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# The *Word Hoard*

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## Embracing Identity Politics as a Way of Dealing with a Self in Crisis in Edmund White's *The Married Man* by Zied Khemakhem

In his book *The Psychology of Nationalism*, Joshua S. White observes that “we identify strongly with a nation because, in today’s world, national identity offers us the greatest possibilities for increasing our sense of self-worth. We devalue other national groups because when we compare ourselves to them we feel more important, more moral, and more just” (67). For J. S. White, national identity plays a key role in the process of the subject’s constitution. It allows individuals to ascribe a significant number of culture-specific images, values, and qualities onto themselves and therefore helps them develop a sense of who (they think) they are. These properties inherent in national identity, insofar as they are internalized by the subject, will become an integral part of the individual’s self-understanding and self-image. Hence, a positive perception of one’s national identity is likely to correlate with a positive self-image, whereas a negative view of one’s national affiliations may be linked to anxiety about the status of the self or, at worst, contribute to the crystallization of a negative self-perception.

In light of the apparent connection between national identity and the individual’s self-view, J. S. White asks: “why should we always need to strive for a positive sense of identity? What is wrong with the way we are? What is it about the nature of identity that leads us to be striving constantly to improve it?” (66). In answer to these questions, J. S. White argues that “underly[ing] much of nationalism” is the fear

“that [...] we are fragile” (67). Feelings of worthlessness, a damaged self-image, vaguely defined self-identity, and the impression that one’s subjective presence is somehow meaningless threaten to dissolve one’s individuality by reducing it into a state of indistinctness or pure nothingness. To cope with the effects of subjective dissolution, individuals strive to assert their self-worth through identification with particular groups. We ally ourselves with particular groups and value systems in order to feel consistent with our ideal self-image and therefore at peace with ourselves. As J. S. White points out, we sometimes “feel flawed, inadequate, or unfulfilled and we do not want to feel that way. We crave a sense of being good [...] and being right” about ourselves (84-5). Group identification such as attachment to one’s nation “provides a way for us to join together with others [and] to be convinced that we are good” (85). This need for identification with others has to do with the very nature of the self—not as an autonomous, self-governing, and self-sufficient entity (as one may imagine)—but as “a social construct, developed and maintained in interaction with others. If those around us make sudden changes in their behaviour towards us, we quickly become conscious of the importance of others’ appraisals in how we view ourselves” (Fan et al. 177). Likewise, we subscribe to the values embraced by a group of individuals because we desire to be accepted by members of that group and because we want to develop a positive self-

awareness. Judith Butler argues that “the desire to persist in one’s own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one’s own: a submission that [...] frames and makes possible the desire to be” (28). It is for this reason that we seek refuge and protection in group identities such as national identities. The latter bestow on us a number of cultural and group markers, which have the power of redressing a growingly felt sense of ambiguity about the self. Since the very concept of a nation/nationality is grounded in a differential (or binary) logic that allows individuals to define themselves in opposition to other national groups, a sense of one’s distinctness and self-respect may be acquired through the very embrace of a national identity. As J. S. White argues, national self-identification could be “one response to this anxiety that is inherent in being human” (71). It helps us not only “[f]ill some of the deep voids in our identity [and] feel justified and worthwhile,” but also fulfil the psychological need for recognition and positive evaluation by others and maintain a sense of what we stand for as social entities (87). In short, national and group identities can be seen as “an ego enhancer,” as Sabrina P. Ramet points out, whose main function is to compensate and ward off the individual’s negative self-views or self-images (432).

