

JEFFREY MELNICK. *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. Pp. ix + 277.

ADAM ZACHARY NEWTON. *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America*. Cultural Margins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xviii + 218.

ETHAN GOFFMAN. *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*. SUNY Series in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Pp. xiii + 262.

I take my point of departure from a statement in one of the studies under review here, that the phrase “black-Jewish relations” is less a historically grounded, sociopolitical, and economic description of an actual alliance between these two American ethnic/racial groups than it is a “figure of speech” (p. 7), a “rhetorical tendency” (p. 165). “The guiding assumption of *A Right to Sing the Blues*,” asserts its author, Jeffrey Melnick, “is that more than anything else, ‘Black-Jewish relations’ is a ritualistic pattern of discussion” (p. 3). Nor is this pattern employed equally by the two groups referred to, or even generally within American public culture. The other “central assumption of this book,” Melnick goes on to say, “is that ‘Black-Jewish relations’ needs to be approached—not exclusively, but still significantly—as a story told *by Jews about* interracial relations” (pp. 3–4). The idea that “Black-Jewish relations” is less a political than a rhetorical category receives powerful, albeit differently adduced, reinforcement from Adam Newton’s *Facing Black and Jew*, which coins the useful neologism “*blacksandjews*” (p. 124). Throughout his study, Newton stresses the literary rather than the political intersections (intersections as opposed to interrelations) between Jewish and African Americans.

Melnick’s contention, that the subject of *blacksandjews* is more a rhetorical construct than a sociopolitical description, and on the parts of Jews more than blacks, is borne out by the flurry of books (including the three books under review here) that have appeared in the last several decades, almost all of them written by Jews. In the 1960s and 1970s, indeed into the 1980s, these books primarily dealt with the traditional black-Jewish alliance—either to lament its demise at the hands of black power militants and Islamic extremists, or to claim that such an alliance never properly

existed, or, at least, did not exist in the ways in which the myth of black-Jewish relations would have it (see, for example, Hasia Diner's *In the Almost Promised Land*; Paul Berman's edited volume *Blacks and Jews: Arguments and Alliances*; my own *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation*; Seth Forman's even more recent *Blacks in the Jewish Mind*; and Ethan Goffman's *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*, to cite only a few of the many volumes that have appeared during these years). If one were to extrapolate an evolving argument from these books, which reaches a kind of climax in Melnick's study, it would be that identification with blacks and the utilization of black cultural materials were less acts of Jewish commitment to the black cause than a way American Jews had of positioning themselves as white Americans within a racist and potentially anti-Semitic social structure. In so arguing, this tradition of critical books constitutes what may well be an enactment of its own thesis, with the American Jewish critic, rather than the primary cultural producer, like the writers or musicians these books discuss, once again utilizing black materials in order to secure his or her position as an *American Jew*, which is to say, a Jew within American culture.

I begin with Melnick's book, which is extremely learned and scholarly, and which offers a fascinating set of materials to which Melnick brings considerable intelligence, sensitivity, and powers of insight. Primarily, the book focuses on the period of the 1920s and 1930s, when black and Jewish musicians were producing ragtime and jazz. Or, rather, when Jewish musicians—such as Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Sophie Tucker, George and Ira Gershwin, Isaiah Berlin, and Jerome Kern—utilizing black cultural materials, were producing this transformation in American music. Despite the various local nuances and emphases of the book's analyses, some of which are quite extraordinary, Melnick's presentation of this era in American music essentially concerns the ways in which Jews exploited both African American music and, even more painfully perhaps, the musicians themselves, in order to further their own assimilation into American culture.

"One way in which members of this generation of Jews established their legitimacy as a distinct people," writes Melnick, "was by exploiting the racialized notion that their flexibility made them well suited for articulating the music of fusion; the pivot for this contention and its popular reception was a certainty that Jews bore a special relationship to African Americans" (p. 96). American Jews, in other words, would take it upon themselves to realize the ideals of the American melting pot (itself a Jewish-authored phrase); and they would do so in such a way as to make them central players in the American culture game. In this process, the rhetorical term "black-Jewish," quite irrespective of what it might in re-

ality represent, served the function of calling public notice to the Jews' mediating position between black and white American culture.

