

Reviewing the Situation: Jewish and Black Identities— Inventing Strangers

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Abstract

Dominant national myths create versions of reality that we need to deconstruct if we are to take students beyond stereotype. Using the USA as an example, histories that do not align with critical national narratives become silenced or muted. Preoccupation with Black and White dichotomies is just such a narrative that has hidden the significance of class; the idea of the USA as a haven for the stranger similarly blurs a long history of anti-Semitism. The essay demonstrates that collective identities are constructs not objective realities. They devolve from myths, acts of imagination, seductive narratives. A transition from myth to history, from archetypal dream to reality, reveals complexities that subvert simplistic stereotypes. Conventional assumptions about ethnicity and race need to be subject to deconstruction; if exported abroad they are likely to bring confusion rather than clarity. In these circumstances, destabilizing student perceptions is an intellectual imperative.

Keywords:

Class and race, Jewish and Black American identities, Inventing strangers, Stereotypes, Prejudice, Discrimination

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*I'm reviewing the situation
 The trials and tribulation
 There is no in between for me
 But who will change the scene for me?
 I think I'd better think it out again!*
 Lionel Bart, 1960.¹

Complex Fates: The Export of Illusion

There is a tendency to seek abroad evidence of that which we anticipate, to confirm the expectations with which we travel. This becomes particularly evident when those derive from national myths that shape the identities we inhabit.² We seek to find the artefacts, hear the sounds, have experiences and learn histories that validate the landscape of the mind that we have imagined. In so doing, we mitigate the impact of the unfamiliar and manage the challenge of the new. As William Hyndman observed: “We want to hear voices that mirror our own beliefs” (2017). The baggage students carry with them is also metaphorical. Assumptions drawn from domestic experience may create distorted lenses that over-simplify foreign environments. Narratives concerning national myths should always carry the qualification “however.”

The idea that America is a classless society framed by egalitarian opportunity is an example of just such a myth. It permeates national narratives that include figures such as Horatio Alger, an archetypal “rags to riches” immigrant experience, the notion of the American Dream, the slogan “The Land of Opportunity.” This concept is embedded in formulations of American exceptionalism so, the assumption is, that class distinction is a characteristic of elsewhere. If that elsewhere is the United Kingdom, popular images sustain the concept and are part of what is sold in the industry of education abroad. Assumed traditional hierarchies permeate popular culture, Harry Potter and Downton Abbey are good examples. The great monuments and edifices of London, embedded in marketing iconography, further illustrate an idea of national identity formed around social and class distinctions.

In contrast, a dominant American narrative is built around a combination of myths that represent America as a place of egalitarian values; the frontier, for example, is seen as an individualistic, democratic space (except for excluded Native Americans of course). It is also a moving line that defines

¹ From Lionel Bart’s musical *Olivier* (1960) sang by the Jew Fagin as he contemplates, and discards, the idea of a reformed life!

² Myth is used throughout this essay to designate the narratives that inform our consciousness. Whether they are true or false matters less than their influence on those identities we carry with us.

and redefines the evolution of the nation.³ This is enforced by the historical narrative of the fight for independence: freedom from the class-ridden, monarchical despotism of the British Empire in 1776.

The idea of a nation shaped by class is symbolized in London's great imperial buildings at the heart of which stands the Royal residence of Buckingham Palace, guarded at the entrance by the imposing statue of Queen Victoria. In contrast, the image of the frontier is that of virgin territory within which the pioneer is unencumbered by the restraints of status and tradition. No building on the frontier symbolizes inherited authority.

The power of these iconic locations mutes the impact of alternative histories. Thus, London is characterized as "traditional" within the artificial distinction between "non-traditional" and "traditional" locations in the rhetoric of education abroad. The call for program growth in non-traditional locations has emerged as a kind of mantra. A consequence is that the validity of experience becomes defined by location rather than academic content. "Traditional" locations are popular for good reason; the curriculum of US universities still draws heavily upon European sources. Furthermore, the idea that Western Europe is a traditional location is based on the illusion that the focus of study will necessarily be on historical and social continuities rather than on highly reformed space in which the impacts of globalization have led to fundamental alterations. As a consequence, the reality of London as one of the most radically reformed cities in Europe is obscured.

In a similar process of selective representation, the significance of class distinction and regional inequalities are edited out of the American national ethos. That is the thesis offered by Nancy Isenberg in *White Trash*. She reveals the degree to which aspects of political and economic life, particularly issues of class, have been excluded and minimized in more conventional narratives, "fables we forget by" (Isenberg, 2016, xxiii)⁴:

How does a culture that prizes equality of opportunity explain, or indeed accommodate, its persistently marginalized people? Twenty-first-century Americans need to confront this enduring conundrum. Let us recognize the existence of our underclass (Isenberg, 2016, 2).

