HYPERVISIBLE INVISIBILITY:
A STUDY OF BLACK-JEWISH RELATIONSHIPS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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In their fiction, canonical authors of African American literature such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen have portrayed Jewish people in their work in both positive and negative ways. Additional works by Black American writers also explore the complexity of the relationship between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews, with some authors even traversing the experience of being both Black *and* Jewish, a complex existence given the common conflation of Jewishness with whiteness. In this thesis, I observe the portrayals of Jews of all races in the works of several Black American writers and discover that, despite the history of animosity in American Black-Jewish relationships, Black writers have consistently chosen to sympathize with Jewishness in fiction and nonfiction. Beginning with a portrayal in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), I track the European Jew's "choosing whiteness" throughout American history, and how this choice has changed the relationship between non-Black Jews, especially white Jews, and Black Gentiles. I discuss several major works

of African American literature, among them Wright's *Native Son* (1940), *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler, and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) by James Baldwin. I also, however, investigate the portrayal of Black-Jewish relationships in lesser-known texts such as *Big White Fog* (1937) by Theodore Ward to prove just how pervasive this topic is in African American literature, even though it remains essentially unexplored. I describe the simultaneous hypervisible and invisible experience of Black people and Jews in the United States through historical examples and portrayals in these literary works to help contextualize the often-ambiguous relationship between these two groups in real life as well as fiction.

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Dedication

To my wife, Aubri. Because of you, I believe in myself, and because of you I complete my Master of Arts degree.

And to the Black and Jewish communities. Together, we can.

"You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

--The Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot* 2:21

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Introduction

According to Catherine Rottenberg in *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African American and Jewish-American Literature* (2008), Black American people and Jewish people of European descent first encountered each other in large numbers in the Northeastern United States during the Great Migrations North (1910-1940), which coincided with mass immigration to the area by European Jews. "By 1920, the black presence in New York City had increased by at least 60 percent," Rottenberg writes. "Along similar lines, approximately two and a half million Eastern European Jews arrived in the United States between 1880 and 1920, radically transforming the makeup of Jewish communities" throughout the country (2). Since then, Black Gentiles and non-Black Jewish people have continued to uphold this proximity, physical and abstract, in the United States. The relationship between the two groups is complicated, and their relationship has changed over time. Of course, neither group is monolithic, but the relationship between the two has generally evolved from negative to positive to negative again, with the twentieth century ending in uncertainty.

In his introduction to *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments* (1994), Paul Berman wonders why, despite the decades-long proximity, there tends to be so much animosity between the groups:

> Have the Jews and the blacks been fighting all this time over political spoils? Not especially. Over economic interests? Some people think so, but economic competition between blacks and Jews is strictly marginal. Has it been a war over neighborhoods? Sometimes, but not consistently. Is it a war between parties, Republicans and Democrats? Or between liberalism and conservatism? Not even that, for at the end of the day the

> blacks and the Jews have trooped off to the polls and in one national election after another they have, more often than not, voted for the same candidates. (4)

Berman offers then disputes several possible sources of this animosity. The question of what causes these groups to discriminate against one another–in ways both trivial and generationally significant–cannot be answered simply. An adjacent question might read: Despite the sordid side of the relationship between these two groups, why do they remain in such close proximity, and why do we find them collaborating throughout American history, sometimes right before or right after periods defined by discrimination and violence? I assert that despite several historical instances of antisemitic violence by Black Gentiles and anti-Black violence by non-Black Jews, the groups continue to collaborate and seek solidarity with one another because both groups deal with a unique combination of hypervisibility, diasporic experience, and generational trauma.

In the United States today, Jewish people as a group are simultaneously hypervisible and *in*visible. Most Americans have met a Jewish person before and, depending on the region, a large fraction of non-Jewish Americans would likely report that they are friends with a Jewish person. However, because of antisemitism and the mass assimilation of American Jewish people, huge regions of Gentile America are filled with citizens with little-to-no non-stereotypical knowledge of Judaism or Jewishness.[1] Arguably, many Christians, even devout ones, do not know the differences between Christianity and Judaism, besides maybe their stances on the Messiah and whether or not He has come. On television, Gentiles see mostly assimilated Jewish people living culturally Christian lives. Any adult Gentile could give the Yiddish word for the small head covering Jewish men wear—*yarmulke* (though they probably could not spell it)—but do not know the Hebrew word for it—*kippah*. In diverse synagogues where the population of the congregation is not entirely European Jewish, it is customary to use Hebrew words when

possible, so as to not exclude those who do not speak Yiddish—especially as the number of Ashkenazi Jews with the ability to speak and read Yiddish shrinks with each generation. Despite the ignorance of simple Jewish traditions and customs, however, Yiddish words—such as glitch, spiel, and schmuck—have become mainstays of contemporary American speech, even in areas without huge Jewish populations.

Black Americans today face similar issues, though not because of assimilation. Black Americans still typically live segregated from their non-Black counterparts (García n.p.). Non-Black Americans *still* rely on stereotypes to try and understand Black Americans and their culture, much like they do with Jewish Americans. But what do non-Black people say when accused of being anti-Black? "I have a Black friend" is a common response, because many non-Black Americans do; Black people make up over 12% of the American population, according to the 2020 Census (Jones et al. n.p.). Here we find another example of simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility. Despite common anti-Blackness in the United States, Black Americans, like Jewish Americans, were instrumental in building today's standard American dialect. Gumbo, goober, yam, and banjo are all African words. On a more contemporary scale, cool, my bad, hater, 24/7, back in the day, high-five, lame and rip off all originate from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Grady n.p.).

Perhaps the strongest historical thread connecting the groups is generational trauma. Non-Black Jewish and Black Gentile Americans both exist in the diaspora, far away from geographic areas they consider their "origins." As diasporic groups, both have been threatened by cultural genocide, which has led to literal genocide more than once in history. Generational trauma generally affects the behaviors of its victims even if the original trauma occurred generations ago. Non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles must deal with the generational trauma of several

historical genocides, enslavements, and pogroms enacted against their peoples. For individuals who are both Black and Jewish, the generational trauma is two-fold.

The proximity, solidarity, animosity, and violence between the groups is seen in Black and Jewish interaction in several examples of African American literature. I have observed through my reading that these interactions, fictional and nonfictional, often reflect the realistic relationship between the groups during the time period in which the text is set. This thesis tracks the relationships between Black people, Jewish people, and those who are both throughout American history, alongside interactions between the groups in African American literature. The chapters of this thesis are mostly divided by the time period in which the texts are set, with the exception of Chapter 4 which explores how the Biblical figure Moses connects the two groups and refers to texts written decades apart.

Not long before the Great Migration of Southern Black Americans to the North, more European Jewish people and their descendants living in America were choosing—for lack of a better term— "whiteness." Originally, European Jewish people were not seen as white by Western European Gentiles settling in the United States. Like Irish and Italian people, however, European Jews evolved from non-white to white in the eyes of other white people as well as people of color. Any solidarity formed between European Jews and Black Gentiles as fellow "non-whites" earlier in history was destroyed by this choosing of whiteness, and though Jewish people of many races exist in America, descendants of European Jewish immigrants make up the largest fraction of the population, causing Black Gentiles, as many Gentiles do, to conflate Jewishness with whiteness. In African American Literature, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) portrays the contemporary issue of light-skinned Black people "crossing the color line" to live as white. A major character in the novel, Clare Kendry, a mixed Black and white woman who

passes as white so well that her own white husband doesn't know she has Black ancestry, shows a different world of Black people choosing whiteness, and the end of her story proves that the option does not appear to Black Americans the same way that it did Jewish Americans of European origin. Additionally, Clare and her friends discuss a Black man who converted to Judaism as if he has somehow chosen to be white by doing so.

In the 1930s and 1940s, after European Jews had chosen whiteness, Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews found themselves in political and cultural proximity when Black Gentile members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) found true solidarity with non-Black Jewish members. While these non-Black Jews were still separated from their Black Gentile comrades by race, both groups were a part of a high-risk and unpopular political group. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) was published while this solidarity was growing within the CPUSA. The novel briefly explores the free legal aid offered to a Black man by two white Communists, one of whom is Jewish. Also, while the novel is mostly about anti-Black racism, Wright takes great care to address antisemitism as well. Theodore Ward's play *Big White Fog* (1937) also traverses white Jewish and Black Gentile solidarity within the Communist Party, as the main character's son breaks away from his father's Garveyist beliefs to join the Party.

During the Holocaust, many Black Gentiles in America, including writers, stood up for Jewish people suffering in Europe when few others would. As Daniel A. Gross notes in *Smithsonian Magazine*, "Immigration restrictions actually tightened as the refugee crisis [of Jewish refugees trying to seek asylum in the United States] worsened … President Roosevelt repeated the unproven claims from his advisers that some Jewish refugees had been coerced to spy for the Nazis" (Gross n.p.). Great numbers of Jewish refugees were refused entry into the United States, and many had no other choice but to return to Europe where they would face

persecution, forced labor, and death from execution or disease. Black writers, on the other hand, saw the immediate threat of Nazi Germany. Wright is one example; he left the CPUSA in 1942 after being a member for almost ten years, partially because of the organization's continued support of the Soviet Union after Joseph Stalin briefly allied with Adolf Hitler (Katz n.p.).

In "The Schisms of '67: On Certain Restructurings of the American Left, from the Civil Rights Movement to the Multiculturalist Constellation," cultural theorist Michel Feher addresses what he refers to as a series of "schisms" between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles (263). For several reasons, the solidarity built between these two groups within the Communist Party began to crumble. In the late 1960s, some members of the African American community had to face the reality that the solidarity forged between their parents and Jewish Communists deteriorated when Black people demanded more than just the right to vote in the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights era appears to be one that reminded Black people of the "whiteness" of white Jews.

Though the relationship is complicated and sometimes negative during this era, African American literature portrays white Jews who were enthusiastic participants in the Civil Rights Movement. For example, James McBride's memoir *The Color of Water* (1995), which takes place largely in the 1960s and 1970s, describes McBride's white Jewish mother, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, as someone who would defend Black liberation with her life, and who left and stopped speaking to her parents largely because of their anti-Black racism. Still, the memoir explores animosity between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews, as McBride's own half-Black siblings begin to harbor anger toward their white mother.

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) partly focuses on the story of Moses, a figure shared by Black Christians and non-Black Jewish people that reminds them of their place in the diaspora. Reed's novel represents a positive moment amidst the "schisms" between the two

groups. Reed has also spoken out against antisemitism several times, including criticizing Alice Walker, a significant figure in African American literature with millions of loyal fans, by publicly condemning her antisemitic statements. James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), also published during the schisms, portrays animosity between the groups, but also offers a white Jewish character who is a "savior" of sorts to the Black main characters.

In the early 1990s, Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews clashed repeatedly during and after the Crown Heights riots, a series of violent confrontations between the groups in New York City after a car accident involving a white, Orthodox Jewish man resulted in the death of a Black child. The riots challenged the remaining solidarity that had been achieved during the decades before, which had already been made weaker by the schisms of the '60s and '70s. Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), however, portrays a positive relationship between non-Black Jewish people and Black Gentiles after the Crown Heights riots–coexisting in their separate spheres of hypervisibility in a neighborhood of Santa Monica with a large population of each group.

Interestingly, while these texts often explore the animosity and violence between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles as relevant to the periods in which the texts are set, most of these Black authors still portray at least one positive relationship between people of the different groups. This decision by the authors is further proof that, though the relationship between the groups is "complex" and "fraught," the groups are permanently "intertwined" (Rottenberg 3). Rottenberg observes that the groups are both forced to "[perform] Americanness" to remain safe in this country (Rottenberg n.p.).

My writing of this thesis comes at an apt time in the history between these groups. More people who are both Black and Jewish exist than ever, including Alice Walker's own daughter,

Rebecca Walker, whose memoir, *Black White and Jewish* (2000), I address in this thesis. Rapper Drake is another popular individual who is both Black and proudly and openly Jewish. Despite the existence of Black Jews, Jewishness continues to be conflated with whiteness by Black Gentiles and non-Black Gentiles alike. This year, Kanye West went on a manic Twitter rant about Jewish people ruling the media and the world, a conspiracy theory that has existed for decades and perhaps even centuries. Of course, West suffers from bipolar disorder with psychosis, and his words do not always reflect his actual beliefs, but his influence has encouraged people who have been white supremacists for years to speak publicly about their own antisemitism. Additionally, this Twitter blast comes at an especially unsafe time for Jewish people who are targeted by white supremacist violence.

Antisemitic violence and targeting Jewish people for harassment has become a major problem locally, too. Appalachian State University has a Turning Point USA (TPUSA) chapter that administration is allowing to continue to exist. TPUSA, a conservative student group, was founded by Charlie Kirk, a white Gentile who believes in "Cultural Marxism," a conspiracy theory that a secret "Kabbal" of Jewish people is trying to force the world to be politically correct. One can find articles about Cultural Marxism and how students can "fight" it on TPUSA's website (Zegers, "WTH Is Cultural Marxism?"; Zegers, "Insane Cultural Marxism"). Also on Appalachian State's campus and the surrounding Boone, North Carolina area, spray-painted swastikas have been discovered on the Self Expression Tunnel; an unidentified individual has draped a Nazi flag over the sign of the local synagogue; and leaders of the Jewish fraternity have received violently antisemitic messages from burner accounts on social media.

