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The interface between British contemporary Black and Jewish cultures

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Introduction: The Interface Between Contemporary British Jewish and BME Cultures

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The origins of this special issue lie in a symposium on 'The Interface Between British Contemporary Black and Jewish Cultures', co-sponsored by the British Academy-funded network 'British Jewish Contemporary Cultures' and the 'Identities' research group at the University of Reading, held at Reading in November 2016. The symposium was conceived as part of a larger, interdisciplinary research project entitled 'Towards a British "Black-Jewish Imaginary": The Interface Between British Black and Jewish Literature, Art and Culture 1945-2015'. The inspiration for this project was the recognition of the stark contrast between the large body of scholarship on black-Jewish relations in the United States and the relative paucity of work on this subject in the context of the United Kingdom.

Over the past four decades, a considerable body of work has emerged on the interface between black and Jewish literature, art and culture in the United States, whose influence is signified by the circulation of the term 'black-Jewish imaginary' within U.S. academic discourse.[1] In contrast, there has been very little scholarship on black-Jewish cultural relations in the context of the United Kingdom. There is a significant body of historical scholarship that explores the affinities and differences between the experiences of Jews and BME immigrants in Britain. Colin Holmes, in *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society*, 1871-1971 (London: Routledge, 1988) points out the parallels between the racism encountered by a range of different immigrant groups during this period:

> The relationships of [immigrants] … from the West Indies, India and Pakistan to the housing market … was subject to change over the course of time. But … the majority of individuals from such groups were to be found by 1971 in the inferior properties of the inner cities … these newcomers soon became associated with the causes of the infrastructural

problems of the grey, forbidding inner city regions and, as with the earlier Jews in the East End, this association was to add a further complication to their lives.[2]

In *A tolerant country?: immigrants, refugees and minorities in Britain* (2015), Colin Holmes emphasises the transnational dimension of a racism of which Jews and BME groups are the targets: 'Fascist and racial nationalist organizations in Britain, which are hostile to Jews, Blacks, Asians and other groups, are part of a European network.[3] Panikos Panayi has also done valuable work, tracing the development of what he calls 'multicultural racism' in Britain since the start of the nineteenth century and exploring the connections between Jewish and Chinese immigrant experience.[4] Tony Kushner and Anne Kershen have written extensively on the intersection of immigrant Jewish history with those of other BME communities, particularly in the East End of London[5], while Gavin Schaffer has done excellent recent comparative work in the field of race and immigration history.[6]

However, this historical work has not been matched by comparative, contemporary cultural studies - and it is the interface between contemporary British Jewish and BME cultures that is the subject of this special issue. In this context, Gemma Romain's observation in 2006 that 'Generally in academia these two communities have not been compared with each other' remains largely valid today, her book being the most notable exception.[7] Romain's qualification 'in academia' is significant here. There are a number of contemporary British novelists - most notably Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith - who have repeatedly juxtaposed Jewish and BME characters in their fiction, and indeed in the case of the protagonist of Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002), combined the two.[8] Yet there remains a striking disparity between the large body of scholarly work on black/Jewish cultural relations in the US and the relative paucity of work on the topic on this side of the Atlantic.

To a certain extent, this disparity can be explained by the very different histories of Jewish and black populations on either side of the Atlantic. The history of slavery, reconstruction, segregation and civil rights in the United States has no direct analogy in the United Kingdom, and the post-war cultural confidence and prominence of Jews in America contrasts conspicuously with

the relative ambivalence, historically, of British Jews towards both their Jewishness and Britishness. Whilst recognising the importance of these differences, however, there is much, in terms of the discourse that has developed around the 'black-Jewish imaginary' in the United States, that could be appropriated and adapted in the British context, as the recent migration of the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign across the Atlantic demonstrates. Similarly, the recent 'migrant crisis' and associated rise in xenophobia, manifested in and enabled by, the rise of populist rightwing movements, is a transatlantic phenomenon. Despite the relative dearth of research in this area, there has been some work that might provide the foundation for a more detailed exploration of the field.[9]

As we have seen, a number of historians have emphasised the parallels between the experiences of BME and Jewish Britons. In the field of cultural criticism, Gemma Romain, Rachel Garfield and Bryan Cheyette have all explored the interface between black and Jewish identities. Cheyette points out that

> East European Jews migrating to Britain were the object of the earliest anti-immigration and naturalisation acts in the first half of the twentieth century and this legislation was extended in each decade from the 1960s onwards. Jewish immigrants anticipated their 'new' commonwealth counterparts in having to negotiate 'anti-alien' legislation by demonstrating that they were respectable and hard-working citizens who valued, above all else, religion, family and community.[10]

Yet there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which 'blackness' and 'Jewishness' have been dealt with in terms of public policy and academic discourse, particularly since the advent of multiculturalism in the 1980s. Whereas black British citizens are given the status of an ethnic minority (and often associated with other non-white communities, as in the acronym BME, meaning 'Black and other Minority Ethnic'), Jewish British citizens are not officially recognised as an ethnic minority: Jewish identity is defined only in terms of religious affiliation, in spite of the fact that many British Jews identify themselves as ethnically and/or culturally Jewish while leading secular lives.