The question that Melnick's study raises is one that has concerned many culture critics: who owns culture? Who has the right to certain materials, for example, the Holocaust? I raise this particular example because in the instance of the Holocaust, appropriation, in the view of many critics of the black-Jewish relationship, has moved in the other direction, from Jewish history to black culture, with African Americans and not Jews borrowing the cultural materials of the other group. Such issues of cultural theft and exploitation are inseparable from issues of power. Decimated by the events of the Holocaust, Jews seem entitled to whatever benefits or relief the subject of the Holocaust might bring.

An analogous argument holds for blacks in relation to the subjects of slavery and racism. Had blacks enjoyed equal rights in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, then presumably the issue of who wrote black history or utilized black folk materials, whether in music, film, or any other cultural medium, would not arise. After all, black music itself is a cultural borrowing. It is African *and* American, and, as such, like all cultural productions, it is an admixture of cultural elements. The African American tradition, in other words, is no more pure than the jazz, ragtime, and blues produced by Jewish musicians in the 1920s and 1930s. What does, however, distinguish such ethnic cultural production from the works of a Nathaniel Hawthorne or a Henry James or even a Cecil B. DeMille is that it is the cultural production of an enslaved and then a racially ostracized and marginalized minority community.

The question that has to be asked concerning Melnick's study is whether the Jews who went into music and film in the early part of the twentieth century were *at that time* members of an any less ostracized and marginalized group than African Americans, and if not in the United States, then in the countries of their immediate origins, since these Americans who made good in music and the arts were at best first- or second-generation Americans, who grew up in communities well acquainted through firsthand experience with just that level of violence and discrimination experienced in the United States, not by Jews, but by blacks. This is *not* to assert that American Jews identified extensively with American blacks. It is only to raise the question whether the status of those Jews' borrowing cultural goods in order to advance themselves in their new country of residence is any different from, and more to be impugned than, black borrowings of African and/or Jewish culture, or, for that matter, Christian borrowings of Jewish materials, going back to the Old Testament itself (which is not, of course, referred to in Jewish culture as the Old Testament at all).

Though Melnick does pay some attention to the characterization and role of Jews in European culture, a greater contextualization of the immigrant and first-generation Jewish experience would yield certain important correctives to the argument that he (like Michael Rogin in his landmark study *Black Face, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*) is putting forth. Though Jews may in contemporary America be indistinguishable from other Americans, this was not yet the case at the beginning of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the Jews of Europe already had a tradition of cultural integration and borrowing, in which the Jewish assimilation of German or Austrian or Russian culture had a long history. In other words, Jews didn't suddenly begin to become procurers of local culture upon their arrival in the United States; nor was their experience as assimilationists founded in relation to marginalized or excluded cultural others. In Europe, the Jews took on the dominant culture, and, in very important ways, they continued that trajectory in the United States. Indeed, the European response to Jewish assimilation is hardly irrelevant to what is going on among America Jews in the early part of the twentieth century. It was the failure of the Jews in Europe to achieve assimilation that sent them in pursuit of cheerier shores, where they discovered African American culture along with other aspects of American culture.

Adam Newton, in *Facing Black and Jew*, is less concerned with the conflicts and competition between blacks and Jews (real or imagined) than with placing both African American and Jewish American writers within the same literary tradition, in order to discover how reading their texts in the context of their mutuality and difference enables us to perceive dimensions of their literary achievements barely discernible when we read the texts as expressions of each group's separate sociopolitical and literary history. Newton's is an extremely difficult book, more difficult, I think, than it absolutely needs to be, but it provides rich readings of the writers it discusses: Henry Roth, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, Philip Roth, David Bradley, Cynthia Ozick, Ishmael Reed, and David Mamet, to cite only some.

Though Newton wants to produce a dialogue between black-authored and Jewish-authored American texts, he takes his theoretical ground from two Jewish philosophers, neither of them American: Emmanuel Levinas and Walter Benjamin. "Allegory in Benjamin," writes Newton, "charts the gap between sign and meaning. As Benjamin's contemporary, Theodor Adorno, put it, the aesthetic understood in this sense disenchant an already enchanted world. It breaks the spell that locks figures into ruin or disaster" (p. xiv). As such, allegory plays a role like that of

the “face” in the writings of Levinas, which, to adapt one of Newton’s Levinasian statements about texts, “preserve[s] the strangeness of [the] other’s strangeness” (p. xiii). Through Newton’s couplings, African American and Jewish American fiction are made to “face” each other—and help to preserve rather than to dissolve “each other’s strangeness,” not to mention their own.