A persistent idea of America derives from a form of historical amnesia.

American experience is perceived through narrowed lenses. In education abroad, a consequence is that USA is imagined as exceptionally unburdened by class. Students carry with them a belief in their egalitarian roots

³ This thesis is represented in Turner's classic, if flawed, study: *The Frontier in American History*.

⁴ See also for further example Howard Zinn (2005).

aligned with an expectation that they will discover traditional social schisms in Europe wherein historical and social continuity is defined by class. The New World and the Old World are, in this configuration, imagined to be profoundly distinct; New is liberated from the burden of class while it is exemplified in the Old.

In contrast, a persistent version of American experience is that of a society fundamentally shaped by racial rather than class distinctions. The USA is occupied (even preoccupied) by dichotomies framed in terms of Black and White: visible difference rather than the more hidden dynamics of class. This dominant narrative is shaped by enslavement as a formative element in the national experience. In the American national narrative, slavery is defined by the exploitation of Africans imported against their will to support the emerging economies of the independent nation. This selective perspective edits out the global experience of slavery over thousands of years from the experience of the Jews in biblical times, indentured labor as an element of early US settlement, the experience of the Roma (Gypsies) in Spain and, in particular, the Ottoman Empire.

Black enslavement is a dominant factor in American histories. It informs the perceived objectives of the Union in the Civil War, although there is much evidence to suggest that humanitarian motivations were of less significance than the political and economic. Post-Civil War dynamics embed racism in national history through Jim Crow legislation, segregation, the Civil Rights movement, and the on-going sense of White privilege and systemic prejudice.

Revisionist histories that deny the critical significance of that narrative are frequently motivated by racist ideologies but the idea that race is at the root of all the fractures in American society is ultimately myopic. Inequities of class and region are edited out of the national narrative. A consequence in education abroad may be that the dominance of race becomes an expectation of a global condition through which students seek to understand worlds elsewhere. The US student abroad may, therefore, bear two assumptions that are a barrier to effective agency and understanding: that their own identities are free from the influence of class; that the default distinction in the USA offers a filter through which worlds elsewhere can be effectively analyzed.

In practice, divisions in other parts of the world may have little to do with Black-White dichotomy. Class, gender, religion, region, tribe, caste, ideology are other factors that shape inequalities and create unequal power structures. Japan offers an obvious example of a context in which Black-White distinctions are relatively insignificant. Power structures on the island of Ireland are not based on race but shaped by the intersection of religion and class. Privilege in post-colonial, sub-Saharan Africa is framed by tribal and regional fractures. In India and the Arab world, complex structures of privilege

cannot be defined by a simplistic Black - White distinction. In short, to believe that race offers a way of comprehending social division in a global context is parochial and demonstrably untrue. The history of race relations in the USA has left bitter and unresolved legacies. It has also created myopic lenses through which other national and international realities are distorted.

In preparing students to understand foreign spaces, it is vital to disrupt their understanding of their own: to subvert the myth of a classless society, and to render assumptions about race more complex and multi-layered. Students would benefit from the deconstruction of the national mythos. We have an obligation to bestow the gift of uncertainty and to empower them to discern ambiguities and paradoxes within their own identities and within the society from which they come. With that consciousness, they may better understand those contradictions they will encounter abroad.

The purpose of this discussion is to explore the relationship between Black and Jewish Americans within the USA as an illustration of those multi-layered complexities that undermine simplistic and reductive narratives. It seeks to demonstrate the dangers of traveling with stereotypical expectations and points to the all too human temptation to “discover” the familiar in unfamiliar landscapes.

Black and Jewish Americans: Paradoxical Narratives

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

("Black Sabbath," 2011, np).

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

Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other.
Bernard Malamud, *The Tenants* (1971, 211)

In the struggle for social justice and equity, relationships between Jews and Black Americans have been shaped by ambiguities and tensions.⁵ In the context of colleagues in international education, this is a difficult, disturbing conversation that we have tended to avoid rather than risk offending those with whom we share ideals and values. However, in the wider environment, relationships between Jewish and Black Americans have been shaped by contradictory, paradoxical narratives, as Cornel West recognizes:

There is a sense in which Black and Jewish folk are almost stuck together, either at each other's throats or embracing each other, but that is still a kind of family fight (Lerner and West, 1996, 221).

