmidt, and as Charlotte presses her father on the prejudice that he is again obliquely but obstinately expressing, he thinks, “The effect of one hundred proof bourbon on an empty stomach was marvelous” (*AS*, 205). Confronted with an emotional eruption that pushes him to acknowledge, just as his daughter is doing, his own bigoted and possessive self, Schmidt’s habitual repression asserts itself. After offering the evasive (and common white) assertion that he cannot be harboring discriminatory feelings against Jews because he has openly socialized with many of them,<sup>45</sup> Schmidt abruptly ends the conversation and then turns immediately to Carrie for condolence and then for more sex, this time on the kitchen table. His refusal to acknowledge certain emotions, let alone to consider their sources, continues, as does his compensatory



drive to possess others, and the gap between himself, his daughter, and the possibility of wider familial contentment increases. Thus, where Begley differs from the essentialist politics of many of his era's white male storytellers is by maintaining a critical focus on broader forces that influence common white male feelings. Although a man in Schmidt's situation might find some sort of life-affirming release in a new sexual relationship, Begley's protagonist remains sadly responsive to earlier sociohistorical forces that have shaped his emotions and actions, warping how he regards and reacts in a newer social order toward not only Carrie, his daughter, and his future in-laws but also himself and his own general future.

As the novel approaches its conclusion, Schmidt again meets with Jon's mother, Renata. He requests that they meet at "his club," the Harvard Club, a spatial choice that suggests how being energized by Carrie has solidified not into a new appreciation for life and the people around him but rather into his habitual mode of privileged and possessive white masculinity. Prior to consummating his relationship with Carrie, Schmidt had vacillated between finding Renata bearable and alluring, but he now thinks of her as a "meddling witch" (*AS*, 216). As they talk, it becomes clear that Charlotte is quite happy to join their Jewish family and also to move further from what remains of her own family, that is, her father. Renata relays to him Jon and Charlotte's proposal, that contrary to his own idea regarding the Bridgehampton property—that he pay her gift taxes so the house will be hers right away rather than when he dies—he instead buy out her portion and keep the house himself. Schmidt agrees, reasoning to himself that he can quickly sell it and that he "wouldn't be selling the Schmidts' ancestral homestead. Someone must have sold that long ago" (*AS*, 229). Charlotte and Jon are instead thinking of buying property north of New York City, and they will also hold the wedding reception at a restaurant in Manhattan instead of in Bridgehampton, where Schmidt had hoped it would be. That he has lost all shreds of his daughter's affection seems obvious to all but Schmidt, who suppresses, beyond even his own awareness, his sense of loss in order to focus instead on being sure that he understands the financial matters at hand and what the various arrangements will cost him in those terms. When he later reads a letter from Charlotte that further explains her wishes regarding the house and the wedding, he quickly writes back, mostly to assert again his own financial agreements and refusals, the latter including a notice that he will keep the family

silverware that Charlotte has requested. His own curtness is clearly further prompted by Charlotte's explanation in her letter that she will likely convert to Judaism. When Schmidt finishes his letter, his masculine and ethnoracialized tendency to suppress his feelings results in another: "Shouldn't I send a copy of the letter to Renata? ... In the end, he didn't do it; he felt too ashamed" (*AS*, 242). Once again, Schmidt does not understand his sense of shame, let alone examine it. Readers can surmise that for a moment he feels something akin to disgust with his actions, and ultimately with himself, not only because he has driven away his daughter but also because he let his possessiveness, and thus his resurgent anti-Semitism, cause that to happen.

Begley suggests in these moments that although the feelings of paternalistic, ethnoracial shame are often confusing, searching for their roots can prove enlightening, particularly in regard to how one conceives of oneself. Schmidt's ultimate failure is his refusal to take the opportunity for personal understanding and growth provided by a more egalitarian social order and thus by the provocation of the surprising emotions it evokes in him. Were such a person to do so, he might uncover the sources of his anti-Semitism in his early training as WASP male status and its attendant mores, which have no doubt included disdain for and fears of Jewish people, effectively embedding such feelings within him and creating an illusory psychic split between "his" people and "them" that he refuses to suture.

