Race doesn't prescribe the experience or predict emotional depth, but there are historical experiences only being Black in space, time and mind will make possible.

The Village Voice, Greg Tate

It is a testament to many things that my first exposure to racial tyranny and genocide was an imaginative one. It is a testament to a happy childhood, albeit one in a former colony; it is a testament to the psychological rotting that often happens when one lives in a Black society, albeit one subject to the whims and fancies of the metropolis. It is a testament to the very colonial status of the islands I grow up in, Trinidad and Tobago, that I was not exposed, either in school or imaginatively through library books, to the horror that was the Middle Passage and African life under slavery in the New World. I was sixteen before I began to learn West Indian history. I had read neither The Souls of Black Folk or Up From Slavery. There wasn't a copy of either at my library — I had read virtually the entire collection and those books I hadn’t read, I knew of.

It is a testament to power. The overwhelming and oppressive weight of colonial power which attempts to create subjects in their own image — the good colonist; the power of those who are able to withhold your history in an attempt to control your thoughts.

The imaginative exposure to what we now euphemistically call ‘whites cleansing’ came through the books of Leon Uris, in particular Exodus. At twelve, possibly thirteen, I was outraged and upset at what had happened to the Jews. In the silence surrounding my own history and my own memory, I took to myself the pain of what had happened to Jewish people in Europe. Perhaps — I am sure that at some deeper level I knew what had happened to my own people (this knowledge, even if not spoken, is passed on, sometimes silently transmitted from one generation to another), and that I was on the journey to my own past albeit through a surrogate issue. It matters not how we come to understand oppression, provided we take the lessons to heart and apply them to our lives.

I know the exposure to be a significant one because it continues to crop up in my own imaginative and poetic life. In “St. Clair Avenue West” (Salmon Cudjoe) I wrote:

I stared
saw
(believed for the first time I knew all along)
the blue veins
the numbered wrist

I had seen ‘It’ a name-
Suffering
silent you shook your head, mouthed
“Persecution”
white they called it blessings

and we were the B.C.Ds-
Basic Common Denominators
silence divided by time
one oppression by two realities
the only reminder
one scarred wrist
tattooed blue with numbers
and branded memories that balk at talk

Do you think it was like this
when Salmon showed his way
his wisdom to the stranger eyes
of the black Queen from the South?
Did they bargain like this
shaking each other’s memories
casual to avoid each other’s potholes of personal truth...
That was in 1963. In 1989, Mrs. Blowhamp, an old Jewish woman in my novel, Hanover's Daughter, leaves something for the fourteen-year-old Margaret/Heir, the young African American girl. What Mrs. Blowhamp has left for Margaret is still unknown to me, but it does have to do with the girl's understanding another's pain that was given to another young girl many years ago on a Caribbean island. I was always conscious of laying the ground work for a sequel that would explore the possible links between a Jewish survivor of the Nazi Holocaust and the descendant survivors of the African Holocaust.

Recently in Toronto, there has been much talk of Jewish/Black tension. It is also difficult not to be aware of the allegations and counter-allegations south of the border between Jews and African Americans. Some of the sensitivity on both sides comes from the identification of Jewish involvement in the slave trade. It is clear to anyone who has more than a cursory understanding of the period of time of the African slave trade that slavery was involved in the African slave trade. There is blood on everyone's hands: Christian, Jew, Muslim and African — Black and white alike. Even Native people bought, owned and sold slaves. As a descendant of survivors of the Middle Passage and the atrocity of slavery, I am kissed with all of them.

Research and writings that attempt to blame Africans for the slave trade, as I read recently in an article in the Toronto Star, are as reprehensible as those that attempt to suggest that Jews were the main culprits. African involvement was driven by the great need of the European powers for slaves and is similar to the plight of Colombians peasants who are forced into growing coca to support America's addiction. So too having been forced by anti-Semitism in Europe into money-lending, some Jews were able to underwrite the expansion of the slave trade. This is not to excuse and absolve those involved but to explain and understand, which is what responsible scholarship is all about.

