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0521651069 - Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America

Adam Zachary Newton

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### 1. The space between Black and Jew

But then life always makes you choose between two possibilities, and you always feel: One is missing! Always one – the uninvented third possibility!

Robert Musil, *The Enthusiasts*

The data of daily use gently but insistently repel us; day by day, in overcoming the sum of secret resistances – not only the overt ones – that they put in our way, we have an immense labor to perform.

Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*

The task of criticism remains essential, even if God were not dead but only exiled.

Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow”

#### *Bright sparks and divine sparkles*

From the first section entitled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” to the last on the “Sorrow Songs,” Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* is framed by an arresting image of “falling stars.” It appears in the spirituals “My Lord, what a mourning” (whose last line reads, “when the stars begin to fall”), “Stars in the Elements” (whose first line reads, “Oh the stars in the elements are falling”), and “Bright Sparkles in the Churchyard.” It also surfaces in Du Bois’s prose itself when he writes, “Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their consciousness.”<sup>1</sup>

At a strictly symbolic level, the trope signifies sacrifice and redemption. Eric Sundquist has pointed to a semantic underground that discloses African resonances beneath the Christian, notions of

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race unity and a buried life. "The soul," he writes, "waits not so much to be reborn, as to be discovered as always existing and already engaged in its journey back to the world of the spirit."<sup>2</sup> Du Bois himself remarks of "Stars in the Elements," that it may possess "some traces of outside [non-Western] influence." (213)

From this perspective, "falling stars" – most obviously in Du Bois's theme of dispersed or submerged cultural power – becomes an historicized image for diaspora, for a scattering which awaits future reclamation and integration. As such, like all diasporic narratives, Du Bois's and that of the sorrow songs tells an allegory of fallenness, of damage, of loss, and the link between all of these and *time*. "Diamonds of song, buried deep beneath the weight of dark and heavy years," Sterling Brown once versified.<sup>3</sup> And according to the Yiddish-American H. Leivick, "A song means filling a jug, and even more so breaking the jug. Breaking it apart. In the language of *kabbalah* we might call it: Broken Vessels."<sup>4</sup>

Emboldened by the appearance of the word *traces* in Du Bois's remark about "Stars in the Elements," I want to extend the image of falling stars in a direction that calls up a very different time and culture. I make no argument here for influence or filiation, nor do I want to suggest a common image repertoire. Rather, I want to *create* a correspondence that only takes shape, because, as Harold Bloom puts it, "meaning wanders, like human tribulation, from text to text,"<sup>5</sup> and in this case when human tribulation wanders from people to people, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth.

After the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, Jewish Kabbalists like Meir ben Gabbai, Moses Cordovero, and above all, Issac Luria Ashkenazi, reconfigured the mystical import of *kabbalah* – the word itself connotes "reception" – to reflect the experience and consequences of exile, the most far-reaching modification being a new theory of creation conveyed through a set of imagistic tropes.<sup>6</sup> *Shevirat ha kelim* (the breaking of the vessels), is one such, and refers to a stage in creation after God has contracted into himself in order to clear a space for the world.

The light resulting from this divine self-limitation was to be precipitated out and resolved through vessels called *kelim* – transcendental 'melting pots'. But the emanations of light were so intense that they shattered two thirds of the vessels, most of the light then falling to earth, and, together with the shell fragments, captured and held fast in a composite form called *klippot*, or husks.<sup>7</sup> Kabbalists called the light *nitzutzot* (divine sparks, or falling stars) and it is the task of

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*tikkun* (redemption) that all creation strive toward the freeing of these sparkles from their earthly captivity. Indeed, two centuries after Luria, Levi Yitzkhak of Berdichev, one of the early Hasidic masters, claimed, much like Du Bois, that the divine sparks have a role to play in exile, to flash here and there on earth, and in that flashing thereby illuminate creation; like the angels of Jacob's ladder, the *nitzutzot* can rise up to Heaven as well as rain down from above.<sup>8</sup>

Now, apart from its mystical thrust, this re-mythifying of Jewish revelation follows a plainly allegorical design, and tells a dialectical narrative of exile and redemption which, as Gershom Scholem is perhaps most famous for propounding, makes sense *as history*, as the entry into human and *nationalist* time.<sup>9</sup> Scholem's friend, Walter Benjamin called such point of entry the "jagged line of demarcation" whose marks and traces, in the face of a "storm blowing from Paradise," narrate the historicity of individuals and cultures.