That Schmidt will continue refusing as well to face the roots of his own emotional confusion is conclusively suggested in what I read as the climax of this novel's largely internal drama—Schmidt's killing of the person he only ever refers to as "the man." After attending a party thrown by fellow Hamptons residents who are no longer, and clearly never really were, his friends, Schmidt races home toward Carrie. He hits a lengthy patch of dense fog, "an immense, unending bottle of milk," out of which rises none other than the man (*AS*, 266). Like a *deus ex machina*, the car kills this message-bearing adversary, freeing Schmidt from an irritating and vaguely frightening presence and freeing him as well, at a symbolic and subliminal level, from the various forces that have been pushing him to confront the repressed, rigidly maintained characteristics within himself that this mirroring double figure represents. Just as Schmidt has refused to recognize this person with his name, "Mr. Wilson," he also refuses to recognize the actual "man" that he himself

remains. In this sense, then, this novel's protagonist refuses to grow up; he remains the "Schmidtie" of yore instead of becoming Albert Schmidt.

By portraying the inner workings of a recalcitrant United States American who feels that his status is under threat, Begley exposes the effects of masculine, white supremacist forces that commonly animated the more traditional members of an elite demographic. These are ongoing sociohistorical forces that also bolster an inequitable social order and discourage recuperative human connection. In the novel's denouement, after the car accident, Schmidt finds himself being nursed at the Bridgehampton house by Bryan, the young man whom Carrie has said she is "kind of seeing." Schmidt remembers his plans to sell the house after buying out Charlotte's share since the cost of upkeep would be beyond his remaining means. It becomes clear that Bryan and Carrie are involved in illegal drug trafficking, and when they smoke hashish in front of him, he refuses to partake, preferring his own habitual anesthetics. He remains largely unconcerned about what the true relationship and motives of this pair might be and fixated instead on Carrie's continued claims that she actually "belongs" to him. In the novel's final pages, Schmidt receives a letter regarding the death of his stepmother, who had been living in Florida. In a traditional O'Henry twist, the letter reveals that she has left him a great deal of money, both from his long-dead father and from her own deceased family members.<sup>46</sup>

Schmidt now has no need to sell the Bridgehampton house, and having just acquired another one in Florida, he instantly sees a way to vanquish this young man, whom he can't help but think of as a rival for Carrie's body and affections. Bryan has portrayed himself as something of a jack-of-all-trades, so the novel closes with Schmidt offering to hire him for extensive renovations on the Florida house, a move that would leave Carrie with Schmidt. Thus, while Begley provides an ostensibly happy ending, careful readers will deduce that, as Victoria N. Alexander writes, "Schmidt's world, like *King Lear*'s, is presided over by irrational gods."<sup>47</sup> Given the course of Begley's penetrating, incisive depiction of both his protagonist's representatively distorted WASP-male emotional inclinations and an obstinate refusal to explore and alter them, Schmidt seems likely to go on harming himself and others. He remains stubbornly influenced by an earlier era's racially influenced inducements toward enactment of material and corporeal possessiveness and thus into continuing to assert a using, abusing, and narcissistic version of himself.

## NOTES

1. Hepburn, 380 and Begley, "Louis Begley, The Art of Fiction," 111.
2. Robinson, *Marked Men*, 3, 2.
3. Robinson, *Marked Men*, 5.
4. Flatley, 25. As noted in this study's introduction, see also Frederik Tygstrup, who writes that if we understand the self as socially situated in such a way that discernible structures like whiteness and masculinity tend to provoke predictable emotional responses, then "we can study the self in different historical situations and chart different historically contextualized emotions," and we can also trace "how [such] subjectively felt emotions taint the perception of outer stimuli..." (195).
5. Begley's explicitly admired modernists include Henry James, Marcel Proust, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann, and Franz Kafka (Begley, "Louis Begley, The Art of Fiction," 126–27). Begley has also written a biography of Kafka, *The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head: Franz Kafka: A Biographical Essay* (Atlas & Co., 2008).
6. When pronounced aloud, the firm's name sounds like "wooden king," suggesting Schmidt's lack of human emotional display as well as his elevated but rickety pose of self-assuredness. In Alexander Payne's 2002 film version of the same name, Schmidt's job is changed to actuary at an insurance company with an equally suggestive name, "Woodman of the World" (*About Schmidt*).
7. Begley, "My Novel," n.p.
8. Pinder, 33, emphasis in original.
9. Begley, *About Schmidt*, 4. Hereafter cited as *AS*.
10. Friend, 13–14.
11. Edwards, 65.
12. Holliday, 9, 11.
13. Sherwood, 43.
14. Nussbaum, 180.
15. Sherwood, 43.
16. Begley again assesses this group as a demographic, particularly its wealthier members, in his novel *Memories of a Marriage*, in which the protagonist remarks on the city of Salem, Massachusetts as the place "where my ancestors have lived since before the witch trials" (Begley, *Memories*, 187).
17. Brodtkin, 31.
18. *Ibid.*, 30.
19. Nussbaum, 165.
20. *Ibid.*, 31.