To better understand the psychological dynamics which underlie the impassioned endorsement of particular forms of identity politics, I will refer to Edmund White’s fictional autobiography *The Married Man*. The novel’s intriguing articulation of the way characters’ self-assumptions are mediated through their national and social group identifications may illuminate the psychic import of group identities, especially with regards to stabilizing characters’ sense of self. From the beginning, Austin Smith, the novel’s protagonist, is presented to the

reader as an American scholar and “cultural journalist” seemingly mesmerized by French culture, aesthetics, and values (5). We learn that Austin has been living in France for “eight years” and that, for some reason, he has “reinvented himself in Paris and liked his new self” (22; 11). As the narrative unravels, it becomes clear that Austin’s fascination with French society, to which his specialization in “eighteenth century French furniture” testifies, is not simply an illustration of his academic interest in a foreign civilization. At some point, Austin’s identification with the French national character and value system will cause him not only to look down on his American origins, but also to consider the U.S. as an “alien culture” (130). Austin’s depiction of his food-shopping experience upon returning to the U.S. reveals much of his detachment from and contempt to his American origins:

He rolled his cart up and down the aisles, looking at the cellophaned meat and pallid vegetables and the cans of “chunky” soup and loaves of packaged “whole grain” bread and he wept when he thought he’d given up his butcher with his pot of rabbit in mustard sauce and his Veau Orloff, the pastry shop with the croissants au beurre and the greengrocer with his five kinds of mushrooms [...] he could hear mentally the way one could call out cheerily, “Bonsoir, messieurs-dames,” on entering a shop [...] now he was approaching the check-out girl [...] he looked at her pimply face under tumbleweed of sprayed hair, stared at her nails again and burst into sobs. The girl looked right through him and said something to the boy who was “bagging.” In France one bagged one’s own groceries; Austin was slightly scandalized by this babying service (127-28)

Not only do Austin's lexical choices ("pallid vegetables," "pimpley face," "babying service") reflect his insecurity about his origins, but also his "weeping" and "sobbing" as he reminisces about his life in France suggest that he may be going through a "griefwork" or "mourning" process. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud points out that mourning is not exclusively "a reaction to the loss of a loved person," for even "the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, ideal, and so on" could be as much consequential (243). Tammy Clewell also explains that mourning entails

a kind of hyperremembering, a process of obsessive recollection during which the [mourner] resuscitates the existence of the lost other (or lost abstraction) in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence. This magical restoration of the lost object enables the mourner to assess the value of the relationship and comprehend what he or she has lost in losing [the object of mourning] (parentheses added 44)

Austin's "hyperremembering" of his former life in Paris underlines not only his affective attachment to Parisian values and lifestyle, but also his unwillingness to re-assimilate into the U.S. despite long years of separation. Paris has become an integral part of Austin's identity and self-definition, to the point where "in his thoughts about Americans, he could hear himself saying 'them.' He even said to one of his [French] colleagues, 'Americans don't like that sort of thing.' The remark won him a funny look" (130). Austin's pining for Paris and hostility to the American cultural context recall immigrants' state of denial following an identity disrupting dislocation: "in sensory denial, the [new] physical location is experi-

entially denied: 'I am not here; I am there' [...] In social denial, the immigrant rejects the local community and dissociates from it: 'I am not one of them'" (Knafo and Yaari 230-1). By maintaining an "I/them" distinction, nostalgic individuals react to a possible disruption of their sense of self (due to the loss of their identity markers in the host country) and "cultivate a sense of personal identity" that finds momentum in "nostalgic recollections" (Wilson 33). In the same way, Austin's nostalgic attachment for Paris's "glittering cafés spilling out into the streets, its two hundred curtains rising every night on cabarets and theatres and opera houses" allows him to inscribe, preserve, and cherish his connection to his former self-identity using vivid memories (227). His antipathy to his homeland and reluctance to bond with his fellow Americans, though, indicates that the "present [is] deficient in contrast to the past" (32), as Andreea D. Ritivo argues in *Yesterday's Self*, hence his effort at reconstituting a romanticized image of his former life that serves as a psychological buffer against the imagined ambivalences of the present.

