Jews and Black Americans

There is a sense in which Black and Jewish folk are almost stuck together, either at each other's throats or embracing each other, but that is still a kind of family fight. Cornel West (Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue on Race, Religion and Culture in America* (1996).

You might be forgiven for thinking that the history of black–Jewish relations in the United States was one of tension, suspicion, and hostility. For years, the only headlines to include blacks and Jews in the same sentence were ones that screamed mutual mistrust, such as the Crown Heights riot of 1991 and the inflammatory rhetoric of the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan. And yet the truth of that history is more complicated than those examples might suggest…Coalitions of black and Jewish leaders founded the NAACP and the National Urban League; Jewish civil rights protesters and attorneys flooded the South for freedom marches in the '50s and '60s, while prominent rabbis marched arm in arm with Martin Luther King Jr. "Black Sabbath: The Secret Musical History of Black-Jewish Relations" From the catalogue for 2011 exhibition at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco

From every human being there rises a light.
Baal Shem Tov (c.1700 – 1760).

Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other.
Bernard Malamud, *The Tenants*

Paradoxical Narratives:

One of the important conversations at the Diversity Abroad conference in Miami (March 2018) focused around a transition in thought from "safe space" to "brave space." The idea of "safe space" is protectionist, intended to offer environments in which students who feel marginalized (by race, origin, sexual identity and so on) can feel unthreatened.

The demand for "safe space" is a response to a symptom. The root cause is the disease of prejudice, disrespect, hate speech, and the threat of abuse. In short, we need "safe spaces" because the university is not perceived as an environment where respect for diversity of people and views is an institutional imperative. Our responsibility as educators, I would argue, is to protect us all from abuse, not to protect us from disagreement. The solution is to treat the cause rather than the symptom: to tolerate, even encourage, disagreement, but not to

tolerate abuse or prejudice. We need communities of learners whose assumptions are subject to disruption and disturbance (that is how we learn things) in an environment of intellectual curiosity and mutual respect. Those who cannot or will not accept the requirements of such an environment have no place within an institution of higher learning.

Those conversations led me towards thinking about the paradoxical relationships between Jews and Black Americans in the struggle for social justice and equity. (nb. I've used Black Americans rather than African Americans or people of color to try and avoid, in the first case, the idea of a dualistic identity and in the second, a term that is, perhaps, too general and inclusive for this discussion. I know that my fellow panellists prefer the term African-American but for these reasons I will risk annoying them for a few minutes).

This is a difficult, disturbing conversation partly because in our friendships, affections, and shared commitments in international education we have tended to remain silent rather than risk offending those with whom we share ideals and values. However, in the wider environment. relationships between Jews and Black Americans have been shaped by contradictory, paradoxical narratives.

Empathy and a Common Commitment to Social, Political Justice

Let me begin with this thought from Cornel West which resonates with the things I have been thinking:

> *There is a sense in which Black and Jewish folk are almost stuck together, either at each other's throats or embracing each other, but that is still a kind of family fight.*

West points in the direction of an obvious and common heritage: Jews and Black Americans are diaspora peoples, with notions of lost homelands (call them Africa or Zion);

above all, both have been subject to grotesque and inhumane injustices that need no retelling here. There is, for example, the experience of slavery which is formative (if historically distinct), and evidence of deadly persecutions, in the identities of both groups.

There are many examples of shared commitment to social justice in the USA. In 1909, Henry Moscowitz was a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People with W. E. B. DuBois. Kivie Kaplan (a vice-chairman of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) was the national president of the NAACP from 1966 to 1975. The Jewish philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, in the years 1910 to 1940, funded, in whole or in part, more than 2,000 primary and secondary schools and 20 black colleges. He became a trustee of the Tuskegee Institute in 1912 and donated over two million dollars to Black University Centers at Tuskegee, Howard, Fisk, Atlanta, and Dillard Universities (over $35 million in current value). The "Rosenwald schools" made a critical contribution to the education of Black Americans in the South.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Dr. Martin Luther King in Selma in March 1965. Heschel observed that:

> *For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer…. our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.*

Martin Luther King described Heschel as "one of the great men of our age, a truly great prophet."

