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Color Matters: Writing / Whiting Out the Jews in Twenty-First-Century African American Memoirs*

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Abstract

This essay thinks through the implications of reading color into Jewishness in two memoirs, Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001) and Emily Raboteau's *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* (2013). Each of these memoirs undermines attempts to police color lines between Jews and Blacks and at the same time reinforces a narrative that excludes Jews as "White." Rebecca Walker and Emily Raboteau perform a blackness that excludes Jewish identities and perceive "Jewishness" as a rejected social construct, but also a catalyst to discover and reclaim blackness. The article argues that the contemporary context of global ideological discourses which white out Jews must alert us to the resurgent racialization of Jewishness in a postcolonial discourse that cancels antisemitism.

Keywords: antisemitism, biracial identities, cancel culture, hybridity, "Jewishness", United States

PROLOG

The unfortunate gaffes in 2022 of Black American comedian Whoopi Goldberg seemed to drive a wedge between race and the Holocaust when she implied that the genocide of European Jews could not be considered racist since Jews are privileged as "White," therefore they cannot be classed as victims of racism: "This is white people doing it to white people, so y'all gonna fight amongst yourselves," Goldberg commented on the withdrawal by a school board of Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* a graphic novel that has become a classic Holocaust survivor's memoir.[1] Goldberg, who was born Caryn Elaine Johnson

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to a Baptist family in New York and took her stage surname to help increase her public impact, claiming affinity with the Jewish people, said the Nazi genocide was "not about race, it was [instead about] man's inhumanity to man," involving "two white groups of people." She further declared that if threatened by Ku Klux Klan members, she would be attacked, not Jews, implying that Jews were not victims of White Supremacy.[2] This was not an accidental reminder that American race discourse configures Jews as "White" and therefore privileged members of an oppressive exploitative group that cannot be ranked with victims of racism.

In a letter in 2023 to the liberal-progressive British weekly *Observer*, British Labour MP Diane Abbott, a close ally and former partner of Jeremy Corbyn, distinguished between racism and prejudice against Jews, who, she stated, never suffered persecution or segregation as Blacks did.[3] Abbott wrote in direct response to an article in the *Guardian* drawing attention to abuse of Jews, Irish, and Travelers in Britain by Black South Londoner Tomiwa Owolade, author of *This Is Not America: Why Black Lives in Britain Matter* (2023), which set a firewall between multicultural Britain and American race discourse.[4] After over thirty years in politics, Abbott (the first woman of African descent elected to the British Parliament) lost the Labour whip, just when the party was desperately trying, in the post-Corbyn fallout, to purge anti-Semitism from its ranks. Abbott was reinstated prior to the 2024 General Election, and stood for reelection as Labour candidate for her constituency of North Hackney and Stoke Newington—a constituency, as it happens, with a significant immigrant population and a concentration of Jewish *haredi* residents who are not infrequently subject to abuse and assault. This says something about some "liberal progressive" discourses, in which, as the comedian and writer David Baddiel has demonstrated, "Jews don't count," that is, they are erased from the narrative of racism.[5] Unlike Abbott, as Baddiel points out, Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple* (1982), an epic story of Black female empowerment, was not called out for her poem "It Is Our (Frightful) Duty to Study the Talmud" (2017), which reverted to Christian anti-Judaism in an attack on Israel and repeated anti-Semitic myths that Judaism encouraged pedophilia, child rape, and exploitation or murder of "Goyim" like her; nor was she called out for her antisemitic remarks in her published diaries and her recommendation of an antisemitic tract by David Icke, the British conspiracy theorist, *And the Truth Shall Set You Free*.[6] In Baddiel's view, groups can be literally "whited out" for being associated with politically incorrect ideologies, even if individuals affiliated or identified with membership in these groups do not necessarily hold similar views.

INTRODUCTION

The "whiting out" of Jews as a minority which characterizes contemporary rhetoric in the media about Israel and Jews is embedded in a racialized discourse. The anti-racist identity politics of the early twenty-first century takes for granted the whiteness of Jews as a homogenous group or class and largely ignores the large numbers of Jews of color in the United States (not just the Hassidic rapper Nissim Black) and in the United Kingdom,[7] as well as in Israel, where most of the population is not of Ashkenazic background. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, in a collection of voices of American Jews of color, asks why the question is being asked, "Are Jews White?":

> *Are Jews white?* Are they? Are they white? The urgency and anxiety behind the question were palpable and took me a while to understand. First assumption, there was one answer for all Jews. Second, the answer was either yes or no: Jews were white or they were of color. Third, whichever category one chose to file Jews into was a political decision: Jews were either down

> with the people of color, innocent and victimized, or lumped in with whites, guilty and victimizing.
>
> [. . .]
>
> And when I answer tersely and correctly, *Jews are a multiracial multiethnic people,* the asker most frequently succumbs to a tempting shorthand: *Yeah, but white Jews: Are* white *Jews white?*[8]

American Jews are certainly not all White or culturally uniform. The *Forward* in 2015–2016 ran a series of feature articles under the heading "In Jewish Color," focusing on the different ethnic mixes and colors of self-identifying Jews, whether of mixed race or "Jews by choice."[9] Moreover, Sephardim might not subscribe to the Ashkenazic norm of "lox and bagels" *Yiddishkeit*, while Ashkenazi and Sephardi American Jews span a diversity of cultural and religious identities, making the definition of an American Jew elastic and elusive. Nor are Jewish names or faces reliable indicators of identity—the highest score for recognizing Jewish faces was recorded on the basis of antisemitic stereotypes.[10]