West points in the direction of an obvious and common heritage: Black and Jewish Americans are diaspora peoples, with notions of lost homelands (call them Africa or Zion); above all, both have been subject to grotesque and inhumane injustices that need no detailed retelling here. There is, for example, the experience of slavery, discrimination, prejudice, marginalization, and sometimes deadly persecution. Within the USA, both Jewish and Black Americans were subject to legal and social discrimination although the history of anti-Semitism in America is less well known. Black Americans were not alone in being subject to prejudicial views and discriminatory treatment.

The idealization of America as a distant magnet, a haven for the displaced and dispossessed, originates in the 19th century. It finds iconic expression in Emma Lazarus's poem that graces the Statue of Liberty.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore;
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door (Lazarus, 1883, 203).

An alternative narrative, rooted in the traditional trope of Jews as killers of Christ, was expressed by Peter Stuyvesant in September 1654 following the

⁵ I have used Black Americans rather than African Americans or people of color to try and avoid, in the first case, the complexities of a dualistic identity and in the second, a term that is, perhaps, too general and inclusive for this discussion. Except where indicated, the focus is on Jews in America though the influence of global, particularly European experience, permeates representations of identity.

unwelcome arrival of a small group of Jews in New Amsterdam (later New York). Stuyvesant wrote:

We pray that this deceitful race – such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ – be not allowed further to infect and trouble this new colony (Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, 1980, 452).

The national myth of the USA as a place of tolerance does not align with historical evidence. Anti-Semitism in America is as long as the history of the country itself. From 1649 until 1868, many parts of the USA enacted laws aimed at excluding Jews from public office.⁶

Virulent and widespread anti-Semitism was also manifest in the decades between 1920 and 1960. Employment discrimination was, for example, widespread in New York in the 1930s: “The cities telephone and gas companies routinely rejected Jewish applicants. Insurance companies, banks, and law offices regularly refused to hire Jewish workers” (Wenger, 1996, 22). Many elite universities had discriminatory policies; fraternities at Brown did not admit Jews; Cornell’s medical school had discriminatory admissions policies until as late as 1950.

There were also outspoken proponents of anti-Semitism. Charles Lindbergh (1902 – 1974), renowned as the first aviator to complete a solo transatlantic flight in 1927, was a spokesman for the America First Committee (1940 – 41) which was, anti-interventionist, sympathetic to German Nazism and anti-Semitic. In Des Moines, Iowa on September 11, 1941, Lindbergh identified those responsible for “forcing” the US into World War II:

The three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt Administration... Instead of agitating for war, Jews in this country should be opposing it in every way, for they will be the first to feel its consequences. Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government. ⁷

One of the most prominent anti-Semites of the time, the Catholic priest Charles E. Coughlin (1891–1979), broadcast to an audience estimated at around 9 million a week throughout the 1930s at a time when the popularity of radio was paramount. He announced, for example, that “When we get through with the Jews in America, they’ll think the treatment they received in Germany was

⁶ In New Hampshire, for example, Jews were precluded from voting or standing for election until 1876. From 1776 to 1868, the constitution of North Carolina restricted the holding of public office to Protestants. See Dobkowski for further examples, 11 -1 3.

⁷ Full text at <http://www.charleslindbergh.com/americanfirst/speech.asp>

nothing” (summer 1938, cited Manchester, 176). In the journal he founded, *Social Justice*, he castigated the Jewish Press:

I am beginning to understand why I have been dubbed a “Nazi” and or a “fascist” by the Jewish publications in America; for practically all the 16 principles of social justice are being put into practice in Italy and Germany.⁸

Anti-Semitic sympathies were not limited to the particular context of the 1930s. In 1899, Henry Adams lamented that “We are in the hands of the Jews [who] can do what they please with our values” (cited Dobkowski, 1979, 124-5). Christopher Bigsby describes the content of White House tapes some 70 years later:

In 2002, some of the tape recordings made by Richard Nixon in the early 1970s in the oval room of the White House came into public domain. They revealed Billy Graham, unofficial pastor to a succession of American Presidents, as remarking that “the Bible says there are satanic Jews and that’s where our problem arises”, while Nixon claimed that “the Jews are an irreligious, atheistic, immoral bunch of bastards” (Bigsby, 2008, 255).

Anti-Semitism is a global reality but its existence in the USA is a muted narrative. Rather like the history of class conflict, it contradicts some embedded national myths, particularly those of a society uniquely hospitable to outsiders, and to the idea of unimpeded Jewish progress in the USA. American Jews have, in many cases, entered into the center of American social, artistic, economic and political life but that is the consequence of a long struggle to overcome embedded barriers. They have been, and continue to be, subject to prejudice, discrimination, and the rhetoric of hate. In that respect, Jewish and Black Americans have a common experience of being constructed as alien outsiders by those who hate, fear, or mistrust them.

