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"LIKE BUT UNALIKE": ERIC SUNDQUIST AND LITERARY HISTORICISM

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Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005)

As measured by that deadly but inescapable phrase "quantity and quality," Eric Sundquist is perhaps the most productive American literature scholar of his generation. Since 1979, when he was still in his twenties, he has authored half a dozen books while editing another half-dozen. All have made an impact and many of these have been highly influential—his first book, *Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, was among the very first to read canonical American works through the lens of contemporary literary and psychoanalytic theory; his edited collection *American Realism: New Essays* (1982) proved pivotal in reviving the critical energy in a major but long-dormant literary and historical period. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993) was by implicit design and to powerful effect nothing less than a rewriting of the foundational work of American literary history and criticism—F. O. Matthiessen's monumental *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). I will spend some time describing *To Wake the Nations* not only because of the book's exceptional importance but because its eloquent introduction provides the closest thing to a critical credo that Sundquist has written. His description there of his critical ideals—particularly of "justice," boundary-crossing and "verification"—will help orient our approach to *Strangers in the Land*, which remains loyal to these ideals as it extends his interest in race and ethnicity, black and white, to the tormented subject of blacks and Jews, united by a "bond of alienation." (52).

Weighing in at over seven hundred pages, exceeding in girth Matthiessen's already heavy volume, *To Wake the Nations* gains its initial momentum by redescribing the renaissance (as Matthiessen christened the great flowering of mid-nineteenth-century literature) as a rebirth of freedom—specifically the right of African American slaves to claim their own liberty with "the same

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moral authority . . . that had served as the foundation for the United States itself."[1] This new meaning of renaissance, with its potent political charge, provides the turn in the lock that will enable him to "reconfigure the geography of the American literary imagination" during the "defining period" of the "nation's defining event—slavery and its aftermath" (*TWN* 624). Most immediately, this rebirth means that Nat Turner's *Confessions* and Martin Delaney's neglected *Blake*, a novel of maroon slave revolts in the US and the Caribbean, now step forward to join Frederick Douglass and the Melville of *Benito Cereno*, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Jacobs. These additions are one way to create greater democratic inclusion, but Sundquist's renovation pauses to scrutinize democracy itself, for his aim is

> to focus attention on the very premise of democracy as it was articulated and challenged in the crisis over slavery, and therefore to modify the underlying notion of a "renaissance" to include the most daring rebirth of all—the rebirth of African American resistance to slavery, and the rebirth of unbiased principles of liberty that had been wrenchingly betrayed in the flawed revolution of the founders. (*TWN* 10)

Thanks to this "proper reconceptualization of the renaissance," Nat Turner's spiritual autobiography merits the "same attention granted, say, Emerson's 'Self-Reliance,' or Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience,'" and Delany's *Blake*, with its dramatization of a global ethos of slave resistance, becomes "the perfect companion to *Benito Cereno*, for Delany alters our understanding of Melville's achievement (as well as the limitations of Melville's vision) even as he too extends the boundaries of America" (*TWN* 10–11). Sundquist's integrative effort to set texts in mutual reciprocity brings him to the "kingdom of culture," in Du Bois's phrase, a realm unscarred by Jim Crow laws and what he calls the very "goal of black striving": "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas."[2] Sundquist too, inspired as well by Ralph Ellison, insists on this freedom of cultural mixing: "we make a serious error if we imagine that race alone determines an author's capacity [or a critic's capacity, for that matter] to cross cultural boundaries with something approaching understanding of the other race's imaginative matrix or its necessarily different legacy and perspective" (*TWN* 23).

To Wake the Nations is really the first American literary history fully to be imbued with this mobile Du Boisian and Ellisonian spirit, which refuses to contrast "black" and "white" "approaches to the problem of race" but rather keeps "alive the necessary contradiction that the two traditions can be seen as both one and separate" (22). The book is Du Boisian too in granting the entanglement

[1] Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 9. Hereafter cited as *TWN* in the text.

[2] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings* (New York, 1986), 365.