In addition, today's climate is also especially dangerous for Black people in Boone. In 2020, members of the Black at App State Collective and allies marching with them on campus to

call for better treatment of Black students and more meaningful responses from the university's administration against anti-Black racism were threatened with arrest (Marin-Lopez n.p.). Given several abhorrent examples of police brutality against Black people in the United States in recent years, threatening Black people with arrest for peacefully demonstrating is inextricable from a threat of violence and even death.

Public displays of antisemitism and anti-Blackness are increasing throughout the country and on the campus at which this thesis was written, and non-Black Jews sometimes participate in this anti-Blackness while Black Gentiles sometimes participate in the antisemitism. Though Kanye West and other prominent Black Gentiles have made violent statements about Jews, non-Black Jewish people also have a history of not addressing their anti-Blackness and using their own victimhood of white supremacy as a shield against claims of their anti-Blackness. Additionally, many European Jews who chose whiteness in early-twentieth-century America entered the middle class and began to participate in the underpayment and abuse of Black hired people, and perhaps even lynching. The purpose of this thesis is not to quantify which group has it "worse," or which group is more guilty of attacking the other. Instead, it addresses violence and discrimination from each side, both in history and as portrayed in the literature, to provide a realistic view of historical animosity between the groups.

Despite continuous strain on the relationship between these groups, Black writers choosing to portray non-Black Jews positively in their work is significant. Through my research I seek to show the evolution of the relationship between these two groups, but I also hope to find that these groups, as Rottenberg says, are permanently intertwined, and that this intertwining will soon enough lead to another generally positive era of solidarity, one which will hopefully continue indefinitely.

Unlike Rottenberg's book, which examines the portrayal of Black and Jewish relationships in African American *and* Jewish American literature, this thesis examines selected portrayals in African American literature specifically. In addition to the texts already cited, this thesis also addresses how *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) by Charles W. Chesnutt, *Cane* (1923) by Jean Toomer, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) by Zora Neale Hurston, *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright, *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed, and *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler portray relationships between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews

Notes

1. "European Jews" or "European Jewish" refers to Jews who immigrated directly from Europe. I use this term instead of Ashkenazi Jews or *Ashkenazim* because not all European Jews are ethnically Ashkenazi (though most are). Additionally, the Ashkenazi ethnicity includes people whose family left Europe generations ago. "Black Gentiles" refers to Black people who are not Jewish. "Gentiles" refers to anyone who is not Jewish. "Non-Black" refers to just that, but includes both white people and non-Black people of color. "Non-Black Jewish people" or "non-Black Jews" refers to Jewish people who are not Black. I use this term because it is not just white Jewish people who are guilty of anti-Black racism, but also Jewish people of color who are not Black. "Jewish people" or "Jews," if written with no qualifier, refers to anyone who is Jewish, including Black Jews. It should never be assumed that by "Jewish people" or "Jews" I mean only white Jews or non-Black Jews. "Judaism" refers specifically to the Jewish religion. "Jewishness" refers to the state of being Jewish, either religiously or ethnically. According to Judaism, someone who is born Jewish (to a Jewish mother) or converts to Judaism is Jewish for life and has a Jewish soul, regardless of their future actions, including converting to another religion.

CHAPTER 1

Choosing Whiteness and Crossing the Color Line:

Race in the Eyes of Black Gentiles and Non-Black Jews

Three novels from early-twentieth-century African American literature offer detailed portrayals of the relationships between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles. Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, when compared, explore the European Jew's "decision" to "become" white in the United States, which was eventually permanent, while the attempt of light-skinned Black people to do the same in the early twentieth century turned out to be unsustainable. Jean Toomer's *Cane* portrays a Southern United States that did not yet accept the existence of a "white" Jew, and the experience of a Black Jew within that context.

The Marrow of Tradition is one of the earliest twentieth-century examples of a Jewish character appearing in a piece of African American fiction. A Jewish merchant stops and searches Dr. Miller, a respected Black man in the community, during a violent race riot between the town's white and Black citizens. During the interrogation Dr. Miller exclaims, "A Jew—God of Moses!" (Chesnutt 188), referencing a figure central to both Judaism and Black evangelism. This brief interaction is the only one between Black and Jewish people in the novel. So why mention it at all?

According to his biographers, Chesnutt was seventh-eighths white. Today, an eighth of Black ancestry may not seem worth mentioning, considering the contemporary American understanding of race. Lacking previous generations' obsession with racial features down to an individual's fingers and toes, Americans today may see a white man when viewing a photo of

Chesnutt. However, in the era of Chesnutt's life, that eighth was significant. Americans were so obsessed with race and ancestry in the early twentieth century that being one-eighth Black was more than enough for people to be able to "tell," or so many people thought. "The fact of miscegenation produced the mixed-blood," William L. Andrews writes in *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (1999). "The fear of racial miscegenation made [Chesnutt] a racial pariah" (Andrews 139). For Chesnutt to have any Black ancestry, someone in his direct line had to have committed the crime of "miscegenation," a fact not lost on people of all races.[1] Chesnutt did consider the option of "passing for white when the alienation, cultural deprivation, and economic hardships of his mixed-blood situation weighed heavily upon him" (139). Passing would have been more than possible, not to mention convenient, considering that people with a much larger Black blood quantum were "crossing the color line," as it was called, or attempting to live their lives as white people–introducing themselves to strangers as white, for example. In the end Chesnutt chose to identify with and be perceived as Black.

In the twentieth century, European Jewish people faced a similar choice to Chesnutt's. Karen Brodkin Sacks, a writer and daughter of European Jewish immigrants, argues that, like many non-British European ethnicities, European Jewish people were considered of another race from American white people. By the early twentieth century, though, "Jews were the first of the new European immigrants to create a middle class of small businesspersons," the first step to their blending in with the white middle class (Sacks 84). In the introduction of *Blacks and Jews*, Paul Berman asserts that early-twentieth-century Jewish Americans were likely "to relegate Jewishness to the sphere of private life" (Berman 11). Like Chesnutt and other Black people who appeared white to race-obsessed peers, European Jewish people had the option to pass as white. The difference between these two plights is that European Jewish people were able to claim

whiteness for themselves and their descendants, while crossing the color line for Black people depended entirely on complexion and other physical features. Like Black Americans, the descendants of European Jewish immigrants in the United States remain members of the diaspora, but they have found their niche among American white people.

Chesnutt includes the interaction between the Jewish character and Dr. Miller as a symbol for European Jewish people choosing whiteness en masse. Through this interaction the author tells his audience that this Jewish man, who has experienced discrimination based on his heritage, chooses whiteness the moment it is available to him. The Jewish man betrays any solidarity that European Jewish people, including himself, have had with Black people. Chesnutt was one of the best people in this period to alert his audience to such a scathing observation, considering that the turn-of-the-century author himself was a perfect candidate to pass for white, but chose not to. The brief interaction between Dr. Miller and the Jewish man who searches him explores a years-long process of the European Jewish person becoming white in the United States and leaving his Black brother behind, all in one moment.

We see the aftermath of European Jewish immigrants and their descendants choosing whiteness in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, published almost thirty years after *Marrow,* in 1929. As three Black women—Irene, Gertrude, and Clare, the latter two passing as white full-time, the former only doing so sometimes—sit down for an afternoon chat, Gertrude explains that an acquaintance of the women, Claude Jones, "was no longer a Negro or a Christian but had become a Jew" (Larsen 37). This exchange shows a group of Black women sharing a fundamental misunderstanding of Judaism and Jewishness. Larsen specifies that Clare is mixed-race, with both Black and white heritage, but the background of Irene and Gertrude is ambiguous. Either way, Clare and Gertrude speak of Claude as if he has committed some sort of

betrayal. Though at least one of these women has some white heritage, both Clare and Gertrude immediately take an *us versus them* mentality, or Black people versus Jewish people, who Clare and Gertrude see as automatically white. For a moment Clare and Gertrude abandon their acts—even Clare's own husband does not know she is at least half Black—and gossip as two Black women.

In *Performing Americanness,* Rottenberg explores this conversation between Irene, Gertrude, and Clare. "…the black man who 'becomes a Jew' is no longer a 'black' man because the Jew is not 'black'… 'On the one hand, the desire to become a Jew is odd, since 'Jewishness' is not considered normative. On the other hand, becoming a 'Jew' seems to carry with it certain privileges" (Rottenberg 90-91). Though "Jewish" is not a privileged category on its own, Rottenberg observes, Gertrude sees Claude's conversion as an ascension socially.

It is difficult to judge Gertrude and her misunderstanding of Jewishness when considering the likely cause. The majority of Jewish people immigrating into the United States during this period came from Europe and fit, or nearly fit, the white American's aesthetic requirements for whiteness. Even today, only 17% of American Jewish people are identified as non-white (Mitchell n.p.). It is difficult to find and verify statistics of the same nature from the twentieth century, but given what we do know about American Jewish people during this period, which is that many of them were immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Europe, it is safe to assume that even fewer Jewish people of color, let alone Black Jewish people, existed in the States. Before Claude Jones, Gertrude had probably never met a Black Jewish person.

Rottenberg observes that the women see "becoming a 'Jew'" as a process which has "certain privileges" because, to these women, Jewish inherently means white. And because the majority of Jewish people in the United States in this period sourced their bloodline back to

Europe and were choosing whiteness, it is only fair that Gertrude and Clare view Jewishness and whiteness as indivisible. Irene does defend Claude, but only says that the other women should not assume he converted to gain privilege (Larsen 38). She does not argue against the statement that to become Jewish is to stop being Black.

There is also irony in the judgment that Gertrude and Clare carry against Claude. They both choose to live as white women every day. Clare's own white husband doesn't know that she is not white. But when Claude converts to Judaism, which the women see as becoming white, they judge him for it.

At the end of the novel, Clare Kendry, who has lived most of her adult life passing as white, becomes overwhelmed with the complexity and tragedy of her life spent lying to her own husband about her true origins and jumps out of a window to her death.[2] Unlike the Jewish merchant in *Marrow*, Clare is not able to sustain her choosing of whiteness. Even if she had not died, there was the looming chance that her children or grandchildren could be born with dark skin, a genuine fear discussed in the novel for women like Clare whose own husbands do not know that they are Black. The merchant and Clare represent their respective groups. After supporting the white aggressors in the massacre, the merchant has shown the white citizens of Wellington that he has picked a side–the white one. His children and grandchildren will be able to distance themselves from non-whiteness even more. After a few generations, his family could be fully assimilated into white American Gentile culture. Clare's descendants, however, could have dark-skinned children for generations to come and not know why. This could happen to her daughter, Margery, who does not know her true ancestry, and she could be accused by her white family of lying about her race, which could end in violence. Clare's decision to "become" white, unlike the same decision made by the merchant, is not as sustainable. Though even Ashkenazi

Jews are still sometimes racialized today because of their features or darker skin tone, most "white" Jews have always had the "privilege" to pass as white, and many took that opportunity to "become" white.

In Jean Toomer's *Cane,* we encounter an early portrayal of a character who is both Jewish and Black. *Cane* is considered an experimental text, often described as a novel but largely consisting of poems and short vignettes. The vignettes are related thematically, but sometimes feature characters are mentioned in one vignette and then never again. One such character is Fern, who appears in an eponymous sketch early in the text. The narrator never says the words "Fern is Jewish," but Toomer makes her Jewishness obvious in other ways. Her nose is described as "aquiline, Semitic" (21). If hooked-nosed was not obvious enough, Toomer throws in the word "Semitic" as well. The narrator, an acquaintance of Fern's, says that the first time he saw her "I felt as if I heard a Jewish cantor sing. As if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folk-song. And I felt bound to her" (23). To describe her as spellbindingly beautiful, the narrator calls upon imagery of a Jewish cantor. At the end of the sketch, the narrator recalls Fern's full name: Fernie May Rosen (26).

Toomer makes his character's Jewishness explicit by giving her an obviously Jewish name: Rosen. Additionally, in the smaller details, we can tell that Fern is not a white Jew. Her skin is described as "cream-colored" (23) and "creamy brown" (21). She is a light-skinned, mixed-Black woman whose father is of European Jewish descent.[3] It is also possible that, instead of her father being entirely white, her father was the result of a Black mother and white Jewish father. Either way, Fern is the result of a "miscegenous" relationship between a person with Black ancestry and a person who is perceived as white.[4] In 1920s Georgia, the story's setting, interracial marriage was illegal, and interracial sex was frowned upon. Regardless of whether

Fern's parents wished to marry one another, Fern's existence in the Jim Crow South is complicated.

Toomer leaves much to be desired in Fern's story. The brief vignette mostly focuses on the narrator and his attraction and brief relationship with Fern. Her experience as a mixed-race person and someone with Jewish ancestry is complicated. We are not told: Can Fern pass as white? Does she ever try for her own privileges or for those of her family? Does her Jewishness complicate her relationship with potentially passing as white? Does she practice Judaism? But historical context can give us more information. In the 1920s Jewish people made up less than 1% of the population in Georgia. At the same time, however, over 10% of stores in Atlanta (not far from the story's setting of Macon) were run by Jews (Bauman n.p.). Jewish people were creating success for themselves in the big cities of Georgia, but remained largely invisible due to their small population size and, likely, hiding of their ancestry.