The issue of these tensions between Jews and Blacks is that both groups have been ineffectively linked in European thought and practice around anti-Semitism and anti-African racism. As J.B. Ndekele points out, for more than their creator links Shylock and Othello, and the Mediterranean division of the world into the descendants of Ishmael, Ham, Japhet and nations of Asia, Africa and Europe respectively underscore these links. Semites and Christians are outside the Christian world and play the Others to straight Europe. The Jews were the representatives of Asia in Europe but linked to Africa by those of the foot of the human ladder, Sander Gilman the Jewish scholar writes:

The Jews are black, according to nineteenth-century racial science, because they are not a pure race, because they are a race which has come from Africa. But the blackness of the African like the blackness of the Jew, was credited to the effect of certain diseases, specifically syphilis, on the skin of the African. The blackness of the Jew is written on the skin. The blackness of the Jew was not only a mark of racial inferiority, but also an indicator of this or her disease nature... African blacks, especially the American blacks, because the epigones of the "ugly race" and being ugly was not merely a matter of aesthetics but was a clear sign of pathology, disease. Being black was an illness. Indeed, the blackness of the African, like the blackness of the Jew, was believed to mark a probable change in the skin. The result of congenital syphilis... (my emphasis)

Sander Gilman, The Jew's Body

Gibson marshals overwhelming evidence to show how European racial science linked both groups: Jews had "intermarried with Africans during the period of the American slave trade"; the Jews' Africanism was evident in "his muscled-shaped mouth and face removing him from certain other races... lips (are) very full (full) mouth projecting... the whole physiognomy, when seen as it often is, has an African look.

Hilarus argues in Mein Kampf that it is "Jews who bring the Negroes into the Rhineland, always with the same secret thought and clear aim of running the hated white race by... bastardization..." Together with gypsies, homosexuals, Communists and Freemasons, Jews and Blacks would become the target of Nazi Germany.

It is deeply significant that each of these exclusions — of Jews and Blacks — has led to a holocaust on a world scale... the exclusion of the African slave trade followed by colonial domination, and the recurrent pogroms against Jews culminating in the Babiho — in the first of which millions of Africans, and the second millions of Jews, lost their lives. (White on Black, Jan Nederveen Pietersen)

But race is infinitely malleable and Gilman writes, despite these links Jews appear to have-homogenized into being while whites in the United States. Gilman writes that the "Jewish concept of the desire for invisibility, the desire to become "white," lies at the center of the Jew's flight from his or her own body." Gilman raises the issue of whether Jews are white as did Melanie Kaye Couture's at a recent speech described Jews as the darkest of the whites and the core of the Blacks suggesting a sort of alipage as being part of the construction of Jewishness in North America. Gilman's words capture best the historical link between Blacks and Jews and the "American" society. The Negro's color, where distance to Blackness continues to be a marker of progress. He sees Al Jolson's role as a Sambo figure performing "Hamlet" in blackface on the consumption of this contradiction:

Are Jews white? Or do they become white when they choose?... Their white jokes, their white identity, etc., by identifying with the ideals of "American" life, with all of its evocation of race, that they — at least in their own minds — are black. Does blackface make everyone put its lip on white?

Sander Gilman, The Jew's Body

One of the most distressing of the tensions between Blacks and Jews is the sense of competition for position of the privileged minority — the most oppressed group. The hierarchy of oppression such as was fueled by recent statements by William F. Buckley (The Toronto Star, June 2, 1983) are offensive and should be avoided. Whose interests are being served when a taped anti-Semitic dissemination of the concerns of Blacks over Jews, is a posture and a "victoiry of the rights of the people of Toronto" and praises Jewish "hyper-sensitivity"? Because of the Holocaust, Jews earned distinctive immunities. Buckley is quoted as saying: "indifference to that hyper-sensitivity on the subject is correct.

Each aspect of their uniqueness is the exception — and so it should be. Often that uniqueness is all the members of the group have to hang on to, and so they should. What happened to Native people is very different from what happened to Africans, which is turn differs from what happened to Jews. It would be presented as a matter of extreme and very rare of me, however, to tell a Native person that the country suffers as much as African people did. Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t. But while we fight about who suffered most, we deflect energies from what the real struggle is about.

