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BEYOND THE COLOR LINE: JEWS BLACKS AND THE AMERICAN RACIAL IMAGINATION

Jennifer Young

In September 1949, the eighty-four year-old African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois visited the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto. “I have seen something of human upheaval in the world,” he wrote, “but nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw in 1949.” In 1903, Du Bois famously declared that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”¹ But, after gaining firsthand knowledge of the destruction of Polish Jewry more than four decades later, Du Bois readjusted his understanding of race in America. He began to see that slavery and racism were not, as he had long thought, a “separate and unique” phenomenon, but part of a larger problem of “perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice.”² While allowing that racial oppression functioned even beyond the color line, Du Bois was careful not to posit a symmetry between the Jewish and black experiences; rather, he argued for an understanding of the asymmetricality of history. Each group’s experience was historically distinct, and was neither entirely unique nor reducible to a universalized, atemporal narrative of common suffering. Du Bois argued that the particular and the universal needed to be held together in suspension. Since Du Bois reconceived the color line’s boundaries, he now saw racism and oppression as relational principles, rather than fixed social categories. Only by understanding³ the multidirectional nature of structural injustice could such inequality be overcome.

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1903), 19.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Jewish Life*, (May 1952), 14-15.

³ For a full discussion of Du Bois understanding of Du Bois, the Holocaust, and “multidirectional memory,” see Michael Rothberg, “W.E.B. Du Bois in Warsaw: Holocaust Memory and the Color Line, 1949-1952,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14:1 (Spring 2001), 169-189.

Just as Du Bois used the Jewish experience to rethink the problem of the color line, American Jews used their encounters with blacks as a way to understand their own position as a minority, particularly as immigrant Jews began to prosper economically and to experience the benefits that whiteness conferred. In his book *A Right to Sing the Blues*, Jeffrey Melnick argued that the concept of “black-Jewish relations” does not describe a historical relationship, but rather rhetorically functions as “a story told *by* Jews *about* interracial relations.”⁴ Although many American Jews lived in proximity to blacks, few developed intimate relationships with them. Rather, they engaged in an internal, one-sided conversation about race that helped them to apprehend their relationship to whiteness, to anti-Semitism, and to racial oppression. Eastern European Jewish immigrants worked out their relationship with blacks in the pages of the Yiddish press, in Yiddish literature, and through philanthropy and political action. Jews on the left in particular championed black political causes, and sought to interpret their simultaneous vulnerability in and culpability for America’s racial hierarchy through fiction, journalism, and social activism.

The Yiddish encounter with African-Americans, and with America’s “peculiar institution” of slavery, began before the era of mass migration, in Eastern Europe. In 1868, Ayzik-Meyer Dik published a Yiddish version of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” *Di Shkloferay* (as Eli Rosenblatt has written about [here](#)). Dik made significant adaptations to the original texts, including giving Uncle Tom Jewish owners. At the end, Uncle Tom moves to a Jewish settlement in Canada. The book was something of an overnight sensation; it sold thousands of copies daily, and in short order, “Almost every Jewish home in the country possessed a copy of the story.”⁵ But it was only after eastern European Jews began to arrive in the United States in significant numbers that American Jews fully grappled with the question of whiteness and race privilege in the American context.

Material relations between Jewish immigrants and blacks in the United States were dependent upon circumstance. Jewish peddlers in the South routinely dealt almost exclusively with black customers, and thus were likely to share meals with them and spend the night in their homes. While some scholars have argued that Southern Jews were the first American Jews to consider themselves “white,” these Jews also knew that their whiteness was always contingent: the 1913 conviction of Leo Frank for the murder of Mary Phagan, and his subsequent 1915 lynching, demonstrated to Southern Jews that many Southern whites considered them to be “racial outsiders,” white enough to be accepted on a general principle, but never white enough to join a lynching party.⁶ In the 1920s, rising anti-Semitism complicated many American Jews’ pathway into the white middle class. Even long-established, upwardly-mobile Jews began to experience a new level of exclusion, prejudice, and violence, leading many to question their previously

⁴ Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4. Italics in the original.