Leonard Rogoff observes that, in the early-twentieth-century South, Jews were still considered people of color, or "colored."[5] Rogoff cites a common anxiety that Jewish men constantly "lust[ed]" (212) after white Gentile women, similar to the common white anxiety that Black men were obsessed with the prospect of having sex with white women. Additionally, a white Gentile woman having sex with a Jewish man was typically seen as a rape or "defilement," just as sex between a white woman and Black man was seen (212). Two Jewish men, Leo Frank and Joseph Needleman, were both extrajudicially attacked or "lynched" in North Carolina in 1925 (212). Frank, who had been accused of murder, was hanged to death. Needleman was accused of raping a white Gentile woman and was violently castrated, but fortunately survived (212).[6] Today, the expert consensus is that neither man committed the crime for which he was attacked.

The genital mutilation of Needleman is identical to the treatment of Black men accused (almost invariably falsely) of raping white women in the Jim Crow South. Before execution, lynchers would brutally attack the accused. Sometimes the genital mutilation did not happen until after the accused was hanged, but the mutilation was often its own punishment for "defiling" a white woman. Though people like Toomer's Fern may have sparked some anxiety in the hearts of Black Christians who knew them, it could not compare to the anxiety white Gentiles felt when one of their "own" women had children with a Jewish man. Given this information, Fern's existence is not as controversial as that of a fully "white" child would be if their father was Jewish and their mother was a Gentile. Today, if a white person with just one Jewish parent does not disclose their background, there is no way to know they are only "half" Jewish, or the result of a relationship that once caused so much violent anxiety in the South. People today with one Black parent and one white often wear their heritage on their skin. In the Jim Crow South, someone could lose their father to lynching if he was Black and their mother was white. Except, apparently, if their mother was Jewish, since Southerners in this period did not consider Jews of European descent to be white.

Fern's being mixed Black and white is anxiety-causing to white people in Georgia, but when they find out her father was actually Jewish, do they care at all? Does her background matter more to Black peers who are likely Christian, or who may view her father as a white man? Do Black people who know Fern judge her mother for having a child with a "white" man? Though often for different reasons, Black Jews today occupy an identity that is just as complex as Fern's.

While a comparison of *Passing* and *Marrow* highlights the white Jewish person's privilege and capability to take on whiteness, *Cane* introduces the complexity of a Black and

Jewish existence in a time when this existence rarely existed. Though Black and European Jewish people having children together failed to attract the attention of Southern white Gentiles, people like Fern had a more complex existence than the "colored" or "white" allowed by Jim Crow lawmakers. Additionally, as most Black people in the South at this time were Christian, Black Jews had to make difficult decisions about religion and culture.

Notes

1. "Miscegenation" is a now-derogatory term used here for emphasis.
2. Larsen leaves Clare's death ambiguous. From an open window she either falls or is pushed out of it, or jumps to her death. My interpretation of the text, given Clare's characterization, is that she jumps.
3. "Rosen" is a common Ashkenazi last name.
4. As mentioned earlier, "miscegenation" or "miscegenous" are now considered derogatory. I use "miscegenous" for emphasis on how Fern is likely perceived.
5. "Colored" is a now-derogatory term that sometimes referred only to Black people but, in some contexts, referred to anyone who was not white.
6. Though Needleman survived, the intention of his attackers was to kill him in an extrajudicial setting, so his attack is mentioned as a "lynching." Needleman is a lynching survivor.

CHAPTER 2

Jews Contributing "A Damn Sight More" Than White Gentiles: The Bond of American Socialism

Non-Black Jewish people and Black Gentiles once found solidarity within the American Communist Party. Between the First and Second Red Scare, from the 1920s to the late 1940s, pre-McCarthy anti-communism in the United States made life miserable for Communists, their sympathizers, and unsuspecting third parties who were often mistaken for Communists. The CPUSA, which had grown more vocal during and after the Great Depression, was now noticed by the mainstream. Why did so many American citizens and politicians hate the CPUSA during this period? There are too many answers to this question. To many people still today, the socialist beliefs of Communists are un-American. To an American patriot clawing their way out of the Great Depression, communism was seen as a dangerous slippery slope toward handouts and confiscation of private property that the once-middle-class was already fighting so hard to retain.

Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*, which is set during the Depression, portrays a family once suspicious of communism who turns to local Communists for help by the end of the play. Main character Victor (Vic) Mason is a Black Chicagoan and active member of his community's Garveyite chapter who hopes to someday "return" to Africa. The real-life Marcus Garvey insisted that returning to their homeland would solve the problems of members of the Black diaspora living in the United States. Vic declines his brother-in-law Daniel's offer to go in with him on the lease of a building and split it into units to sublet, stating that the $1,500 required for the business transaction is all Vic has to his name. However, when Vic's studious son, Les, is denied a scholarship that he was all but guaranteed because of his race, Vic impulsively buys

$1,500 worth of stock in the Black Star Line, Garvey's shipping venture that promises to one day transport Black Americans to Africa to settle permanently.

Vic's wife, Ella, does not agree with Garveyism, but quietly allows her husband to participate in the movement. Her mother, Martha, hates Garveyism, not because she disagrees with its ethnonationalist philosophy, but because she sees herself as an American. Daniel, the husband of Ella's sister Juanita, feels the same way, but Martha sees herself as more American because she and her daughters have light skin. With this ideology, Martha conflates Americanness with whiteness. Martha's colorism is pervasive throughout the play. A term often attributed to Black author Alice Walker, colorism is the act of holding prejudice against another person because of the color of their skin. It differs from racism because it focuses on skin color and other physical traits specifically. In the Black community, colorism appears as a preference given to Black people with lighter skin over people of the same race with darker skin, and extends to other features such as lighter colored hair and eyes. When she becomes angry at Ella for not allowing her to spank Vic and Ella's child, Phillip, Martha calls Phillip "a black scamp" who is "black like his daddy" (58). Not realizing Vic is within earshot, Martha calls Vic the n-word, which Vic says has to be "the dirtiest thing she can think of" (60). Ella becomes angry at Vic for arguing back at Martha, and her own colorism shines through. Though Ella is angry at her mother for calling Vic such a pejorative word, when she becomes angry at Vic she implies that he is animalistic because he has darker skin. She says that going to Africa would be the best thing for him because "maybe you'll find the company of your kind in the [African] jungle!" (62). Like Clare Kendry in *Passing,* Martha and Ella are obsessed with race, and the colorism Vic experiences at the hands of his own family makes him question Garveyism for the first time

in the play. “And like a fool,” Vic says, “I dreamed of getting away from [racism] in Africa!” (63).

The Black characters in the play sometimes view Jewish people as belonging to their own race, other times conflating Jewishness with whiteness. In Act 3, when the Mason women are trying to sell their furniture to Mr. Marks to get enough money to lease another apartment before they are evicted from theirs, the Jewish furniture salesman will not offer them the prices they think they deserve. Ella and Vic’s daughter, Wanda, calls Mr. Marks “a disgrace to [his] race” (66). After Marks leaves, Daniel enters with Les. Daniel tells the rattled Wanda and Ella that Marks’s cheapness is “no more than you can expect from a Jew,” and says that all Jewish people are alike (68). Les, however, who has been attending meetings with local Communists and is friends with a white Jewish man named Piszer, says Daniel is being prejudiced, and sets Jews of European descent apart from other whites: “If anything, [Jews have] contributed a damn sight more [than white people]” (68). In other words, white Jews have done more for Black people than other white people have.

When Les first introduces Piszer to the rest of the Masons in Act 2, Piszer speaks negatively of Garveyism when Les tells him that his father is being decorated as a Garveyite leader. Percy, Vic’s brother, says to Les, “you can’t expect him to see it like we do,” speaking of Piszer as someone who only benefits from white supremacy, not someone in a more complicated position who also suffers white supremacy, as Jews often do. But Piszer, instead of objecting to Percy’s statement, offers instead of Black Americans trying to leave the country for Africa: “...what’s there to prevent all the underprivileged from getting together?” (48). Piszer does not just tolerate Black comrades for his benefit, either–he sympathizes with the plight of Black Americans as a whole. He stays for the speech Vic delivers to the other guests in the Mason

home, members of his Garveyite chapter. Vic, though portrayed as naively enchanted by Garveyism, describes real issues faced by Black Americans: “We’re still in the hands of the enemy with our children cut off from opportunity, and the lynch rope lying ready for any black man who dares to raise his head” (50). Piszer, who has openly disagreed with Garveyism, tells Vic that his speech is “very moving” (51), and remains friends with Les for the next ten years.

The friendship between Les and Piszer represents a common solidarity between Black and Jewish people. They are friends in Act 2 when Piszer is a Communist but Les is not, but in Act 3, when both have joined the Party, they trust each other as friends and comrades who participate in direct action together. When the Masons are set to be evicted in Act 3, Les tells his father that they must resist. Vic replies, “A poor Negro like me can only get it in the neck if he bucks the law…” (85). However, when Vic finds out that the money the family has to secure a lease elsewhere has come from Wanda’s sex work, he decides to resist eviction instead of using the money to move. The final scene of the play shows the local Communists crowding the bailiffs who have come to evict the Masons. Piszer says that they have “put ten families back in their homes this week” via the same means (85). Unfortunately, the police arrive and shoot Vic. Vic, who just told his son that it is dangerous for a Black man to resist the law, ends up being right. Piszer does not describe the race of the other families helped this week, but it is significant that the family the police decide to use deadly force against are Black.

Vic is no longer a Garveyite in Act 3, and as he lay dying, he realizes that communism may not be the solution for his people either. However, he sees white people assisting his family in a way he is unfamiliar with. As the Communists continue to crowd the entrance to the house in an attempt to stop the eviction, Les tells Vic to look over to where they stand: “I wanted you to see them – black and white” (94). Minutes before his death, Vic realizes that Black

nationalism and returning to Africa, where he has roots only biologically, is not the solution. Importantly, at least one of the white people risking life and limb for his family is Jewish.

Another reason for the American anti-communist sentiment of the early twentieth century is antisemitism, which has led to a conflation of Jewishness and being a Communist. The Great Depression radicalized a huge number of American Jewish people. As Jewish academic Henry Felix Srebrnik argues, "socio-economic mobility was blocked [by the Depression] and many [Jews] became proletarianized" (3). Harvey Klehr's *The Heyday of American Communism* (qtd. in Srebrnik) notes that between 1921 and 1938, "no Central Committee had fewer than a one-third Jewish membership; most were about 40 per cent [sic] Jewish" (163). It is no wonder, then, that Chicago white Gentiles in Richard Wright's *Native Son* conflate communism with Jewishness. While investigating the disappearance of socialite Mary Dalton, private detective Britten interviews Peggy, the Daltons' housekeeper. Britten asks about Bigger Thomas, the household's Black chauffer: "When he talks, does he wave his hands around a lot, like he's been around a lot of Jews?" (Wright 192).

Bigger Thomas, who accidentally kills Mary and disposes of her body in the Dalton family's furnace, tries to frame Jan Erlone, Mary's communist boyfriend for the murder. Despite the crudeness of Bigger's attempts, his framing of Jan almost works because of the media's anti-communist, antisemitic stance. When Jan is still a person of interest, one journalist suggests, "Mention his foreign-sounding name" in the papers to rile up suspicion. Another journalist asks if Jan is Jewish (214). Though Bigger Thomas is not a Communist, many Black Chicagoans in the 1930s were, including Wright himself, who joined the CPUSA in 1932 (Tikkanen n.p.). In 1931, about a quarter of the members of the Chicago CPUSA chapter were Black (Klehr 332).[1] In "Narrating Nationalisms: Black Marxism and Jewish Communists through the Eyes of Harold

Cruse," Alan Wald insists that there was "a communion between African-American and Jewish American leftists from the 1920s through the 1960s" (400).

Native Son offers a glimpse of the communion observed by Wald. Despite Bigger's trying to frame him earlier in the novel, Jan secures Bigger a pro bono lawyer through his communist connections. The lawyer, Boris Max, is Jewish and a Communist. Max is kind to Bigger despite Bigger's crimes, and believes that Bigger was not given fair opportunities in life. At the very least, Max hopes to save Bigger from the death penalty. Bigger may not be a Communist himself, but Jan does give Bigger communist literature at the beginning of the book, hoping that radicalizing the young Black man may improve his quality of life. Regardless of Bigger's political affiliations, though, the Jewish Max offers Bigger his only chance at avoiding execution, and he does it free of charge.

Wright's positive reflection of non-Black Jewish people in his work makes sense, as he had many Jewish friends in his life. His second wife, Ellen Poplar Wright, was also Jewish, as was his first wife, Dhimah Rose Meidman. Many of those Jewish friends, including Ellen, held similar political beliefs to Wright's, but perhaps their Jewish identities were a welcome refuge from Black evangelism, which focuses on the afterlife. Unlike Christian evangelism, Judaism focuses on the human life on Earth. There is no standard Jewish afterlife, and rabbinical scholars do not seek to speculate about one. The main goal of a practicing Jewish person is to live life by the Torah and follow as many *mitzvot* (religious laws) as possible, not because it will lead to eternal salvation, but because it is the right thing to do and brings one closer to *HaShem*.[2] For the same reason, most Jewish communities focus little on prayer. Besides the *Mi Shebeirach*, or the prayer for the sick, which is standard at most Shabbat services, Jewish congregations often only pray to *HaShem* to thank Him, not to ask Him for anything else. Even if Wright's Jewish friends

were secular, their views as atheists-raised-Jewish would have been different from those of culturally Christian atheists.