Ethnicity—however defined—does not create a social divide in America in the same way that "race" does. In the literary imaginary, racial crossings such as Jews who pass for Black or Blacks who pass as Jews introduce ambiguities into the construction of binary racialization of identities, but they generally confirm a choice between being Black and being Jewish.[11] Performing a fake or imagined identity however, is less acceptable in real life. In 2020, when historian Jessica Krug, who was brought up Jewish, came out as "White" in a confession that she had passed as Black Puerto Rican in order to escape the neuroses of her origins, she was met with condemnation and was forced to resign her university position. She was not just lying, she was stealing someone else's heritage and (more significantly) someone else's victimhood; her story made persons of mixed race, including Jews of color, uncomfortable for crossing the color line.[12] Rachel Doležal was fired and disgraced in 2015 after passing as Black, but insisted on her right to self-identification regardless of her biological ancestry in her memoir *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World* (2017). Her insistence that passing as Black was not an opportunistic camouflage undermines attempts to essentialize identities, but the public backlash also shows just how transgressive are such crossings.[13]

In addressing some (though by far not all) race discourses that displace Jews as victims, this brief essay cannot set out the wider and more complex contexts of race and racialization of "Jewishness"; it merely proposes the need to look at the interrelatedness of color and Jewish identities in the contemporary context of discourses about antisemitism, Black-Jewish relations, and the Israel-Arab conflict. My material for analysis is literary, not sociological data, as a way of understanding how life-writing constructs ethnic and racial identities. In this essay I think through the implications of reading color into the racial construction of Jewishness in two memoirs, Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001) and Emily Raboteau's *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* (2013). Neither of these authors is halakhically Jewish or affiliated to a Jewish community; what is at issue is how "Jewishness" is related to color as a racialized category of identity in these texts. Each of these memoirs resists attempts to police color lines between Jews and Blacks and yet at the same time they color Jews as "White," despite the evidence of Jews of color in these same texts, in order to subscribe to an ideological discourse that is fundamentally hostile to Israel and to Jews.

Racialization of Jews links ethnicity and color in a discourse of politics and class. The "whiting" of the Jews has, after all, a history in the United States and beyond. Matthew Frye Jacobson

shows in *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998) how, like Irish and Italian immigrants, Jews were racialized in the early twentieth century,[14] yet, in Karen Brodkin's view, they became "white folks" after World War II.[15] However, this binary view of the racialization of Jews and its relation to American identity has also been seen to be more complex as Jews disowned racial identity after World War II, turning to a religious or tribal identification, and from the sixties turned to a revivalism that preserved a distinctiveness lost to integration and assimilation, looking to Black models of radicalism and the growing challenge to White hegemony coming from Asian and Hispanic Americans.[16] In "post-racial" America, color nevertheless matters. Moreover, for all the ambiguities and confusions in applying classification of ethnicity, religion, and nation to Jews, or the multiple affiliation and dis-affiliation of American Jews, race continues to dominate discourses about Jews in the twenty-first century.[17] Although suburban Jews have become largely indistinguishable from their neighbors and achieved near invisibility in ways most Blacks have not, the figure of the "Jew" in far-right and far-left discourses is persistently Othered. The following discussion will bring out the paradox in assigning skin color to Jews as a group in an anti-racist discourse that claims to promote diversity and recognition of difference among individuals.

The interrelationship of African American and American Jewish self-perceptions and the history of their mutual fears have been studied in the framework of African American and American Jewish political alliances or confrontations, and the stereotyping of Jews as middlemen and surrogate oppressors has been shown to go back to the 1960s.[18] Jews and Blacks have been said to share or compete for victimhood, yet the Jew and the Black have been constructed as sexual and gendered Others, as Franz Fanon commented in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).[19] James Baldwin's essay "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White" (1967) came at an auspicious moment, when America was emerging from segregation and coming to terms with the legacy of slavery, while Jews, many of whom were prominent in the Civil Rights Movement, were increasingly reevaluating their identities in terms of Holocaust consciousness and solidarity with Israel. Their material success and upward mobility owed much to a liberal educational system and social privilege associated with the White middle class, both of which were attacked on the far left and far right.[20] From the Black Panthers to #Black Lives Matter, Black identity politics has been hostile to Zionism and to Jews as Whites, which has not stopped Jews voicing support for Blacks and other Others, including Palestinian Arabs, as victims of oppression.[21] However, the mantra of slavery as the real holocaust in Black militant rhetoric ("sixty million and more" in Toni Morison's memorable phrase) infers Holocaust denial or relativism and cancels Jewish victimhood.[22]

BLACK OR WHITE AND JEWISH: A SHIFTING OF SELF

In Rebecca Walker's memoir *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001), the narrator feels "amorphous, missing the unbroken black outline around my body that everyone else seems to have."[23] The reason for this inability to know her own bodily, spiritual, or ethnic identity is the underlying question of this memoir, and the question of race prevents her self-identification in American society, or for that matter elsewhere in the world. This is why she feels more comfortable in international airports, the global transitional spaces that can be remembered only by the style they adopt for their waiting lounges or shopping malls, which could be anywhere and nowhere. She feels "more comfortable in airports than in either of the houses I call, with undeserved nostalgia, Home" (3). She can remember the limbotopias of airports but cannot remember anything she learned in the eight schools she attended.

The difficulty of being unable to identify herself except in the "neutral" transitional space of airports, that make no demands on passengers except for documentation of identity papers and ticketing as well as a declaration she does not carry a weapon, robs her of the safety of boundaries and constraints: "I want to know the limits of who I am" (4). To be confined in a home, even a prison or an asylum, with its rules and rituals, would at least give her a sense of self that she does not have despite her unlimited freedom to do and be whatever she wants. The qualification in the phrase "undeserved nostalgia" alerts us to her ambivalent unease about the homes in which she grew up and their failure to give her a sense of where she comes from or who she is. Her homes and the apartments where she lived did not have protective walls like a womb but doors through which she was encouraged to leave.