This has led to what Jon Stratton calls the 'elision' of Jewish identity in British cultural studies and to the marginalisation of antisemitism within academic discourses on racism in the United Kingdom: it is mentioned only briefly, if at all, in most of the major studies on the topic published towards the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first.[11] This might be understood in the context of the exclusion of Jewish ethnicity from the multiculturalism agenda in the U.S.,[12] as part of a larger pattern of antagonism between Jewish Studies and Postcolonial Studies,[13] or as a manifestation and consequence of Jewish/Muslim relations.[14] On the other hand, it might be seen as symptomatic of a specific gap in UK scholarship: namely, the absence of any significant work in Ethnic Studies in the United Kingdom that corresponds with the multi-ethnic literary and cultural studies work in the United States that is represented not just in numerous books and essays but in the journal *MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the US*).

In this special issue of *Jewish Culture and History*, therefore, we are attempting to address this gap in scholarship through five essays reflecting on cultural encounters between contemporary BME and Jewish cultures. At the same time, we are keenly aware of the limited parameters within which we are operating. Only one of our contributors comes from a Black Studies as opposed to Jewish Studies background, which reflects a wider imbalance in British academic culture, where institutional support of ethnic studies and of students and staff from minority communities lags a long way behind the US. The emphasis here is also very much on the interface between British black and Jewish cultures (in two cases in a transatlantic context), with the only exception being an essay on the representation of UK Jewish/Muslim relations in recent fiction. We would have liked to include material that encompassed a broader range of BME cultures, but we hope that this issue will be the beginning, rather than the end, of a conversation in this field.

Using a wide variety of literature, both fiction and non-fiction, Ruth Gilbert explores what she calls the 'East End imaginary'. She focuses, in particular, on the use of metaphor in the literary construction of Brick Lane and its environs. Gilbert explores the points of interface between Jews and other migrant groups in and around the street that was once synonymous with Jewish life in

London and has functioned more recently as a metonym for British Asian culture (as in Monica Ali's 2003 novel) in order to ask questions about the ways in which such intersections have been imagined.

Staying in Britain, Sue Vice opens by pointing out how there are surprisingly few contemporary works of fiction that bring together British Jews and Muslims. Vice then explores Claire Hajaj's novel *Ishmael's Oranges* (2014) and Jemma Wayne's *Chains of Sand* (2016) which depict British Jews and Muslims as located not in their national context, but in the Middle East, for both novels present the relationship between Muslims and Jews in Britain as one that is inextricably linked with the contemporary situation in Israel and Palestine. Yet, as Vice shows, while Britain might only appear as a location intermittently in both novels, the historical and ideological legacy of British history lingers, impacting on contemporary Jewish/Muslim relations.

Switching to film, Nathan Abrams explores black-Jewish relations as presented through the lens of Paul Morrison's 2003 film *Wondrous Oblivion,* a rare filmic text that reflects on black and Jewish immigrants in Britain. Set in South London in 1960, the film depicts the transition of a young Jewish boy from outsider to insider through his encounter with his Jamaican neighbours who teach him not only how to play cricket better but a more solid code of values than the one he is offered at school. Ironically, it is the newly-arrived immigrants who turn him into a better Englishman but, as Abrams argues, on his own terms that simultaneously resist the dominant values.

Bridging the United States and the United Kingdom, Nicole King's essay applies theories of intersectionality to a young adult novel, Karen Schwabach's *A Pickpocket's Tale* (2006), which explores indentured servitude, slavery and Jewishness in eighteenth-century Britain and America. She demonstrates how the novel represents feminist resistance and its limits within the shared social and physical spaces of Jewishness and blackness where both identities are defined and intersect. She argues that in its focus on black/Jewish coalitional politics, *A Pickpocket's Tale* presents a

politicised intersectional narrative of racial, gender and religious identity that is both subversive and conservative.