A common experience of discrimination and prejudice find expression in Jewish empathy and commitment to social and political justice in the USA, particularly in the context of Black marginalization. In 1909, Henry Moscowitz was a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People with W. E. B. DuBois. Kivie Kaplan (a vice-chairman of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) was the national president of the NAACP from 1966 to 1975. The Jewish philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, in the years 1910 to 1940, funded, in whole or in part, more than 2,000 primary and secondary schools and 20 black colleges. He became a trustee of the Tuskegee Institute in 1912 and donated over two million dollars to Black University Centers at

⁸ *Social Justice*, February 13, 1939, 7.

Tuskegee, Howard, Fisk, Atlanta, and Dillard Universities (over \$40 million in current value). The "Rosenwald schools" made a critical contribution to the education of Black Americans in the South.

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

For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer.... our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying (Heschel,1965).

Martin Luther King described Heschel as "one of the great men of our age, a truly great prophet." Joachim Prinz, a Rabbi in Berlin when Hitler came to power, spoke at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. His speech embodies internationalist principles and encapsulates the empathy that defines this narrative:

Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity (Prinz, 1963).

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

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

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

The Alienation Narrative

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

A dispute between the Jewish intellectual Norman Podhoretz and his friend, the great Black writer James Baldwin, that dates back to 1963 reveals some troubling perspectives. The immediate and rather arcane cause of the argument was that Podhoretz had commissioned an article from Baldwin for

Commentary. Ultimately, Baldwin sold the article (which became *The Fire Next Time*) to *The New Yorker* for a significantly larger sum than agreed with Podhoretz. Podhoretz's annoyance was manifest: He argued that Baldwin was not disadvantaged by being Black but was privileged because his behavior was tolerated in ways that would not have been acceptable had he been a white writer.

Podhoretz further commented on his childhood experience:

For a long time I was puzzled to think that Jews were supposed to be rich when the only Jews I knew were poor, and that Negroes were supposed to be persecuted when it was the Negroes who were doing the only persecuting I knew about—and doing it, moreover, to me (Podhoretz, 1963, 93).

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

Jews in Harlem are small tradesmen, rent collectors, real estate agents, and pawnbrokers; they operate in accordance with the American business tradition of exploiting Negroes, and they are therefore identified with oppression and are hated for it (*Harlem*, 1948).

However, in the same article, Baldwin identifies an element of those tensions that is critical to understanding a curious intimacy:

At the same time, there is a subterranean assumption that the Jew should “know better,” that he has suffered enough himself to know what suffering means. An understanding is expected of the Jew such as none... has ever expected of the American Gentile (*Harlem*, 1948).

Implicit in Baldwin's view is that tensions between Jews and Black Americans derive from a sense of mutual disappointment; love turned sour; a common cause eroded by the divisive dynamics of American capitalism. At root, the alienation of Jews and Black Americans and, simultaneously, the activism of Jews in support of Civil Rights, has a common paradoxical root: a heritage of suffering that has caused us to act together, to invest aspirations in our imaginative constructions, and in some cases to separate, estranged lovers, each from each.

The narrative of alienation draws upon experience but also has its roots in stereotypical projections of urban life: a Black view that Jews were privileged, rich, and only interested in Jewish welfare and prosperity; a Jewish view that Blacks were feckless, irresponsible, and disruptive of urban life. We carry the burden of our own prejudices and we are both diminished by them.

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

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

Jews and Black Americans have invented each other's identities and generated barriers to the recognition of common histories and ethical empathies, as Fiedler argued: "In our time, Negro and Jew ... long to be delivered from their mythical status, to be translated from dream to history" (231 – 232). In short, in expecting so much the seeds of disappointment have been sown while the potential for realignment and reaffirmation is simultaneously sustained. That conclusion is argued by Michael Lerner and Cornel West: "There is nothing inevitable or structurally necessary about Black antagonism towards Jews or Jewish antagonism towards Blacks" (278).

Collective identities are constructs, not objective realities. They devolve from myths, acts of imagination, narratives based on political, economic, and social assumptions. This is an insight that students should be taught to perceive at home and abroad. What we think of as community characteristics derives from sources within and without, hostile and sympathetic, informed and ignorant, disinterested and prejudiced. We may seek to define ourselves, but we are also made in the minds of others. A transition from myth to history, from archetypal dream to reality, would reveal complexities that subvert simplistic stereotypes.