Wright often criticized Black evangelism in his work, asserting that waiting for freedom in "heaven" instead of fighting against racism in one's current life was unproductive. When Bigger Thomas complains that he will never fly a plane because he is Black, his friend Gus says, albeit sarcastically, "God'll let you fly when He gives you your wings up in heaven" (17). Toward the end of the story, the Black preacher that Bigger is allowed to see in his jail cell can only advise him to ask God for forgiveness. Bigger's own mother begs him to ask God for forgiveness so she can see him in heaven: "No matter what happens to us here, we can be together in God's heaven" (299). The only people who actually fight to save Bigger's life are the secular Jan and the Jewish Max.

In his 1945 memoir *Black Boy*, Wright speaks extensively about his experiences with white Jews. When explaining the large variety of people who visit a shop he frequents, Wright says they range from "from Ku Klux Klanners to Jews" (224). The implication here is that Jews are the opposite of members of the KKK: they do not benefit from white supremacy. Wright later describes a white Jewish man named Don as someone whose "position was not much better than mine" (245). In both instances, Wright avoids conflating Jewishness with whiteness, and deliberately deciphers white Jews from other white people. Wright also addresses and condemns antisemitism specific to Black communities. As Black people, "To hold an attitude of antagonism or distrust toward Jews was bred in us from childhood; it was not merely racial prejudice, it was a part of our cultural heritage" (62). As a child the author remembers chanting antisemitic rhymes with other neighborhood kids, sometimes when a Jewish person was nearby and could hear them:

Bloody Christ killers
Never trust a Jew
Bloody Christ killers
What won't a Jew do? (61)

Wright says that his community hated Jewish people, "not because they exploited us" as other white people did, but because of religion: "... we had been taught at home and in Sunday school that Jews were 'Christ killers'" (60). This fact, however, is presented critically by a writer who is ashamed of his past antisemitism.

Though Wright's depiction of non-Black Jews is often sympathetic, he does describe some anti-Black racism on their part in *Black Boy.* For example, while working as an orderly for doctors completing medical research, Wright observes, "when I asked a timid question I found that even Jewish doctors had learned to imitate the sadistic method of humbling a Negro that the native-born whites had cultivated" (304). Notice, however, that he compares Jews to "native-born whites," implying that white Jews have not always been considered white. Additionally, he refers to this sadism as an "imitat[ion]," not a natural response. Wright acknowledges, even in these negative moments, that even white Jews have been oppressed by white supremacy.

The texts discussed in this chapter are nowhere near an exhaustive list of major texts in African American literature that portray Black people and Jewish people interacting positively within the American Communist Party and other socialist settings. They are, however, examples that portray the phenomenon extensively. *Big White Fog* criticizes Garveyism and, though it does not necessarily promote Communism uncritically, it does show Black and Jewish friendships within this context in a historically accurate way. Wright's work portrays both hypothetical and real-life interactions between the groups. All primary texts referenced here expand on Berman's point that non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles also have similar political opinions

Notes

1. Chicago is also the city in which *Big White Fog* is set.
2. I use "*HaShem*," a periphrastic name for the Abrahamic god, to describe this god as He is understood by Jews as opposed to Christians or Muslims. I normally censor the word God (G-d) or use a periphrastic myself, but for the purpose of this formal thesis, I do not.

CHAPTER 3

Slaving for the Jew:

Navigating the 1960s and 1970s Among the Civil Rights Movement

Beginning in the late 1960s, a division formed between Black Gentiles and white Jewish people in leftist circles. One clear reason for this division, according to Michel Feher, is the anti-Zionism of Black nationalists during this period. Of course, anti-Zionism does not automatically mean antisemitism, and Feher observes that many of these young Jewish people in the "new left" were not Zionists anyway. "However, the denunciation of Israel they were asked to subscribe to wasn't based on the wish to see races unite and borders abolished; it was an expression of the irreducible conflict between Western expansionism and emancipation of the people it crushed" (265). As a "cosmopolitan" people, as Feher refers to them, these young Jewish activists who rejected nationalism could not understand Black nationalism. For this reason and others, Black nationalists chose to build more solidarity with other non-Black groups, like Asian and Latino people (267). A major connection between the two groups, far-left politics, that had forged solidarity in decades past, was now no longer enough.

However, despite the "schisms" between the groups that Feher observes during the 1960s and 1970s, Black American writers were producing surprisingly pro-Jewish work. James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* both portray Black sympathy toward non-Black Jews. *The Color of Water,* a memoir published by James McBride, highlights the struggles of growing up as a mixed Black and white child raised by his white Jewish mother at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The memoir was published in 1995 but takes place mostly during the '60s and '70s. Though McBride highlights adversity throughout his story,

Black and Jewish solidarity, including characters who are both Jewish and Black, prevails in the end.

In his essay "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White" (1967), James Baldwin states: "When we were growing up in Harlem our demoralizing series of landlords were Jewish, and we hated them. We hated them because they were terrible landlords and did not take care of the building" (31). In Baldwin's neighborhood, the grocer, butcher, and other merchants on 125th street from whom the author's family bought their other goods were *all* Jewish (31-32). However, the teachers, welfare workers, and police officers who made life difficult for Baldwin and his family were only *sometimes* Jewish. While Baldwin admits that many non-Black Jewish people are anti-Black (33), the widespread oppression of Black people by white people "is not produced by the Star of David, but by the old, rugged Roman cross on which Christendom's most celebrated Jew was murdered" (41). Baldwin continues, dispelling the antisemitic myth, "And not by Jews" (41). Baldwin speaks candidly in this essay to both non-Black Jewish people and Black Gentiles. He tells the first group that he sees their anti-Blackness, but he insists to his Black Gentile peers that antisemitism is its own form of racism, and that, while non-Black Jews can be anti-Black, as a population they have not caused oppression of Black individuals in the same way as white Christians.

Baldwin expresses this balance of opinion in his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk.* The story takes place in Harlem, the same neighborhood in which Baldwin grew up. Just like the actual Harlem in Baldwin's childhood, Jewish people are everywhere in the novel's version of the neighborhood. Fonny's friend Daniel says of work, "I gotta slave for the Jew in the garment center…" (98). This quote portrays Daniel's boss negatively, as a strict boss who expects back-breaking labor of his employees. However, later when Daniel is talking about getting arrested

and put in jail with no one to call, he says he considered calling his boss. “I ain’t got nobody to call… except maybe that Jew I work for; he a nice enough dude…” (107). Daniel only decides in the end to not call his boss because “man, he ain’t hardly going to dig it” (107). A Black man in the ’70s even considering calling his boss—who is not Black—for help after being arrested has profound implications. Daniel considers how his boss’s knowing he was arrested could affect the boss’s image of him, so he does not call him, but he does not worry about facing violence from the Jewish man or even losing his job. While Daniel only refers to the man as “the Jew,” and may sometimes think the work the man requires of him is too intense, in his most vulnerable moment he almost calls his Jewish boss for help.

Despite the fact that the audience knows so little about him, “the Jew” that is Daniel’s boss is a complex character. First, Daniel speaks of him like he is a tyrannical boss, but a few pages later he admits he almost called the man when he was in jail. It appears that Daniel has a relationship with his boss that is balanced but intimate. He complains about work like everyone else does, but unlike everyone else, he *nearly* feels secure enough in his relationship with this boss to call him to get him out of jail. Daniel’s calling his boss “the Jew” may sound insultingly harsh to many people, but Daniel perhaps says this because local and cultural colloquialisms tell him it is appropriate to do so.

Opposite Daniel’s boss is Levy, a Jewish landlord who rents an apartment to Fonny and his pregnant girlfriend Tish, two young Black people, when no one else will. He is described as “an olive-skinned, curly-haired, merry-faced boy from the Bronx…” (133). Levy, unlike Daniel’s boss, is never referred to as “the Jew,” or Jewish in any sense. One could argue that Baldwin did not intend for Levy to be Jewish, and that his very Jewish surname is just a coincidence, but a lifelong New Yorker like Baldwin would most likely know such an obviously

Jewish name when he saw one. The creators of the 2018 film adaptation of the novel agree, as Dave Franco's Levy is visibly Jewish, wearing a *yarmulke*/*kippah* on his head.

It is possible that, while Baldwin knows Levy is Jewish, Fonny and Tish do not. The young couple, as Baldwin himself did as a young Harlemite, may have preconceived notions about Jewish people. Through Levy, Baldwin shows his young characters that not all Jewish people are money-hungry or anti-Black. Levy rents the young couple a place when no one else will, like the Biblical innkeeper offering a stable to Mary and Joseph to give birth to their child. At this point in the novel, Tish does not know she is pregnant, but this Biblical reference is supported by the epigraph at the beginning of the novel, a quote from a religious song: "*Mary, Mary / What you going to name / That pretty little baby?"* Tish and Fonny's baby is quite the Christ figure.

Throughout most of the novel, Fonny sits in jail for a rape that all the other main characters know he did not commit. Though Fonny could have been jailed for any crime to move the plot forward, Baldwin chooses rape to tackle the Jim-Crow-era epidemic of false rape accusations against Black men that pervaded through time and space, continuing to affect innocent men in the North decades later. Even though Jim Crow has ended, and even if a Black man lives in the North away from the more overt anti-Blackness of the South, he cannot escape this oppression.

Just as Wright airs his grievances in *Native Son,* Baldwin uses Fonny's arrest to criticize Black evangelism in *Beale Street.* Despite his apparent innocence, Fonny's own mother, Mrs. Hunt, says, "… I tremble for my son, sitting in a dungeon which only the love of God can bring him out of…" (65). Frank, Fonny's father, angry at his wife's statement, says, "You was making it with that white Jew bastard when you should have been with your son" (66). While her son is

in jail for a crime he did not commit, Mrs. Hunt does not miss church once. To Frank, this devotion is a betrayal of Fonny. In this passage Baldwin not only criticizes Black evangelism, but speaks to the fact that many Christian evangelists in the '70s and today are uncomfortable accepting: that the Son of God, Christianity's Messiah, was a Jewish man. Frank's outburst also shows the negative view of Jewishness that the Black community in Harlem may hold or have held in the '70s.

Though most of the Black characters in the novel appear to know little about Jews and Jewishness, the two main characters have a major trait in common with most Jewish people. On the first page of the novel, Fonny and Tish are each introduced first by their legal names—Alonzo and Clementine—and then the names by which they are called by people who know them. Though Baldwin may or may not have been aware of the coincidence, this characteristic of Fonny and Tish is one that Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews have in common. It is common for many Black Americans to have their legal name as well as a nickname. The nickname is often more important than a nickname given in other cultures—here, the nickname may be the only name by which some people know another person. In some cases, the nickname overtakes the legal name in everyday life, leaving the legal name to exist only for work and school purposes. Similarly, Jewish people around the world usually have a legal name as well as a Hebrew name. In a religious congregation, a Jewish person may only introduce themselves as their Hebrew name, keeping their legal name for their secular life. The importance of each name is similar in both groups. In the case of Black Americans, "nickname" is used for lack of a better word, because—as mentioned—some people may know an individual only by this identification. In the life of a religious Jewish person, the Hebrew name is just as important as the legal name. Some sects of Christianity still practice giving a baptized name that is different from the legal

name, but the Hebrew name is arguably more important and more useful to the modern Jewish person than the baptized name is to the modern Christian.

Butler's *Kindred* portrays no Jewish characters, but it does explore American slavery as it compares to the Holocaust. The novel is an excellent example of a neo-slave narrative, coincidentally a term coined by Ishmael Reed, who will be discussed in Chapter 4. In Butler's novel, a Black woman named Dana lives in '70s Los Angeles with her white husband, Kevin. Suddenly, and without warning, Dana—beyond her control—travels back through time and space to a plantation in the Antebellum South, and then is sent back home again. The first couple of times this happens, she only interacts with Rufus Weylin, the son of the plantation owner. The more times she travels to the past, the longer she stays each time. Because she is a Black woman, she is assumed to be one of the plantation's slaves by the white family who owns it, so she must do the work of a slave while she is stuck in the past.

As Dana experiences the horrors of slavery more often, she begins to reflect on the similarities between American slavery and the Holocaust. During one of her few days spent at home after the involuntary time traveling begins, she reads about World War II. She reads stories "of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every degradation. As though Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred … Like Nazis, ante bellum [sic] whites had known quite a bit about torture—quite a bit more than I ever wanted to learn" (117).

Dana's thoughts about the Germans doing as much harm in twelve years as white Americans did in two centuries is immensely important to the relationship between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jewish people. Eleven million people were killed during the Holocaust, six million of them Jews. Between 1526 and 1867, "some 12.5 million slaves were shipped from

Africa [to America]." In 341 years, approximately 37,000 Africans were forcibly shipped to America each year (Mintz n.p.). And only a fraction of them died prematurely. This is a much smaller number than the approximately two million Jewish people who died each year of the Holocaust.