Finally, David Brauner's essay situates expatriate British writer Zoe Heller's 2008 novel *The Believers* in the context of the history of black-Jewish relations in the United States, specifically in terms of recent debates about identity politics and cultural appropriation. Britishness here is inserted through Audrey, the English-born, secular Jewish wife of the main character who, like Heller, has moved to New York and retained her distinctive and unapologetic British idiom. Set primarily in the context of post-9/11 New York in 2002, the novel is both a critique (of certain kinds) as well as an implicit defence (of certain other kinds) of cultural appropriation, Brauner argues.

We hope that, taken together, these five essays will provide the foundation for a deeper and wider exploration, across different media, and in different disciplines, of the interface between Jewish and BME cultures in contemporary Britain.

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[1] See, for example, Emily Budick Miller, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Dean Franco, *Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish and African American Writing* (Charlottesville, VA: Virginia University Press, 2006); Erving Goffman, *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*. New York: State of New York University Press, 2000); Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). Lori Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy & the Black-Jewish Imaginary* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007); Adam Meyer, *Black-Jewish Relations in African American & Jewish American Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2002); Adam Newton, *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1999); Jack Salzman, & Cornel West, eds. *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Naomi Zack 'On Being and Not-Being Black and Jewish', *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria Root. (New York: Sage, 1996): 140-151. Bryan Cheyette used the term 'black-Jewish imaginary' in his essay 'Frantz Fanon and the Black-Jewish Imaginary' in *Frantz Fanon's Black Skin White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. M. Silverman (Manchester University Press, 2005: 74-99) but Harrison-Kahan redeploys it in the context of an intersectional study of three Jewish women artists (Sophie Tucker, Fannie Hurst and Edna Ferber) whose work 'compel[s] us to move beyond the critical tendency to reify the black-white binary, clearing a path for more nuanced accounts of the black-Jewish imaginary' (184).

[2] *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society*, 1871-1971 (London: Routledge, 1988): 236-37.
[3] Colin Holmes, *A Tolerant Country?: Immigrants, Refugees and Minorities in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2015): 106.
[4] Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism since 1800* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2010); 'The Chinese Connection', *Outsiders & Outcasts: Essays in Honour of William J.* Fishman, eds. Geoffrey Alderman and Colin Holmes (London: Duckworth, 1993).
[5] See, for example, Tony Kushner, 'The impact of British anti-semitism 1918-1945', *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, ed. David Cesarani (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Kushner, 'Remembering to Forget: Racism and Anti-Racism in Post-War Britain', *Modernity, Culture and the Jew*, eds. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (London: Polity, 1998); Anne Kershen, *Strangers, Aliens and Asians: Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis in Spitalfields, 1660-2000* (London: Routledge, 2005); Kershen, ed. *London the Promised Land Revisited: the Changing Face of the London Migrant Landscape in the Early 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2015).
[6] See Gavin Schaffer, *Racial Science and British Society 1930-62*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)
[7] Gemma Romain, *Connecting Histories: A Comparative Exploration of African-Caribbean & Jewish History & Memory in Modern Britain* (London: Kegan Paul, 2006): 218.
[8] Alex Li-Tandem is Jewish-Chinese and his best friend, Adam, is a black Jew, with roots in Harlem.
[9] See, for example, Lisa Bloom, 'Jewish Identities, Sexualities and Feminist Art', *Jews and Sex*, ed. Nathan Abrams (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2008): 121-137; Bryan Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); 'Eliot and "Race": Jews, Irish, Blacks', *A Companion to T.S.* Eliot, ed. David Chintz (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 335-349; Rachel Garfield, 'Ali G: Just Who Does He Think He Is', *Jewish Quarterly* 54 (Spring 2001): 63-70; 'So you think you can tell' (20-minute video installation) https://vimeo.com/5214435; 'Imagining Multicultural London: Containment and Excess in *Snatch*', *European Judaism* 47: 2 (2014): 60-68; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture & the Normalisation of Difference* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); Gavin Schaffer, *The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television, 1960-80* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014); Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
[10] Bryan Cheyette, 'British-Jewish Writing and the Turn towards Diaspora', *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, eds. Laura Marcus & Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 700-715): 701.
[11] See, for example, James Donald & Ali Rattansi, eds. *'Race', Culture and Difference* (London: Sage, 1992); Arun Kundnani, *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st-Century Britain*; Derek McGhee, *Intolerant Britain? Hate, Citizenship and Difference* (London: Open University Press, 2005); Robert Miles, *Racism After 'Race Relations'* (New York: Routledge, 1993); John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).
[12] See, for example, Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).
[13] See, for example, Bryan Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
[14] See, for example, Sander Gilman, *Multiculturalism and the Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2006)