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of the aesthetic and political, the national and transnational, a doubleness that mirrors Du Bois's multidisciplinary range of accomplishments and lifelong commitment to pan-Africanism. But even Sundquist's capaciousness falls short of capturing Du Bois the man in full. One could argue that in highlighting Du Bois's Africanity, Sundquist minimizes or ignores another potent dimension of this amazingly complicated man—his investment in the "kingdom of culture" as a realm unraced, his bold implication that the souls of black folk are uncolored: these are expressions of aesthetic idealism as a model of political utopia. One way to put the point is that Sundquist does indeed cross cultural boundaries but stays in Africa to construct his Du Bois, a decision that comes at the cost of losing sight of the latter's cosmopolitan interrogation of racial identity.

Along with important studies published two years later by Ann Douglas and George Hutchinson on "miscegenated Manhattan" in the 1920s and 1930s, *To Wake the Nations* ushered in a major integrative turn in American and modernist literary history and cultural criticism. There could be no better watchword for this turn than Du Bois's scathing address to his white readers near the close of *The Souls of Black Folk*: "Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here . . . Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation" (quoted on *TWN* 4). Applying pinpoint pressure to the arrogant assumption of purity and possessiveness distilled in the pronoun "yours," Du Bois insists on the discomfiting fact of our motley mixture, precisely what Jim Crow was designed to erase. The galling fact of the color line—the daily demeaning reality of segregation—defines for Sundquist American social reality of the post-Reconstruction years and this premise undergirds his decision to devote more than half of his book to the color line's two most creative and profound analysts—Du Bois and Charles Chesnutt.

Together they accrue nearly three hundred fifty pages of erudite and acute commentary; what justifies this stunning departure from canonical wisdom is not only the intrinsic merits of their art but the egregious neglect each had suffered. "Perhaps no other book of such stature, such beautiful accomplishment and influence, is so little appreciated even today by a general scholarly audience, let alone a literate public," he notes of *The Souls of Black Folk* (*TWN* 4). 1993, the year of *To Wake the Nations*, also saw the first volume of David Levering Lewis's superb biography of Du Bois; together these two acts of recovery began Du Bois's decisive elevation in the ensuing decade, via a flood of books and essays, to his rightful stature as a pre-eminent figure of African-American, American and international world culture. Because Chesnutt, unlike Twain, "has scarcely been read with anything approaching the seriousness he deserves" as "among the major American fiction writers of the nineteenth century," Sundquist redresses the imbalance but insists on a new imbalance. Twain and Melville, that is, are not given equal time. So persuasive was his case for Chesnutt's virtuosic use of

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black folk vernacular and literary craft in stories and novels, that Sundquist's revaluation prompted the author's canonization; diaries, letters, forgotten or lost novels, and collections of essays were all brought to print, culminating in Library of America editions of his work in 2002.

In sum, despite decades of multicultural ferment, *To Wake the Nations* alerted us to what remained an intolerable provincialism in the study of American literature—"our simple blindness to cultural work rooted in the originating resources of African American life"—and pledged itself to a project: "to redefine the basic questions we ask about American literature and the strategies we employ to teach and write about that literature" that would at last definitively desegregate the nineteenth-century canon (*TWN* 14–15). This is not to imply that prior to Sundquist race was an invisible or negligible matter; thanks, for instance, to pioneering scholarly work and advocacy by William Andrews and Jean Fagin Yellen, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs had joined the canon years before *To Wake the Nations*. Rather, his book, unique in its depth and range of learning, was the first to do justice to "writing about *African America* as integral to American literary culture" (14).

Indeed, *doing justice*—as ethical imperative and literary critical mandate both—is a crucial term in his practice. And scale and thoroughness—this book and *Strangers in the Land* together weigh in at over 1,400 pages—is no minor part of doing justice. He describes *To Wake the Nations* as a "study in literary values and their just estimation" and declares that justice and value cannot be severed from each other and "therefore from politics"; which is "not to say that literature and politics are the same thing" (*TWN* 17). To gloss his understanding of justice, Sundquist borrows Patricia Williams's stress on a "continual balancing of competing visions," an ambition that insists we "value a multiplicity of knowledge systems, in pursuit of a more complete sense of the world in which we all live." That pursuit, itself Du Boisian in its esteem for scope and complexity, is, says Williams, "an act of verification and vision," a statement that Sundquist uses as a hinge upon which to ground his critical enterprise: he finds "verification" a "term that admirably sums up the acts of location, identification, evaluation, and endowing with value or truth that any act of criticism should include as its principal goals" (*TWN* 18).