In order to locate herself in an African American identity, Rebecca Walker relates her birth to a calendar of race—November 1969, seventeen months after the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr.—and in a racialized territory, Jackson, Mississippi, in a newly desegregated hospital. Her birth certificate comes with a question mark over her mixed race, something still unusual and unaccepted. As the daughter of a well-known liberal Jewish Civil Rights lawyer, Melvyn R. Leventhal, and an Afro-American writer, the Pulitzer-winning Alice Walker, she performed the "tragic mulatta," and the roles she plays in her mind and in life often act out familiar scenarios from popular culture or mimic social behavior patterns, estranging her all the more from herself and accentuating her inner identity conflict. That conflict erupted when her parents divorced in 1976 and she alternated between her father's Jewish home in Riverdale, later in Larchmont, and her mother's bohemian artistic home in a largely Black area of San Francisco.

Rebecca was only too aware that her parents' inter-racial marriage in 1967 went against rules and taboos and that they were being watched by the Ku Klux Klan. However, her representation of her feelings towards her paternal Jewishness are ambivalent and complex: she feels "shut out" of her father's Jewish family, whose history she wants to be part of, pulled by a primal loyalty. Riding the subway to Brooklyn, she represses her urge to scream at the Hasidim, "crouched xenophobically over their Bibles," that she knows their story and to burst their "suffocating illusions of purity" (37). The prejudiced hostility in this perception of fellow Jews speaks for the rage she feels at feeling racially excluded from their community. Yet the racialized gaze is hers, not theirs, as she sees herself through what she calls their biblically ordained "xenophobia." Her paternal grandmother Miriam in Brooklyn, disregarding her parents' wishes, wants her to know she is Jewish, yet she considers her grandmother's Judaism inauthentic, barely extending beyond a smattering of broken Yiddish when she speaks to great-grandmother Jennie, a senile inarticulate old woman who won't or can't share her memories of Russia. In fact, Rebecca repeatedly projects onto her grandmother her negative feelings about her own Jewishness. Grandmother Miriam resents that her daughters-in-law are all "shiksas" (46) and that she will not have Jewish grandchildren, yet the bicultural atmosphere at Uncle Jack's Jewish-American-Catholic-Italian house seems familiarly pluralistic. After all, Italian Americans are also an ethnic-religious minority who have successfully integrated, like the Jews, into White America. However, since her mother is consistently absent there, Rebecca does not feel she fully belongs, as if she was "in the family through some kind of affirmative-action plan," a nod to governmental intervention in identity politics (47). Rebecca's mother would be as out of place in their smart, well-heeled home as they would be in hers. Twenty years later, when she meets one of her Jewish cousins, she still feels the gulf between them, holding back out of lack of trust in him and unsure if he is another "racist hick from Staten Island" (49). Rebecca Walker has written race into her childhood memories as an undeniable issue, but in doing so, she has internalized the race rules of

American society that override the "loyalty" that pulls her to her own people.

It is indeed a matter of loyalty and betrayal. She learns from her close friend Louisa, a mother figure, how to act cool and in control. At junior high it is this attitude that alienates her from her friends who resent her "'acting like a white girl,'" but she is unaware that what she is taking away from other "darker-skinned girls" must feel like "betrayal" (one of several examples of the narrator telling us what Rebecca was *not* thinking in this judgmental revision of childhood) (41). Significantly, the narrator notes that when she rushed out of school after class she noticed her White friend Lena was not there. Another test of loyalty is her father's betrayal of her mother. She finds it hard to choose sides when her father remarries a Jewish woman, whose care and nurturing make her feel guilty. The feminist movement claims her mother's service as a writer for *Ms. Magazine*. Then Black Power dissolves the alliances formed around her father's "transgressive" marriage, and he is treated as an "interloper" in the Black community. The new militant polarization of color has placed her copper-brown body in a quandary: "I no longer make sense. I am a remnant, a throwaway, a painful reminder of a happier and more optimistic but ultimately unsustainable time" (60).

The new polarization structures the narrative of Rebecca's identity formation. While her early childhood seemed happy, surrounded by friends of different colors, an encounter with a drunken "WASP-looking" Jewish student late one night during her first year at Yale challenges her identity as both Black and Jewish. Her response is no less racialized, in a "voice I want him to be sure is black that I think he'd better go" (25). Her physical strength in taking away from him the Swiss Army knife he was playing with in his "nimble, tennis-champion fingers" and her retort conceal the doubts within her: "Am I possible?" (25). In setting up this scene in terms of race and power, she is acting out class and gender barriers across color lines. However, she is also performing her biracial blackness, externalizing the stereotypical prejudices she perceives in others: When she shocks people with her east European Jewish ancestry, she gets "a strange, sadistic pleasure from watching their faces contort as they reconsider the woman who was more easily dismissible as Puerto Rican or Arab" (36–37).

Her parents' divorce makes Rebecca feel even more out of place. She has lost trust in people and feels shame at her being a "black girl." Envious of her friend Sarah's biracial house, she is thrown out of her friend's Sasha's home for sharing an erotic novel and rejected by Bryon, the boy she likes, because she is a "black girl." Rebecca doesn't want to be White; she wants to be "not black." What is missing is a story that will bring together the shards of memories, fragmented by the pain of living on a sharp color line. Although she identifies with the masculinity of her Black male relatives in Atlanta, their jokes about some of her idiosyncrasies remind her she is not completely accepted as her father's child because she is associated with the Whites who have caused them so much sorrow and injustice. Being pulled between her yearning for her mother's body and her father's house with her Jewish stepmother makes her identify with Anne Frank not just as a Jewish teenager but because of that loneliness and insecurity in her own secret annex inside her: she is convinced that her father will be unable to save her when they come to take them away (89). In the end, Jewishness does not give her walls that contain her in a sustainable identity. Why is this?

