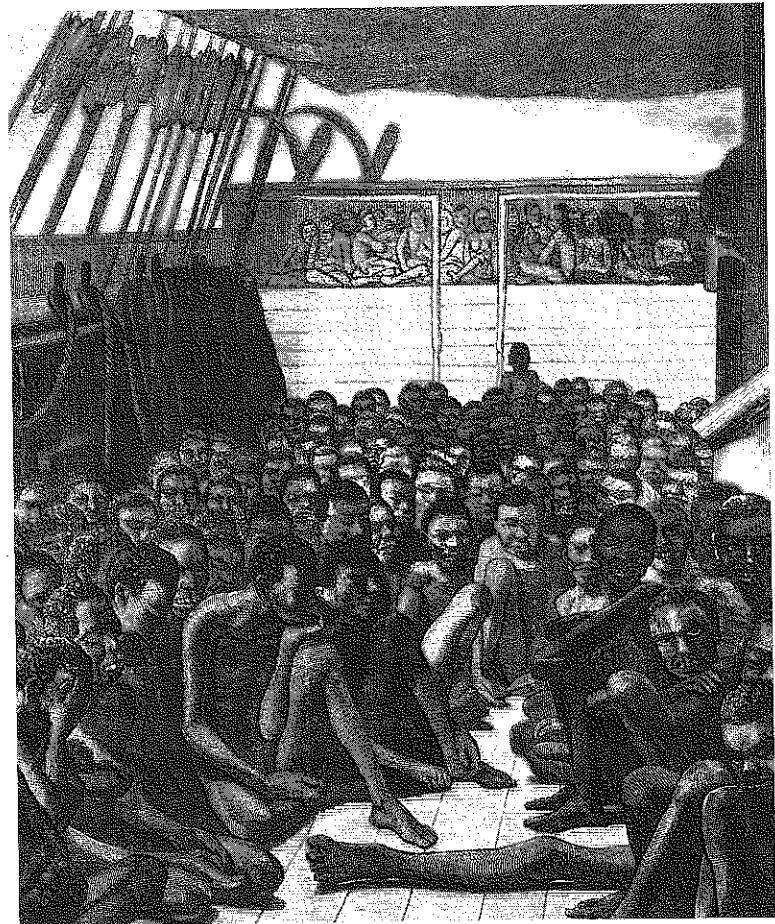


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by M. Nourbese Philip

RELATIONS

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There are things the Negro knows that the white man can never know. Things which belong to the pure, unique, spiritual destiny of America, and which have been denied to the white man, will be denied to him forever

because of his brutality to the Negro and to the Indian. So too there are things the Jew alone can know, things closed forever to the gentile even to the best of Christians.

(Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Thomas Merton)

Race doesn't prescribe 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 rooting 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 grew 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 colonial; 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 'ethnic 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 infinitely nuanced 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 Courage*) I wrote:



Eyeglasses taken from prisoners killed in Auschwitz.

I stared  
saw  
(believed for the first though I knew all along)  
the blue veins  
the numbered wrist  
...  
I had given 'It' a name-  
Suffering  
silent you shook your head, mouthed  
"Persecution"  
while they called it Ratings  
...  
and we were the B.C.Ds -  
Basic Common Denominators -  
silence divided by time  
one oppression by two realities  
the only remainder  
one scrawny wrist  
tattooed blue with numbers  
and branded memories that balk at talk  
...  
D'you think it was like this  
when Solomon showed his wares  
his wisdom to the stranger eyes  
of the black Queen from the South?  
Did they bargain like this  
stalking each other's memories  
careful to avoid each other's potholes of  
personal truth...

That was in 1983. In 1988, Mrs. Blewchamp, an old Jewish woman in my novel, *Harriet's Daughter*, leaves something for the fourteen-year-old Margaret/Harriet, the young African Canadian girl. What Mrs. Blewchamp has left for Margaret is still unknown to me, but it does have to do with the 'gift' of understanding another's pain that was given to another young girl many years ago on a Caribbean island. I was also 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 of survivors of the African holocaust.

Recently in Toronto, there has been much talk of Jewish/Black tensions; 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 every group 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 pissed to hell 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 Colombian peasants who are forced into growing cocoa 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 expenses of the trade. This is not to excuse and absolve those involved but to explain and understand, which is what responsible scholarship is all about.