Sundquist's pursuit of "verification" as the doing of literary critical justice has little patience with "position papers," preferring a "demonstration of historicist theory rather than an articulation of it" (*TWN* 20–21). A remarkable aspect of Sundquist's historicism has always been its indifference to New Historicism, the reigning paradigm in literature departments through much of the 1980s and 1990s. While sharing its general concern to place authors in a web of textual affiliations that breaks down the rigid distinction between primary and secondary works, Sundquist had no interest in dissolving the primacy of the

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individual subject or text into a larger network or structure of relations (typically the capitalist market) generated by what Walter Benn Michaels calls a cultural logic. This Foucault-inspired strategy of displacing the centered subject is one branch of New Historicism; another, also inspired by Foucault, is associated with Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher and seeks out "counterhistories that make apparent the slippages, cracks, fault lines, and surprising absences in the monumental structures that dominated a more traditional historicism."[3]

Both branches, one dismissive of the notion of subversion, the other a connoisseur of its heroically doomed traces, depend on constructing artfully selective contexts (Michaels's *Our America*, for instance, though about culture and race in 1920s American literature, has nothing to say about Du Bois) that rely on "anecdotal virtuosity."[4] Anecdote is pivotal, for it embodies "the fingerprints of the accidental, suppressed, defeated" remnants lost in the "*grands récits* inherited from the last century."[5] Like postmodernism, New Historicism—seeking redemption of and in the marginal and taking flight from the monumental conceived as intrinsically repressive—has always had a whiff of "small is beautiful" aestheticism, a penchant for turning cultural and literary history into an art of fashioning exquisite miniatures burnished by the critic's cleverness.

While Sundquist's remaking of the canon, by recovering its suppressed and revolutionary Africanity, coincides with the general project of New Historicism, he parts company from its self-conscious preciousness. One may even read Sundquist's monumentality as an implicit rebuke to New Historicism. But such a critique would not reduce to the predictable binary of savvy postmodern skepticism of the *grand récit* versus a monumentality fueled by a theoretically naive, blithely arrogant positivism. Sundquist's unmatched accumulation of fact and detail and nuance—what comprises his acts of "verification" and his monumentality—is without pretension to the definitive or the imperial. Instead, he reinvigorates what might be described as a historical formalism that excels in locating cracks and faultlines not in redemptive "counterhistories" but in the distortions and even incoherence of literary form as it registers or enacts historical dilemmas. So, for instance, in *Puddn'head Wilson*, "Twain himself, southern imposter and puddn'head author, stood in mocking yet deadly serious judgment over materials that refused to cohere," as he made the discordant parts of his own novel into a distorted mirror reflecting democracy betrayed, its ideals yoked to twisted legal opinions shoring up Jim Crow laws (*TWN* 233).

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3 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2001), 17.

4 Alan Liu, "The Power of Formalism: the New Historicism" *ELH* 4/56 (1989), 721–77, 722.

5 Gallagher and Greenblatt, 52.

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One might say of Sundquist's commitment to "verification" that while not postmodern it is at least idiosyncratic, a signature of an aesthetic sensibility fearless about embracing excess and imbalance. Delving, in *Strangers in the Land*, into the variegated transnational theologies of early twentieth-century black Jews of Harlem and Newark and their far-flung Ethiopian affiliations, pursuing, in *To Wake the Nations*, a richly detailed charting of the intricate cultural and artistic genealogy and strategies of the plantation cakewalk: these immersions reflect the pleasure of bringing to view remarkable, resonant but barely known cultural forms. Sundquist does "justice," but the very exorbitance of his "doing," the luxuriance of his knowledge-gathering, has the happy effect of cutting against any potential for the programmatic or the encyclopedic, regulatory motives to which an imperative to do "justice" might be susceptible. In other words, Sundquist's passion for "verification" gives free play to his curiosity and hence gives the lie to the cherished postmodern and New Historicism romanticism that assumes monumentality to be inevitably a mode of imperial domination.