⁵ Bertha Wiernik, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin Judaized: I.M. Dick’s Yiddish Adaption of Mrs. Stowe’s Masterpiece,” *New Era Illustrated Magazine* (January 1905, Vol. 6, No. 2), 147.

⁶ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 62-63.

comfortable place within the American racial hierarchy.⁷ At the same time, Jewish vaudevillian Al Jolson employed blackface as a tool to “whiten” Jews’ perceived racial status on stage, and Jewish philanthropist Julius Rosenwald served on the board of the Tuskegee Institute, using philanthropy for black causes as a way to differentiate Jews’ own racially ambiguous position while covertly defending against anti-Semitism.⁸

In contrast to Southern Jews, immigrant Jews in the urban North tended to live in neighborhoods with high Jewish populations, such as New York’s Lower East Side, where few black families lived, and tended to work in trades with heavy Jewish representation, such as the garment industry, which employed few blacks.⁹ As Jews moved north into Harlem and the Bronx, they became more likely than other white groups to live alongside blacks. There were a number of reasons for this: recently-arrived Jewish immigrants were not as sensitive to local racialized geographies; many could not afford to set up shop in whiter, more middle-class areas; and some Jews found a profitable economic niche running businesses catering to blacks. Since many Eastern European Jews had grown up within a culture that defined itself in opposition to the exclusionary and even violent attitudes of non-Jews, upon moving to the United States some Jews felt that they could not comfortably adopt the condescending manners and superior attitudes of their white compatriots towards blacks.¹⁰

It was in the American Yiddish press that “the most assertive statements of identifications with African Americans were made,” in a format in which Jews could explore their relationship with blacks within a private sphere.¹¹ “The Yiddish dailies expressed unbounded interest in the conditions and problems of Negro life,” Hasia Diner remarked, “and also in the relationship between their own readers and those very problems.”¹² When the film version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* premiered in New York in 1927, the *Forverts* ran special ads proclaiming that Jews would want to see the film because they would empathize with the story of a people freed from slavery, just as the Jews had been liberated from Egypt.¹³ A significant amount of Yiddish writing in the early 1930s dwelt on the Scottsboro case, in which nine young black men faced the death penalty for allegedly raping two white women on a freight train in Alabama in 1931. The case was immediately, and accurately, seen as a “frame up” by white Northerners. The *Frayhayt’s* regular coverage of the Scottsboro case included articles, photographs, cartoons, poems, and excerpts of the defendants’ letters. For Yiddish readers and writers on the left, Scottsboro “quickly came to stand for ‘race.’”¹⁴ Many Jews saw the persecution of the Scottsboro defendants as stemming from the same source of racial

⁷ Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 146.

⁸ Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995 [1977]).

⁹ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 144.

¹⁰ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 144-45.

¹¹ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 153.

¹² Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995 [1977]), 68.

¹³ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 153.

¹⁴ Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub, eds. and Amelia Glaser, trans. *Proletpen: America’s Rebel Yiddish Poets* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 132.

hatred responsible for rising anti-Semitism and pro-fascist sympathies both at home and abroad. New York writer Isidore Century remembered holding a “Free the Scottsboro Boys” sign in 1932 at his first May Day demonstration, when he was six. “By the time I was 11 I knew more about the Scottsboro Boys than American history,” he wrote. “Being Jewish and freeing the Scottsboro Boys became inseparably linked in my consciousness.”¹⁵

Jews on the Communist left often sent their children to integrated summer camps such as Kinderland and Wochica, where Jewish children played with black bunkmates, learned modern dance with prominent black artists such as Pearl Primus, and visited with black singer and athlete Paul Robeson. But back in the Bronx, many Jews lived in apartment complexes that didn’t allow blacks, and Jewish children rarely socialized with black children. Although fighting racial injustice was at the forefront of their political imagination, few left-wing Jews found opportunities to share the intimacies of daily life with black comrades. One Jewish mother in the Bronx, who was active in many left-wing causes, read the *Frayhayt*, and sent her children to Kinderland, commented sadly, “I’ve never been in a black person’s house.”¹⁶ Even when Jews and blacks worked in common cause, they rarely created or maintained real friendships; the social, political, and economic distances between the two groups were often seen as insurmountable.

