"A Man With Many Faces, All Turned in the Same Direction": Julius Lester on Anti-Semitism, Anti-Blackness, and Black-Jewish Coalitions

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Beginning in the early 20th century, Black and Jewish civil rights activists joined forces to protest racial discrimination, forming institutional and individual relationships.[1] However, countless historical scholarship has highlighted that the popular mythology around this so-called Black-Jewish alliance romanticizes a relationship that was in fact fraught with contradiction from its inception.[2] A particularly potent strand of the myth describes a conflict-free Black-Jewish coalition in the early 1960s, emblemized by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, religious and civil rights leaders, who marched arm in arm across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama to advocate for voting rights. The myth then turns sour around 1965, with the rise of the Black Power movement and repeated, reciprocal accusations of anti-Semitism and anti-Blackness that captured national media attention and divided the former allies.

Historians appear undecided on whether the Black Power movement instigated the end of the Black-Jewish alliance or merely revealed how frayed the alliance had already become.[3] However, most scholars mark the end of the Black-Jewish alliance with the rise of Black Power, and tend to blame Black leaders' anti-Semitism for causing the

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[1] Clayborne Carson, "Blacks and Jews in the Civil Rights Movement," in *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States*, edited by Maureen Adams and John Bracey (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000) https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/blacks_jews_civil_rights.pdf

[2] Melanie Kaye-Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporaism*. (Indiana University Press, 2007).

[3] Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, and Post-Holocaust America* (Belknap Press, 2009), 4.

tension.[4] Yet, historians have not adequately taken up the question of how and why Black activists accused Jews of anti-Black racism during major moments of tension between the two groups. Few scholars address Jewish racism against Black Americans as a key factor in damaging Black-Jewish relations.

Although the popular historical narrative of Black-Jewish relations tends to paint with broad strokes, activists and critics held lively debates over anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism in essay collections and leftist newspapers from the 1960s through the 1980s. Black and Jewish writers publicly disagreed about the cause of tension between their communities and presented a nuanced analysis of the reasons the Black and Jewish communities increasingly clashed after the mid-'60s.

Julius Lester was a key participant in these debates about Black-Jewish relations. A folk singer born in St. Louis, his guitar brought him into collaboration with Pete Seeger and into grassroots organizing with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Lester became involved in the most polarizing moments of tension between Black and Jewish civil rights organizations in the late 1900s. He wrote essays, political treatises, and novels about anti-racist activism and Black identity. In the early 1980s, Lester converted to Judaism and published a memoir entitled "Lovesong: Becoming a Jew."[5]

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[4] This line of thinking is repeated in, for example, Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein *Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American Jew* (Negro Universities Press, 1970); *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States,* edited by Jack Salzman and Cornel West (Oxford University Press 1997); Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

[5] Julius Lester, *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (Henry Holt & Co, January 1988).

That Lester both instigated Black-Jewish conflict and later became a Black Jew is more than historical anomaly. His life circled around issues of Black anti-Semitism and Jewish anti-Black racism when he was studying at Fisk in Nashville, organizing for civil rights in New York City and Mississippi, and teaching in Amherst, Massachusetts. At various moments in his career, Lester straddled both sides of the debate about Black anti-Semitism and Jewish anti-Black racism. His writing reveals that these debates were embedded in conversations about whiteness, and about the tension between American Jewish privilege and the persistence of anti-Semitism. Lester's work allows us to grapple with how Black activists viewed their Jewish allies' relationship to racial privilege and power. By analyzing moments of Lester's life when he was deeply involved in major conflict between Black and Jewish civil rights groups, we can better understand how and why Black activists' critiques of Jewish racism were transformed into debates over whether those critiques were antisemitic.