Joachim Prinz, a Rabbi in Berlin when Hitler came to power, spoke at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. His speech encapsulates the empathy that defines this narrative: "Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity."

This is not just an American phenomenon. In South Africa, the African National Congress was actively supported by a significant number of Jewish activists most famously Abbie Sachs, Joe Slovo, Dennis Goldberg, Ruth First, Helene Suzman, among many others.

A common cause based upon a shared history of abuse, persecution and marginalization shapes this narrative, as Cornel West further argues:

> *There is a real sense in which Black people are profoundly Jewish people, just as Jews are profoundly Black … these groups do have a very deep affinity with one another* (West p. 221).

The Alienation Narrative

There is, though, another narrative. At the extreme end, Louis Farrakhan and his apologists and allies, demonizes the Jews as "bloodsuckers," "Satanic," and prime agents of the slave trade. That view is by no means common (and Farrakhan's view of history is demonstrably false). However, tensions between Jews and Black Americans are not only found within the rantings of extremists from both communities.

A dispute between the Jewish intellectual Norman Podhoretz and his friend, the great Black writer James Baldwin [1] (*Commentary*, February 1963) that dates back to 1963 reveals one source of some troubling perspectives. The immediate and rather arcane cause of the argument was that Podhoretz had commissioned an article from Baldwin for *Commentary*. Ultimately, Baldwin sold the article (which became *The Fire Next Time*) to *The New Yorker* for a significantly larger sum than agreed with Podhoretz.

Podhoretz's annoyance was manifest in two ways:

He argued that Baldwin was not disadvantaged by being Black but was privileged because his behavior was tolerated in ways that would not have been acceptable had he been a white writer.

Podhoretz further commented on his childhood experience:

> *For a long time I was puzzled to think that Jews were supposed to be rich when the only Jews I knew were poor, and that Negroes were supposed to be persecuted when it was the Negroes who were doing the only persecuting I knew about—and doing it, moreover, to me.*

Both writers pointed to what they saw as embedded hostilities: racism papered over by liberal empathies. In 1948, Baldwin observed that:

> *Jews in Harlem are small tradesmen, rent collectors, real estate agents, and pawnbrokers; they operate in accordance with the American business tradition of exploiting Negroes, and they are therefore identified with oppression and are hated for it.*

However, in the same article, Baldwin identifies an element of those tensions that is critical to our understanding of each other:

> *At the same time, there is a subterranean assumption that the Jew should "know better," that he has suffered enough himself to know what suffering means. An understanding is expected of the Jew such as none… has ever expected of the American Gentile.*

Implicit in Baldwin's view is that tensions between Jews and Black Americans derive from a sense of disappointed intimacy; love turned sour, a common cause eroded by the divisive dynamics of American life. At root, the alienation of Jews and Black Americans and,

simultaneously, the activism of Jews in support of Civil Rights, has a common paradoxical root: a heritage of suffering that has caused us to act together, to invest aspirations in our imaginative constructions, and in some cases to separate, estranged lovers, in disappointment, each from each.

The narrative of alienation draws upon experience but also has its roots in stereotypical projections of urban life: a Black view that Jews were privileged, rich, and only interested in Jewish welfare and prosperity; a Jewish view that Blacks were feckless, irresponsible, and disruptive of urban life.

We carry the burden of our own prejudices and we are both diminished by them.

A Jewish drift towards neo-conservatism has been another cause of alienation. That this is partial has not stopped it from becoming generated into a defining characteristic. However, it would be myopic to ignore separations that are sometimes physical. In the childhoods of writers such as Podhoretz and Alfred Kazin, working-class areas of cities such as New York were integrated in ways that have eroded. Jews have become suburban to some degree and in some areas. This is not a universal truth, but it is a widespread assumption.