Rebecca broadcasts feelings of alienation from a side of her family that is minimally Jewish because she identifies them as White. However, when looking at a photograph of her maternal ancestor May Poole, a Black slave, she cannot relate to her and feels that her ancestor would have rejected her for not being sufficiently Black, for representing the brutality that oppressed her. Yet she thinks great-grandmother Jennie, who collected rent from Black tenements in Harlem, would have dismissed her as a brown insect, of

no importance (148–149). As a person of mixed race, Rebecca is neither a Black passing as White (like Nella Larsen), nor a Jew of color, like the Black Jewish family she meets during first year of high school in San Francisco but who don't talk about being Black and Jewish (120). Nor does she have the confidence to be a "real Black girl" who sticks up for herself (124). Nevertheless, Rebecca cannot get out of binary thinking because in the color coding of American ethnoracialism (African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and native Americans), Jews are invisible; they "don't count" in Baddiel's terms as an ethnic group identified as White who therefore cannot complain of racism.

Rebecca's "shifting selves" are largely determined by identification of her as Other. Beaten up by Black kids as a "yellow bitch" (106) and spurned by Latino boys for being White, Rebecca's puberty is a story of fleeting relationships disrupted by moving between her parents' homes and separate worlds which to her mind reinforce racial exclusivity: her father has married a "nice Jewish girl," and her mother has also teamed up with a Black man "as expected" (114–115). At summer camp, where there are two other Black girls, she fits in with the other cliquey girls from conspicuously wealthy Jewish homes who play the detested Jewish American Princess yet feels she has not got it right among Jews: "And yet I never get it quite right, never get the voice to match up with the clothes, never can completely shake free of my blackness: my respect for elders, my impatience with white-girl snottiness [sic!], the no-shit tough attitude [. . .] which makes other girls defer to me, look up to me, fear me" (177–178). It is the older authorial voice who interpolates the retrospective insight that her perception of being viewed as "intimidating might be another word for black" (178). These are stereotyped roles she is performing, screened through the color perspective of the narrative: "I do what I do everywhere else, I heighten the characteristics I share with the people around me and minimize, as best I can, the ones that don't belong" (182–183). She does in fact integrate well, except for her bossiness, which loses her a leadership honor at summer camp, yet she is always holding back: "I move my body like I belong but I also hold it back" (183).

This is because, although she embraces her rootlessness and distrusts permanence, she wears a mask of belonging that fends off the fear of a door being slammed in her face despite being brought up by her liberal parents to believe that being a woman, or Black, or Jewish does not prevent one getting what one is entitled to; nevertheless, her childhood memories remind her of her fear of being unworthy and inferior (184–186). She only feels comfortable, as a person of color, among her Dominican friends in the tough streets of the Bronx; it is there, in Theresa's messy, dark apartment, that she finally finds walls which contain her (203). When her Jewish stepmother decides they are moving to a house standing in its own grounds in desirable Larchmont, she reacts that this is a plot to kill the blackness in her, to pull her father away from "a past more sensual and righteous" and scratch "the dirt off pale Jewish roots I didn't know he had" (205). She comes to believe that this is robbing her of her father and denying her right to be mixed-race. At school, Rebecca averts her eyes from the scruffy Black kids from across the railroad tracks. She lies and passes for Spanish, feeling guilty for abandoning her friends back in the Bronx. As the daughter of a famous African American writer, she hates the predictable bourgeois comfort of this too Jewish suburb where there are few outsiders like her. She walks out in an adolescent rage. The narrative structures a segregation of narrative worlds along racialized lines of color and class.

Rebecca's developing sexuality raises further questions about her shifting self. From the nineteen-seventies, the subjective experience of race, gender, and sexual orientation opened options for who one might be, rather than the predetermined identities of birth, religion, or ethnicity. Above all, she craves physical closeness. After her black body is criticized and

mocked, she seeks solace in Malaika's naked brown body as they play Mummy and Daddy, needing to fill the place in her that is empty and cold and feeling the warmth as Malaika slaps her with one of her father's old leather belts—projecting the pain of her abjection, wishing, as she says, to be the one whom it is done to (97). Her body feels none of the certainty that her peers feel about their color, and she seeks protective refuge in sex and drugs from the constant racial gaze that constructs her ethnically, culturally, and sexually. She pilfers loose change from her mother's purse to win social approval with small gifts for friends; older, she steals clothes from stores. She self-harms. Partly, this is a power struggle that is White on Black, in which she fears she is not Black enough or small and unthreatening enough to fit in (98–99). She moves freely across color lines to hang out or party and sleep with boys, discovering other maladjusted, delinquent kids in San Francisco, but everywhere gender, class, and color get in the way: her boyfriend Luca, for example, drops her after social pressure for going with a "nigger." Rebecca's self-identification as biracial and bisexual puts her in an ambiguous space beyond the pale of Black Power militancy (her African American boyfriend Andre tries to persuade her she can only be Black, there is no "mixed"). She drifts, not knowing where she fits in. She is conflicted instead of celebrating multiple identities in some post-racial liberal multiculturalism.[24]

Society, it appears, is enforcing a color coding into which she does not fit. The unchosen color of her body, she decides, is what determines who she is, and she is not at home in her body:

> I have never been at home in my body. Not in its color, not in its size or shape. Not in its strange, unique conglomeration of organic forms and wavy lines. In the mirror, I am always too pale, too pasty, not honey-colored, not the glamorous-sounding café au lait. My breasts are always too small, my thighs too fat, my gait inelegant, my neck too long. There is an awkwardness to my body, a lack of grace, as if the racial mix, the two sides coming together in my body, have yet to reconcile. (253)