The Israel Factor

The Founding Fathers of America sought biblical authority for the settlement of the New World from the New Testament ; the metaphor of the city on the hill, from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5:14-16 (KJV), is

recurrent in the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, from John Winthrop in 1630, through Ronald Reagan in 1980, to Barack Obama in 2006.⁹

The Old Testament also offered critical metaphors. The notion of Zion as an alternative dreamed space of security and fulfilment was significant to the founders of the USA as an idealized projection of the home they sought to build—a space blessed by God and a territory where the physical and the spiritual might be aligned; for Jews it melded with Jerusalem to represent a spiritual landscape, the home they had lost and to which they dreamed of return; For Black Americans, Zion melded with the Africa of the mind to symbolize a location in which dreamed freedom might be realized.

Moses is the other key figure in the enlistment of Old Testament mythologies in American narratives. *Go Down Moses*, an inspirational spiritual for slaves, aligned Jewish escape from slavery with that of Black aspiration. The song appeared around 1800 but origins are obscure. In many adaptations, it reflected an alignment of Black slavery with that of the Jews, a dream of freedom, and a text that was adapted to direct escaping slaves to routes towards freedom:

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go
When Israel was in Egypt land
Oppressed so hard they could not stand...
The lord said, "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go."

The figure of Moses leading the Jews towards a promised land is potent in American mythologies over centuries. It is a myth that aligns the dreams of the founders of the nation, with the Jews, with Black Americans.

The emergence of the State of Israel complicated matters. There are two narratives that shape the identity of Israel. The first, in many left-wing circles, is that Israel has become a colonial power unjustly dominating its neighbors. If that is the case, Israel is a unique colonial power in that its dominance of other

⁹ John Winthrop. "A Modell of Christian Charity," 1630. Ronald Reagan used precisely this metaphor in his "A Vision for America" speech on the eve of Presidential election, November 3, 1980, "I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining 'city on a hill,' as were those long ago settlers."

Barack Obama: "It was right here, in the waters around us, where the American experiment began. As the earliest settlers arrived on the shores of Boston and Salem and Plymouth, they dreamed of building a City upon a Hill. " Barack Obama "21st Century Schools for a 21st Century Economy" University of Massachusetts at Boston Commencement Address, June 2, 2006.

territories was not founded in invasion but was a reaction to being invaded by implacable enemies who sought to destroy the new nation.

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

...At the time of the birth of the state of Israel, the East Bloc particularly following the lead of Stalinist Russia eagerly embraced the independence struggle and survival of the fledgling state of Israel. The position ...seemed consistent with the Marxist position that socialists should support nationalist movements opposed to western imperialist powers (William Brustein, 2019, 104).

Support for Zionism was also deeply embedded in Black American rhetoric. At a very obvious level, the idea of a promised land resonated with pervasive myths drawn from the alignment of Jewish and Black identities. The significance of this story for Black Americans is both obvious and profound. Marcus Garvey, W. E. Dubois, and Martin Luther King (among others) saw Jewish history and mythology as aligned with Black aspiration, shared formative myths.

These complex inter-connections are also exemplified in musical relationships between Jews and American Blacks in the 20th century. The social and political significance of music offers a filter through which domestic and international histories are illuminated.

Playing the same tune?

The relationship between Jewish and Black Americans demonstrates ambiguities, narratives of connection and disconnection that model the kind of questions that should be asked about communities abroad. However, there are patterns of observable actions in specific contexts that will help students understand where we differ and where we align without falling into the trap of over generalization. An analysis of Jewish and Black American interactions in the context of popular music serves further to disrupt conventional narratives.

The Strange Case of Asa Yoelson

The dynamic between these two groups has been marked both by intimacy and alienation. In the single figure of Asa Yoelson (born in Lithuania in 1886; died San Francisco, 1950), those ambiguities are embodied in performance.

Yoelson was taken to the USA at the age of 7 and, from 1911, reinvented himself as Al Jolson, known ultimately as “the world’s greatest entertainer.” What marked his stage persona was that he usually performed in blackface. Musical productions are, of course, symptomatic of time and place and need to be filtered through contemporaneous intention rather than contemporary judgement. There is, nevertheless, something profoundly disturbing about watching Al Jolson perform.¹⁰

Jolson offers an extreme example of an invented identity through stereotypical, “imagined blackness” (Alexander, 2001,137). This was a hallmark of a long tradition of minstrel performances in which white performers blacked their faces. However distasteful that persona might be to us today, Jolson was an active supporter of the rights of Black Americans in show business when that was far from the norm. He resisted the exclusion of Black performers and segregation. Jolson had a track record of advocating for inclusion and diversity in popular music. Professor Jon Epstein¹¹ describes Jolson resistance to racial prejudice and the subversive intent behind his stage performances :

As for his “blackface” persona which seems to (almost literally) fly in the face of his apparent true feelings on race, this persona was often used as a means to introduce white audiences to black culture, and also to make fun of the general idea of “white supremacy” (Epstein, 2016).