One group of Jews who did come into frequent contact with blacks were Jewish teachers. At midcentury, Jewish women constituted the “vast majority of all public school teachers in New York City.”¹⁷ In black neighborhoods such as Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, Jewish teachers encountered conditions of structural racism that they had never seen before, such as missing or broken blackboards, overcrowded classrooms, and racist textbooks. One of these teachers, Alice Citron, was shocked by the black students she met on her first teaching assignment in Harlem in 1931. She felt they were beaten down and hopeless from hunger and lack of opportunity. Citron determined to do whatever she could so that her students would “know that they are people.”¹⁸ In so doing, she co-founded Negro History Week in Harlem schools, and got black baseball icon Jackie Robinson to visit her classroom in 1949 to view the class play, a retelling of Howard Fast’s narrative of an ex-slave, “Freedom Road.”¹⁹ In 1950, Citron lost her job after refusing to state whether or not she had ever been a member of the Communist Party. She continued to be politically active, working with the black women’s organization, Sojourners for Truth and Justice, and at the Frederick Douglass Educational Center in Harlem, as well as writing on racial issues for *Jewish Life* magazine.

¹⁵ I. Century, “Free the Scottsboro Boys!” *Jewish Currents*, September-October 2007, 28.

¹⁶ Interview with Dick and Mickey Flacks, Santa Barbara, California, August 7, 2012. Mickey Flacks is referring to her mother in the above quotation.

¹⁷ Ruth Jacknow Markowitz, *My Daughter, the Teacher* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁹ Alice Citron, Opinion, *New York Times Magazine*, May 16, 1982.

As Cheryl Greenberg has pointed out, Jews continued to support black causes even when they had no direct or self-interested motivation to do so.²⁰ This is most evident in the civil rights movement, when Jews participated in the March on Washington in 1963; in the Freedom Rides that aided desegregation of interstate buses; and in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. However, such support did not remain constant. Michael Staub has argued that 1965 can be considered both the “zenith” of the Black-Jewish alliance, and as the beginning of its eventual dissolution.²¹ Incidents of anti-Semitism within civil rights organizations, the rise of Black Power, and anger over black anti-Zionism created tensions that came to a head in the debates over community control in New York City schools in 1968, and led *Time Magazine* to declare the death of the “Black-Jewish alliance” in January 1969.

In the midst of this rapidly-changing relationship, *Jewish Currents* magazine tried to maintain a channel of communication between left-wing Jews and blacks, publishing articles by radical black intellectuals and activists and encouraging Jewish readers to respond with an open mind. *Jewish Currents* was founded in 1958 as a reconstituted version of *Jewish Life* magazine, in which Du Bois had published his 1952 essay on the Warsaw Ghetto. Published by the parent association of *Morgn frayhayt*, the Communist-affiliated Yiddish-language daily newspaper, the English-language *Jewish Life* ceased publishing in 1956, after revelations in the Polish Communist Yiddish press exposed Stalin’s executions of members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The editorial committee re-formed in 1958 to independently publish *Jewish Currents*. After publicly confessing to the “grievous mistake” of trusting the Soviet Union on the issues of anti-Semitism and the protection of Yiddish culture, *Jewish Currents* took a critical position toward the Soviet Union and to expressions of anti-Semitism within the left in general.²²

In October 1967, *Jewish Currents* editors alerted their readers to “classical anti-Semitic propaganda” published in a cartoon in the June-July SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) *Newsletter*. The cartoon displayed a hand tattooed with a dollar sign, surrounded by a Star of David, holding a noose around the necks of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Mohammed Ali. In the background, a dark-colored arm identified as the “Third World” wielded a sword named “Liberation Movement” to cut the noose. *Jewish Currents* printed the cartoon next to what they considered to be an even more egregious example of racism: a “disgusting, vicious, white racist cartoon” that appeared in the daily Yiddish newspaper *Der tog-morgn zhurnal* on August 27th, 1967. This cartoon featured a caricatured African face on the body of a monkey or rat-like creature, labeled, in Yiddish, “*snik – shvartse makht*,” or “Snick [SNCC] – Black Power.” The animal is drawn playing an old-fashioned phonograph, out of which blares “anti-Israel propaganda.”²³ A

²⁰ Cheryl Greenberg, “Negotiating Coalition: Black and Jewish Civil Rights Agencies in the Twentieth Century,” in Jack Salzman and Cornel West, eds., *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 163.