Other distinctions have embedded alienation into mutual perceptions. Color is a key factor, as Michael Lerner notes: "It's quite possible for many Jews… to leave their Jewishness behind, fully assimilate into the American secular mainstream" (Lerner p.8). However, as Leslie Fiedler noted in 1972 "The Negro is the prisoner of his face in a way that the Jew is not" [2] (1972, p.238).

Jews and Black Americans have invented each other's identities and generated barriers to the recognition of common histories and ethical empathies, as Fiedler argued: "In our time, Negro and Jew … long to be delivered from their mythical status, to be translated from dream to history" (pp. 231 – 232). In short, in expecting so much from each other we

have sown the seeds of disappointment while simultaneously sustaining the potential for realignment and reaffirmation. That conclusion is argued by Michael Lerner and Cornel West: "There is nothing inevitable or structurally necessary about Black antagonism towards Jews or Jewish antagonism towards Blacks," (p. 278).

The Israel Factor

The emergence of the State of Israel also complicated matters. The idea of Zion as an alternative dreamed space of security and fulfilment had been a shared one: "Go Down Moses" was an inspirational spiritual for Black slaves in that it aligned Jewish escape from slavery with that of Black aspiration. The notion of a promised land was potent for both peoples. However, the political perceptions of Israel have transformed Jews (in some perspectives) from persecuted to persecutor.

There are two narratives that shape the identity of Israel. The first, in many left-wing circles, is that Israel has become a colonial power unjustly dominating its neighbours. If that is the case, Israel is a unique colonial power in that its dominance of other territories was not founded in invasion but was a reaction to being invaded by implacable enemies who sought to destroy the new nation.

The second narrative that was dominant at the founding of the nation saw Israel as engaging in a post-colonial struggle for self-determination. That narrative suggests affinities with African struggles for independence. It also led to support from two sources, firstly:

> *…At the time of the birth of the state of Israel, the East Bloc particularly following the lead of Stalinist Russia eagerly embraced the independence struggle and survival of the fledgling state of Israel. The position …seemed consistent with the Marxist*

> *position that socialists should support nationalist movements opposed to western imperialist powers...*
>
> William Brustein, *Anti-Semitism and the Mobility of Prejudice* [3]

Support for Zionism was also deeply embedded in Black American rhetoric. At a very obvious level, the idea of a promised land resonated with pervasive myths drawn from the alignment of Jewish and Black experience. I am not using myth here to mean lie or delusion but rather stories that are profoundly part of group identity. The parallels are obvious: Biblical sources describe an escape from slavery led by Moses. The significance of this story for Black Americans is both obvious and pervasive.

Marcus Garvey, W. E. Dubois, and Martin Luther King (among others) saw Jewish history and mythology as aligned with Black aspiration. Blacks and Jews share formative myths.

These inter- connections are also exemplified in concrete musical relationships between Jews and American Blacks in the 20th century. The question is to what degree were we playing the same tune?

Playing the same tune?

Musical productions are, of course, symptomatic of time and place and need to be filtered through contemporaneous intention rather than contemporary judgement. Al Jolson in blackface should be seen as an aberration rather than typical. There are multiple ways in which the interactions have been shaped by intimacy rather than parody:

> *One of our English musicians who became very successful in the US and beyond , blind pianist George Shearing, joked about it …when it was pointed out to him that his quintet was unusually diverse, sometimes containing…black musicians [John Levy on double-bass , Denzil Best on drums and Chuck Wayne on guitar], he cried "What ? Nobody told me that!"*[4]

The jazz world offers other examples of affinities between Jews and Black Americans as described by Charles Hersch.[5] The jazz impresario Norman Ganz (1918 – 2001) was committed to the view that "Jazz is truly the music of democratic America" (cited Hersch p.64). Ganz's principles were based upon the notion that jazz "more than anything else … brings people together as spectators and participants with a complete disregard for race, color or creed."