The African scholar, Ali Musun, has argued that unlike in the case of Africans who had a commercial price put on them, Native Americans were not sold to the Japs and the Whites. The Tragedy of the Japs, in the sense of the Japs in South Africa, is that they were not only dehumanized; they were totally dehumanized. Herein lies one major difference. On the other hand, the historian, Orlando Patterson, has argued compellingly about the fact that for Africans slavery represented a 'social death.' Will the African Jew, therefore sit picking over the bones of our deed, our ancestors, arguing about which was worse, the social death or the real death? This would be a tragedy to their memories and lives. And those who traffic in death and discount honor of bargain basement prices like nothing better but to see us fight among ourselves.
What can be argued is that once the need for Africans had waned, they too were devalued as shown in the movement to deport them from the United States. Might there, therefore, not be a connection between what happened to Blacks and what would eventually happen to Jew when a state could bring about against them and others, all the technological means of death at its disposal? What of the prototype of concentration camps at Gobo and all along the west coast of Africa? Still these differences are very real, nuanced and important.

Jews and Blacks are at present invested very differently in North American society, and while Blacks are neither entirely powerless, nor Jews all-powerful, the disparity in power between the two groups is very real. The crushing weight of white racism is manifest in all the institutions of society one expects to further the lives of citizens; Blacks and Africans often see these organizations as enemiesarrayed against them. Education has served them badly; health care — particularly in the United States — is often minimal; and between them, the police and the justice system so effectively manage the clash the winnowing winds of racism discard, almost fifty percent of the jail population in the United States is comprised of Blacks. An Melanie Kay Kauzowits started at a speech in Toronto (GEO) on April 17, 1980, the killing of the Jewish student in Crown Heights, offers a Black child was run over and died, was an exception; the beating of Rodney King by the police was an act of normalcy, Jews today say ‘never again’ and so they should. Blacks and African peoples say ‘again and again’ as we see the broken bodies on television, Somalia, South Africa, as we hear of Black youth being shot, as we see the horror white life wreaks on Black people.

Jews face different problems: their concern with and sensitivity to identification is understandable given what this has meant for them historically. But the ability to pass comes with its own peculiar set of burdens. Given the latest and not so latent anti-Semitism in Western societies, reminders of the Jewish Holocaust serve the very necessary function of keeping that anti-Semitism at bay and in check.

While anti-Semitism against Jews presents itself most often as non-institutional, racism against Blacks is both institutional and non-institutional. Both these faces of racism are linked, however — a system that is less than committed to fighting the systemic racism within its own institutions will encourage the flowering of neo-Nazi groups. The fight against one must include the fight against the other.

One Jew sent to the ovens is too much. One African captured and taken out of Africa is too much. One Native person killed as a result of European expansionism, one Japanese sent to the camps is too much. One is too many. And that is where we may be able to locate a public with the possibility of communication in the fight against what Mumia calls “systems of humiliation.”

Blocks — African Caribbeans people whom I know best — have had a long history of resisting these systems. We understand what the fight against Hitler meant and many Black men joined up and fought overseas on behalf of the Allied powers to prevent the culmination of an obscene racist ideology that hadingered everyone who wasn’t ‘white.’ As a matter of course, many of us have taken the Jewish experience in World War II into our lives. We have had to. I believe some of the anger expressed over the last few months comes from the desire for some show of reciprocity. Maybe the horror of the Shoah has been so great that there is no room for the concerns of others. That too would be understandable, but there has been sufficient example otherwise, to show that this is not necessarily the case.

The contradictions of life are such that one can be a member of an oppressed group and be powerful. Coming from Trinidad whose Indians/African relations are often tense, it was a disturbing but useful experience to observe how Asians saw Asians as being powerful and oppressive. This image is, of course, at odds with the one we hold of ourselves, and there was truth on both sides. Those are some of the contradictions that arise, particularly when groups have been powerfully shaped by external events. The experience of oppression is, however, no guarantee that former victims will not themselves become oppressors. At my core jealous I have often argued the only thing oppression guarantees is further oppression when the former victims gain power. We cannot, therefore, afford to rest on our experiences, group or personal, of oppression. We have to consciously work to make links, and be vigilant that we not use our oppression to justify oppressing or hurting others.

Our ethnicity and race do not isolate us against racism and anti-Semitism. Racism exists among Jews as surely as anti-Semitism exists among Blacks. Unfortunately, the pathologies of these social illnesses have affected us all; what we need to do is first be conscious of this reality finger-pointing until we have examined the roots or logs in our own eyes and work to understand how systems of power work to pit us against each other.

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