

Trading Places: From Black Power Activist to “Anti-Negro Negro”

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In March of 1988, the faculty of the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst unanimously demanded that the University remove one of its most distinguished members, Professor Julius Lester. The official reason given for this unprecedented request was that Lester had become an “anti-Negro-Negro.”¹ In making this extraordinary demand, Lester’s colleagues were reacting to the recent publication of his autobiography. Entitled *Lovesong: On Becoming a Jew* (1988a), the book tells the story of Lester’s conversion to Judaism and details his growing alienation from Black politics. The faculty’s lengthy report concluded, “Professor Lester would be infinitely more comfortable at a different location in the University” (Lester 1988b, 17-8).² Elaborating on the written account, one of the authors pointedly remarked that retaining Lester in Afro-American Studies is “like having Yassir Arafat teaching in the Jewish Studies Department.”³ The University eventually complied with the request and transferred Professor Lester to another department.

This bit of academic infighting soon became national news.⁴ Journalists reminded their readers that back in the late 1960s, when he was a prominent Black Power activist, Lester gained notoriety as an anti-Semite. The *Los Angeles Times* maintained that now Lester was himself a victim of anti-Semitism.⁵ Despite the University’s intervention, or perhaps because of it, the scandal refused to die. Lester himself contributed to the prolonged life of this affair by

rehashing events and responding to his detractors in published articles and public lectures.⁶ More significant still, conservative critics enthusiastically seized upon the story of Lester's excommunication. It is an anecdote repeatedly recited to dramatize the perilous effects of "victim politics."

Lester became the poster-boy for anti-victimism. Dinesh D'Souza's best selling *Illiberal Education*, for instance, employs Lester's story to illustrate the casualties of what he calls the "victims' revolution" (D'Souza 1991, 194-204). In their respective books, Shelby Steele and Stephen Carter emphasize the Lester debacle specifically to warn other African Americans of the penalties awaiting those who don't follow "the party line" (Steele 1990, 73-4; Carter 1991, 109, 133, 195, 209). These and other commentators maintain that Lester's great transgression was criticizing Blacks for languishing in their victimhood. In fact, Charles Sykes's *A Nation of Victims*—a far-reaching condemnation of the "victim zeitgeist" enfeebling America—features Lester's writings as authoritative testimony on the rise and proliferation of "victimism" (Sykes 1992, 167). While Lester may seem at first to be just another "multicultural conservative," there is much more to his story that merits careful examination.⁷

An Exemplary Victim

Julius Lester's trajectory from militant Black anti-Semite to Jewish critic of Black anti-Semitism is surely exceptional. His conversion is neither part of a mass movement of African Americans becoming Jews, nor emblematic of the experience of most African Americans who are Jews, whether by conversion or by ancestry.⁸ The extraordinary nature of his story, however, illuminates the permutations of victim discourse in contemporary America, its ambiguities and ironies, its power to forge identities, build community, or pit groups against one another.

Paradoxically, Lester occupies two positions within the victim discourse: one, as an avid opponent of victim politics, the other, as a victim; for Lester is taken to be, and takes himself to be, a victim of victim politics. According to Sykes and others who retell his story, Lester's treatment by his colleagues vividly demonstrates how those anointed as "official victims" actually victimize others. Lester concurs, asserting in his autobiography that such victimists are "merely . . . executioner[s] too cowardly to sharpen [their] sword[s]" (1988a, 126). This ambiguity is symptomatic of a larger phenomenon: many critics of victim politics become its practitioners by devising and promoting new groups of worthy victims. As this affair makes so clear, moreover, fighting against the proliferation of victimism can be a way for anti-victimists to establish their own status as victims.

Closer examination of the circumstances of Lester's conversion provides additional evidence that his journey was actually a search for a pure victim position. I suggest that Lester is drawn specifically to Judaism and Jewishness because of how Jewish victimization, especially the Holocaust, is commemo-

rated in the United States. Lester's story exposes some unexpected consequences of the hegemonic status of the destruction of European Jewry as the venerated American narrative of suffering. He appropriates the Holocaust not solely as a symbol of Jewish persecution, but also as a private cataclysm, a palpable experience of violence, immolation, and rebirth. His self-understanding has been predicated upon and negotiated through his relationships to Jews, who, at different junctures in his career, he perceived as either treacherous victimizers or innocent victims. In Lester's imagination African Americans also oscillate between the binary positions of victims and victimizers. His case history, therefore, underlines the interplay between two sets of identifications—personal and collective, African American and Jewish—that were forged around victimhood.