Austin's wistful affinity for French society and emotional distance from the U.S. (despite his awareness that he is "the foreigner in France, the expatriate in America" (129)) results from the values he has come to associate with the respective countries, which affect his self-worth very differently. By subscribing to French ideals and values, Austin can not only view himself in positive light, but also alleviate such anxieties regarding his seropositive status, his emotionally-charged childhood memories, his old age, and the haunting thought of dying from AIDS. Austin's attachment to his homeland, on the other hand, is swathed in memories that highlight his inmost insecurities and self inadequacies. This is why he construes of the U.S. as "eerie" and "feebly menacing" and insists on taking "a safe distance" from it

(227). Likewise, Julien's (Austin's lover) insistence on belonging to the social category of French "petite noblesse" is ultimately revealed to be a coping strategy against his inability to come to terms with his family's background:

Austin realized that everything Julien said about his family had been compounded of lies. His parents had not been aristocrats but a beautician and a shipping clerk, just as his maternal grandparents had been a railway man and a farm worker. That was why Julien hadn't let Austin meet his grandmother that time they'd gone to Nancy. That was why Julien had heaped much contempt on Josephine's origins (which turned out to be more elevated than his) and had doted on all of Austin's rich or titled friends, such as Henry McVay, Marie-France and Vladimir (306)

Like Austin's self-identification with French values, Julien's attachment to the ideal of French aristocracy reveals the importance of identity categories in addressing various anxieties about the self. Austin and Julien's refuge in socially and culturally engineered identity structures allows them to mitigate their self-inadequacies and to pretend to embody their idealized self images. It also enables them to project their anxieties on other cultural and social groups and to construct "a dream world" for themselves away from their innermost insecurities (308).

In chapter five of *The Married Man*, White expounds on some of the cultural differences between France and the U.S., especially in terms of the social approaches and policies chosen by both countries to deal with the AIDS pandemic. He argues that "Americans sat up telling each other horror stories, but they were later astonished when their worst fantasies came true, as if they'd hoped to ward off evil by

talking it into submission or by taking homeopathic doses of it. The French, however, feared summoning an evil genius by pronouncing its name" (39). For Austin, Americans have had the "defiant conviction that learning the truth is always liberating, but since moving to Europe he'd come to doubt his democratic frankness, his 'transparence,' as the French called it" (38). He avows that back in the U.S., "he'd gained nothing but knowing [that he tested positive], since the only available treatments didn't seem to work" (38). To deflect any anxieties associated with his seropositive status, Austin "embraced the French silence in the face of the disease (and of all other fatal maladies). Something surreptitious in him whispered that if he didn't think about it, the virus would go away" (38-39). Though Austin seems aware that "neither system worked," he nevertheless adopts the French approach because it allows him to feel less anxious about his seropositive status (39). He remarks, for instance, that Joséphine (a friend of Austin) "acknowledged Austin's health status only during those rare times when he mentioned it" (36). The French approach would enable Austin to maintain an image of himself as healthy and unaffected by the disease. Conversely, the American discourse on AIDS constantly reminds him of the possibility of falling ill and of the dire consequences of health deterioration; this image haunts him. To illustrate his fears of his condition's progression, Austin uses a leonine metaphor, postulating that "when the lioness awakened and felt the first hunger pains, she would show her claws" (39). Thus, though Austin seems to allow for the possibility of succumbing to the disease, he would nonetheless learn in France

not to blurt out whatever happened to be passing through his mind, and out of the same curbing of instinct, he'd started to shy away

from bald declarations of facts, even when other people made them. If another American called out anything in a loud, unironic voice, he'd exchanged amused but slightly alarmed glances with his French friends—can humankind bear so much candor? He seemed to be asking. Isn't there something inherently alarming about so much explicitness, even when the subject is safe? (38)