But curiosity is on trial in *Strangers in the Land*. Near the end of his introduction he acknowledges in effect that the volatility of his topic makes curiosity, and the empathy and sympathy it implies, immediately suspect. Sundquist asks, "may someone neither black nor Jewish write on the topic of black–Jewish relations? . . . This is the commonplace risk run by any scholar undertaking commentary on 'another' culture," a risk that this topic heightens, for in recent years some blacks have accused Jews "of responsibility for slavery and blacks considered by some Jews to be capable of speaking only the language of grievance and victimization" (15–16). Because he is committed to boundary-crossing, to cosmopolitan surmounting of ethnic–racial identity (in the opening he says that even though such "identity "cannot be ignored . . . it must be transcended"), Sundquist takes "seriously the right to analyze and interpret a problem central to the nation's history and culture" and to discuss literary works "addressed to us all by their creators, even those most chauvinistic or intolerant." Though he admits he had been reluctant to make a statement about his "positionality," he acknowledges he would have been wrong to have avoided it given that the "very burden" of his book is that "we are still a long way from an era in which identity determined by membership in a bounded ethno-racial group . . . does not appear to afford a special vantage and therefore require a certain allegiance" (16). To study the relation of blacks and Jews, then, is to run up against the heavy hand of identity politics, to see one's cosmopolitan aspirations put on the defensive; one's unfettered curiosity enters a minefield. Just to reflect on the two words—black and Jew—says why: "Jews are now ethnic, but blacks remain racial," because color "still trumps all else" (14–15).

"How like yet unalike blacks and Jews were by the early 1960s," Sundquist observes, as if echoing a remark of Philip Roth's he quoted earlier from

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The Human Stain. Coleman Silk, black passing as Jew, says Roth, embodies a "heretofore unknown amalgam of the most unalike of America's historic undesirables" (525, 514). And what has made them so "unalike," what has made their original bond as alien, despised outsiders to WASP America ultimately so brittle, so "shot full of illusion" (15), is of course the simple, crucial fact of whiteness. All the "widespread agreement that 'race' is constructed, contingent, ephemeral, illusionary, or nonexistent" has not altered the social supremacy of whiteness, Sundquist notes; in addition, the supposed antidote to this invidious hierarchy, multiculturalism, has itself relied on and affirmed the category of black as firmly as the "one-drop" rule of Jim Crow segregationists. This persistence "has proved critical to the erosion of the partnership between Jews and blacks," an alliance of "historic undesirables" whose "political and social stations in the United States were never the same, and their coalition was eviscerated far less by differing goals than by differing opportunities" (15).

The topic, in short, is a melancholy one; on the second page its alleged "special" quality (reaching its height in the civil-rights struggle of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as, for instance, Rabbi Heschel marched with Dr King) is deemed a fleeting thing of the past. For the alliance grounded on liberalism and universalism "appears to have ended" as long ago as the late 1960s with the murder of Dr King, the rise of black power, the Israeli triumph of the Six Day War in 1967, and the concomitant growth of Jewish neoconservatism, a fateful nexus upon which Sundquist dilates throughout. His historical narrative, as he notes, follows most current accounts, a point affirmed with the publication a year after *Strangers in the Land* of Cheryl Greenberg's *Troubling the Waters* (2006). Greenberg views the alliance as a window on twentieth-century liberalism. Liberalism at its finest, in postwar America (founded on the recognition that "if any were denied equality, all were vulnerable"), ended formal, legislative barriers to equality, as blacks and Jews worked together. But when "liberalism lost its footing" in the late 1960s and the 1970s "so too did black–Jewish cooperation": coming to the surface were the divisions that had always lurked beneath the self-interested but inclusive coalitions of mid-century; many blacks grew impatient with liberalism's emphasis on integration at the expense of addressing the obdurate problem of structural racism.[6]

Although, remarks Sundquist, the alliance is now more or less a wistful might-have-been, there has been no end to writing about it, "proving, perhaps, that

[6] Blending social, political, and institutional history, Greenberg understands the black–Jewish alliance not as the union of natural allies but as always fragile, shaped by the historical vicissitudes in which both groups found themselves. Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black–Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, 2006), 253.