Despite Lester's insistence that converting was simply the culmination of his personal quest for God, his autobiographical writings betray a desire for transformation that exceeds an individual search for religion or religious community.⁹ Indeed, I propose that becoming a Jew was a racial conversion more than a religious one. Lester justifies his radical transformation from a supposedly existentialist vantage point, claiming that his Black identity is inauthentic, while becoming a Jew represents a revelatory moment of authenticity. Furthermore, Lester seems to use his conversion to address what Franz Fanon termed the "corporeal malediction" (Fanon 1952/1967, 111). Assuming a Jewish identity is his method of avoiding being determined by the racial gaze. Thus, Lester's embrace of Judaism and Jewishness suggests a type of racial crossing that I call "Jewface." This is not to undermine or ridicule his religious conversion, or to condone the appalling way he was treated by his colleagues or by his university, but to highlight how Lester's rebirth as a Jew coexists with the practices of blackface and other forms of "racechanges."¹⁰

In *Blackface, White Noise*, Michael Rogin shows how blackface minstrelsy provided a means for children of Jewish immigrants, as performers and Hollywood moviemakers, to facilitate their inclusion in white America. "The [Jewish] jazz singer," Rogin maintains, "Americanized himself through blackface" (Rogin 1996, 147, 73-112).¹¹ By temporarily putting on black masks Jews accentuated the divide between themselves and Blacks, placing themselves on the side of whiteness. Lester's "ethnic transvestism"—his appropriation of Jewish history, Jewish food, music and other forms of *Yiddishkeit*—inverts this cultural device.¹² His performance is fundamentally an act of individuation, not simply an assimilationist gesture or an attempt to pass. If Jewish performers wore the black mask to merge into the white mainstream, Lester dons the *yarmulke* to distinguish himself from Blacks and ultimately to guarantee his double marginality. He achieves this position by combining two "identities"—African American and Jewish—that have become dramatically opposed in American society. His narrative, then, provides a unique perspective on the problems and peculiarities of Black-Jewish relations in post-civil rights America.

The following analysis is based on Lester's writings, especially his second autobiography, *Lovesong*, which construes his life as inevitably leading to his

conversion. This text affords a view into Lester's emotional state, family relations, bodily sensations and sexual anxieties, all of which I use in my effort to understand his remarkable life story. As one reviewer remarked, "Lester almost invites a reader to psychoanalyze him. . . ." ¹³ My aim, however, is not to place Lester on the proverbial couch, but rather to investigate the relationship between the personal and the political. The highly personal nature of Lester's public confession may be seen as part of a recent and prevalent political discourse in which intimate experiences function as the content of politics: "[t]estimony takes the place of conversation," and claims of abuse and victimization confer political status (Kaminer 1993, 2). ¹⁴ Lester denounces politicizing the personal, continually proclaiming his retreat from politics. "[W]hen the personal becomes political," he cautions, "persons cease to exist. When persons cease to exist, war is imminent" (1988b, 233; 1990a, 139). However, I shall demonstrate that he inundates his readers with titillating intimate details in order to conceal the political beneath the personal.

Original Sins

Born in 1939, Lester spent most of his early childhood in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, until his father, a Methodist minister, received an appointment as the Director of Negro Affairs for the Board of Evangelism of the Methodist Church and moved the family to Nashville, Tennessee. The Lesters had a devout Christian home, family life revolving around his father's vocation, and they were relatively affluent. Lester remained in Tennessee for his undergraduate studies at Fisk University, spending his junior year as an exchange student at San Diego State College. After earning his B.A., he moved to New York City, where he embarked on a career as a writer. To support himself, he worked as a folk singer and guitar and banjo teacher; he has produced at least two albums of original songs.