The irony of these tensions between Jews and Blacks is that both groups have been inextricably linked in European thought and practice around anti-Semitism and anti-African racism. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse notes, far more than their creator links Shylock and Othello, and the Medieval division of the world into the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japhet and ancestors of Asia, Africa and Europe respectively underscore these links. Semites and Hamites are outside the Christian world and play the Other to straight Europe. The Jews were the representatives of Asia in Europe but linked to Africans who were placed at 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 (his or her) diseased nature ...African blacks, especially the Hottentot...became the epitome 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 not beautiful. Indeed, the blackness of the African, like the blackness of the Jew, was believed to mark a pathological change in the skin, the result of congenital syphilis. (my emphasis)**

Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*

Gilman marshalls overwhelming evidence to show how European racial science linked both groups: Jews had "interbred with Africans during the period of the Alexandrian exile"; the Jew's Africanness was evident in "his muzzle-shaped mouth and face removing him from certain other races...lips (are) very full,(the) mouth projecting...the whole physiognomy, when swarthy, as it often is, has an African look."

Hitler 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 ruining 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 centuries of the African slave trade followed by colonial domination, and the recurrent pogroms against Jews culminating in the Shoah — in the first of which millions of Africans, and the second millions of Jews, lost their lives." (*White on Black*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse)

But race is infinitely malleable and as Gilman writes, despite these links Jews appear to have metamorphosed into being white in the United States. Gilman writes that 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 Katrowitz at a recent speech described Jews as the darkest of the whites and the fairest of the Blacks suggesting a sort of slippage 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" reality where distance from Blackness continues to be a marker of progress. He sees Al Jolson's role as a Sambo figure performing "Mammy" in black-face as the consummation of this contradiction:

**Are Jews white? Or do they become white when they, like Jack Robin, acculturate into American society, so identifying with the ideals of "American" life, with all of its evocation of race, that they — at least in their own mind's eye — become white? Does black-face make everyone who puts it on white?**

Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*

One of the most distressing aspects 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 fuelled by recent statements by William F. Buckley (*The Toronto Star*, June 2, 1993) are offensive and should be avoided. Whose interests are being served when a lapsed anti-Semite dismisses the concerns of Blacks over *Show Boat* as preposterous and a "violation of the rights of the people of Toronto" and praises Jewish 'hypersensitivity'? "Because of the Holocaust, Jews earned distinctive immunities," Buckley is quoted as saying; "indifference to that, hypersensitivity on the subject is correct."

Each group claims the uniqueness of their oppression — 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 in turn differs from what happened to the Jews. It would be presumptuous and very wrong of me, however, to tell a Native person that they didn't suffer 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 all about.

The African scholar, Ali Mazrui, has argued that unlike in the case of Africans who had a commercial price put on them, Nazis hunted Jews purely to murder them. His argument, as stated in his book *The African Condition*, is that "they were not only dehumanized; they were totally devalued." 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 we African and Jew, therefore sit picking over the bones of our dead, our ancestors, arguing about which was worse, the social death or the real death. This would be a travesty to their memories and lives. And those who traffic in death and discount horror at bargain basement prices like nothing better but to see us fight among ourselves.



"Lady of Tuskegee" by P.H. Palk, 1932



"Washing The Souls Of The Feet" by Doris Ullman, 1930  
Tuskegee Institute Archives

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 Jews when a state could bring to bear against them and others, all the technological means of death at its disposal. What of the prototype of concentration camps at Goree and all along the west coast of Africa? Still there are differences which are very real, nuanced and important.

Jews and Blacks are at present inserted 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 enemies arrayed 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 chaff the winnowing winds of racism discard, almost fifty percent of the jail population in the United States is comprised of Blacks. As Melanie Kay Kantrowitz stated at a speech in Toronto (OISE) on April 17, 1993, the killing of the Jewish student in Crown Heights, after 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 havoc white life wreaks on Black peoples.

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 latent 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.