To our sensibilities, Jolson represents a strange paradox; he performed a version of blackness that was clearly based in parody and stereotype. From a contemporary perspective, we would imagine that would be a source of widespread condemnation by Black performers and the wider community. That was not the case. As Rebecca Valentine argues “He introduced African American music and dance to white America and made it something to celebrate.”¹² The film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), in which he sings in blackface, was not met by outrage from Black commentators. Instead, it was widely praised, described for example, in a Harlem newspaper, *The Amsterdam News*, as “one of the greatest pictures ever produced,” and that, furthermore, “Every colored performer is proud of him” (cited Epstein, 2016). Ironically, Jolson helped pave the way for the success of such legends as Louis Armstrong, Ethyl Waters, Duke Ellington

¹⁰ The tradition had a remarkable longevity. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* ran on British television for 20 years from 1958 to 1978 when objections on grounds of racism led to its closure. Nevertheless, a stage version ran for a further 10 years.

¹¹ Jon Epstein is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of Holocaust programs at Greensboro College, NC.

¹² "Jolson, Al." Encyclopaedia Judaica. Encyclopedia.com. <https://www.encyclopedia.com>. See also: “Blackface More a Mask Than Racism,” “Jolson, Al. Contemporary Musicians.” [Encyclopedia.com. https://www.encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com) and <http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/minstrelsy/jimcrow-to-jolson/al-jolson>.

and Cab Calloway. As the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* stated: “Almost single-handedly, Jolson helped to introduce African-American musical innovations like jazz, ragtime, and the blues to white audiences.”¹³ Famed African-American jazz singer Clarence Henry noted of Jolson, “Jolson? I loved him. I think he did wonders for the blacks and glorified entertainment” (cited Epstein, 2016).¹⁴ Sammy Davis Jr declared his debt to Jolson; at a testimonial banquet for Jolson in 1946 Dinah Shore dedicated a song to Jolson; it was *You Made Me Love You*.¹⁵ In 1961, Jackie Wilson recorded *You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet* as a tribute to Al Jolson.¹⁶

Whatever else Jolson may have been (and by report he could be a difficult egoist) he was not a racist. The blackface persona had no connection with real Black people; it was a mask that, in one sense, implied a connection between Jewish and Black American experience. Some of his famous songs arguably expressed empathy for a Black experience that resonated with Jewish marginalization and migration. Between 1916 and 1970 circa 6 million Black people moved from the south to the northern cities in one of the largest internal migrations in American history.¹⁷ Black Americans from the south were refugees from racism but they did not experience ease or unqualified welcome in their new homes: an experience that resonated with that of immigrant Jews.

Nostalgia for a lost home permeates the emotional landscape of a number of Jolson’s most famous songs: “I’d give the world to be among the folks in D-I-X-I- E/ The folks up north will see me no more/When I go to the Swanee shore! (*Swanee*, 1919, music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Irving Caesar). *My Mammy* contains a comparable sense of separation from home.

Obviously, these lyrics can be interpreted as a distortion of Black American experience and appropriation of a painful history. However, they may also be seen as one immigrant community expressing a form of empathy with another group uprooted by circumstances. Over time, lost homes are

¹³ Cited in <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/al-jolson/>

¹⁴ See the following for further examples of African-American endorsements of Al Jolson: <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2014/10/al-jolson-hero-villain> <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/links/essays/jolson.htm> http://archive.boston.com/ae/movies/blog/2007/10/all_that_jazz.html

¹⁵ The Motion Picture Chapter of the American War Veterans Committee held a banquet for Jolson on October 1st, 1946.

¹⁶ Szwed in *Billie Holiday* offers further examples of the popularity and respect that Jolson received from American Black performers pp. 23- 30.