Throughout his career as an activist and intellectual, Lester encouraged American Jews to reconsider how they discussed race, power, and privilege. In the 1960s, Lester frequently called out Jewish racism against Black people. His early work reflected a growing consensus among some Black activists who argued that anti-Semitism was far less important than anti-Black racism. Lester and others described how Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States were not always considered white in the country's racial hierarchy, but by the mid-1900s, most American Jews had gained access to the privileges of whiteness long prohibited to Black Americans, including housing,

education, jobs, and freedom from violence.[6] Though American Jews' relationship with whiteness was tenuous, Lester's early writing epitomized how, as literary scholar Efraim Sicher notes, "Blacks have often perceived Jews as whites and identified them with the dominant White society that segregated and enslaved them."[7]

In the face of Lester and other Black activists' critiques, many Jews struggled to reckon with their newfound privilege while still defining themselves as victims, "feeling [themselves] oppressed and poor yet anomalously burdened with prosperity."[8] American Jews' newfound whiteness in the United States did not preclude them from experiencing anti-Semitism, nor did it minimize their fears of potential future anti-Jewish violence.[9] Paul Berman described this mindset well in a 1994 New Yorker essay about American Jewish politics: "For the driveway may be long and circular, and the living-room carpet may be thick, but the enemy-memory does not fade."[10] Many Jews clung tight to their "enemy memory" and rejected Lester's, and others,' charges to contextualize anti-Semitism with the fact of white Jewish privilege. In response to Lester and other Black writers who critiqued their privilege and power, American Jews and Jewish institutions tended to exaggerate the threat of anti-Semitism and minimize the racism that

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[6] A small number of historians have analyzed the ways European Jewish immigrants to the United States navigated civil rights coalitions while grappling with their own whiteness, notably Eric Goldstein's *The Price of Whiteness*. See also Cheryl Greenberg "I'm Not White -- I'm Jewish: The Racial Politics of American Jews" in *Race, Color, Identity: Rethinking Discourses about "Jews" in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Efraim Sicher (Berghahn Books, 2013) https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qd22t.

[7] Efraim Sicher, introduction to *Race, Color, Identity: Rethinking Discourses about "Jews" in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Sicher, Berghahn Books, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qd22t, 3.

[8] *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, ed. Paul Berman (New York, Delacorte Press, 1994), 13.

[9] "Jews...are both white and not quite white; they are simultaneously participants and antagonists of whiteness." Susannah Heschel "Reading Cynthia Baker's *Jew* with James Baldwin" *Marginalia (LA Review of Books)* July 5, 2017. https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/reading-cynthia-bakers-jew-james-baldwin/

[10] Paul Berman, "Reflections: The Other and the Almost the Same," *The New Yorker,* February 28, 1994, 61-66. http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/jews-blacks-berman.html

Black Americans faced. Whereas Lester in his early activism dismissed anti-Semitism and emphasized anti-Blackness, most Jewish groups claimed anti-Semitism was more important than racism and implied that one should choose which oppression was most severe and dismiss the other.

In the 1960s, Lester was part of a cadre of Black civil rights activists who rejected national outrage over Black activist groups' alleged anti-Semitism and instead emphasized the importance of discussing Jewish anti-Black racism. In his later writings, Lester reversed course and began to argue that anti-Semitism was more pressing than anti-Black racism. Most scholars have ignored Lester's analysis of these issues, perhaps because his views complicate questions about Black-Jewish relations, whose answers the historical literature has tended to oversimplify. A handful of scholars from religious studies, history, and gender studies have analyzed Lester's political and personal evolution, but they tend to read his complex relationship to identity, race, and radicalism rather uncharitably. These authors describe Lester as disingenuous, and some argue that his 1982 conversion to Judaism was motivated by a psychological desire to redeem himself from having been accused of anti-Semitism in the past.[11] In a chapter dedicated to Lester at the end of his history of Black-Jewish relations, "Strangers in the Land," literary scholar Eric Sundquist argues that Lester's writing presents "Jewishness .. .as one way to escape the most hateful stereotypes and primordial fears of black life."[12] But neither Sundquist nor academic historians adequately address Lester's countless essays about the

[11] See: Alyson Cole, "Trading Places: From Black Power Activist to 'Anti-Negro Negro'." *American Studies* 44, no. 3 (2003): 37-76 and William D. Hart, *Black Religion : Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis*. (1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[12] Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, and Post-Holocaust America* (Belknap Press, 2009), 510.

relationship between Black and Jewish identity and between anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism. Few explore how Lester's trajectory helps illuminate Jewish and Black Americans' changing relationships to politics and race.