Butler, however, is not saying that the Holocaust was worse than American slavery was. Of course, this math does not include people born into slavery in the Americas, or the fact that not an equal number of Jewish people died each year of the Holocaust. These tragedies are nuanced and to even begin to compare them mathematically would take countless, complex formulas and considerations; even then, mathematics would not be a fair judge of which event was "worse." I mention this simple arithmetic only to add context to Dana's thoughts about Nazi Germany condensing the pain and suffering caused by the Antebellum South in fewer years. The point Butler makes is that neither tragedy is worse than the other. While more Jewish people died per year during the Holocaust than African slaves died per year in America (especially by proportion—as two-thirds of the Jewish population in Europe was wiped out by the Holocaust), a *cultural* genocide was enacted upon African slaves. They were stripped of their indigenous cultures and religions and were forced to assimilate into "American culture," but only guardedly, because they were still seen as foreign aliens to many white Americans. Additionally, if we were able to count every person who was born into slavery and died a slave in the United States, that number would far exceed six million. All details considered, Black Gentiles and non-Black Jewish people each have a tragic event looming over them that causes generational trauma. For people who are Black and Jewish, that generational trauma is doubled.

Kindred also portrays survival minstrelsy, which non-Black Jews mimic to an extent through assimilation.[1] For example, a Black slave named Nigel says to his master, "Thank you,

Marse Tom. Yes, sir. Sure do thank you. Fine clothes, yes, sir…" (161). Dana notes that Nigel is actually angry that he has been given clothes for himself and his wife, as well as a blanket for their new baby, because Master Tom is only rewarding them for having a child and providing him with additional slave labor. However, to please his master and stay out of trouble, Nigel is not just polite, but over-polite. This over-exaggeration evokes the stereotypes white actors in blackface acted out during minstrel shows. For his survival Nigel acts out what he assumes his master thinks of when he imagines the least threatening version of a Black man. As states earlier, Rottenberg observes that European Jewish people in the United States once acted similarly, but instead of appearing as meek and nonthreatening as possible, they tried to appear as close to white Americans as they could. Of course, this acting is not as humiliating as survival minstrelsy, but Rottenberg notes that, like survival minstrelsy, "performing Americanness" is not a choice but a necessity. Though "subjects are never fully determined by these norms," both Black Gentiles and non-Black Jewish people in the twentieth century and earlier "are forced to identify with regulatory ideals" (7).

During decades-long schisms between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles, two prominent Black authors chose instead to highlight positive relationships between the two groups. Baldwin, who spoke out against antisemitism in an essay in 1967, later published a novel where two different white Jewish people are the saving grace for young Black people. Butler, while focusing on a sickening tragedy that needs no comparison, chose to mention the Holocaust, a genocide that primarily targeted Jews, as an event that non-Black Jews experienced that her main character feels is similar to, or perhaps even worse than, the horrors of American slavery.

McBride's *The Color of Water* was published much later than these other two books, but the memoir describes events that took place during the schisms beginning in the late '60s. While

the memoir explores relevant issues, such as mixed Black and white children reckoning with their relationship with their white mother, who also happens to be Jewish, it also delves deeply into an issue only briefly discussed in Toomer's *Cane* identified in Chapter 1: being Black *and* Jewish. While Fern's religious life is left ambiguous in *Cane*, McBride is explicit that he is Jewish according to Jewish law only, and does not practice the religion. Similarly, McBride's mother, Ruth, who was raised by Polish Orthodox Jews, no longer practices Judaism or considers herself Jewish. When she left home and married a Black man, Ruth's family "[mourned] her… They said kaddish and sat shiva" as if she were dead (2). Instead of doing what plenty of Jewish people do and lead a secular life, Ruth takes a different direction and becomes a devout Christian. However, according to Jewish law, leaving the Jewish faith in favor of atheism or another faith does not absolve someone of their Jewishness. There is, in fact, no way for a Jewish person to become "not Jewish" in the eyes of Jewish law, and because McBride and his siblings were born to a Jewish mother, they are Jewish as well.[2]

Though McBride himself is Jewish (though not observant), he often conflates Jewishness with whiteness throughout the memoir. When visiting his mother's childhood synagogue in Suffolk, Virginia as an adult, for example, he refers to the house of worship as "a white man's building" (172). Near the end of his story, while reflecting upon what he knows of his mother's life, he says, "There are probably a hundred reasons why Ruthie should have stayed on the Jewish side… but I'm glad she came over to the African-American side" (215). And McBride's mother did not teach him that Jewishness equaled whiteness, either, despite the fact that she had been raised by a white Jewish family and had, presumably, never met a Jewish person of color. While discussing how hard it was to survive as Jewish people in the largely-gentile Suffolk, Ruth refers to the white Gentiles who oppressed her simply as "white folk": "My real name was

Rachel, which in Yiddish is *Ruckla*, which is what my parents called me–but I used the name Ruth around *white folk*, because it didn't sound so Jewish…" (62; my emphasis). According to McBride, Ruth "never spoke about Jewish people as white. She spoke about them as Jews, which made them somehow different" (66-67). McBride says "somehow different," as if he is not so sure.

Ruth, however, explains how European Jews in Suffolk were treated more like Black people than white people. McBride includes several chapters that appear in italics and are told from Ruth's perspective. In one such chapter, she explains how most children at her white school taunted her with antisemitic epithets like "Jew baby" and "Christ killer" (31). Additionally, the "white sections" of Suffolk barred not only people of color from buying land, but Jews as well (62). Unfortunately, while Ruth found a kinship with the large Black population of Suffolk, her family, especially her father, remained severely anti-Black.

After leaving home to marry her first husband, a Black man named Dennis McBride, Ruth professes her love for Jesus Christ and accepts Him as her Savior. Dennis becomes a pastor and all of Ruth's children, including those she later has with Hunter Jordan, Sr. are raised Protestant Christian. However, before she even reveals to her children that she was raised Jewish, she enrolls them in "predominately Jewish public schools" (67-68) and argues with Jewish salespeople in Yiddish to get the best "deals" (65). It seems that Ruth largely hides her Jewish past because it was traumatic for her, as her father was abusive and would use religion to justify his actions. It also appears that, though her trauma originally pushed her away from her religion and heritage, she can now, in the scope of the memoir, appreciate Judaism and Jewishness, but she has devoted her life to Jesus and truly sees herself as a Christian. As an adult

McBride takes Ruth to his Jewish friend's wedding in a synagogue, where Ruth is moved by the ceremony. "In her mind," however, "she was a guest here" (223).

McBride's mother, despite her being raised by a racist father, is not anti-Black and never has been. Her best friend is a Black woman named Irene who "had helped her raise her older children and had been like a sister to her" (127). Unlike some white Jewish people at the beginning of the schisms, Ruth is not unsettled by the Civil Rights Movement, including the more radical concept of Black Power:

> White folks, she felt, were implicitly evil toward blacks… I often found Mommy's ease among black people surprising. Most white folks I knew seemed to have a great fear of blacks… When Malcolm X, the supposed demon of the white man, was killed, I asked her who he was and she said, 'He was a man ahead of his time.' She actually liked Malcolm X… She viewed the civil rights achievements of black Americans with pride, as if they were her own. (22-24)

Though McBride largely portrays Jewishness in a negative light, and though the best Jewish ally to Black people in the memoir is someone who no longer considers herself Jewish, the author provides negative details mostly from the perspective of someone who experienced it. He includes positive interactions between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews as well. While Ruth's father is very anti-Black, the only *Shabbos goy* (a Gentile who could perform Shabbat-forbidden tasks like lighting a fire) he can find for his family was a Black kid named Eddie, whom he pays ten cents to light the family's stove on the Sabbath (162). During his research for the memoir in adulthood, McBride reports that most white Jews he encounters acknowledge his Jewishness without scorn. Though the Jewish life was not for Ruth who mostly has negative memories of

her family, she also states: “Of course it wasn’t torment twenty-four hours a day being a Jew. We had good times, especially with my mother” (33-34).

Whether deliberately or not, McBride highlights the diasporic experience of European Jews in the United States. Ruth reports that her grandmother, who spent most of her life in Poland, threw away her *sheitel*, a wig worn by married Jewish women, after living in the United States for a few years. She continued, however, to follow strict kosher laws such as changing tablecloths between meals (102). In the first generation that has immigrated, Ruth’s family has already begun to evolve. After her older brother dies, Ruth is the only child in the family who can speak Yiddish to translate for her mother, but when considering calling home as an adult living in New York City, she decides to call her parents on a pay phone because she is too “embarrassed” to speak Yiddish in front of her roommates (152). When Black nationalism becomes popular in the 1960s, Ruth says to McBride, “If you want to go back to Africa, James, well, you can go. I don’t see the point in your going when you have your family here. But if you feel you want to go to Africa to find your roots I won’t stop you. I’ll still be your mother when you come back. And you’ll still be my son” (182). But McBride is not interested in returning to Africa because he does not consider it his home. Like most Black Americans, McBride has no idea what *part* of Africa his ancestors are from. Similarly, Ruth has no interest in returning to Poland, and she has no official homeland to return to (besides present-day Israel, which is another issue on its own). Similar to McBride’s not knowing which African region or country his family is from, Ruth does not know which Tribe of Israel her family comes from.

I do not agree with all of McBride’s commentary on Judaism, but he does not emphasize his personal division from his Jewishness without good reason. When he calls the current rabbi of his mother’s childhood synagogue and asks to see some of the records housed there, the rabbi

says, “curtly,” “There’s nothing in them that would help you.” When McBride asks if he can see the inside of the house of worship, the rabbi says, “‘I’ll have to check with some other board members to see who would have time to open it up to let you see it,’ and hung up” (174). No law in Judaism prohibits McBride from entering a synagogue. Even if he were not Jewish by Jewish law, Gentiles are allowed in Jewish worship houses. Synagogues are not like Mormon temples, which only allow church members to enter. The rabbi must have had an issue with McBride personally, and McBride does note that the rabbi knew his mother and that she has children with Black men. Working as a reporter before he started his memoir, McBride had to interview the headmistress of a Jewish school. When he says that his mother is Jewish, the headmistress says kindly and enthusiastically, “Well, according to Jewish law that means you’re Jewish too! We have a black Jew who works in our school!” (173). When the “black Jew” in question comes to the office to meet McBride, the author sees that the man is the school’s janitor. “I’d pay good money for a picture of my face at that moment,” McBride says. “Ol’ Sam smiled and said hello and I gurgled out a polite response, though I wanted to choke myself for opening up my big mouth” (173). McBride has no privileges because he is Jewish. If anything, he is further disadvantaged because of his mother’s heritage. Sam, the Black Jewish janitor, does not have any privileges, either. *The Color of Water* disproves the idea from *Passing* that Jewishness can bring a Black person any closer to whiteness. Though the white Jewish headmistress is kind to McBride, he learns that the Jewish community is not immune to the de facto segregation of the jobs available to Black versus white people.

The ’60s and ’70s brought a complexity to the relationship between Black and Jewish people that threatened the solidarity they had forged within the Communist Party. Black people were, rightfully, focused on their own civil liberties and freedoms. Many Black activists were

focusing on Black Nationalism, which alienated white allies both Jewish and Gentile. Baldwin and Butler, however, choose to focus on solidarity rather than schisms. McBride portrays a complicated childhood in the ’60s and ’70s where his siblings became distrustful of white people, but their white Jewish mother heavily supported the Civil Rights Movement.

Notes

1. In this thesis, “survival minstrelsy” refers to the act of Black people playing up meekness or over-performing for white people in authority in ways that could be compared to behavior from minstrel shows, but specifically for safety. This behavior likely brings shame to the individual and is done only to preserve their safety or even lives. This is like Rottenberg’s concept of “performing Americanness,” but applies to Black people specifically.
2. Jewishness, except for cases of conversion, is matrilineal.

CHAPTER 4

Moses the Hoo Doo Man:

The Exodus Connection

Regardless of the time period, the Biblical figure of Moses is a major connection between Black and Jewish people in the United States. Since African slaves were introduced to Christianity by their captors, Moses has become an important figure to the Black diaspora displaced by slavery. Both Zora Neale Hurston and Ishmael Reed have written novels that follow the story of Moses. While Black people and Jews formed great solidarity during the Communist movement in the United States, Hurston rewrote the Book of Exodus to mock Nazism. In the 1970s, as this solidarity lay in shambles from the division brought about during the previous decade, Reed rewrote the same Biblical story to remind Black and Jewish people what they had in common.

Hurston offers a look at the Moses connection in her novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. In her introduction to the book, she asserts, "Wherever the children of Africa have been scattered by slavery, there is the acceptance of Moses as the fountain of mystic powers" (viii). *Moses* is a retelling of the Book of Exodus in the Christian Bible, or *Shemot* in the Torah, which begins with a measurement of time dictated by Moses's life. Amid the description of the ban on male Hebrew babies in Ancient Egypt, the narrator notes, "Moses hadn't come yet" (1). Time is marked around Moses as it often is around Christ in Christian culture. Before Moses was born, life for the Hebrews was filled with horror: any male Hebrew babies who were born and discovered by the Pharaoh's men were killed, as were many of their parents. Pharaoh was constantly lengthening the Hebrew workday and demanding faster turnaround on slave labor. The Hebrew slaves were whipped as they worked. These issues appear in Hurston's novel as

well as in Exodus. After Moses is born, so is hope. Though not everything is magically solved the moment of the child's birth—the Hebrews are still forced to work in awful conditions and prohibited from having sons—his coming into the world represents the birth of deliverance for the Hebrews. Similarly, not all Biblical issues disappeared the moment Christ was born, but his birth is still a monumental event, one that would eventually lead to his people reaching the Promised Land in the holy text as well as the novel. When Moses grew up, left Egypt, and then returned to rescue the Hebrews from the Pharaoh's oppression, hope flourished. "Moses hadn't come yet" is an adequate marker of time, just as "Before Christ" or "*Anno Domini* (in the year of our Lord)" once measured the timeline of human history in both the religious and the secular world.