¹⁷ During the 1930s, 2.5 million people left the Dust Bowl states—Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma. Arguably, this was the largest internal migration given the shorter time period in which it occurred.

reimagined nostalgically in a way that is also reflected, for example, in Irish consciousness.¹⁸ Michael Alexander in *Jazz Age Jews*, argues just this point:

At a time when African-American migration was dividing northern American cities, and as the white middle class defined itself against this new presence, Jews became fascinated by African-American culture or at least their own version of it. On Broadway... and in Hollywood they showed off their new attraction and proclaimed themselves to be, if anywhere in the conflict between black and white, decidedly on the side of American blacks (Alexander, 2001, 3).

Jolson embodies, however distastefully for contemporary perceptions, the process where a version of Black history is constructed by outsiders into a narrative that was meant to express empathy through an alignment of common suffering: “Eastern Jews in America maneuvered to see in African-American life their own story of exile and slavery” (Alexander, 2001, 137). That perceived alignment shaped one of the ways in which Jews imagined Black Americans and were in turn imagined. Musical interactions have frequently implied a subtext of empathy that is part of complex narratives in which each constructs the other.

Ethical simplifications distort the ways in which we perceive present and past. In higher education the qualification “however” is critical. It points to the fact that our worlds, at home and abroad, contain layers of meaning that are more complex than we might assume. Thus, it would be wrong to cast Jolson as a racist villain. Instead, in intention and outcome he paved the way for Black performers to achieve fame and success. The paradox is that he did it in blackface.

All That Jazz

Al Jolson is not representative of ways in which Black and Jewish identities intersected. There are multiple ways in which the interactions have been shaped by ideals and action rather than parody:

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

Charles Hersch offers many examples of affinities between Jews and Black Americans within the jazz world. The impresario Norman Ganz (1918 –

¹⁸ There is hardly a single popular Irish song that does not express sorrow at dislocation from home.

2001) was committed to the view that “Jazz is truly the music of democratic America” (Hersch, 2017, 64). Ganz’s principles were based upon the notion that jazz “more than anything else ... brings people together as spectators and participants with a complete disregard for race, color or creed (Hersch, 2017, 64).” Hersch records the anti-segregationist principles of other less well-known figures such as Morris Levy who, from 1957, would only book his “Birdland Stars” at integrated theatres. Similar principles were enforced by the impresario and club owner, Billy Berg. In short, “Jewishness has an affinity for hybridity” (Hersch, 2017, 3).

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

There are also numerous examples of Jewish popular composers and musicians directly writing and performing with a deep empathy for Black experience. George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935), though conditioned by its time and in places arguably stereotypical and condescending, was nevertheless an expression of Jewish empathy. *Showboat* (1927) written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein expresses a sense of connection with Black struggles and suffering. It contained the song *Old Man River* made famous by Paul Robeson.

Paul Robeson and Abel Meerpol

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

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

Robeson rewrote these lyrics to reflect an active rather than passive representation. Thus, “Get a little drunk” becomes “You show a little grit” and “I’m tired of living/ Feared of dying” becomes “ I must keep fightin’/ Until I’m

dyin” Robeson’s reaction to *Showboat* and *Old Man River* was always ambiguous but in the alteration to Hammerstein’s lyrics he transformed a stereotypical passivity into a political activism, a declaration of intent.

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

Robeson also extended the interaction between Black and Jewish consciousness by singing spirituals that drew heavily on Old Testament sources. He recorded and performed a number of songs in Yiddish including the Chassidic *Chant* of Levi Isaac of Berditshev, a version of the *Kaddish* (Karp, 2003). Robeson also frequently sang *The Partisan Song* in both Yiddish and English. Written in 1943 by Hirsh Glick (1922- 1944), a young Jewish inmate of the Vilna Ghetto to commemorate resistance to the Nazis, the song has become representative of Jewish activism in the face of persecution. As in the revisions to *Old Man River*, Robeson uses the song to subvert stereotypical notions of passive endurance of both Black and Jews. Robeson, probably more than any other single figure, demonstrates a profound intimacy and empathy: his work existed at an intersection between Jewish and Black consciousness.

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

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

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
 Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
 Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,

Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

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

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

This is not to say that all things in music were noble and enlightened, but it does demonstrate that there is a narrative of interconnection that is rooted in empathy and expressed in action. Whatever else, we may choose to say, there is a sense of special intimacy between Black and Jewish Americans to be found in histories, shared mythologies, in some political affinities and creative alliances that challenged racial prejudices. These musical interactions serve as one example of relationships that challenge narratives of alienation.