To solely focus on Black activists' alleged anti-Semitism, as many Jews at the time did and historical scholars have done, clouds historical understanding of the debates around Black-Jewish tension. This also ignores Black Jews, whose unique relationship to both anti-Semitism and racism complicates easy assumptions about race and identity. Lester and his contemporaries mostly referred to Black and Jewish communities as discrete and non-overlapping, and tended to see an interest in racism and anti-Semitism as mutually exclusive.[13] Unlike many Jewish writers and activists who argued that Black Americans disproportionately held latent anti-Jewish prejudice, Lester made space in his writing for the idea that American Jews could be racist, even as they themselves could also be the targets of anti-Semitism. After he converted to Judaism, Lester also opened a conversion about the often-ignored fact that not all American Jews are white. Lester frequently decried the skepticism and isolation he faced when entering mostly-white synagogues as a Black man. Accusations of Jewish racism take on new weight when we consider Black and other non-white Jews, such as Lester, who in the late 1980s wrote of facing prejudice from fellow Jews.

However, for most of his life, non-white Jews were hardly on Lester's radar, with little more than the oft-ridiculed Sammy Davis Jr. to refer to as a prominent example of

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[13] See: Bruce D. Haynes. *The Soul of Judaism: Jews of African Descent in America*. (New York University Press, 2018), 6-7. "Though two rabbis in Greenwich Village in 1964 formed a network of "assistance" for Black Jews that also sought to increase Black-white Jewish interaction called Hatzaad Harishon, most mainstream Jewish perception remained that American Jews were white until the highly publicized airlifts of African and Ethiopian Jews flown to Israel in 1985 and 1990."

someone who traversed Black American and Jewish identity. To this day, the perspectives of non-white Jews remain absent in most scholarly work about Black-Jewish relations. The recent publication of sociologist Bruce Haynes' "The Soul of Judaism" is one of few inquiries into Black Jewish identity. Haynes surveyed various Black American Jewish communities, currently estimated at around 2% of the American Jewish population or approximately 200,000 people. He delved into how anti-Semitism, racism, and representation manifest uniquely for Jews of color.[14] But Haynes is one of few scholars engaging in the depth and singularity of the experience of non-white Jews. In light of scholarly neglect, Lester represents a singular voice on the history of Black-Jewish relations, as a figure both involved in moments of debate over Black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism and who himself complicates the historiography around such moments.

Julius Lester's role in and writing about key moments of Black-Jewish tension are important reminders of the reductive ways activists, reporters, and historians discussed anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism. Lester was widely seen as a spokesperson for Black radical anti-Semitism during the 1968 New York City teachers' strike, and thus his subsequent critiques of Jewish teachers' anti-Black racism fell on skeptical ears. During the following decade, Lester critiqued what he perceived to be widespread Black anti-Semitism in a moment of national Black-Jewish tension over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and entered a dispute over domestic and foreign policy issues. In the 1980s, Lester accused famed author James Baldwin of anti-Semitism and sparked a national

[14] Haynes, introduction to *The Soul of Judaism*.

controversy about anti-Semitism, academic freedom, and Black Studies. In each of these moments, reciprocal accusations of Jewish anti-Black racism and Black anti-Semitism divided former coalition partners, forcing activists to pick sides and either ignoring or insulting those who crossed the proverbial, and sometimes literal, picket line.

Lester's role in these three moments of Black-Jewish tension, coupled with his personal evolution from Black Power advocate to critic of Black Studies and newly-converted Jew, reveal that Black and Jewish activists used accusations of anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism to reinforce reductive myths about Black-Jewish relations. Lester's life and work prove that more complicated stories about anti-Semitism and anti-Blackness rarely stick.

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