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the black–Jewish relationship is stronger in the life of the mind than in reality" (93). Stunning testimony to this inwardness is Richard Powers's immense novel *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) (a novel briefly discussed but not in this context) where in the cocoon of a family of musical geniuses lives a Du Boisian dream. In the 1940s a Jewish refugee father and a black woman from Philadelphia produce two sons and a daughter and for a time they all together turn from the outside world to devote their lives to making music. In a Du Boisian dream of liberation, they will dwell, at least in the blissful childhood of their children, in a "kingdom of culture," closing the door on Jim Crow. Inside the dense contrapuntal harmonies they produce at home, inside "the time of our singing," they float above or beyond historical time, and have attained, the mother wants to believe, "the right place . . . the place I want . . . Nobody owns anybody. Nobody's anything but their own.'" But even as she speaks she grasps the purely utopian quality of this "place." "No: It's too soon for this life, too far out ahead of anything their children can reach. Something in this place [the United States] needs race. Some groundfloor tribalism" is demanded by this "caste-crazed country."[7] Yet she persists: until the demand comes, "she'll give them—however illusory or doomed—self." Her beautiful dream will, of course, be destroyed; violence, literal and verbal, will mock it. "Two of them, raising us like three sweet little white kids. See No Race, Hear No Race, Sing No Race," remarks the daughter later in life, scornful not only of her parents but of her brothers, both of whom devoted their lives to music.[8]

The other great contemporary novel of the "black and Jewish question," Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), exhibits an analogous investment in inwardness: where the Strom family creates a private time of singing richly to themselves in defiant group autonomy ("nobody's anything but their own"), Coleman Silk too nurtures a private place—his self. He builds it on the freedom of a secret—he is a black man passing as a white man, a Jew. He insulates himself in his inwardness, telling his secret neither to his wife nor his four children. Sacrificing intimacy, making himself all engorged will, residing inside his self-described "narcissistic bubble,"[9] living a ghostly life (the incriminating word "spooks" that lands him in trouble is most apt as a self-description), Coleman, like the Stroms, will see his effort to sustain his inwardness unravel. The rudely ironic intrusion of history shatters his fortified selfhood. This secret black man is publicly accused of being racist.

Sundquist gives a virtuoso reading of *The Human Stain*: Coleman Silk "contains the whole history of the twentieth-century black–Jewish question—its paradoxical intimacies as well as its ever-accumulating differences and animosities—in one liberatingly invented but ultimately tragic life" (522–3). In

7 Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* (New York, 2003), 481.

8 Ibid., 375.

9 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston, 2000), 19.

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Coleman "black emulation of Jews is painfully literalized, as blackness is left behind—at least in principle—in favor of the unpredictable but nonetheless perceptible advantageous advantages of Jewishness" (523). But the wounding irony is that Silk is both killed and buried "as a Jew," the victim of a deranged Vietnam vet, the white-trash Les Farley, "a man in whom anti-Semitism registers as strongly as anti-black racism" (522). Originally intent when young on passing to escape the tribal obligations of the black bourgeoisie's "We," Silk finds his career in ruins (after his innocent use of "spooks" is interpreted as a racist slur) thanks to the identitarian intolerances of multiculturalism. But, Sundquist points out,

> his Jewishness is just as provoking as his blackness would have been . . . Even as he renounces blackness and its liabilities, he inadvertently exposes the illusion that Jews are safe, white enough to escape the rage of nativist racists. In Coleman Silk's charade, the fates of black and Jew remain bound together as tightly, as fatally, as ever. (522)

"Like yet unalike"—these three words handily encapsulate the coiled tensions at the center of the book: "imitation and revulsion, kinship and alienation" are the unsentimental facts of "intermixture" grounded in "empathy, anxiety, and hostility." These entwined elements are already present in the biblical passage (Leviticus) that gives the book its title: "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." Contemplating each other, black and Jew found it "at once easy and hard" to love the other as oneself (4). But in another light African-Americans, unlike Jews and other immigrants, were not aliens and strangers to America but rather "held a position of priority *as Americans*" (51; original emphasis), in terms of longevity, forced labor, formative impact in creating American culture, and as Christians. "The core beliefs of African America principally derive, on the one hand, from democratic liberalism and, on the other, from Christianity," notes Sundquist. Yet "for all their potential priority as Americans, however, blacks were in Babylon, Jews were not. Blacks wore their mark of servitude in the color of their skin. Jews did not" (54).