Hersch records the anti-segregationist principles of other less well-known figures such as Morris Levy who, from 1957, would only book his "Birdland Stars" at integrated theatres. Similar principles were enforced by the impresario and club owner, Billy Berg. In short, "Jewishness has an affinity for hybridity" (Hersch, p.3).

Benny Goodman (1909 – 1986) was the first jazz musician to break segregationist practices by hiring the Black pianist Teddy Wilson (1912 – 1986) in 1935 and, a year later, vibraphonist Lionel Hampton (1908 – 2002). The Jewish clarinet player and writer, Artie Shaw (1910 -2004), born Arthur Jacob Arshawsky, was another who hired Black musicians and refused to play before segregated audiences or tour in locations where Black musicians were treated differently.

There are also numerous examples of Jewish popular composers and musicians directly writing and performing with a deep empathy for Black experience. George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), though conditioned by its time and in places arguably

stereotypical and condescending, was nevertheless an expression of Jewish empathy. *Showboat* (1927) written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein expresses a sense of connection with African-American struggles and suffering. It contained the song “Old Man River” made famous by Paul Robeson.

Robeson represented the kinds of empathy that resounded within Jewish and American musical relationships. As well as being a civil rights activist, Robeson was a great musical figure who is deeply associated with “Old Man River.” The Mississippi is offered as a metaphorical counterpoint to Black struggles:

Tote that barge
Lift that bale
Get a little drunk
And you land in jail…
I'm tired of living
Feared of dying
But ol' man river
He's rolling along

Robeson rewrote these lyrics to reflect an active rather than passive representation. Thus, “Get a little drunk” becomes “You show a little grit” and “I'm tired of living/ Feared of dying” becomes “ I must keep fightin'/ Until I'm dyin'” Robeson’s reaction to *Showboat* and “Old Man River” was always ambiguous but in the alteration to Hammerstein’s lyrics he transformed a stereotypical passivity into a political activism, a declaration of intent.

Robeson adaptation caused Hammerstein some irritation, but they shared a friendship and political commitment to radical causes. Robeson’s alterations reflect emerging activism and rejection of stereotype. These distinctions should not obscure the fact that Hammerstein wrote out of sense of deep empathy and Robeson transformed that empathy into an activist civil rights message. Both were of their time, but both shared a political and moral

commitment to social justice. Hammerstein's intent was to represent real people suffering the circumstances of injustice.

Robeson also extended the interaction between Black and Jewish consciousness singing spirituals that drew heavily on Old Testament sources. He recorded and performed a number of songs in Yiddish. [6] He regularly performed the Chassidic *Chant* of Levi Isaac of Berditschev, a version of the Kaddish.

Robeson also frequently sang *The Partisan Song* in both Yiddish and English. Written in 1943 by Hirsh Glick (1922- 1944), a young Jewish inmate of the Vilna Ghetto to commemorate resistance to the Nazis, the song has become representative of Jewish resistance. As in the revisions to "Old Man River," Robeson performs in a manner that subverts stereotypical notions of passivity in the face of persecution of both Black and Jews.

Robeson, probably more than any other figure, demonstrates a profound intimacy and empathy: Robeson's work existed at an intersection between Jewish and Black consciousness.

Robeson also performed *The House I Live In* written by Lewis Allen whose real name was Abel Meerpol (1903 - 1986). It includes the concept "All races and religions/ That's America to me." Meerpol's life was extraordinary in many ways. For 17 years he taught at Dewitt Clinton High School, a public high school in the Bronx, attended incidentally by the poet Countee Cullen and James Baldwin. He adopted the children of the executed spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, was a Jewish activist, songwriter, and for many years a member of the Communist party.

He wrote an iconic, powerful song that highlighted the tragedies of lynching, *Strange Fruit,* made famous in the almost unbearably moving performances of Billie Holiday:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,

Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Meerpol's song reflects an interaction between Jews and Blacks that is politically sensitive, empathetic, and symptomatic of a profound affinity, built around a consciousness of common suffering.