She ascribes her dissociation from her imperfect body to her mixed race. What saves her is her mother's gift of "rhythm," which makes her acceptable to her Black lovers. The racialized gaze excludes the possibility of having a Jewish body, or of hybridity. Rebecca is ashamed of one half of her body, proud of the other half. The fear of not being liked melts only when her male partners embrace her and cover the wound inside her, penetrating the softness behind the hard exterior that is always tensing, always looking for hints of how she should behave according to the social context (253–254). She is always trying not to say anything too "Black" among Whites, or too "White" among Blacks; not so much passing as performing a racialized identity (269). In New York, her body is seen as cool, and she begins to feel she is becoming a White girl, privy to the privileges denied to Blacks. She feels guilty this is somehow a betrayal of her mixed racial appeal to her White boyfriend who is incensed she is leaving him for a White, half-Jewish man much older than her, because, in her mind, she is "too thick-lipped" for a White. She believes in her parents' ideals of racial integration and in telling the world the truth about herself whether they want to hear it or not, yet she cannot dismiss her anxiety and rage whenever she hears the n-word. She is conscious that race is the biggest cultural construct there is and cannot free herself of the dictates of memory and history, yet she cannot easily choose her allegiances or say who is "my people" (303–305). "Jewishness," then, is a foil to work through her in-betweenness, but it also tests her conformity to racialization of her body.

James McBride's *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1996) is a similar tale of growing up mixed-race, in his case rejecting the religion of his Jewish mother, an

imperiled and fragile figure in a Black neighborhood.[25] Although he recognizes that Jews are a different type of Whites and that there are both liberal and racist Jews, McBride reinforces instead of contesting the racial polarization of color, as Helene Meyers has noted.[26] Indeed, Judith Ruderman points out that the framing of the mother's memoir in italics reinforces the rejection of Jewishness, possibly as a response to childhood abuse.[27] Much the same can be said of Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish*: "choosing blackness in these memoirs entails renunciation of a Jewishness that can only be conceived as historically and politically whitened and deracinated."[28] By dissolving racial difference in faith in Jesus ("the color of water"), McBride claims a Jewishness that effectively erases Jewish difference. Similarly, in *Black, White, and Jewish,* Rebecca Walker distances herself from an estranged, deracinated Jewishness which is whitened as hostile territory which she perceives in stereotypes. She declares that blood has no color, that her blood is made from water, despite the emotional ties with her Jewish family (318-20). Blood here may be more metaphorical than biological, yet it is a complicated component of the construct of race, just as McBride opposes "colorless" universalism to a perceived Jewish particularism.

In performance of racial difference, the cards are stacked against Judaism with its perceived "White Jewish" exclusivity in its preference for endogamy which resulted in her father Mel Leventhal's family disowning him for marrying a "shvartse." Additionally, third-wave feminism and Black Pride trump the "whiteness" of Rebecca's Jewishness which for her is her patrilineal name, the patriarchal injustice opposed to her mother's name and to her blackness. She changes her surname because she feels no affinity with whiteness, with "what Jewishness has become," whereas she does identify because of her experience of living in a non-White body with the injustice done to Blacks and others.[29] The Black-Jewish alliance that inspired her father's work for justice and gave birth to her in 1969 as a "Movement Child" has vanished. If in the 1960s and '70s Jewish and Black intellectuals mutually constructed each other in their writings as part of their formation of an American identity,[30] the Black cultural and religious identities that became dominant did not always encompass assimilated Jewish intellectuals' wish for their integration. Blacks did not always perceive Jews on an equal footing, if at all; one extreme position was that of the Nation of Islam, another that of Malcolm X or LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) who saw the Holocaust as a lesson that assimilation was a dangerous delusion,[31] though we should be careful not to conclude that all proponents of Black Power felt that their culture was precluded by assimilation. As Werner Sollors puts it, liberal pluralism flattened ethnic difference; the new multiculturalism reclaimed it.[32] Rebecca thinks of her copper-brown body as a floating signifier of her shifting identity between White-Jewish and Black or passing as Hispanic, although this may be owing, as we have seen, to her inability to embrace Jewishness as a Black because of her predetermined or socially conditioned attitudes that enforce binary choices.

In Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), there is a more or less accurate picture of Jewish participation in the Civil Rights movements, although the Jewish female Civil Rights activist is herself subject to "Jewish racism."[33] However, Alice Walker's antisemitic remarks which I mentioned earlier in this essay align her against White Jews and against Zionism in defense of the Palestinian Arab cause, which Black Lives Matter has long supported, though her rancor over her marital breakdown and Mel Leventhal's failure to condemn Israel might also kick in (Rebecca Walker has publicly disassociated from her mother, whom she accuses of neglecting her as a child).[34] The term "colorism" is in fact attributed to Rebecca's mother, Alice Walker, referring to the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color." In this scheme, "colorism" was a divisive

marker, as when mixed-race persons ("mulattos") were perceived as holding a superior status in the American race hierarchy, as well as a gendered indicator on a scale of physical beauty that prioritized either blonde (among Whites) or jet black (among Blacks), inviting pity or contempt and discrimination.[35] Certainly, in her memoir Rebecca is acutely conscious her body is not "beautiful."[36] Color, one might say, is in the eye of the beholder, but as we will now see, it can also be determinate in a performance of race.