Of Christianity, Sundquist notes that it is "in its foundations a Jewish narrative" (50). And Exodus, exile and diaspora are key elements of that narrative, elements that black Americans have appropriated, making them basic to understanding their own new world experience and their continually stymied entry to the promised land of full democratic equality. In sum, Christianity is at once a mark of difference between blacks and Jews and a mark signifying a deeper commonality—the Exodus myth—that ultimately exposes yet more difference. And this slipperiness, registered in a variety of contexts, could be said to constitute Sundquist's leitmotif. It begins with "America's Jews": his first chapter's title refers to blacks, not simply to Jews, and is an inverted mirror of the belief

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that in Europe the Jew was for centuries a Negro. The tormented "bond of alienation" infiltrates and makes ambiguous all the terms of opposition and fraternity between black and Jew (52). So while it is true that black Americans improvised upon the Exodus myth of deliverance from oppression with dazzling creativity amid exigency, believing "that the Jews' liberation provided a model for their own" (96), American blacks have used this trope while "acutely conscious of their position as outsiders" as they only dream of a freedom achieved within a few generations by Jews and other immigrant groups. Thus black adaptation of Jewish history, especially of the Mosaic paradigm, has to cope with the galling differences within this identification. "Like but unalike."

But Exodus, the more familiar bridge between blacks and Jews, is not Sundquist's major concern. Rather, he emphasizes the Holocaust as an even more powerful node of unsettled identification, one that furnishes the crucial conceptual and historical prism through which postwar black and Jewish alliances are enacted and must be understood. Remarkably, "the revelation of the Jewish genocide changed the African American experience, or at least its public expression, even more than it did the broader American experience" (92). Not only did the Holocaust become "the benchmark of genocide against which at least one other case, African American slavery and its aftermath, has been judged" (6), but as "*Holocaust* replaced *Exodus* as the stronger metaphor joining black and Jewish lives, a matrix of suffering, guilt, and the demand for reparations, in both moral and economic terms, threatened to become the ultimate meaning of African American identity" (92). This last claim is bound to be controversial and, like any attempt to fix an "ultimate meaning," is basically unprovable. But at the least Sundquist shows, and is the first to do so, how pervasive the Holocaust is in structuring the postwar history of black and Jewish relations. As early as 1939, with Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, "uncannily marked by a post-Holocaust understanding of the Exodus" (the charismatic Moses is cast as a potentially Hitlerian figure as he leads his people to nationhood), "black rewritings of the Exodus would be ineluctably haunted by the prospect of a people's extermination" (214).

Black Americans were on the whole more alert to the rise of Nazism and sympathetic to the revelations of the genocide against European Jews than were gentile white Americans, notes Sundquist. Oppressed under American racial apartheid, blacks knew that the Third Reich had studied Jim Crow segregation laws for inspiration and the research program of the American eugenics movement as it searched for a "master race" (186). "It could happen to black folks in America," remarked one black GI after witnessing Buchenwald's horrors (quoted on 215). Indeed, blacks had been lynched for decades in the American south and under slavery had been murdered with impunity. That day, the soldier would later recollect, "I came to the realization that human suffering

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is not relegated to me and mine." Even here, in this compassionate reaction, are latently present the troubling elements—the implied comparison of scales of suffering and horror—that would later embitter identification. Sundquist charts this tension in Du Bois's 1947 and 1949 responses to the Holocaust. His first statement insisted on continuity: "there was no Nazi atrocity . . . which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world" (quoted on 216). But after his 1949 visit to the Warsaw Ghetto he abruptly abandoned his continuity thesis. Nothing in his "wildest imagination," remarked this veteran of the Atlanta race riots, had prepared him for the horror he encountered.