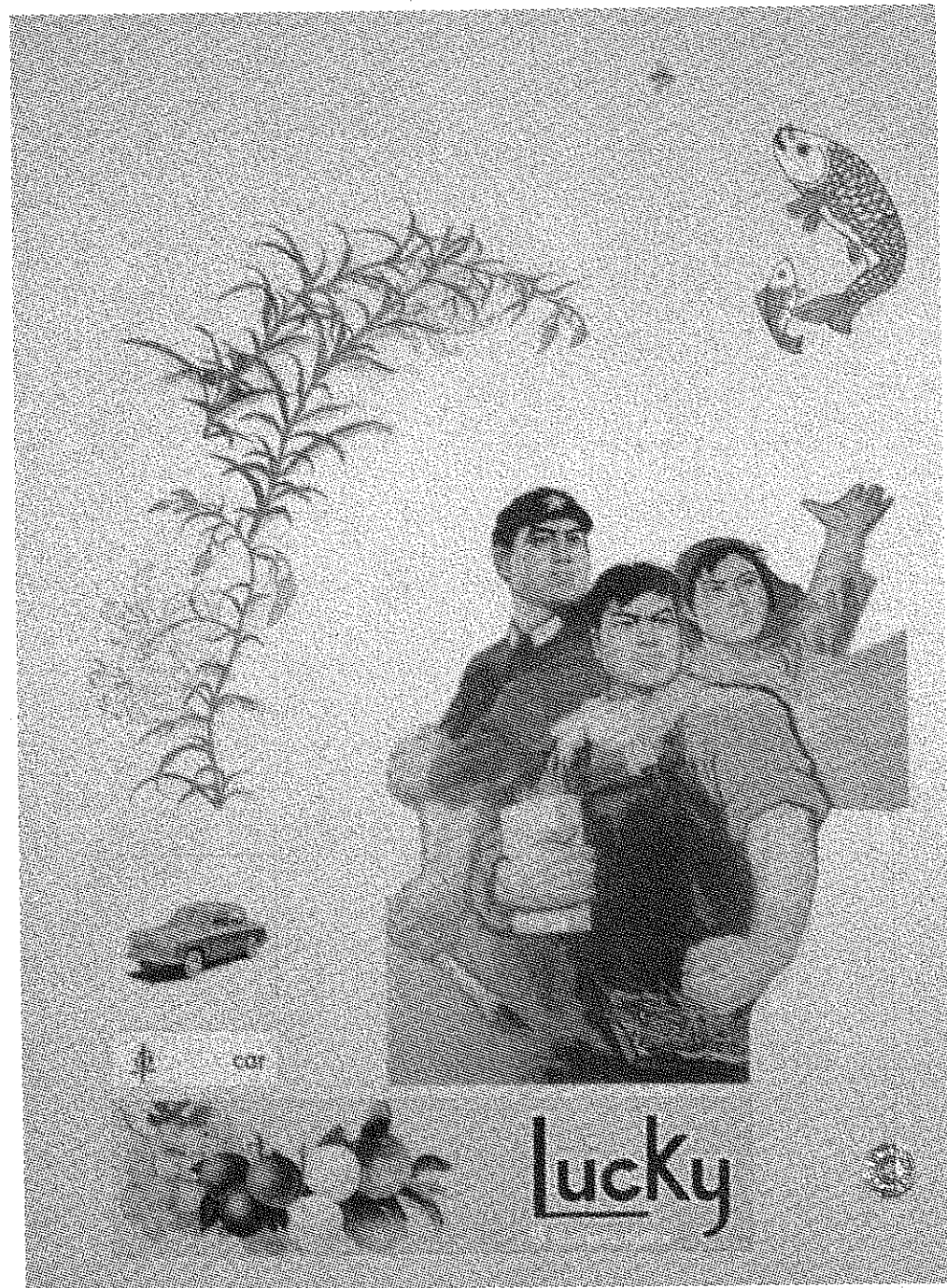
One Jew sent to the ovens is too much. One African captured and taken out of Africa is too much. One Native person killed as a result of European expansionism. One Japanese sent to the camps is too much. *One is too many.* And that is where we may be able to locate a politic with the possibility of communication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

Blacks — African Caribbean people whom I know best — have had a long history of resisting these systems. We understood 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 had fingered 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 have been sufficient examples otherwise, to show that this is not necessarily the case.