By allying himself with “his French friends,” Austin also sets (and defines) himself in stark opposition to his fellow Americans. In chapter eleven, White points out that Austin “was disturbed to see the buses in front of ParisVision disgorging so many fellow Americans, as though he feared being confused with them. He spoke loudly to Julien in French to insulate himself against the confusion” (130). Austin's identification with French values and removal from his origins are clearly motivated by a phobic element. As White seems to imply, Austin would not have been much concerned about embracing a protective identity in Paris if there had not been “something inherently alarming” about the values he associates with Americans. His fears lead him to erect clear-cut group boundaries and to set himself apart from other Americans, whom he now envisions as threatening to his newly constructed identity in France. As Marilyn B. Brewer explains, “threats to the distinctive identity of one's important social groups motivate defensiveness, protection of group boundaries, and other efforts to restore optimal identities” mainly “because distinctive group identities are so important to one's sense of self” (513). Likewise, Austin's obsession with identity markers conceals much of his latent fear of psychological dismantling and dissolution; a fear which he associates with America and his memories back in the

U.S. For instance, when Austin is faced with the “silly simulacrum” of Paris in Disneyland, he avows that he “was also frightened by it, as if it meant to suggest that he'd never gotten out of America, never lived on the real Ile Saint Louis for eight years” (191). Almost immediately, he remembers his family and the “feeling that their very existence was imperilled, that their house would be dismantled room after room by bill collectors” when “his drunk father hadn't been able to pay their utilities bill” (191). Austin's encounter with a simulacrum of Paris undermines the very identity he seems to have constructed in Europe. Because such an identity has allowed him to keep threatening possibilities away from his sense of self and to considerably enhance his sense of self-worth, its belittlement by the Disneyland simulacrum somehow divests him from his psychic defences. It leaves him with overpowering feelings of psychic vulnerability that Austin connects to his childhood memories, and which give him the threatening impression that his life is once again at risk of crumbling.

This is why Austin speaks of “the trauma of returning to America” (139). Once in Providence, Austin “half imagined that the homeboys were turned loose after the sun set” (127). He also thinks of “the patch of woods across the street” as “frighteningly black” and “dangerous” (128-30). Clearly, Austin projects his inner anxieties about his insecure American identity onto the spatial setting in Providence in an attempt to distance himself from his own fears. When Peter calls to ask “how does it feel to be back home?” Austin answers:

Appalling. Everything seems to be sleeping all the time. The only living creatures are giant squirrels bounding insolently over the lawn. This home is huge and hideous. There is the

locked up wine cellar in the basement, the locked up computer room in the attic, everything else has a film of grease on it (129)

Austin's "appalling" description of the professor's house, his fears of returning to America, together with his unrelenting attempts to mark off the boundaries between himself and other Americans recall Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection." In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues that "the phobic has no object than the abject" (6). For her, "what causes abjection" is precisely that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Abjection, as Kelly Oliver explains, "do[es] not just propose that in order to have an identity we need to exclude some possibilities from our sense of ourselves, but that these exclusions are hostile and that which is excluded becomes abject and threatening to us" (97). Likewise, Austin's abjection of his American identity is motivated by the need to rule out the threatening possibility of subjective disintegration. Whether they are due to American discourse on AIDS, his childhood memories, or his "dead friends" in New York, Austin's apprehensions constantly remind him of aspects of himself with which he is extremely uncomfortable (11). The demarcation of identity boundaries as such allows him to entertain the illusion of having an orderly identity and to define himself against a menacing "America [which] was so shaggy, so unsystematic, so full of surprises" (139). Ironically, Austin seems aware of the ambivalent position he has come to occupy by choosing to live as "the foreigner in France, the expatriate in America" (129). It is this feeling of "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," as Kristeva argues, which encourages individuals to consider a set of identity traits as abject: "imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons

to us and ends up engulfing us" (4). In Austin's case, abjection becomes the flipside of his latent desire to stabilize his ambivalent identity and to define himself in positive terms (mainly with reference to his life in France). In fact, the threat which Austin experiences in a presumably "shaggy" and "unsystematic" America is nothing but a reflection of his unsteady self and of his deep awareness of being uncomfortably torn between two locales. The menacing possibilities which he associates with America as such turn out to be an integral part of his own self-understanding, much like the HIV/AIDS virus which he cannot simply expel from his body and about which he feels occasionally anxious.