One consequence of the revelation of historical discontinuity, of uniqueness of scale, was that "suddenly the threat to Jews as a people, even if those in the United States remained comparatively safe, was devastatingly real, and the threat to blacks might well seem diminished in comparison" (6). Inevitably, then, resentment was mixed with identification, empathy was mixed with anxiety that black American suffering would be diminished by comparison to that of the Jews. Commenting on a scene from John A. Williams's *Clifford's Blues* (1999) about a gay black jazz pianist imprisoned in Dachau where Jews are called "the niggers of Dachau," Sundquist remarks that "this formulation proves also that blacks are not—and, more to the point, that there was no Dachau of any kind in the United States" (446). But his blunt literalism, a useful critical tool of deflation, is dwarfed by the inflation incited by the "comparability fray" between black slavery and the Holocaust, a contest that culminated in Toni Morrison's famous epigraph to *Beloved*, "Sixty Million and more." This, in turn, provoked Stanley Crouch to call her book a "blackface Holocaust novel," Morrison's entry of "American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest" (quoted on 449). Sundquist comments, "By the time Morrison's novel appeared . . . routine appeals to genocide's touchstone had nearly drained it of meaning," so that Crouch's caustic response "was no more outrageous than her epigraph." The epigraph to *Beloved*, a novel which Morrison intended to be a memorial to the fact of the slave journey to America in the absence of "any suitable memorial or plaque or wreath," "recapitulated assumptions that had been gathering force" ever since the term genocide had been invented after the war "and that became more heated and accusatory in the era of Black Power" (449).

In the summer of 1966 Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown of SNCC issued a manifesto of Black Power, defying Dr King's non-violent, interracial approach; in declaring an end to any white (read Jewish) participation in the black struggle, they expressed solidarity with Third World anti-colonial movements. The following year Israel's stunning victory in the Six Day War and the flood of emotional and financial support it elicited (in a period of three weeks the UJA raised $100 million) further frayed relations. "Frustration with their comparative

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lack of power and prestige undoubtedly exacerbated black radicals' tendency to blur the distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism" (341). The military strength of Israel helped ignite rage among black nationalists against a hitherto admired Zionism. What had in 1948, the year of Israel's founding, been a stirring sign to black Americans of their own hope for a homeland or at least a spiritual ingathering, had nineteen years later become, in the eyes of a vocal and influential minority of black Americans, the diabolical transformation of David into Goliath, victim into executioner, Jew into Nazi (319). Before long, with the emergence of Yassir Arafat as chair of the PLO in 1969, the Palestianian cause became the Black Power cause, a commonality of dispossession and victimhood that helped put the final nails in the casket of the political partnership of blacks and Jews. "Like SNCC, the Black Panthers insisted they were not anti-Semitic but only anti-Zionist, a distinction their rhetoric at times made hard to discern" (333).

Sundquist sums up the beginning of the end: a

> comparable inversion [of Israelis into Nazis] in perceptions, on the part of blacks and Jews alike, took place at home. From seeing the United States as the "Fourth Reich," it was for blacks but a short step to confusing American Jews with Israeli colonizers and accusing them of Nazism. For Jews, it was almost as short a step from seeing blacks as fellow sufferers under the yoke of racial persecution to accusing them of Hitlerite anti-Semitism. Such a devolution in black–Jewish relations might have happened in any case, but the Six-Day War set the antagonistic course for political allegiances and animosities for decades to come. (319)

Sundquist remarks the troubling transformation of James Baldwin's political vision in 1967. Long celebrated as a crucial mediator between blacks and Jews, and, with Dr King, the most lyrical visionary of Exodus as deliverance to the Promised Land, Baldwin now replaced that optimism with the bleak lens of the Holocaust. He saw Jews less as allies than as "envied antagonists," regarding the Holocaust "almost as an affront to the more horrendous suffering of blacks" and describing Harlem as a concentration camp (452).

In post-Holocaust America, blacks redescribed the horrors of the middle passage and the centuries of ensuing US enslavement as the "Black Holocaust." And with this refiguring came the imperative to never forget. But since no actual survivors of slavery remained alive in the 1980s when the notion of a "Black Holocaust" took hold, the imperative transformed actual memory into the metaphor, central to *Beloved*, of "rememory." "What can be known is never the ancestor but only her ghost" and the past is known only through "the ineffable language of enduring, unspeakable pain, transformed," writes Sundquist, "through the act of 'rememorying' into the essence of racial identity" (460). For Morrison and others the "Black Holocaust" is the defining catastrophe of modernity, displacing the more familiar Jewish Holocaust as the bearer of