This similarity between Hurston's Moses and the Christian messiah is significant as it creates a thread between a figure who is arguably the most important individual in the Jewish canon (Moses), and the single most important figure in the Christian one (Christ). Black evangelism, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries following the end of American slavery and the Jim Crow laws, cherished Moses as much as it did Jesus. In some Black churches, Jesus was (and is) referred to as "the second Moses." John M. Murrin explains in *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People* (2020): "To the slaves, America was Egypt, they were the chosen people, and the slaveholders were Pharaoh … In songs and sermons, the figures of Jesus and Moses were often blurred, and it was not always clear whether deliverance—accompanied by divine retribution—would take place in this world or the next" (n.p.).

Similarly, Moses is an integral character in the Jewish religious canon. According to Judaism, the Torah was written by Moses, who transcribed the word of *HaShem*. For this reason,

the Torah is also known as the Five Books of Moses. While Black American evangelicals relate to Exodus because of the enslavement of their ancestors, Jewish people—both practicing and secular—relate to Exodus because they see the Israelites as their direct ancestors, and the Exodus from slavery as the beginning of their freedom as a people. While Christians in general acknowledge Moses as an Old Testament savior, Black evangelism elevates the figure even higher, next to Jesus himself, while Jewish people, who do not believe Jesus Christ was the Messiah, view Moses as a Jewish man who rescued other ancestral Jews from slavery. The figure of Moses is a major bridge between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jewish people.

Hurston never describes Moses as Black, but she also avoids describing him as white or of some other non-Black, non-white race. On the cover of older copies of the novel, we see a common white Christian interpretation of Moses: a white man with a long, white beard. The Harper Perennial Modern Classics copy, however, shows a man in profile, with a broad nose, coarse hair, and skin that is literally ink black. Even on this cover, Moses's ethnicity is technically ambiguous. His skin is black in the way that most things pictured are black in a black and white photograph. He does not, however, look anything like the Moses in the white Christian canon. The actual skin color of these characters is unimportant, which is why Hurston spends little time describing the race and color of some characters, and no time at all describing that of others.

Hurston spins the Biblical tale into an allegory of American slavery, American anti-Blackness, and the Holocaust. As a folklorist Hurston retells Exodus in a universe much like that of a fairytale—or, more appropriately, like the Bible itself. Biblical stories are matter of fact. They dwell for pages on single subjects and events, while others are given only a line or two. Similarly, Hurston spends several pages describing the relationship between Moses and Mentu—

a stable hand who mentors Moses through his childhood—but only a paragraph is spared to explain the death of Moses's mother *and* his treaty marriage. *Moses* has a similar meandering style to the Bible. The novel does not follow the usual literary guidelines of clean transitions and abundant context. Only the important parts are dwelled upon. According to Hurston, the important parts of the story are those that resonate with racial issues familiar to the author.

Deborah E. McDowell breaks down these historical contexts in "Lines of Descent/Dissenting Lines" (1991). McDowell agrees that Moses's race is not important in this novel. "In sustaining the ambiguities of race throughout the text, Hurston effectively argues against a system of racial classification whose validity she disputes" (19). Additionally, "…Hurston is not so much intent on establishing the patriarch's origins beyond dispute but rather on casting doubts about Moses's 'pure' origins and, by extension, on the very idea of 'racial purity'" (16). Today, it is generally understood that Moses was a Hebrew merely adopted into Pharaoh's family, and that Aaron and Miriam were certainly his biological siblings. In the novel, however, Moses never explicitly addresses his biological origins, only that he heard rumors that Aaron and Miriam are his siblings.

As McDowell states, Hurston takes great care to demean the belief in racial purity with a Biblical story. Though we do not know the skin color of Moses or the Hebrews, we are told that Jethro and his children have dark skin. Miriam complains that she does not want to be bossed around by Moses's wife Zipporah—Jethro's daughter—because of her dark hue (Hurston 244). If Hurston envisions Miriam as non-Black, this issue simply represents anti-Black racism. If Hurston intends for Miriam to also be Black, the passage reflects the issue of colorism. Either way, Moses shuts it down: "Haven't we had mixed multitudes with us ever since we started from Egypt?" (244).

McDowell identifies Hurston's "[concern] with questions of racial purity" as significant (17). She continues, "1939 [the year *Moses* was published] … was the year Hitler ordered the attack on Poland and led Germany into a world war…" (17). In the Jim Crow South racial purity was an obsession of white people. If a person was found to have even one-eighth Black blood, like Charles W. Chesnutt, they could not be considered "purely" white. A similar obsession plagued Germany as chancellor Adolf Hitler gained greater traction with his opinion that all of Germany's problems could be blamed on the country's Jewish citizens. He preached that the Jewish people were cosmopolitan, as they had no homeland. In fact, the German Jewish, Hitler argued, were not German at all. In the novel Amram speaks of finding a place for his wife to give birth that will not be found out by the "secret police" (Hurston 4). He could have said "Pharaoh's military" or even "Pharoah's police," but "secret police" evokes Nazi Germany.

Regardless of the actual skin color of Hurston's Moses and other Hebrews, their speech and culture evoke enslaved individuals in the Southern United States. When Moses returns to Egypt to free the Hebrews, he refers to Pharoah as "the old coon" (190), an anti-Black slur that has been reclaimed by Black people to call other Black people—sometimes playfully, or, as in this case, pejoratively. With the quail feast provided by God, the Hebrews are also given a bread that they observe "wasn't pone bread [or] hoe-cake" (206). Pone bread and hoe-cake are both Southern American recipes that did not exist in Ancient Egypt.

Christianity attracted African slaves in the United States partly because it offered freedom after death. Though slavery was eventually abolished, generations of Black people had been born slaves and had died slaves in the United States. The only end to slavery they had to look forward to was a Christian heaven, which could only be reached by death. Though Hebrews do not yet know the Abrahamic God at this point in religious history, Amram alludes to this

reality in a conversation with Caleb: “I don’t see no way out but death and, Caleb, you are against a hard game when you got to die to beat it” (6). As mentioned in Chapter 3, Wright also noted that this attitude continued within Black evangelism after slavery was abolished.

Hurston also focuses on lashing Hebrew slaves with a whip, a common practice in American slavery. When Ta-Phar becomes Pharoah, he takes on a similar attitude toward his slaves as American slaveholders had. “What would slaves want to be free for anyway? They are being fed and taken care of. What more could they want?” (145). Like American slaveholders, Pharoah sees no moral issues with keeping humans as slaves, as long as he does not abuse them. Ironically, both Pharoah and American slaveholders still abused their slaves.

Characters of all races and ethnicities speak with a distinct Southern American dialect in the novel. Jochebed, Moses’s biological mother, says to her husband Amram of the baby she let float down the Nile River, “…you want to believe now that the crocodiles et it up…” (33). Speaking of Moses and his magical powers, Jethro calls him a “hoodoo man” (114). Instead of “hadn’t have,” Joshua says “hadn’t of” (211). Characters also use idioms in the same style as many Southern Black people. For example, “If what you are doing ain’t bossing then there isn’t a crocodile in the Nile” (70), and, “Many dogs are the death of the lion” (71).

The novel includes a reference to the blues, a music genre created by Black Americans not long after slavery was abolished. After leaving Egypt the first time, Moses comes across a campsite full of people. One of the men in the camp plays a stringed instrument while another sings “a song with sad words and funny gestures and intonations. ‘I had a good woman but the fool laid down and died…’” (80). In the same camp two men avoid a physical fight and instead play the dozens:

"…it is a good thing you didn't catch me. If you had they would have toted you across three yards—this yard, the church yard, and the graveyard."

"I don't beat up bums like you … and if you hit me they'll give you four names—Nubby, Peggy, Bad-eyed and Shorty, cause you'll look like all of them." (81)

Folklorist Roger Abrahams, a white Jewish scholar, defines playing the dozens as "a verbal contest which is an important part of the linguistic and psychosocial development of the [Black boys and men] who indulge in this verbal strategy" (209). Abrahams, like many twentieth-century anthropologists, has the bad habit of speaking about his research subjects like they are animals, and there are other flaws in his work. However, he is one of the earliest scholars to describe the dozens to a mainstream audience, and his article is foundational. As Walker is quoted in Chapter 2 despite her antisemitism, Abrahams is quoted here despite his sometimes-outdated way of speaking about Black communities.

Abrahams clarifies that the dozens is Black American in origin, and that the game is used to relieve the pressure of stressors that the players, usually men and boys, cannot control (213). Abrahams also observes that the game rarely ends in a physical fight (210), likely because the game itself is a release of pressure. The two men in *Moses* play the game instead of fighting: "They had everything for a good fight except the courage" (Hurston 81). According to Abrahams, the game often ends when the players grow bored (210), which is what happens to these unnamed characters in *Moses*. Once heated and ready for a physical fight, the two men "ran out of threats" and soon "returned to the circle about the fire and drank together as if not a word had passed between them" (81).

Although only Jethro and his children are specified as Black people, most of the characters of the novel, given all of the above details, appear to navigate a Black existence. Their

speech, food, and suffering can be compared to that of Black slaves in the American South. *Moses* acts as a bridge between non-Black Jewish people and Black Gentiles in more ways than one. As McDowell notes, the Nazi metaphors in Hurston's novel are not accidental. Additionally, Exodus is a story shared by Jews and Christians alike—holding a special place in the hearts of Black evangelicals. Hurston tells the story of the modern Jewish person's legendary ancestors with abundant metaphors, comparing this story to that of Black slaves in America.

Decades after Hurston's *Moses Man of the Mountain*, Ishmael Reed also rewrites the story of Moses in a section of his acclaimed novel, *Mumbo Jumbo.* Reed is aware of Hurston as a foundational Black writer, as she is quoted in the epigraph of *Mumbo Jumbo*, so it is highly probable that he read *Moses, Man of the Mountain* while researching for his own novel. Unlike Hurston's Moses, however, the Moses in *Mumbo Jumbo* is definitely a Black man, although the racial makeup and skin color of Ancient Egyptians is still heavily debated. On one hand it seems obvious that they were Black, as Egypt is in Africa and most indigenous Africans in that period had dark skin that would be considered, by today's standards, "Black." The archaeological and anthropological evidence, however, is inconclusive (University College London n.p.). For Reed, it could be that the simplest explanation is the correct one—Ancient Egypt was an African country and existed before colonization by Western Europe, so Ancient Egyptians were Black. Or Reed could be taking a page from Hurston's book. It could also be that the literary decision to make Moses a Black man (or, in Hurston's case, a man of undistinguished race who speaks like a Southern Black slave) is just that—a literary decision and not a scientific observation.

In Reed's version of Exodus, Moses's powers come not from God, but from Voo Doo, Hoo Doo, and Masonry. In the universe of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Black people are the founders of the secretive Masonic fraternities and are later pushed out of the community. While Freemasonry

was not single-handedly founded by Black people in real life, they did play a major part in its development. In the eighteenth century–the same century that mainstream Masonry was created–Prince Hall founded Prince Hall Freemasonry for the participation of Black men. Historically, Freemasons were predominately Jewish for years before they were also alienated. A mass exodus of Jewish men from the Freemason community was the result of Nazi invasions and, later, oppression from Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theories (Donskis n.p.).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Alan Wald worried that the "communion" between the groups, forged by leftist politics, began to dissolve during the schisms introduced in Chapter 3. *Mumbo Jumbo* refreshes this communion. Reed retells the story of a Jewish religious figure as a Black man, but he never says that his Moses is not *also* a Hebrew, therefore still the ancestor of modern Jewish people. Additionally, Reed's Moses threatens to "unleash the Holocaust" upon the people of Egypt (Reed 185). Reed chooses to use "Holocaust" instead of "genocide" or "mass killing" for a reason: its specificity and evocation of Jewish struggle. The reclamation of Masonry is another area that Reed takes advantage of in which Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews can relate.

In 1976 Reed published *Flight to Canada*, a satirical, neo-slave narrative about the Civil War that features twentieth-century technology. The novel, like *Mumbo Jumbo*, is complicated and multifaceted, but I will focus on a single character: Mel Leer. The character is a Jewish indentured servant who has paid off his servitude. He and Raven Quickskill, an escaped Black slave, argue over whose people had it worse:

> 'Your people think that you corner the market on the business of atrocity. My relatives were dragged through the streets of St. Petersburg, weren't permitted to go to

school in Moscow, were pogrommed in Poland … Hooligans were allowed to attack us with weapons, and the police just stood there, laughing…'

'Oh yeah? Nobody's stoning you in the streets here [in the United States] …' There are more types of slavery than merely material slavery… The whole world, sometimes, seems to be against us. Hissing us. Nobody has suffered as much as we have.'

'Nobody has suffered as much as my people…'

'Don't tell me that lie…'

'Our people have suffered the most.' …

'My people!'

'My people!'

'My people!'

'My people!' (67-68)

Though this argument remains unresolved, Quickskill defends Leer when another character speaks poorly of him when Leer is not there to defend himself. Another runaway slave, 40s, refers to Leer only as "that Jew," and Quickskill tells him not to (77). Though Quickskill disagrees with Leer about whose people has it the hardest, he refuses to let someone else speak about Leer in an antisemitic way.