EMILY RABOTEAU: PERFORMING POST-RACIAL IDENTITIES

Like *Black, White, and Jewish*, Emily Raboteau's *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* (2013) begins with the mystery of her identity, set in an airport, not this time a transitional limbotopia but a site of departure for what might or not be a home, from which she is barred because of her inability to identify herself in a clear, binary way.[37] The opening scene presents a forced strip-search that serves as a strip-tease for the enigma of who the narrator is, her color, and race.

> "Answer the question then! What are your origins?" What else was I supposed to say? "A sperm and an egg," I snapped. That's when they grabbed my luggage, whisked me to the basement, stripped off my clothes and probed every orifice of my body for explosives. When they didn't find any, they focused on my tattoo, a Japanese character which means different, precious, unique. I was completely naked, and the room was cold. My nipples were hard. I tried to cover myself with my hands. I remember feeling incredibly thirsty. One of them flicked my left shoulder with a latex glove. "What does it mean?" he asked. This was the first time I'd ever been racially profiled, not that the experience would have been any less humiliating had it been my five hundredth. "It means Fuck you" I wanted to say, not because they'd stripped me of my dignity, but because they'd shoved my face into my own rootlessness. I have never felt more black in my life than I did when I was mistaken for an Arab. (5–6)

Because of her confusion about her origins, Emily fails the binary test of Black/White, Jew/Arab, which she projects onto the El Al personnel at Newark Airport, whom she describes condescendingly as her inferiors who are unable to understand her indecipherable difference, symbolized by her Japanese tattoo. Only much later does she discover that her middle name is for an aunt who married a German Jew. The staging of a fantasy of being stripped and penetrated by security officers opens Emily's search for identity by positing a binary racialized discourse which, in her mind, forces her into blackness.

Emily's projection of her rage at her inborn sense of displacement stems from her paternal ancestry from a Black slave on a plantation in the Caribbeans, her grandfather's murder in Mississippi in 1943, and growing up in a dysfunctional biracial family. She does not feel at home in the United States, moreover, because of historical memory of segregation and the injustice done to Blacks, especially those GIs who had fought for freedom and democracy in World War Two. Like her grandmother Mabel, who set off for the "Promised Land" of the North, she is looking for a home. This is why she is visiting her childhood friend Tamar Cohen in Israel, with whom she grew up as daughters of professors in White-privileged Princeton, where they stood out—she as "blackish" and identifying with Black history, Tamar as Jewish and culturally apart. So strong was their preadolescent infatuation with each other that Emily borrowed Tamar's bat-mitzvah dress for her Catholic confirmation. Their shared otherness makes them non-conformists in a joint resistance against conventions. When Emily attends Friday night Shabbat dinner at Tamar's, she "believed the solemn ritual made me part of something ancient and large" (8). The girls bond together by tattooing their bodies, which Emily

knows transgresses Torah law, but which creates a somatic solidarity. Emily starts "keeping kosher" by picking out the shrimps from her plate at mealtimes. Each of their fathers teaches history, and the girls are aware of their "quiet anger"—the grandfather's murder in Jim Crow's America and the Holocaust are unspoken presences in their respective homes. However, the girls are raised not on victimhood but pride. Nevertheless, these were "powerful ghosts in both our houses" (8).

Emily adopts this individualistic form of cultural Jewishness by osmosis. Tamar is Emily's "soul sister" in an oppression that aligns the Holocaust with Black slavery. When they view an exhibition held during Passover, a symbolic timing, that was organized, a few years after the 1991 Crown Heights riots, by the Jewish Museum in New York and NAACP, the Black spiritual "Go Down Moses (Let My People Go)" drowns out the strains of klezmer. Viewing images of pogrom victims and Black victims of lynching, they feel a personal outrage. The Exodus story, which for Jews signifies the redemption from Egypt, is presented as the Black liberation from slavery and the journey to Canaan, not the biblical land promised to the Jews but, as Emily's father explains, the promise of freedom in the North. That inspiration from the Jews' biblical history is, Emily's father comments, what made Blacks convert to Christianity.

What follows is a gradual shift from accepting her Jewish friend as non-White and identifying with Jewishness to outing her friend because she is Jewish and White and accepting a discourse that whites out Jews and condemns Israel. In her view, Emily does not think of Tamar as White, any more than she thinks of her White mother as more than her mother, who is Irish, with a proud family history of being colonized by the British. In fact, it is Tamar who identifies as non-White one day in 1992 during the Los Angeles riots after they sing in the school choir the emotional lines from Song of Songs:

> *Nigra sum sed formosa filiae Jherusalem*
> I am black but comely, daughters of Jerusalem. (10–11)

As the friends grow up, they each follow their own path, drawing closer to their own ethnic groups. Tamar makes *aliya* to Israel, and they part company. Until the Second Intifada, that is, when Tamar calls her in what Emily thinks is some desperation and asks her to visit. Emily has not extended her mind very much beyond mental and geographical borders, so the memoir reads as a travelogue that is also a bildungsroman, changing her assumptions and expectations from those set by media coverage, but also transforming her biracial identity. In Israel Emily has found her Zion, or so it seems at first. However, her rapture is partly based on her envy that Tamar has found her home, however much Tamar might be conflicted politically and feel guilt for the injustice she feels was done to Palestinian Arabs. It is a tangible real place, not a dream, and yet it makes Emily feel all the more unsettled, especially after the degrading, aggressive treatment she received at the El Al check-in desk where they did not believe America was her home but made Israel seem inhospitable. The trip to Jerusalem and Tamar's crisis of faith in Zionism are therefore a catalyst for Emily's own search for home, but also project Emily's awareness of the disillusion in Frederick Douglass's vision of Canaan in the North, where Blacks mistakenly thought they would be free.