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that mantle. But the gain in cultural prestige comes at a cost, one that Sundquist notes: the importance accorded the imperative to dwell with the genocidal past in "rememory" is grounded "in the assumption that black life, and therefore black memory, is characterized not peripherally but centrally by a heritage of psychic and cultural destruction" (462). As a result, to the ubiquity of the victim is joined the ubiquity of the survivor, for once memory has been severed from literal witness and made metaphorical, all black Americans are "survivors of slavery—just as all Jews are survivors of the death camps—but they are also survivors of the continuing holocaust of American racism" (465). One way (mine, not Sundquist's) to describe this predominance of the Black Holocaust paradigm is that in effect it constitutes the grimly ironic return of the reviled "damage thesis" of the late 1950s and the 1960s—the argument that socio-economic misery had inflicted psychic injury upon black Americans, a thesis exemplified in the Moynihan report on the black family as a "tangle of pathology" and in Stanley Elkins's book on slavery that compared plantations to concentration camps. Now the "damage thesis" was in effect embraced as an emblem of the stature of historical and cultural victimage, eventually, by the 1980s, producing an identity politics of *ressentiment* "invested in its own subjection," to borrow the words of political theorist Wendy Brown.[10]

Sundquist's new book, like his previous one, is epic in its scale of evidence and analysis: besides memoirs, poems, drama, novels, he draws on speeches, essays, manifestos, broadsides, even rumors, in short, "the precious heritage that lives outside of books" in folklore and song and oral testimony (291). Out of all these materials, he has once again produced a triumph of "verification," and the weight and length of his inquiry are the necessary means of enacting his judiciousness, the crucial quality such volatile material requires. Anchoring the sprawling assemblage gathered here are the novels to which Sundquist gives extended and brilliant scrutiny. And he uses his literary criticism to great organizing advantage, making his texts serve as the structural pivots from which he casts his enormous loops of contextual inquiry and historical reconstruction.

Strangers in the Land, like *To Wake the Nations*, examines with consummate care and evenhandedness how black writers "coming to terms with their own catastrophic past" sought "to enter into Nation Time," to fashion a usable past through which they "might determine their own fate and write their own history" (291). But whereas the grandeur of *To Wake the Nations* mirrors the grandeur of black resistance as it achieved a vital measure of autonomy, *Strangers in the Land* tells a more somber tale, of the ways that the writing of one's own history get distorted by the nasty ironies of history, not least that shared (and not

[10] See Wendy Brown's essay "Wounded Attachments," in *idem*, *States of Injury* (Princeton, 1995), 52–76, 70.

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shared) by historical victims of hatred in the same nation but whose different skin color made all the difference in surmounting the stigma and psychology of victimhood. The relationship of blacks and Jews has left psychic scars inflicted on each side, perhaps especially on the black one. In a host of literary works, famous and obscure, by Paule Marshall, William Melvin Kelley, John A. Williams, Saul Bellow, Harper Lee and Bernard Malamud, to name those who receive the most sustained attention, Sundquist examines the pain and violence of the collisions, whether muted and symbolic or raw and violent, or sometimes both, and also assesses the enactments of empathy. Each of these novels—especially those by Marshall (*The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*), Lee (*To Kill a Mocking Bird*) and Malamud (*The Tenants*)—is revealed as a powerful historical and imaginative meditation on black and Jewish entwinements and together they form a canon now valuably brought to light.

Near the end of his intensely meditated study, exhilarating in the empathy, acuteness and reach of its intellectual command, exhausting in its assemblage of mutual acrimony, Sundquist notes that "at the dawn of the transnational, potentially post-race, post-ethnic, twenty-first century, blacks are still 'America's Jews,'" yet Jews, "despite their singular modern tragedy and continued threats against them worldwide . . . are not 'America's Negroes'" (526). What he earlier called the "unresolvable problems of parity" between the Holocaust and American slavery may finally be best understood as parallel events not governed by the same ideology or intentions or having the same outcomes (446). The reasonable, anti-polemical notion that the experiences of blacks and Jews are best grasped as parallel dominates Lori Segal's underrated novel *Her First American* (1985), where the black character notes that "parallels are two lines that run side by side and never meet except in infinity" (quoted on 494), "Not a shared history, not a shared genocide, but only their parallel stories are what the characters have in common," and the clear-eyed novel suggests, says Sundquist, that it is "only in storytelling, only in the joint narration of parallel lives destined never to meet except in infinity, that Jews and blacks will find what remains of their shared history" (495).

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