In *The Married Man*, AIDS becomes an emblem of the "abject," that part of the self which we are unable to cope with and which causes deep anxieties to our self-understanding and self-concept. Austin avows that "he knew that the minute someone became ill (with AIDS) he began, secretly, to withdraw larger and larger sums of love from that person's account" (162). Like America, Julien's illness reminds Austin of his own anxieties associated with his seropositive status. This is why he takes an emotional distance from Julien after he falls ill and begins questioning the basis of their relationship: "if Julien complained (about Austin not sleeping with him), Austin said: 'the other rooms feel neglected,' but so much silliness only concealed his need to be alone" (178).

White's emphasis on his characters' need for definite identity boundaries to maintain a stable self-image and to ward off anxieties about their sense of self is found again in Julien. So protective of his petite noblesse identity that he interprets Peter's denigration of his constant "pardon(s)" as an attack against his presumably noble origins, Julien responds "merde! He can't force me to give up my manners. I'm sorry, but that's the way my mother brought

me up. That's who I am" (158). Mirroring Austin's anti-American self-definition, Julien's passionate endorsement of an aristocratic identity comes at the cost of considering other social groups as abject. In explaining the reasons behind his divorce, Julien mentions that "my grandmother didn't want me to do something so bourgeois as get married [...] they wanted me to be gay—anything rather than marry that petit bourgeois bitch and her stuffy, petty family" (43). Though Julien identifies himself as a member of the "petite noblesse of Nancy" and as such assumes an "aristocratic" superiority over Christine's origins, his repetitive references to Christine's socio-economic background camouflage deeper anxieties about his own social caste (158). In fact, not until the end of the novel do we discover that Julien's attachment to a French petite noblesse identity is simply "a dream world he was living in":

"Don't you remember, Maman," Robert asked, "how he'd always write the address of your apartment block as the Palais Fitzwilliam when it was just the plain old Fitzwilliam. Oh, that Julien (sacré Julien), he liked to hint that everything was grander than it was. No harm there, of course; he'd never used it to his advantage. It was just a dream world he was living in (308)

White's description of Julien's social manners suggests that even though identity categories boil down to imaginary constructs or "false consciousness," they nevertheless play a key role in managing individuals' anxieties about what they perceive as their inherent defects and inadequacies. Like Austin's self-identification with French values which allows him to deflect various anxieties about his childhood traumas and HIV infection, Julien's relationship with

Austin makes him feel less preoccupied with his social status and more in tune with his idealized self image. As White points out, "Julien was incapable of understanding the concept of an 'American aristocracy' and had once sneered and guffawed when he'd heard those two words pronounced together" (158). The idea that aristocracy is incompatible with American culture (as Julien seems to think) allows Julien to feel less threatened by Austin's origins. Conversely, he "squabbled over little things" with Christine because her prestigious pedigree functions as a constant reminder of his own lack of social status (310), hence his insistence that she is "a petit bourgeois bitch" and that his background is more superior than hers. As Linda Martin Alcoff argues, "the more one expresses an insistence on identity, then, the more one is evidently suffering from [a certain] lack" (320). Julien's "lack," however, is not to be understood in terms of a dearth in material privilege. What Julien lacks is precisely a positive self-awareness which he happens to attribute to his low-standing social background and which he struggles to compensate by claiming membership in the French aristocracy. To many psychological professionals, a positive self-awareness is what constitutes an individual's "psychological immune system," or a shield that guards the self against threatening information such as negative self-evaluations (Gilbert et al. 617). One way of responding to unnerving assumptions about the self is by embracing "identities [that] are not and can not be accurate representations of the real self" (Alcoff 321). As demonstrated in White's novel, identities boil down to sets of assumptions that the subject internalizes as part of himself and mobilizes as coping resources in situations of threat. Identity attachments are thus vacuous categories that serve to bring order to a restless psyche and various unresolved psychological conflicts. These attach-



ments, Alcoff points out by re-phrasing Freud, “are the symptom of a certain ego dysfunction” and of a certain “effort to overcome the unavoidable disunity of the self through a collective identification or group solidarity” (320).