Since *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada,* Reed has continued to fight antisemitism, even from other Black American writers. In March 2021 he spoke out against fellow Black novelist Alice Walker for her vocal support of known antisemite and Holocaust-denier David Icke. This was not the first time Reed had expressed distaste for Walker. In his article "The Alice Walker Cult," he explains that writer Salamishah Tillet "makes insubstantial claims about my

criticism of the film, *The Color Purple.*" He says that there is a "cult" built around Walker that protects her from criticism, even for something as awful as antisemitism. He continues:

> All that Tillet could say about Walker's being condemned for supporting a Holocaust denier, is that it was an example of her being "stereotyped as a black woman filled with hate and consumed by anger." What? Doesn't the scholarly Tillet have sympathy for the millions of her sisters, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were victims of the Holocaust? Would Walker support a Holocaust denier, and Tillet excuse her for doing so if they were aware that Blacks and Africans were placed in German concentration camps? (n.p.)

Holocaust-denial, Reed says, is inexcusable, even if it is supported by one of the most foundational Black female writers of recent history.

Reed's outspokenness against antisemitism is important, but one of the largest contributions he could have made toward Black and Jewish solidarity was the rewriting of Moses as a Jewish man, reminding the groups of the suffering they have in common. Hurston, too, portrays Moses as both Black and Jewish, allowing that there is such a thing as Black and Jewish, that Jewishness and whiteness are not synonymous. More importantly, Hurston does so during the Holocaust itself, and when few Americans were stepping up to give a voice to Jewish people persecuted in Europe by the Nazi regime.

CHAPTER 5

Friendship and Solidarity Over Pain:

After the Crown Heights Riots

In 1991 a white, Orthodox Jewish man driving down President Street in New York City hit another car, swerved into the pedestrian sidewalk, and pushed a cement pillar into two Black children. One child was injured and the other, Gavin Cato, was killed. Community members of several races were outraged at the injury of the children, and at the way the accident was handled. Many wondered why the Jewish man was escorted away by ambulance and not by police car, as many of their community members of color had been arrested for less. On the same day, an innocent white Jewish man, unrelated to the accident, was beaten and stabbed to death by a group of Black men. Rioting in the city continued for two days. When the riots ceased, Lemrick Nelson, who stabbed the innocent Jewish man, Yankel Rosenbaum, was charged and sent to prison. Yosef Lifsh, the Jewish man who accidentally killed a child in the original car accident, was never charged. Since then, Gavin Cato's father, Carmel Cato, and Yankel Rosenbaum's brother, Norman Rosenbaum, have become friends. Cato has said of Rosenbaum, "We're close" (Greene et al. n.p.).

Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle,* a novel published five years after the Crown Heights riots, illustrates a healing solidarity between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jews. The narrative portrays the two groups coexisting in a way that is not overtly positive or negative, but neutral. At the beginning of the novel, a Black teenager named Gunnar and his family live in Santa Monica, California, in a neighborhood with a large white Jewish population. Gunnar's best friend is a white Jewish boy named David Schoenfield. Gunnar says of David, "The only time race entered our war was when we sat over a basket of french fries drinking root beer and

debating who Hitler would kill first, David the diabolical Jew or me the subhuman Negroid" (39-40). Gunnar also mentions the Beastie Boys when listing "black folks whose names [he] knew…" (35). The Beastie Boys are actually white Jewish men, but Gunnar feels a kinship with them all the same.

When tasked with making a family tree for school, Gunnar is not the only student in his largely Jewish class who struggles. "Although most kids could only go back as far as their grandparents, it was with unabashed pride that we gave oral encapsulations of our caricature American ancestries" (11). While genealogy is a fun pastime for many white Gentiles in America, it is an infamously difficult feat for many Black and Jewish Americans. Jewish Americans of all races often struggle to find records of their families, even if they have lived in America since before the Holocaust. If their family did suffer under the Holocaust directly, many of their ancestral records were wiped from existence. The same issue appears for Black Americans whose families have been in America since slavery—adequate records were not kept for enslaved individuals, nor were they always appropriately kept for Black people in the volatile, post-slavery United States.

The White Boy Shuffle is not solely about the relationships between non-Black Jewish people and Black Gentiles. As a matter of fact, Jewish people and Jewishness are hardly mentioned in the second half of the novel. This silent solidarity between white Jewish people and Black Gentiles, however, is an important image to portray after the Crown Heights riots. Just as Carmel Cato and Norman Rosenbaum eventually bonded, Beatty's Gunnar forges a friendship with a white Jewish boy that is purely positive. Though Beatty was obviously aware of the contention that exploded five years before his novel was published, he chose to portray the

effects of anti-Blackness and antisemitism, but no anti-Blackness from non-Black Jews and no antisemitism from Black Gentiles.

Rebecca Walker's memoir *Black White and Jewish* details the life of the author who exists in a liminal space described by the title. Her mother is Black author (and, as of recently, outspoken antisemite) Alice Walker, an integral contributor to the canon of African American literature; her father is white Jewish Civil Rights lawyer Melvyn Leventhal. Walker and Leventhal were the first legally married interracial couple in Mississippi history, marrying in 1967 (Oakes 354). Rebecca, the author of the memoir, is born in Jackson two years later. The younger Walker recounts the day she was born: "When my mother went into labor my father was in New Orleans arguing a case on behalf of black people who didn't have streetlights or sewage systems in their neighborhoods. Daddy told the judge that his wife was in labor, turned his case over to co-counsel, and caught the last plane back to Jackson" (11).[1] While living in Mississippi as a child, Walker remembers her father sometimes sitting on the porch "with the rifle and the dog, waiting for the Klan to come" (14).

Walker's parents divorce when she is still a child, and she spends the rest of her childhood and teenage years moving between parents. Her parents decide that she will live with one parent for two years, then the other parent for the next two, and so on, with visits to the parent Walker is not living with in between. She feels that "as [she] move[s] from place to place," she also moves "from Jewish to black," only being one or the other when with the respective parent (115). Like *The Color of Water*, *Black White and Jewish* is a poignant and devastating account of growing up mixed Black and white, but unlike in McBride's experience, Walker's Jewish parent continues to practice Judaism and live a Jewish life, adding to the complexity of her experience.

The author finds herself in a lost space between Black and white, and the same space between Jewish and Gentile. Even when her parents are still married, Alice never interacts with Melvyn's family. Like Ruth McBride Jordan's parents, Melvyn's mother Miriam sits shiva for him when he marries a Black woman (319). When Walker is still a small child, though, Miriam accepts Walker and introduces her granddaughter "with her chest poked out to whoever would listen" (319). Alice, however, remains outside of the Leventhal family and never makes up with Miriam or any of Melvyn's family members. It appears that the Leventhals make an allowance for Rebecca, who is Melvyn's own blood, but never enthusiastically accept his interracial marriage.

Though Walker's paternal grandmother has come to accept her, her great-grandmother, a Russian pogrom survivor named Jennie, has not. She refuses to speak to or acknowledge Walker, even when she is just a toddler (30). As a child, Jennie witnessed "the burning of Jewish villages, homes, people" (36), but refuses to push past her anti-Blackness to accept her great-granddaughter. And Miriam, while she may refrain from making anti-Black statements toward or about Walker, is openly racist toward others. For example, she calls a Puerto Rican family "not… clean," not for the family to hear, but for Rebecca's ears only (31).

Walker is treated as Jewish by Jewish people in her life, including her family, but does not have a *bat mitzvah* or go to Hebrew school (208), nor does she really explain why. Born to a Jewish father and Gentile mother, many Jewish congregations would not consider her Jewish without a formal conversion, but plenty of congregations, most of them Reform, would accept her as Jewish regardless. It would seem, however, given how much she outlines how she is treated as different by white Jewish people, that she would mention in the memoir if she was not *bat mitzvah*'ed because the synagogue her father is connected with would not allow it.

Regardless, Walker's white Jewish friends do treat her differently than other Jewish girls who are not mixed Black. When she asks them at summer camp "why people are sometimes quiet or reserved around me, they say that I am intimidating, which doesn't really answer my question but gives me a general idea of how I am perceived. It doesn't occur to me that intimidating might be another word for black" (178).

In college, a Jewish classmate, drunk and belligerent, breaks into Walker's room through the fire exit and refuses to believe that she is Jewish, asking "How can that be possible?" (25). "...this boy squints at me then, peering at my nose, my eyes, my hair…" (25). Walker implies that this Jewish boy, at least in this moment, participates in race science that has harmed both Black and Jewish people. He looks at Rebecca's hair, seeing if it looks "Black enough" to him. He looks at her nose, seeing if it looks "Jewish enough" to him. Black people, of course, do not all have the same hair texture, and the idea that one can tell if someone else is Jewish by looking at their nose is incredibly antisemitic, but this Jewish person participates in this study of Rebecca's body that is not only anti-Black but perpetuates antisemitic stereotypes that harm him and his own family. This classmate is so haunted by anti-Black racism that he examines a female acquaintance's body to see if she looks Jewish enough to him, in a way that he, presumably, would not want done to his own mother or sister. Rebecca is the victim of race science earlier in life, too. "...I take ballet classes from a woman who tells me I will never be a great ballerina because black women's bodies aren't suited for ballet" (93). The ballet teacher says, "Too much rear end, legs that are not straight. There have never been any famous black ballerinas" (93).

Walker also experiences run-of-the-mill anti-Blackness from non-Black people who are not Jewish. Her best friend from junior high, Bethany, grows up to be a skinhead. Walker runs into her and notices "a swastika painted on her scalp" (111). Bethany and Walker become friends

while Walker lives with her mother in San Francisco, so it is possible Bethany never learned that Walker comes from a Jewish background. But because Walker is visibly part Black, a skinhead is still a danger to her. Fortunately, Bethany tries not to acknowledge Walker when they see one another. When Walker's father and stepmother have children of their own, a boy and a girl, when Walker is a teenager, Walker takes the children out: "Walking with my brother and sister down Larchmont Avenue or Chatsworth, I have been asked if I am the baby-sitter, the maid, the au pair. I imagine that my father would like to relax and enjoy his assimilated all-white family without the aberration, the dark spot in an otherwise picture-perfect suburban life" (228). Walker does not say "all-Jewish" family because, unlike McBride, she does not make a habit of conflating Jewishness with whiteness. She knows that her father sees her as Jewish. But her father being white, especially now that he has a white wife and white children, now takes precedence over his Jewishness in causing Walker pain. The people who see her on the street and assume she is a babysitter do not care, nor can they tell, that she does not live as Jewish of a life as her father and his new family. All they see is that she is not white while the children with her are, meaning she cannot possibly be related to them, which is an example of classic racism.

While none of McBride's friends knew his mother was white until they saw her, Walker grew up with light skin, which told her Black peers that she was not "purely" Black. While Walker was once proud of her mixed-race heritage and being the product of a rejection of Mississippi's systematic racism, she observes: "With the rise of Black Power … Black-on-black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor, and being down means proving how black you are…" (60). In late elementary school, two boys, one of whom was once her boyfriend, physically assault her. When she asks why the boys she thought were her friends are hitting her, the one who used to be her boyfriend says,

coldly and without regret, “It doesn’t matter why, you yellow bitch” (106). Walker is around ten or eleven years old when this happens to her.

The memoir reflects upon the complexities of a mixed Black and white existence early on. Walker notes that “I’m the one in the Langston Hughes poem with the white daddy and the black mama who doesn’t know where she’ll rest her head when she’s dead: the colored buryin’ ground behind the chapel or the white man’s cemetery behind gates on the hill” (13). The poem she refers to is “Cross”:

> My old man's a white old man
> And my old mother's black.
> If ever I cursed my white old man
> I take my curses back.
>
> If ever I cursed my black old mother
> And wished she were in hell,
> I'm sorry for that evil wish
> And now I wish her well.
>
> My old man died in a fine big house.
> My ma died in a shack.
> I wonder where I'm gonna to die,
> Being neither white nor black?

Hughes himself is not the speaker of the poem, as both of his parents were Black.[2] Instead, the speaker is fictional, a representation of mixed Black and white people everywhere. Walker, a poet herself, continues the poem: “Where will I die? Also, where will I be buried?” Her questions are further complicated by the Jewish practice of being buried only next to other Jewish people in Jewish cemeteries. Will she be buried in an integrated cemetery where people of all races lie? An all-white cemetery? All-Black? Will she be buried in a Jewish cemetery?

It is also significant that Walker responds to a poem that appears to take place during American slavery, when relationships between Black women who lived in shacks and men who lived in “fine big house[s]” were rarely consensual. Of her Black ancestor Grandmother Poole,

she wonders if she could travel to the past and meet the old woman, would she see her as an innocent Black child, or would she "see the lightness of my skin as a sign of danger, the evidence of brutality?" (149). In other words, would her ancestor see her light skin as evidence of the rape of a Black woman by a white man?