It is at this point in the narrative that the analogy of the Holocaust and Black slavery is displaced by the Naqba and the African Maafa as Emily realizes that the houses in Tamar's Jerusalem neighborhood were expropriated by Holocaust survivors and "immigrants" (actually refugees) from Arab lands. Emily rehearses a reductive postcolonial formula that Israel was created in "reparation" for the Holocaust and that Palestinian Arabs were ousted to make way for the arrival of the survivors. In her confusion, Emily identifies Tamar with White colonialism: "her choice to be Israeli had turned my best

friend white" (15). Emily therefore ejects Tamar from her "tribe" (15). The Black-Jewish alliance of liberation fighters gives way to a common conflation of Zionism and all Jews; Emily "whites out" the Jews.

Emily's own conflicts of identity are put to the test on her return to the States. When 9/11 cracks America's sense of power and security, Emily finds the world is again divided into "us" and "them" in a wave of patriotism. A drunk identifies her as one of "them" and throws a beer bottle at her, shouting at her to go home. In this racist assault, a relatively minor incident in a series of attacks on foreigners and American Muslims, Emily identifies the same aggression she experienced at the hands of the El Al "teenagers" (18)—thus equating racist violence and security frisking. Of course, she understands there is no "continuum" between being mistaken for an Arab and her grandfather's murder for defending a Black woman; after all, as her father points out in a letter that the *New York Times* refuses to publish, she has achieved invisibility thanks to her mixed ancestry, an invisibility which is challenged by her attacker. Violent xenophobia signals to her that she is not safe in her own country. On a Rosh Hashanah visit to her family in the States, Tamar reminds her that she too experiences violence in Israel at the hands of terrorists on a daily basis. Emily now shares that reality of violence with Tamar, except that Emily calls it "the daily consequences of her nation's bullying" (20). Again, the hostile analogy of Israel's self-defense and America's War on Terrorism alerts us to a reductive political lens through which Emily narrates her journey of self-discovery.

Emily finds it no easier than Rebecca Walker to evade the binary racialization in her identity formation. Emily travels abroad to escape the universal hatred of America, passing as Arab or Latina and blending in with one foreign city or another. Nevertheless, she cannot disown America and she returns to publish a novel and to become a professor. She moves to Harlem, the "black city" within the city, where a sign reads "Promised Land"—an ambiguous wording that reminds her of the Blacks' disappointment in the Northern Land of Canaan. During Hurricane Katrina, too, she has seen how the US administration has failed the Blacks, consigning her relatives to a homeless "diaspora," while she enjoys the privileges of what she calls her "terrible whiteness" (21). Then she finds the last remaining synagogue in Harlem, now largely deserted by Jews. It is Friday evening, and she yearns to be back at Tamar's home at the Shabbat dinner table. To her astonishment, an old Black Jew opens the synagogue door with "Good Shabbos!" In a scene that might have been taken from Bernard Malamud's story, "The Angel Levine," this guardian angel welcomes her warmly: "Another wandering Jew has found her way home" (23). Emily is moved to tears at this case of generosity, which is another mistaken identity. Having rejected Tamar for her whiteness, she seems now to have been accepted as a Black Jew (23)!

During Emily's first visit to Israel, during the Second Intifada, Tamar dispelled Emily's blinkered binary racialized view that there are no Black people in Israel by telling her about the Jews from Ethiopia and the Black Hebrews. Emily returns to Israel six years later to see if she can find among them her place in a Black Zion (24). Her experiences are negative from the beginning: it is the Second Lebanon War and Israel is "destroying" Beirut. She accuses El Al security staff of stealing her I-Pod with her Reggae music, thus robbing her of her African rhythm, which she restores only in a drunken night at a Tel-Aviv Ethiopian bar run by a Jamaican Rastafarian. Emily admits to her confusion as she imposes racialized categories from the American South on the Beta Israel, whom she thinks of as becoming Black on arrival in Israel, where they nonetheless treat the Palestinian Arabs as the "niggers," surely a projection of a racial hierarchy in which she

perceives Jews as the "Whites." Emily's cynical, politically loaded attitude does not help her understand the complexity of Israel's social reality when Katyusha rockets rain down on northern Israel in the Second Lebanon War. What she sees is exploitative "assimilation" of the "rescued" Beta Israel (scare quotes in the original) who are whitened, like the immigrants who came before them, into a monolithic whole. The Beta Israel had always yearned for the Zion of the Promised Land, but, according to Emily's carefully selected interviewees, political Zionism killed their dream. As for the Black Hebrew Israelites who claim to be the true Chosen People, she is skeptical of their claim to Canaan and identifies only to a point with their Afrocentric version of redemption in which Martin Luther King was a martyred messiah. Emily decides that Israel is not the Promised Land of Martin Luther King's dream (39, 56–57). Ironically, Ethiopian Jews and Black Hebrews yearn for a return to Israel, while other Blacks wish to return to Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa. So, Zion is not really about a specific territorial space.

From the Black Hebrews' Black Jesus we transition to the Catholic Church of St Anne's in Jerusalem's Old City, a Christian space where Emily becomes reconciled with Tamar, whom she admires for her small efforts to build peace with Palestinian Arabs. After they sing together, as they once did in the school choir, Emily goes back to Harlem, where she is looked upon as an interloper, but she now knows she must search for the Black Zion, for the home where she really belongs:

> Maybe it was just the power of the moment, or all I'd heard from the Ethiopian Jews, the African Hebrew Israelites, and everyone in between, but now more than ever I wanted to feel connected to a place, a people. (59)