But exile is two-faced . . . like allegory: it looks back to catastrophe for its meaning as it finds meaning again by looking ahead towards redemption. In kabbalist tradition, the breaking of the vessels scattered into fragments the light of divinity, but it is the very descent of those bright sparkles that creates a need for human involvement in their re-collection and restoration; the breaking institutes a making. Just as a necessary dialectic links the now-obscurd "powers of black men [which] flash here and there like falling stars," to corresponding acts of historical reclamation and restitution, so the exile of the divine and the human in *kabbalah* requires a deliberate and incessant mending.

Something like the African belief in a soul already oriented and laboring towards freedom, the Lurianic concept of *tikkun* signifies acts of mediation that set right the world's imperfectness, acts for which the world could even be said to have been created. What exists, in other words, exists in order that it may be restored.<sup>10</sup> Damaged patrimony, a non-inalienable place in a society, expulsion or captivity: these make up the loss now oriented to a would-be restitution, that bear witness to Levinas's assertion: "The first question in the interhuman is the question of justice."<sup>11</sup>

This is, in part, how Jews generally and African Americans have mutually understood the experience of exile. Their respective narratives of loss and ruin ground and legitimate a substitutive story of spirituality gained through time. That allegorical story of catastrophe, exile, and restitution acquires the sanction of history through its repeated tellings and refiguration in the literatures of African

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American and Jewish American writers. *Tikkun*, or the image of restitution has a literary analogue in the concept of *representation*, a word whose very etymology signifies the bringing of something absent into presence. To this extent at least, representation turns wounds into scars, or evinces scars as signs of healing.<sup>12</sup>

Although the literary connections in the chapters that follow require much less of a stretch, and link texts far closer in historical time and space, I began this way for a reason. The interface I have created between an early twentieth-century African-American text and the medieval Jewish tradition of *kabbalah* is purposefully far-flung, a pointed asymmetry. It works, but only because I have allegorically introduced the connection. It creates a *facing* precisely because it preserves both distance and difference. We can call this exercise a grappling with space, where the wide temporal and cultural distance separating divine sparks from bright sparkles becomes bridged *allegorically*, in the adapted sense of the term I have taken from Levinas and Benjamin. What ancient Israel, after its Egyptian captivity, knew as *midbar*, and what Africans *in* captivity endured at one stage as the middle-passage, I want to reconfigure as a conceptual territory – a linguistic interspace where words, as Roland Barthes put it, carry with them the places they have been, where divine sparks find an echo in divine sparkles.<sup>13</sup> This would be a reconnoiter half in shadow as, opposed to the mixed blessing of “rigorously reciprocal relations.”<sup>14</sup>

“*Meeting* balances wandering,” writes Julia Kristeva. “A cross-road of two othernesses, it welcomes the foreigner without tying him down, opening the host to his visitor without committing him. A mutual recognition, the meeting owes its success to its temporary nature, and it would be torn by conflicts if it were to be extended.”<sup>15</sup>

It may be that such meeting ultimately *is* a temporary phenomenon for American Blacks and Jews, yet something *has* conjoined them in public space, and at the very least, they are entangled in American history and culture, complexly thrown up against one another. How such conjunction and entanglement will be imagined or enacted, of course, is the freighted question – the shape, that is, of “relations.”

In the chapters to follow, “proximity,” “face-to-face,” “anti-phony,” are some of the phrasal cues for this space-in-the-middle, the space marked out by the “and” in *Black and Jew* – the space, quite literally, of conjunction. What is the nature of such linkage? Does it join, coordinate, equalize, span, unify? What *is* the status of the

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semantic and pragmatic space it locates: binding, intercommunicating, “rigorously reciprocal?” In the normal course of things, that space predicts something like the following:

Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner.  
Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Crown Heights.  
Hollywood and Castlemont High School.  
Louis Farrakhan and the Day of Atonement.  
Jewish Roxbury to Black Roxbury  
More adventurously perhaps:

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Edward Blyden and Moses Hess/Leo Frank and Joe Conley.  
Zora Neale Hurston and Franz Boas/Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog.  
The Spingarn brothers and the NAACP/Bert Williams and Eddie Cantor.  
Naftuli Branwein or Woody Allen/Sidney Bechet or Spike Lee,  
Abraham Heschel and Martin Luther King/*The New Yorker* kiss between  
Hasid and Haitian.  
*Partisan Review* and New York Intellectuals/*Transition* and Black Public  
Intellectuals.  
Milton Mikelson to Mezz Mezzrow/“Whoopie” to “Goldberg”.  
Dutch Schultz to Bumpy Johnson/Sandy Koufax to Jackie Robinson.  
Irving “Slim” Rose of Times Square Records, The Chess Brother, and  
Blue Note/Frankie Lymon, Muddy Waters, and postwar jazz.