Take, for example, one of Newton’s pairings: two classics of black and Jewish literature, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*. While, as modernist fictions, these texts surely have things in common, nonetheless both are concerned with their own ethnic/religious group: neither of them is specifically or insistently concerned with members of the other racial/religious community. Yet Ellison’s opening sentence, “I am an invisible man,” can almost seem to be (in Newton’s way of reading it) an address to which Roth’s concluding line is the response: “He shut his eyes.” Or vice versa: it is possible, Newton argues, to imagine the Invisible Man as closing his eyes and Roth’s David Schearl declaring that he is an invisible man: “As primary figures in the fictive worlds of each novel and despite all their differences as characters and culture heroes, this Black and this Jew [*Invisible Man* and David] can be made to *face one another* even if they do not ‘see’ or ‘hear’ each other” (p. 27). The consequences of this are, for Newton, to lift these texts off the plane of the ideological (of identity politics or special pleading) and to catapult them into the realm of the estrangement that is literariness itself: “while vicissitudes of race and ethnicity propel them, the novels resist being reduced by or to them” (p. 28)—a feature of each novel that is brought into focus by the “communion” between them produced by Newton’s facing the one with the other.

Most of Newton’s chapters proceed this way, juxtaposing novels that are not themselves concerned with *blacksandjews* (an exception to this is the discussion of John Edgar Wideman and Bernard Malamud). This is to completely undo the trajectory of most books on black-Jewish literary relations, such as Ethan Goffman’s *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*. As Goffman characterizes his own undertaking, it is a “relatively straightforward analysis of [the] clamorous dialogue in which Blacks and Jews are portrayed in each other’s literature” in the period extending from the end of World War II until the present (p. xi). To this end, Goffman provides both a theoretical frame for understanding ethnic relations in culture generally and a history of some of the pertinent facts pertaining to black-Jewish relations in the United States in particular. He then proceeds through in-depth readings of a number of works of literature, in order to suggest how changing

socioeconomic and cultural conditions affected black and Jewish life in the United States and, therefore, both the interaction and the representation of that interaction between these two communities.

Goffman begins with two works of African American fiction that deal with one of the major areas of black-Jewish contact in the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* both deal with the complexity of the black response to this alliance, which, insofar as it created a condition of black dependency, spawned a considerable amount of resentment (along with the genuine appreciation that was also felt). Goffman then turns to a series of complementary works by Jewish authors—by Philip Roth (*Goodbye, Columbus*), Saul Bellow (“Looking for Mr. Green,” *Henderson, the Rain King*), and Bernard Malamud (“Angel Levine” and “Black Is My Favorite Color”)—which travel the path of assimilation into mainstream white American culture without necessarily sacrificing a sympathetic feeling about African Americans; although, as Goffman shows, that feeling isn't any more unambiguous than the attitude of blacks toward Jews in the same period.

Both of these chapters—and the one following, dealing with Lorraine Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and several novels by Paule Marshall—focus more or less on the sympathy, however complex, between blacks and Jews, which comes to a fiery eruption in the 1960s in the black power movement (and with the more direct anti-Semitism that accompanied it). That anti-Semitism in writers such as Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni produced within Jewish writers a reevaluation of their fellows blacks, which often manifested itself in representations of blacks as primitive and angry (as, for example, in Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and Bernard Malamud's *The Tenant*).

Goffman's concern throughout is with the individual expressions by blacks and Jews of the tensions and affinities between them. This sets the stage for the final chapters, which deal with the implications of black-Jewish relations for American multiculturalism. Unlike Melnick's and Newton's books, Goffman's does not have an overriding thesis. This is, in many ways, to the book's credit. But it also produces certain problems. The book doesn't break any new ground, either in terms of the historical materials or the readings themselves, even though it does introduce into the canon of black-Jewish relations some texts that are not sufficiently discussed elsewhere, and it succeeds in collecting important material on this subject in one place.