The arts exemplify the ways in which barriers between countries and peoples are porous. There are few walls between creativity, as these interactions demonstrate. A further example from Europe demonstrates cross-fertilization. Klezmer is a Yiddish term that loosely means musical instrument. In Eastern Europe, since the eighteenth century, it has described a style of music that melds Turkish, Roma, and traditional Jewish styles. In the twentieth century, American jazz cadences were also influential in shaping the way in which Klezmer music blended diverse influences into an energetic, passionate and haunting musical style. I first heard it played live in a cafe in Krakow in the heart of what had been, before World War II, the Jewish ghetto. It had a special poignancy in that place. Klezmer offers an example of how music might reflect the intersection of identities. It also demonstrates that a study of music may offer different ways of examining national and international realities. There are circumstances in which it may reveal the

ineffable nature of emotional affinities that transcend the alienation of stereotypical simplifications.

Conclusion: Deconstructing Orthodoxies

The implications of this discussion for education abroad are that conventional assumptions about ethnicity and race need to be subject to deconstruction and, furthermore, if exported abroad they are likely to bring confusion rather than clarity. There is something deeply archaic in clinging to rigid notions of bifurcation between Black and White when identities in other contexts have become fluid and mutable. The default distinction in the USA remains race and I understand why. However, we also need to be aware that identity is shaped by external dynamics and is also a matter of performance and inheritance, subject to analysis and alteration.

In the current environment, there is increasing marginalization, growing reassertion of prejudice, racism, re-emergent anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and so forth. Legitimization of xenophobia permeates political and social discourse. This paradox has created a new ideological divide; the collision of grand narratives of recent history, the great isms that saw conflict between communism, fascism, socialism, and liberalism as the core causes of fractures in international politics, have become less and less significant. The collision of interests that created the Cold War have less and less resonance for us, and even less for the students we teach. Instead, the global political momentum apparent in 2020 signifies an ominous erosion of internationalist ethics, and the disappearance of a liberal consensus (if it ever existed). Militant, radical parochialism is increasingly strident, perhaps as a reaction to perceived impacts of globalisation as an alien dynamic that erodes national identities. Closed world ideologies conflict with open world ideals.

There are though alternative narratives which express a sense of shared experience based on persecution and marginalization: a demonstration of how consciousness of injustice may be raised when diverse peoples “play the same tune.” Between Jewish and Black Americans, for example, there are many points of connection; we have dreamed each other, like lovers, which is why episodes of separation are so painful. There are inter-connected histories, common values and commitments. How do we discuss the histories of these relationships? What histories matter? If we do not talk to each other about these significant questions, how will we talk to our students? That is why the concept of brave space is of profound importance.

In the end what I want to say is disheartening for international educators and, in particular, for the marketing of our endeavors. The signposts by which we direct our students are necessarily made less clear. The assumptions through which we perceive worlds elsewhere have to be rigorously re-examined.

This will frustrate an agenda that draws attention only to assumed realities. Alternative perspectives will disrupt some of the ways in which we talk to students. By way of example, while we justly represent the depth of history in Italy, that which is visible in the majesty of its monuments and edifices, students will also need to learn that in political terms the USA is older than the Italian nation by over 100 years. As a political entity, the USA is older than Germany, only marginally younger than the United Kingdom. Acquiring the habit of skepticism will also reconstruct London in the minds of education abroad students. It might encompass the long traditions that are embodied in the monuments and buildings of the city and, simultaneously, complicate them by the fact that the city is the most reformed and reconstructed capital in Europe. It is rooted in the past and in the present, the most multi-cultural urban space in the world. The focus on cross or inter-cultural studies will also need to be reconsidered; that orthodoxy constructs culture as a barrier we need to teach students to cross. It, therefore, starts with the conclusion that distinctions between peoples are more significant than similarities: an untested assumption.

All of this must draw us back to the wise injunction of Einstein to “make it as simple as possible but no simpler.” Simple stories are, for the most part, simply too simple. In terms of assessing learning abroad we need to consider the degree to which students have unlearned the assumptions they carried with them. This discussion is an example of profound ambiguities in the context of class, race and ethnicity, an area of investigation that is littered with assumed realities. It demonstrates the need to destabilize our students and bestow upon them the kind of wisdom envisaged by old Socrates: “An unexamined life is not worth living. One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing.”

Author Biography

Michael Woolf, Deputy President at CAPA, has spent much of his career in an international context. He taught American Literature at the universities of Hull, Middlesex, Padova, and Venice, and worked as a researcher-writer for BBC radio. Michael has held leadership roles with FIE, CIEE, and Syracuse University. Michael holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and has written widely on international education and cultural studies. You can read a sample of Michael’s short essays in his monthly column: <https://capaworld.capa.org/author/dr-michael-woolf>.

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