The following section pauses to reflect on such conjunction, and proposes a different set of spatial relations.

### *On blackjewishrelations and the space of literature*

For both . . . are victims, big and bitter victims, whatever the order of magnitude, whatever the chronology of victimization. They have, both these nations, suffered too much and so long that they bear their scars grandiosely, as essential features of an identity, as relics of a sacred history, as tests of the extent to which others represent them as they wish to be represented. And so both of them, almost as a matter of emotional and cultural course, could let the scars do the work of the wounds; and the memory of oppression do the work of oppression. (29)<sup>16</sup>

Let us take this précis as one possible narrative formula for the historical entanglement of American Blacks and Jews, compelling precisely because of the accuracy and force of its metaphors (“scars and wounds” even *sounds* a little like “Blacks and Jews”). Partners in catastrophe. Crisis as cathexis. In fact, however, these observations are drawn from an article about the entangled fates of Israelis and Palestinians, not American Blacks and Jews. I quote the passage not

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for analogy's sake (a grossly imprecise one at best), but because the story of competitive scar and wound is such a commonly exploited narrative slot for Black Jewish Relations, and because "Black" and "Jew" so easily plug into it, doing so because the scar-and-wound schema is such a serviceable *American* schema. It is not the only one, to be sure, but it has increasingly become the favored one.

Indeed, despite the restrictive sense of the passage above, out of context, it invites us to correlate the respective fates of American Blacks and Jews, however different and however similar, with deeply embedded instincts of *national* identity and *cultural* character.<sup>17</sup> "The memory of oppression," "relics of a sacred history," "scar and wound": all this can and does describe the *unheimlich* quality that ties American Black to American Jewish experience, that makes them Blacks and Jews vexedly at home but also strangers to themselves and to each other. It is but one instance of the selective narratability and emplottedness of America, "a play within a play backdropped by the peculiar American racial canvas which sets the conditions for the way the play will end."<sup>18</sup> At its most bizarrely ironic (iconic) it stands over the 1995 film *Independence Day* where conjoint Black military prowess (Will Smith) and Jewish scientific expertise (Jeff Goldblum) create the lucky helix that defeats an alien invasion and transfigures Earth into the encompassingly *American* planet in the bargain.<sup>19</sup>

At the time of this book's writing when American Blacks and Jews (differentially) occupy a sideline relative to ethnicities more functionally enmeshed in late modern shifts in immigration and demography, it is, I would maintain, on an enduring *allegorical* not empirical plane that these two storied peoples continue to obsess each other's imagination. Even if the 1991 riots in Crown Heights or what has been dubbed sensationistically the Harlem Massacre in 1996 answered to the force of inevitability – given local tensions between African American and Jewish American residents – the pre-assigned place these confrontations immediately occupied as symbolic cultural capital attests to the plot function possessed by Blacks and Jews together as particular kinds of Americans.<sup>20</sup> Such *mimesis* needs the disenchantment of a new *mythos*.

A remarkably telling instance of the former can be found in Tony Martin's preface to his broadside, *The Jewish Onslaught*. Martin speaks of finding himself waylaid at the same table in a Jewish archive where Yankel Rosenbaum had come to do research before his death in 1991 during the Crown Heights riots. With perhaps not enough hindsight as could be had, Martin wonders, "what inscrutable fate brought me

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to this archive, to this conversation, to Yankel Rosenbaum's table, at a time when my authorship of a book called *The Jewish Onslaught* would have seemed a bizarre improbability.<sup>21</sup>

Whether some weird Black–Jewish masterplot could be shown as lying at the root of uncanny coincidences such as this, still the most prosaic of circumstances yoke together Blacks and Jews in ways that call for comment. What one wants an experience like Martin's to do, of course, is what the spirit of Martin's book systematically defies: a critical refraction of some baseline relatedness, not a lock-step re-enactment at the level of ostensible analysis. That Tony Martin and Yankel Rosenbaum sat at the same table independently of one another, and that familiarity – even when accustomed to breeding contempt – failed to bow before the uncanny, presents an opportunity to consider unrelenting discord as no less *constructed* a dynamic than forced concord. Here, however, identification merely reifies difference.