Estranged from an Americanness that puts her social identity in conflict with her individual self and naively hoping to remedy the history of slavery she associates with the White side of her family, Emily travels the world in search of a Zion that, as her father explains to her, the Black church understands as internal and spiritual and that Martin Luther King understood as over and above state nationalism, not a geographical entity. Her departure for Jamaica, where she is treated as White, coincides with Barack Obama's nomination as the Democrat candidate for president, which fills her with hope for the end of race. She visits Ghana to meet repatriated Blacks, but discovers Blacks are implicated in the slave trade or in child abuse at fetish shrines, a further disappointment in her search for a Zion where she could feel at home. She also meets disappointment when she travels to the American South's "Black Belt," a putative Black republic, to explore her ancestry. It is the demeaning treatment of the El Al security personnel, the token White Jews, that sets her off on her journey of self-discovery, but the destination is always elusive, somewhere on the road ahead, and she does not know what to expect from her homecoming. Emily never truly finds her Zion.[38]

CONCLUSION: PERFORMING BLACKNESS

Gender, Judith Butler tells us in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), is performative, a notion that Catherine Rottenberg has usefully applied to a comparison of Black and Jewish American fiction in the early twentieth century to show how subjects are compelled to conform with dominant behavioral forms if they wish to avoid being marginalized and perform Americanness.[39] Taking up Butler's theory of performativity, Lori Harrison Kahan has pointed to the construction of Jewishness as a way of passing as White in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and suggested that Rebecca Walker in her memoir similarly performs a Jewishness in an attempt to be accepted as a biracial, while posing as a *mestiza* allows her to combine the shifting contradictions in her identities.[40]

Yet, despite the acceptance of alternate gender and sexual identities and the vindication of the right to be different (at least in principle), there still exists in an age of intersectionality in "post-race" America, which in 2008 elected a mixed-race president, a general consignment of identity that is unwilled and often hostile. The "one-drop rule" means that biracials are identified as Black and Jews as White.[41] American Jews are well integrated, yet perception of color in the media and public sphere often becomes trapped in familiar patterns of prejudice.

As we have seen, Rebecca Walker and Emily Raboteau perform a blackness that *excludes* Jewish identities and perceive "Jewishness" as a rejected social construct, tainted by whiteness. In their amorphous mode of discovering and reclaiming blackness, Rebecca's encounter with a "WASP"-ish Jew challenges her blackness, while Emily's meeting with Sephardim in a synagogue in Kingston spurs her interest in the Rastafarian Twelve Tribes of Israel. Yet, in both cases these are defining moments which reinforce the resistance to a racial binary while rejecting the Whiteness of Jewishness Black British sociologist Paul Gilroy remarks that the modern times that W.E.B. Du Bois called the century of the color line have passed, but the racial hierarchy is very much with us, and his own understanding of the complexities of what he calls "raciology" grew as he pondered the Jewish historical experience in the Holocaust and historical affinities between Blacks and Jews.[42] Those complex affinities, as I have shown, can play out negatively in a supersession of Jewish victimhood and a recession to binary constructions of "White" and "Black" that undermine the viability of Black Jewish identities.[43]

Over the years there has been a seasonal resurgence of interest in the racial identity of Jews in the media and in legal cases, as well as publications and blogs by Jews of different genders and identities who deny there is any one way to be "Jewish." Race is a social and cultural construction whose scientific validity was long ago debunked,[44] yet racial binaries are perceived in ideological discourses as markers of difference. Race discourse persists in new guises and political contexts, such as genetics and conspiracy theories that open the door to essentialized concepts of the body and return us to somatic constructions of the "Jew" which often invoke familiar antisemitic stereotypes.[45] We are apparently not yet living in a multiracial utopia where individuals can comfortably be themselves, despite the postmodern fluidity of boundaries of corporeal identities and postcolonial hybridity, which are contingent on random or floating cultural signifiers and social practices. The so-called "new antisemitism," moreover, transposes onto the Israel-Arab conflict ideological narratives of resistance to European colonialism and oppression of native peoples or Blacks. Therefore, after the atrocities of October 7, 2024, it was not surprising that Jews were demarcated collectively as a White privileged class associated with "settler colonialism" and on the wrong side of the struggle for "resistance to apartheid."[46] As we have seen in this essay, "Jewishness" can serve as a foil in determining a Black identity in solidarity with various liberal-progressive causes that resist racism and colonialism and cancel antisemitism.

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39 Catherine Rottenberg, *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2008), 6–7.

40 Lori Harrison-Kahan, "Passing for White, Passing for Jewish: Mixed Race Identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker," *Melus* 30, no. 1 (2005): 19–48.

41 For a discussion of the role of race in Obama's election and in his presidency, see the special issue of *Patterns of Prejudice* 45, nos. 1–2 (2011), "Obama and Race," edited by Richard H. King. See also Gerald Early, "The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama," *Dædalus* (Winter 2011): 11–27; Nikki Khanna, *Biracial in America: Forming and Performing Racial Identity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

42 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

43 See Janice W. Fernheimer, *Stepping into Zion: Hatzaad Harishon, Black Jews, and the Remaking of Jewish Identity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014).

44 See David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

45 See Klaus Hödl, "Sarrazin and the Myth of the Jewish Gene," in *Race, Color, Identity: Rethinking Discourses About "Jews" in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Efraim Sicher (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 247–260.

46 The Black Lives Matter movement issued a statement in response to the Israeli bombardment of Hamas that followed the massacres and mass rape of October 7, 2023, praising the inspiring resistance to racism and "ethnic cleansing of Palestinians": "As a movement committed to the notion of freedom and justice for all, we feel compelled to address the atrocities currently occurring in Palestine. The Movement for Black Lives condemns the deadly, racist attacks against the Palestinian people by the Israeli state" ("End US Complicity in Israel's Abuses of Palestinians," The Movement for Black Lives, https://m4bl.org/statements/end-us-complicity-in-israels-abuses-of-palestinians/).