21. Wald, "The Rise and Fall of the WASP and Jewish Law Firms."
22. Nussbaum, 180.
23. See Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*; Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism*; Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*; and Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*.
24. Harris, 1713.
25. See George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* and Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro's *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*.
26. Regarding the salience of race and ethnicity in residential terms, see David R. Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Become White. The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* and Richard Ronald's *The Ideology of Home Ownership: Homeowner Societies and the Role of Housing*.
27. Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 122.
28. Farough, 243.
29. *Ibid.*, 244.
30. Duncan and Duncan, 160.
31. *Ibid.*, 160. See also Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David G. Embrick, "'Every Place Has a Ghetto...'"
32. Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 144.
33. Sullivan, "White World-Traveling," 303. Sullivan acknowledges her debt to María C. Lugones for the term and concept of "world-traveling."
34. As Timothy J. Lensmire writes, "People of color are central to the drama of White lives.... White people are *always already in relationships with people of color (even if imagined) and always already 'know' them*" (Lensmire, 26, emphasis in original).
35. It's worth noting here that when asked for recommendations of novels from his native region, Begley recommended—for the same reason—Polish novelist Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (1937): "Gombrowicz is one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. ... *Ferdydurke* [is] a haunting humorous and terrifying nightmare about *how society forces us into immaturity*. Whoever hasn't read it should drop all other occupations and plunge into it" (Charney, n.p., emphasis added).
36. Murfin and Supriya, 39.
37. As Begley suggests in his description of Schmidt as a man whose prejudices "imprison" him ("My Novel," n.p.), the Trollope title, *The Warden*, indicates Schmidt's figurative status as both prisoner and warden; as a WASP male, he has usually followed dictates for a person like himself that

entail “proper” containment of perceived desires and impulses. Others are perceived in a binary mode as “other” because they supposedly fail to contain, or imprison, themselves in these ways.

38. Duncan and Duncan, 172.
39. Ibid.
40. Another repressed side of Schmidt’s self, his family’s forgotten ethnicity, is represented by both this doppelgänger with a “good English or German face” and the doppelgänger-like figure of the German Amazonian island proprietor, whom Gil mistakenly dubs “Herr Schmidt.” As Russell A. Kazal notes in his study of formations of German ethnicity and assimilation in Philadelphia, “No other large immigrant group in the twentieth century saw its country of origin twice go to war with the United States; none, correspondingly, faced such sustained pressure to forego its ethnic identity for an ‘American’ one; and none appeared to mute its ethnic identity to so great an extent” (11). As Kazal also points out, degrees of German assimilation took different forms in different times and places and in accordance to differing affiliations within the German immigrant population. Those who were Protestant rather than Catholic, for instance, often assimilated into whiteness more readily, a difference that would help to account for the accelerated movement of German descendants like Schmidt’s toward a self-declared WASP identity.
41. Thandeka, 12.
42. As Bessel A. van der Kolk notes regarding the repetition compulsion initially conceptualized by Freud, “Many traumatized people expose themselves, seemingly compulsively, to situations reminiscent of the original trauma. These behavioral reenactments are rarely consciously understood to be related to earlier life experiences” (389). See also M. S. Levy, “A Conceptualization of the Repetition Compulsion.”
43. Begley, “My Novel,” n.p.
44. Robinson, *Marked Men*, 130.
45. Schmidt echoes here a “standard semantic move” of defensive, white American “post-Civil Rights racial discourse,” a move perhaps most commonly iterated in the phrase “Some of my best friends are black” (Bonilla-Silva, 99).
46. As Steven G. Kellman writes, “The fact that Schmidt dines regularly at a local Bridgehampton restaurant named O’Henry’s should alert the reader to a reversal of fortune on the final page” (99). William Sydney Porter (1852–1910) published over 600 short stories under the pen name of O. Henry; their most remembered feature is surprise endings.
47. Alexander, 302.

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