Consider, by contrast, what one interviewee says in a radio play *Can You Hear Me? African Americans and Jews in Coalition and Conflict* about her experience as a summer school teacher in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1964:

Everything about being in Tuskegee was interesting. It's an all black school, and all black community. Most of them are very religious – Baptists, and I'd grown up in New York and never met anyone like them, and they'd never met anyone like me. So I thought of teaching as political work, civil-right's work. I had them read W.E.B Du Bois; I just had them read Black writers. I had them read Ralph Ellison who wrote *Invisible Man* about Tuskegee. I hadn't read *Invisible Man* either. So we were all discovering what was happening, together . . . And that year there started to be a civil rights' group, and I ended up being advisor to the civil rights' group with really no sense of it being inappropriate really . . . All the planning meetings happened in a church. Being in the churches was so profound to me. It was community, religion, music, warmth, freedom: it was all one, and it was all this one meaning. The main quality for me was just being welcomed. I think that was what was so critical to me. Because I was, in the way that I was Jewish, in the way that I was an immigrant, in the way that I came from a family that didn't identify as Jewish, I was looking for a home, and this was a home to me. Being in those churches was a home to me.<sup>22</sup>

The voice is self-aware, certainly, and place, time, and history determine particular affections and inclinations. But what I find most revealing is the *flow* of identification here, the way newness, otherness, and all-Blackness lead inevitably not to the *unheimlich*, but to

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what Jewish vernacular calls *heimisch* and Black vernacular, “down home.” Here, the kind of recognition elided or rejected by Martin’s anecdote is surplusive, and made iconic: Black Churches house Jewish souls, the secret-sharer as redemptive filler for an originary lack. Crisis speaks to a native susceptibility to disaster.

I see these two narratives as complementary because they respectively understate and overstate the case for *some kind* of relatedness between Blacks and Jews, each distorted by the haze or ambient glow of crisis and disaster. Together, in their cathexes and displacements, the two stories tell a composite story of Black Jewish Relations. They do so, moreover, discursively – as acts of narrative.

Language, of course, is itself an unflinching guarantor of the uncanny in even the most innocuous details, the sheer weight attaching to nomenclature. In his book, for example, Martin was unable to resist castigating Cornel West’s suspect orthography that capitalizes “Jews” and diminishes “Blacks,” citing the following incriminating evidence: “‘a growing black [sic-lower case] antiSemitism [sic-upper case].’” (18) And yet, clearly, words, letters, and even “graphemes” do *make a difference*. Hyphens, negligible punctuation marks that they are, can speak volumes, simultaneously obscuring and disclosing cultural facts of the most salient kind. Is it merely an accident that the hyphen mimics a minus sign? “African+American” and “American+Jew” might be far more linguistically cognate to history and cultural reality, imaging a graphics of deed, not disaster.

Still, with hyphens intact, *African-* or *Afro-American* signify place, typography as topography, the ligature of placename compressing a narrative of travel. The roots of Black America lie in the African continent. By contrast, although American Jews may trace back family lineages to Germany, Russia, Iran, Argentina, *Jewish-American*, like *German-Jewish*, *Russian-Jewish*, *Iranian-Jewish*, or *Argentinian-Jewish*, connotes simply the latest instantiation in a long history of uprooting. Diaspora prove the anomaly of postexilic Jewish peoplehood, a four millenia long migration with a succession of “landings” on multiple shores.

At the same time, however, it must be granted that the hyphen effaces a crucial and obvious difference, functioning like its homograph, the minus sign: Jews emigrated to America by choice; Africans who became Americans did not. If, consequently, we abandon the hyphen, “African” and “Jewish” are still not semantically equivalent; one adjective denotes place of origin, the other transgeographic peoplehood. “African” and “Jew,” adjective and noun, do not line up in



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parallel, even when supplemented (or grounded, some might rather say) by “American.” The hyphenless but still equivocal terminology favored by a recent exhibition, *African Americans and American Jews*, illustrates such problems of asymmetry: African Americans are African-inflected *Americans*, but American Jews are, at bottom, *Jews* who happen to reside in America.<sup>23</sup> The subtitle to the radio play, *Can You Hear Me? African Americans and Jews* (produced under Jewish auspices), intimates that “Jews” doesn’t even need an accompanying referent: Black Americans are “African Americans” but Jewish Americans are just “Jews.”