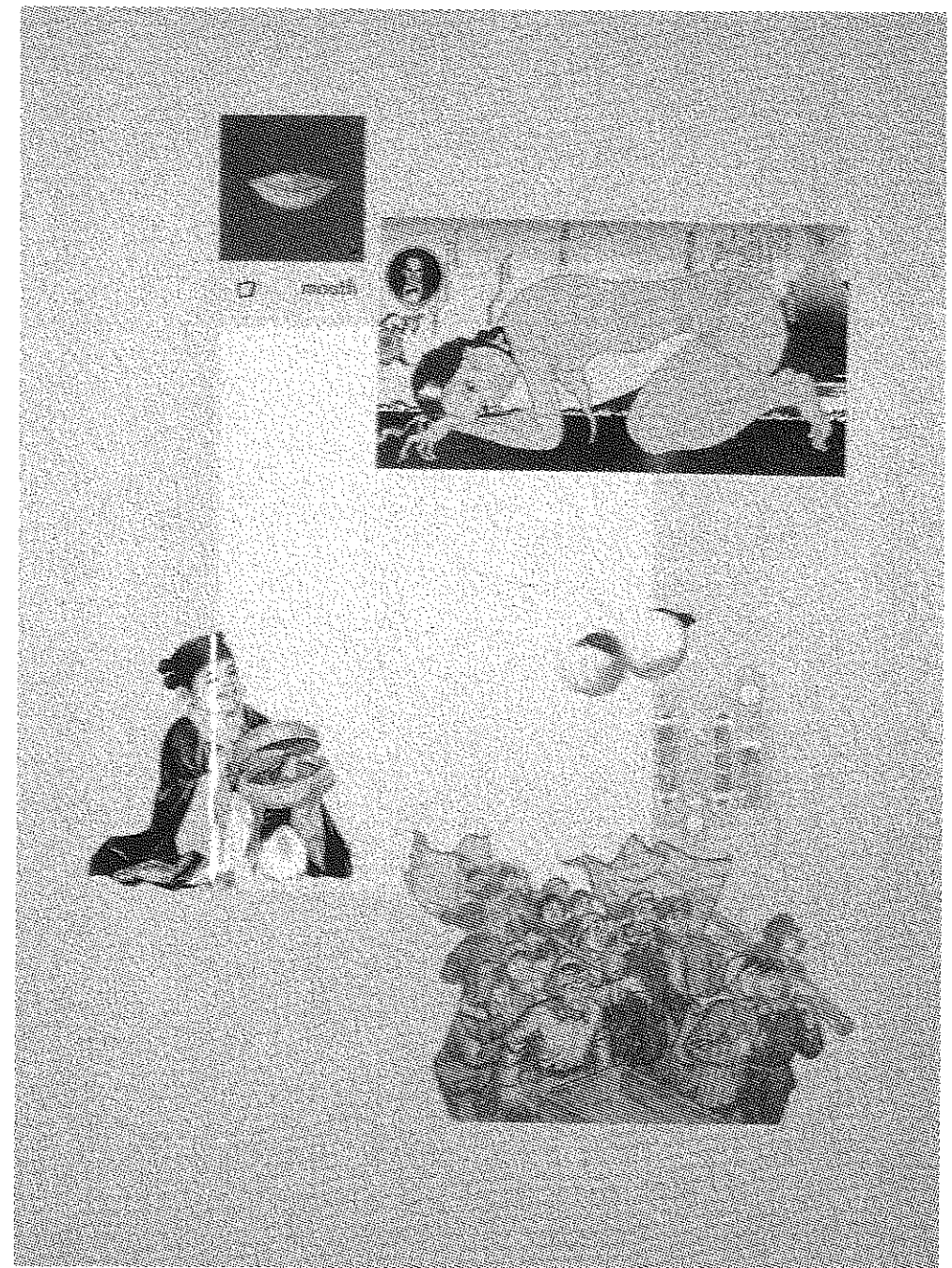
The contradictions of life are such, that one can be a member of an oppressed group and be powerful. Coming from Trinidad where Indian/African relations are often tense, it was a disturbing but useful experience to observe how Asians saw Africans as being powerful and oppressive. This image is, of course, at odds with the one we hold of ourselves, and there was truth on both sides. These are some of the contradictions that arise, particularly where 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 most cynical 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 inoculate 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, resist finger-pointing until we have examined the motes or logs in our own eyes and work to understand how systems of power work to pit us against each other.

*M. Nourbese Philip is a poet and a writer living in Toronto. Her most recent book, Showing Grit: Showboating North of The 44th Parallel, is excerpted here.*



L U C K Y  
BRENDA JOY LEM



L E A P F R O G  
BRENDA JOY LEM