When she turns eighteen, Walker decides to change her last name legally from Leventhal to Walker. She keeps her Jewish father's name, but it becomes her middle name. When her father accuses her of trying to distance herself from her Jewishness, she explains that that was not her intention, but she does wish to distance herself from her father's father and his abuse and refusal to know her because of her race (311). She also says "I do not feel an affinity with whiteness, with what Jewishness has become…" (311). Walker implies here that Jewishness has become whiteness. Her father, whose parents come from Eastern Europe, and even her "Sephardic-looking" stepmother (197) are accepted as white because of choices made by European Jews in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America–people like the merchant in *The Marrow of Tradition.*[3] Walker, however, is a *Black* Jew. Her father and stepmother, who appear white to other white people and have children with light skin, have conditional white privilege. They are targeted by white supremacy only when they reveal that they are Jewish. Walker wears her race on her skin. Strangers know right away that she is not a "pure" white Gentile. When she reveals her Jewishness, she is doubly targeted.

"Jewishness has become," for racist white Jews, a kinship with offenders of white supremacy. This statement recalls the white Jewish boy in college who examined Walker like a science project, who chose white supremacy, a phenomenon that also harms him as a Jew, because he so deeply hated that a Black woman could be Jewish. Walker gives her white Jewish family the benefit of describing how much they love her and how they consider her no less of a

Jew than they are, and does not conflate Jewishness with whiteness like McBride does in his memoir. But she also calls out the racism so many white Jews are guilty of, and acknowledges that, though all Jews regardless of race or ethnicity (including converts with no ethnically Jewish ancestry) are targeted by white supremacy, most Jews of European descent with light skin have become part of the "white" paradigm in the United States, a change they now benefit from in a way that Walker, whose mother is Black, never can.

With both parents attending her high school graduation, Walker worries about her parents arguing about Israel (312), a topic that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable in the 1980s. She implies that her mother does not support Israel because she is not Jewish, and that her father supports the colonization because he is Jewish, but this point of contention is not purely Jew versus Gentile. More than thirty years have passed since Walker graduated from high school, and in those decades, thousands of Jewish people have ceased to support Israel and/or abandoned Zionism altogether. Either way, Walker does not present this issue as a Black versus white one, because she does not see Jewishness and whiteness as synonymous, nor does she see Blackness and Jewishness as mutually exclusive.

In 2018, Walker's mother, Alice published a list of her favorite books, which included David Icke's *And The Truth Shall Set You Free*. Icke's book, according to Black Jewish journalist Nylah Burton, "contains some of the most hateful anti-Semitic lies ever to be printed between covers" (n.p.). Icke is a well-known Holocaust denier and has been banned from traveling to twenty-six countries for his antisemitic and COVID-denying statements (Hume n.p.). Despite the continued criticism of Icke by the general public, Alice has never retracted her support for him. In fact, according to Burton, she "doubled down in her assessment of Icke's indefensible work, calling him 'brave' and dismissing charges of anti-Semitism as an attack on

the pro-Palestinian cause" (n.p.). Calling accusations of antisemitism "anti-Palestinian" is a common tactic of antisemites. Reports on Alice's antisemitism have also largely dried up, except for those from Ishmael Reed and others who continue to demand accountability, but these people appear to be on the fringe of the issue. The literary community at large is satisfied with letting Alice's comments fade from memory with no consequences.

Burton reports on a years-long estrangement between Alice and Rebecca. Rebecca, however, has only ever cited her mother's neglectfulness in childhood as a reason for this estrangement, not Alice's antisemitism. Burton does assume, however, that Alice's public comments must have hurt her daughter, who identifies as Jewish (n.p.).

The Color of Water is a pertinent example of relationships between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles. *Black White and Jewish*, however, takes McBride's exploration of the mixed-race experience and complicates it. Walker never conflates Jewishness with whiteness, though she does draw attention to the anti-Blackness of non-Black Jews. She writes at length about anti-Blackness from within the Jewish community and outside of it, and she tackles antisemitism. Unlike McBride, and despite the anti-Blackness she has experienced from non-Black Jews, Walker considers herself Jewish. Rebecca Walker's memoir is a major example of a memoir written by a Black Jew about the experience of being a Black Jew.

The White Boy Shuffle and *Black White and Jewish* are book-length works published within a decade of The Crown Heights riots. Yet neither author, when discussing relationships between Black and Jewish groups, mentions this major historical explosion of animosity. Instead of reducing the relationship between the groups to a short period of violence, both authors choose to explore the endless complexity of the relationship.

Notes

1. From this point forward, Rebecca is referred to as “Walker” and her mother is referred to as “Alice.”
2. It is also true, however, that the poet has some white ancestry further back than his parents.
3. Sephardic Jews or *Sephardim* are a sub-group of Jewish religion and culture who have their own cultural practices that sometimes differ from other Jewish groups, such as *Ashkenazim*, a sub-group from Europe and the largest group of ethnic Jews in the United States. Generally speaking, Sephardic Jews can trace their ancestry back to the Iberian Peninsula.

Conclusion

The years since the publication of *Black White and Jewish* have brought new issues between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles. In 2018, rapper 21 Savage released the track "asmr," which includes the line, "We been gettin' that Jewish money, everything is Kosher" (n.p.). Not long after, Savage apologized on Twitter and said that he meant the lyric as a compliment (n.p.) This is an innocent enough mistake, but if Savage were educated on Jewish issues and antisemitism, he would know that long-held conspiracy theories about Jewish people controlling banks and the international money supply have been incredibly damaging to the community, and would see how even saying something like "Jewish money" as a "compliment" is antisemitic. More horrifying—and less innocent—is Black Womanist author Alice Walker endorsing Holocaust denier David Icke. Another example: The Women's March originally dissolved because a Black co-founder, Tamika Mallory, was harassing Vanessa Wruble, a Jewish co-founder. "It was about her being Jewish. 'Your people this, your people that,'" fellow organizer Evvie Harmon said. "[She] even said to her 'your people hold all the wealth'" (North n.p.). Though Berman's research finds that the economic divide between the groups is "strictly marginal" (4), the myth that all Jews are wealthy pervades.

Of course, Black Gentiles are not always the aggressors in this relationship. Black writer Julius Lester once said that non-Black Jews practice a special kind of anti-Blackness because they are "a little self-righteous about their liberal record," and "were pitying us and wanted our gratitude, not the realization of the principles of justice and humanity" (qtd. in Hacker 22). In 2013 Jewish legislator Dov Hikind wore blackface to a Purim event, complete with an "afro" wig and painted skin. He said he was dressed as a "basketball player" (Lipman n.p.). 2013 is shockingly recent for a politician to have worn blackface. Journalist Steve Lipman observes that

"Blackface has a rich Jewish history." In *Jazz Age Jews,* Michael Alexander notes that "Jews performed this kind of minstrelsy in the 1910s and 1920s better and more than any other group in America. Jewish faces covered in cork were ubiquitous" (135).

Because of past oppression paired with hypervisibility and life in the diaspora, both American Jewish people and American Black people are hyper-aware of microaggressions that could lead to the macro, extra protective of themselves and loved ones, and are still afraid of things that do not necessarily mean danger because of generational trauma. Most Jewish people today, even converts, are either related to someone or know someone who is related to someone who died in the Holocaust. Though African slavery ended nearly a century before Holocaust, it still affects the behavior of most Black Americans, including those who live in the North. Jim Crow Laws were even more recent than the Holocaust, and still impact Black Americans today. It is a stereotypical joke that Black people are afraid of dogs and that Black people cannot swim, but do people who make these anti-Black jokes know the origins of these stereotypes? For decades dogs were used as tools to hunt escaped slaves and prosecute freemen like animals, even after slavery was abolished and replaced with Jim Crow Laws. Enslaved and free Black men who were being tortured and lynched were often punished with water. One literary example, *Native Son*, portrays Bigger Thomas forced into submission by sprays from a firehose in freezing cold weather (Wright 269).

Though both groups have had their share of suffering, it is difficult to not sympathize with some Black Americans' antisemitic beliefs about the distribution of wealth. Though continued victims of white supremacy, white Jews do not wear their racialized being on their skin like most Black people do. But the more religiously they live, by wearing *kippah* or *pe'ot* (unshaved forelocks on the temples of the head) or other religious donnings, the more danger

they are in, because the more visible they are. Similarly, some Black people can pass as white, whether deliberately or not, but as shown in *Passing,* they cannot be permanently accepted into whiteness as Jews of European descent have. By choosing whiteness, European Jews and their descendants in the twentieth-century United States gave their future descendants potential (though not guaranteed) access to certain privileges that people of color have a harder time accessing. There *is* a collection of forces that keep Black communities down by constricting their upward mobility. The frustration is misdirected at Jewish people, as there is no evidence that Jewish people control wealth or anything else at that scale, but as mentioned earlier, non-Black Jewish people have been just as guilty of anti-Blackness as non-Black Gentiles. The point of using the term anti-Blackness is to assert that any non-Black person can be guilty of it, even if they are also oppressed for their heritage. Additionally, though this thesis does not address any people or major characters who are neither white nor Black, I continuously use "non-Black Jews" instead of "white Jews" for the same reason. Hypothetically, a non-Black Jew who is not white could still act out and/or benefit from anti-Blackness. While most non-Black Jews mentioned in these texts are obviously of European descent, it is not as clear for others. Levy in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, for example, is not Black, but is not described as white either–in fact, the narrator mentions his dark hair and skin.

I have discovered from a survey of several works by Black American authors with different backgrounds that, while they often acknowledge contention between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles, they rarely portray their own opinion as antisemitic or even distrusting of non-Black Jews any more than they are distrusting of non-Black Gentiles. Though Charles W. Chesnutt describes the moment a Jewish man chooses whiteness and portrays a Black man, the Black character, Dr. Miller, is shocked by this, as if he has become used to his solidarity with

European Jewish settlers and their descendants. Despite the fact that white Jews had been racist toward him in his life, Richard Wright typically portrays Jewish people positively throughout his oeuvre, and even expresses shame at the antisemitic feelings he experienced as a child. James McBride, James Baldwin, and Octavia Butler all choose to express positive interactions and solidarity between Black people and Jews, despite the great divides that were separating positive Black-Jewish relationships. Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as other Black authors, were among the few Americans to publicly speak out against Germany in the earliest stages of the Holocaust. Paul Beatty's novel that is published just five years after the Crown Heights riots does not mention the violence at all, and the Black-Jewish relationships in the story are strictly positive.

A major point I wish to make is that, though most Jews in America are white, and those white Jews are guilty of benefiting from anti-Blackness, Jewishness itself does not equal whiteness. Judaism is not a white-only religion, and Jews of Color are not always converts. Fern Rosen, a fictional character in Toomer's *Cane*, has a Jewish father. Rebecca Walker and James McBride, two real-life people who have been discussed in this thesis, were both born into a family with one Jewish parent. McBride's Jewish parent is his mother, and despite her conversion away from the religion and McBride's identifying as a Christian, he would be accepted as Jewish at virtually any synagogue in the country due to Judaism's matrilineal nature. Most Reform congregations would define Walker, who has a Jewish father and a Gentile mother, as Jewish since she was raised in the culture and has one Jewish parent. Though the existence and experiences of these three Black Jewish people is complex and expressed as such in the texts in which they appear, their mere existence proves wrong the characters in *Passing* who conflate Jewishness with whiteness. There is still work to be done, though, as McBride expresses that,

despite the existence of Black Jews and other Jews of Color, he feels alienated by the Jewish religion and ethnic group.

Exploring how twentieth-century African American fiction depicted Black and non-Black Jewish people offers clues into what parts of this relationship must be patched. *The Marrow of Tradition* depicts a European Jewish man choosing whiteness and then immediately using it to oppress a Black man. Is it possible that Black Jewish converts have used their religion to distance themselves from the "Black community"? Nella Larsen seems to imply in *Passing* that a Black man converting to Judaism is the same as a mixed-race Black woman actively pretending to be white, even to the point of deceiving her own white husband.

These depictions reveal common ground, too. Richard Wright uses fiction to explore a solidarity between Black and Jewish Americans during the Labor Movement that was as real as the anti-Blackness Bigger Thomas experiences in the post-slavery North. Ishmael Reed and Zora Neale Hurston use a traditionally Jewish figure, who historically could have very well been Black, to explore the Black experience of living in the diaspora. Hurston and Octavia E. Butler use their writing to sympathize with Jewish victims of the Holocaust. James Baldwin's non-Black Jewish character is the only person in *Beale Street* who will offer housing to a struggling, young Black couple.

The research question that I began my thesis with was: "How do relationships between non-Black Jews and Black Gentiles and, by extension, Blackness and Jewishness, appear in African American Literature?" I have found, and hopefully shown that, though historical events provided plenty of animosity and violence to draw from, some of the most prolific Black writers chose instead to portray kindness and solidarity. The positive portrayals are realistic, too, and not naive or idealistic.

Today, during an uptick of American white supremacy, non-Black Jews should educate themselves on anti-Blackness and Black Gentiles should educate themselves on antisemitism. Both groups should educate themselves on the experience of being Black *and* Jewish, as these existences are not mutually exclusive. Of course, many people have already made these moves individually, but large-scale collaboration from both groups would be huge, considering that, as the aforementioned literature proves, the relationship between Black Gentiles and non-Black Jewish people in America is, as noted by Catherine Rottenberg, "complex, fraught, yet nonetheless intertwined…" (3). Perhaps Black American writers of today will resume the task of their twentieth-century counterparts and further explain this complex relationship with vigor and renewed hope. Both groups have been threatened with slavery and genocide, have fought to survive, and when joined in solidarity instead of separated by animosity, can better fight white supremacy. Given the strength the groups have proven to have when joined in solidarity against capitalism, Nazism, and white supremacy in general throughout American history, their unity is more important now than ever.

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Vita

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