Perhaps then, polysyllabic nomenclatures should be allowed to go the way of the hyphen, and leave us better served with the plain descriptive force of monosyllables: *Blacks*, *Jews*, *Black*, *Jew*, more compelling markers of otherness as acoustic hard fact rather than demographic expediency. Yet problems surface here, too. *Black* and *Jew* are also not semantically equivalent, the one denoting, simply, race (as color) and the other, religion, culture, and debatably perhaps, ethnicity. If they are understood coterminously, the latter markers of difference are simply conflated and the former marker reified.<sup>24</sup>

Beside, “Black” is only by use a noun; strictly speaking, it is an adjective denoting color. Only by the sheer weight of custom and habit do “a black” or “blacks” signify nonoffensively, though I would still prefer us to detect some residual offense in such terms as proper nouns. Understandably, locutions referring to Africa have come increasingly to replace both “Black” and the more coldly taxonomic “Negro.” To defamiliarized eyes and ears, while “black” may objectively designate a certain set of people, it commits a kind of linguistic violence, or in Levinas’s more pointed phrase, ethical homicide.

The word “Jew,” by contrast, derives from Hebrew *Yehudi* (Judean), which itself follows ultimately from a proper name linked to other proper names in a patronymic chain of familial descent. Its counterpart, however, has nothing ontologically, historically, or culturally to do with the people it selects out and describes: “black” merely discriminates between one generalized color and all the other colors contrasting with it. (Still, the terms are alike in being very loosely moored in reference: there are multiple black peoples as there are multiple shades of black, and “Jew” signifies differently in relation to “Gentile” or “Arab” or “Pole” or for that matter, “Black.”)

And then there is the problem of capitalization. T. S. Eliot earned critical censure for the callous antisemitism of the phrase “the jew

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squats on the window sill" in "Gerontion," sufficient to replace lower case "j" with capital "J," though the word, and its cruelty, remained. But Tony Martin does have a point. If "Jew" is spelled upper case, why is "Black" allowed so often to lapse into lower? Is "black and Jew" an acceptable asymmetry? *Mutatis mutandis*, the accident of word order. Only the book co-authored by Michael Lerner and Cornel West (no doubt by design) prefers the titular sequence, *Jews and Blacks*. Across syntactic time at least, "Blacks" habitually precede "Jews." Is it meaningful that the composite locution is invariably Black Jewish Relations, not Jewish Black Relations?

Are Black Jewish Relations so dependably anchored in empirical reference, anyway? The nomenclature often seems to take on a life of its own, agglutinatively, to become *blackjewishrelations*, like those portmanteau words by Faulkner or Joyce that were meant to evince compression or dissolve boundaries: "mansmell" or "brightwin-dbridled." As *term* over and above its empirical referents, the phrase is being asked to do too much work, a beanpole on steroids, simultaneously overwrought and underweight.

The discourse of *blackjewishrelations* itself swells with pregnant, often alliterative figures that attempt to fix the exact nature of the phenomenon: Blacks and Jews are "strange bedfellows," or "stranger and friend," or "ambivalent friends"; they meet in "bittersweet encounter" or "cooperation and conflict" in order to confront "alliances and arguments" or establish "bridges and boundaries" or "let the healing begin," "in the almost promised land." The metaphors are both telling and in their way coercive: they enact rhetorical solutions. "Black" and "Jew" are converted into allegories of the beings they indicate – shadows in Levinas's sense – which are in turn metamorphosed into linchpins for stories and what the narrative theorists call plot functions.

But even ostensibly meta-discursive versions of *blackjewishrelations* remain caught within the same circuit. In his prefatory remarks to Anna Deavere Smith's performance piece, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights and Other Identities*, Cornel West, for example, supplies a fairly standard rehearsal of *blackjewishrelations* up to the present time, a condensed version of a history one can find redacted in a number of readily available studies.<sup>25</sup> Two moments, however (both perhaps tangential to West's purposes), stand out for me.

In characterizing Smith's work, West calls it an "example of how art can create a *public space*,"<sup>26</sup> intending this, I think, in the sense we find variously articulated by Greek tragedy, Rousseau, or Bertold