²¹ Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 111.

²² *Jewish Currents*, “Our 20th Anniversary,” November 1966, 3.

²³ “Anti-Semitism/White Racism,” *Jewish Currents* (October 1967), 37.

fearsome-looking figure wearing traditional Arab clothing stands next to the phonograph with a record in his hand. The *Jewish Currents* editors explained that the cartoon demonstrates that SNCC was “learning Jew-baiting from the Arabs.”²⁴ They issued a call to all the Jews who had denounced SNCC’s anti-Semitism to equally condemn the white racism of the Yiddish press. While alarmed at this turn of events, *Currents* nevertheless continued to defend militant black activism as one manifestation of larger social injustices affecting both blacks and whites.

Jewish Currents editor Morris Schappes grappled with these issues within the pages of his periodical, and within his own life as well: imprisoned for perjury in 1943-44 for refusing to identify fellow Communists teaching at the City College of New York, he served time shackled to a fellow black prisoner. It was an experience that moved him deeply. As he wrote in *Jewish Currents* in 1982,

The experience with this black prisoner stripped away totally the idea that we were equal. If my advocacy of affirmative action and even of preferential treatment seems to have a special fervor, it is because my political and moral conviction is continually reinforced by the memory of this experience: that handcuffs and leg-irons did not make us equal.²⁵

Schappes claimed that, while it was his study of the “Negro question” that caused him to be interested in the Jewish question, it was his experiences as a Jew in prison that fully opened his eyes to racial injustice in the United States. Like Du Bois, Schappes’ experience of another group’s oppression led him to see more clearly the oppression against his own people. He used this insight as a way to further open up his understanding of racism, and argued that Jewish expressions of solidarity with American blacks came from Jews’ relative position of privilege, not from their common experiences of oppression.

Jews like Morris Schappes and Alice Citron staked a position for their vision of a just American society based on their experiences working with and learning from blacks. They believed that, despite differences in opinion, left-wing Jews and blacks ultimately wanted the same thing: a society that would eliminate oppression and would recognize economic and racial equality as basic human rights. *Jewish Currents* editorials began to focus less on internal divisions within the left and more on the larger, sometimes amorphous power structures dividing American society, including the military-industrial complex and colonial powers waging war in Vietnam and throughout the Third World. These real enemies of social progress, Schappes believed, were the ones pitting groups against one another both at home and overseas, allowing extremists to take control.

In *The Price of Whiteness*, Eric Goldstein writes that Jews needed to claim whiteness in order to succeed, but that many Jews’ “ongoing commitment to a distinctive identity” complicated their attempts to claim whiteness.²⁶ The less different Jews became, the more they claimed difference as a marker of identification with

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Morris Schappes, “Personal and Political,” *Jewish Currents* (September 1982), 15.

²⁶ Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*, 3.

racialized others, rather than with white privilege. This claim to difference served as an internal identity marker for Jews, particularly as later generations lost a connection to their immigrant past and shed other aspects of linguistic, cultural, and religious identity that distinguished them from their white neighbors. The demographics of the postwar era—upward mobility, suburban settlement and the concomitant transition from racially diverse urban areas to racially homogenous neighborhoods—meant that Jews and blacks were even less likely to identify with each other, or to see themselves as threatened by a common enemy. In the post-Scottsboro era, Jews were more likely to see the mobilization of black political movements as a threat to Jewish interests, rather than as a response to structural inequality that affected both Jews and blacks.

In the age of Black Lives Matter, American Jews still ponder the question of white privilege, but few turn to Du Bois or Schappes to explicate an understanding of racial oppression as asymmetrical, relational, and historically specific. However, many Jews continue to struggle to understand their own place in a racialized society, and grapple with their own agency to either embrace that world, or tear it down. These dynamics continue to play out an unfinished drama whose next act remains to be written.