White’s awareness of the psychological dynamics which underlie his characters’ attachment to social/cultural identities is transposed thematically through the couple’s constant travelling. In what Austin calls their “AIDS restlessness,” the couple visit various places: “we would live here,’ they’d say, ‘or here,’ every time they’d see a quiet town that looked as if time soared right over it. But all the while they knew that what they lacked wasn’t a place to do their living in but life itself” (210). At some point, Julien and Austin may have thought that attachments to a place, much like attachments to particular identity categories, are likely to ward off their innermost apprehensions and to procure them a certain form of psychological well-being. And yet, their restless travelling betrays a failure to overcome their anxieties through identification with a spatial setting. White suggests that embracing readymade spatial, cultural, or social identities may not solve the innermost fears and self-inadequacies with which his characters are grappling. Instead, he points to other strategies by which his characters have managed to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment without considering other groups as abject, threatening, or inferior. For instance, Austin mentions that when Julien decided, as part of his struggle with AIDS, to fully realize his artistic potential through painting, he

forgot about the impression he might be making and became, all over again, the serious kid constructing with toy blocks. He could sit at his desk for hours drawing, hearing the African radio station, Radio Nova, without really

listening to it; he’d get up from his work, blinking and merry and ready to eat. And he’d be unusually affectionate in his warm, one might say, fatherly way. Working restored his equilibrium and gave him back that sense of purpose that even living with a fatal disease requires if one is to live at all (226-27)

At first glance, it may appear that by embracing an artist’s identity, Julien is able to deal with his innermost frustrations in the same way that he can cope with his family’s background; i.e. through subscription to a self-protective, ego-enhancing identity structure. Though this statement is partially true, I nevertheless believe that ultimately the coping strategies enabled by Julien’s self-identification as an aristocrat and as an artist differ in crucial ways. Julien’s need to protect his assumedly aristocratic identity is predicated on an outright rejection of his mediocre family background and therefore on a refusal to deal openly with his vexed relationship with his origins. Like Austin’s phobic shying away from his national origins, Julien’s false claim to class membership initiates an anxious state of self-denial; in Julien’s case, this finds expression in bouts of hostility against Christine’s background. Julien’s paintings, on the other hand, acknowledge rather than obfuscate his inner frustrations (whether due to his social rung or to his HIV/AIDS infection) albeit in a creative or oblique fashion. Julien’s sketches, which will later be known as “Bitter Boys and Sweet Sad Men,” portray

dark, brooding young men posed, often in silhouette, in an open doorway against salmon-pink evening sky along the girding of an industrial-era metal bridge. In one of them the man was walking a leashed dog who was al-

ready straining halfway out of the composition. (231)

Besides capturing much of Julien's anxiety and apprehensions, the "dark" and "brooding" quality of the paintings suggest a certain willingness on the part of Julien to acknowledge and deal with rather than deny his inner frustrations through creativity. Painting allows Julien to defuse the tension generated by various psychological conflicts and to "sublimate" his self-inadequacies "into something higher and finer, more 'sublime' such as art or intellect [...] or work in general" (La Caze 261). Creativity, White seems to imply, enables Julien to reframe his anxiety in a way that makes it appear less threatening to his overall self-understanding. This is why he would turn up "warm" and "unusually affectionate" upon finishing his work (227). Though painting does not offer Julien a miraculous solution to deal with his insecurities, it at least allows him to make peace with unnerving aspects of himself without having to project his anxieties on other individuals or social groups.

White's novel could as such be read as a reflection on his characters' ethical choices at a time when their sense of self is at risk of dissolution. By gesturing to the pernicious effects of abjection and psychic projection, White invites his reader to consider individuals' strategies of coping with life-altering conditions such as HIV/AIDS infection. By shedding light on his characters' self-perceptions, White calls into question the notion of identity—not as an integral part of his characters' self-definition—but as an imaginary construct and psychological defence which, more often than not, bypasses rather than addresses the latent individual anxieties.

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