It also exists at the centre of misdirections. Billie Holiday claimed in her autobiography that she was partly responsible for the lyrics. The rabid anti-Semite and disciple of Farrakhan, Khaill Abdul Muhammad, has repeatedly cited it in speeches assailing American racism (seemingly unaware that it was written by a Jew). As late as 1999 at a celebration of Black composers at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the song was represented as part of a celebration of Black composers. The reality is that Billie Holiday had no part in writing the lyrics. The song she first recorded in 1939 uses an unedited and unaltered version of the lyrics written by Meerpol in 1937.

This is not to say that all things in music were noble and enlightened, but it does demonstrate that there is a narrative of interconnection that is rooted in empathy and expressed in action. Whatever else, we may choose to say, there is a sense of special intimacy between Black Americans and Jews to be found in histories, shared mythologies, in some

political affinities and creative alliances that challenged racial prejudices. These musical interactions serve as one example of relationships that challenge narratives of alienation.

Conclusion: Troubled Relationships

Back when I had dark hair and a waistline, I had some heroes in my head: W. E. B. DuBois, James Baldwin, Countee Cullen, Nelson Mandela, Chester Himes, Martin Luther King, Billie Holiday, Baal Shem Tov, Joachim Prinz, Abraham Heschel, Alan Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, and Jewish and Black novelists who enriched our sensibilities. In 1964, I mourned the murder of Civil Rights activists Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney: two Jews and a Black American.

As a Jew raised in one of the poorest parts of London in the shadow of the Holocaust, I had an innate affinity with the dispossessed and impoverished. There was nothing heroic or exceptional about that; it was simply an inevitable part of our identity in that place and time.

I read the literature and became familiar with the fractures between Black Americans and Jews; experienced this first hand in conversations and through observation in the USA. Stereotypical constructs (some based on social and economic realities) gave weight to the narrative of alienation, but it was not part of my professional, moral or emotional life. I also know that many Jews and Black Americans, our brothers and sisters, continue to work together for equity and inclusion in education abroad.

However, these divisions exist in history and in the world in which we all live. Paradoxical narratives coexist. We are allies but we live in a broader reality about which we rarely speak. This is a conversation in a “brave space” that I think we need to have. I believe we have to go beyond deficit narratives which focus on those things that divide us, however serious they may be. There is something deeply archaic in clinging to bifurcation when

identities in other contexts have become fluid and mutable. The default distinction in the USA remains race and I understand why. However, we also need to be aware that identity is also a matter of performance and inheritance, subject to analysis and alteration. In the current environment, there is increasing marginalisation, growing reassertion of prejudice, re-emergent anti-Semitism. This discussion has a current urgency.

There are many points of connection between Jews and Black American; we have dreamed each other, like lovers, which is why episodes of separation are so painful. There are inter-connected histories, common values and commitments (as represented by this panel). It is not our intention to obscure difference but rather to discuss them with respect and attention.

How do we discuss the histories of our relationships? What histories matter? If we do not talk to each other about these significant questions, how will we talk to our students? That is why we wanted to have this discussion and to assert the importance of brave space.

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[1] Norman Podhoretz's "My Negro Problem—and Ours," *Commentary*, February 1963

[2] Leslie Fiedler, *No! In Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature*, New York: Stein and Day, 1972.

[3] To be published in *Borders, Migration and Mobilities*, CAPA, Boston, May 2019

[4] Robert Wyatt, *Beneath the Underdog - A Paradox of Jazz and Racism* https://www.strongcomet.com/wyatt/beneath-the-underdog/

[5] Charles Hersch *Jews and Jazz: Improvising Ethnicity* (Routledge, New York, 2017).

[6] See Jonathan Karp , “Performing Black-Jewish Symbiosis: The "Hassidic Chant" of Paul Robeson” , American Jewish History, Vol. 91, No. 1, Jews and Performance (March 2003), pp. 53-81).