In the mid-1960s, Lester emerged as a "revolutionary" (1988a, 39). He made numerous trips to the South, becoming involved first in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and later in the Black Power Movement. In 1967, SNCC sent him to North Vietnam as their representative. He later traveled to Sweden to report on the tribunal on the war in Vietnam and accompanied Stokely Carmichael to Cuba. His service as a spokesman for SNCC and speechwriter for Carmichael culminated in his first book, "an anti-white diatribe," *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama* (1968a). ¹⁵ Thirteen years later, Lester left New York to join the faculty in the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In 1983, he converted. He presently serves as the spiritual leader for an unaffiliated synagogue in St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

At the time of the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville confrontation, Lester was hosting a weekly broadcast on New York public radio, WBAI. This teachers' strike at a Brooklyn school sparked tensions that pitted Black community mem-



Figure 1: Lester as he appeared on the dust jacket of *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama* (1968). Photo by David Gahr, courtesy of the photographer.

bers and the predominantly Jewish faculty against each other. It was, by all accounts, a pivotal moment in the dissolution of the civil rights alliance between Jews and Blacks.¹⁶ As part of his coverage of the events, Lester included a Black student's poem that opens with the lines:

Hey, Jew boy, with that yarmulke on your head/ You pale-faced Jew boy—I wish you were dead. . . . I'm sick of hearing about your suffering in Germany/ I'm sick about your escape from tyranny/ . . . /About the murder of 6 million Jews/ Hitler's reign lasted for only fifteen years/ For that period of time you shed crocodile tears/ My suffering lasted for over 400 years, Jew boy/ And the white man only let me play with his toys/ Jew boy you took my religion and adopted it for you/ But you know that black people were the original Hebrews. . . (1988a, 51).

Soon after, Lester gained national repute as “New York Anti-Semite Number 1.”¹⁷

Lester fiercely defended his actions. Airing the poem, he explained during his next broadcast, was an integral part of his responsibility to offer listeners a view of “the black frame of reference, the black psyche, the black mind” (1969c, 231). His critics mistakenly saw him only as an individual, but he had “no choice but to look upon myself as black” (*Ibid.*, 232). As for the charges of anti-Semitism, Lester countered that American Jews were “borrowing suffering” from the Holocaust, while remaining indifferent to the anguish of Blacks (1988a, 57). In America, he elaborated, it is African Americans who are the “Jews.” “There is no need for black people to wear yellow Stars of David on their sleeves; that Star of David is all over us.” Then, going beyond the sentiments expressed in the poem, he clarified that now “it is the Jews who are in the position of being Germans” (*Ibid.*, 61; 1969c, 235). Even back in 1968, it seems, Lester identified as a “Jew,” though at this stage he maintained that Jews had been replaced as the symbol of victimhood: African Americans are the “Jews,” and American Jews, the “Germans.”

Fifteen years after he equated Jews with Nazis, Lester converted to Judaism. This was a protracted process that began with a growing preoccupation with the Holocaust. His interest in this topic, he claims, was motivated by a fear that African Americans would face the fate of Jews in Europe (1988a, 119). But, as he explains in his autobiography, while reading testimonies of survivors, he fell into a depression, consumed by “grief and mourning for the six million murdered Jews,” along with “mourning for my own innocence” (*Ibid.*, 120). Images of the Holocaust invade his dreams, where alarmingly his Black body has been transformed into a Jewish one:

I awake each morning, tired. In the night I have wandered among naked bodies piled atop one another; I shovel bodies into ovens and I am the Jew closing the oven door and the Jew inside; I am smoke and flame spewing from smoke stacks; I am particles of ash . . . (*Ibid.*, 123).

His grief for the slaughtered Jews blends with guilt and with memories of himself as a child playing in the dirt. “I see myself kneeling in the dirt of the backyard of the parsonage. . . . I am five years old. I do not know that at that same moment . . . five-year old boys and girls are being killed because they are Jews” (*Ibid.*, 120).

Lester determines that “after Auschwitz . . . it is not possible to be innocent” (*Ibid.*). Even a young Black boy living in the segregated South must claim guilt as part of his condition. This epiphany about the universal implications of the European Holocaust is crucial to Lester’s break with Black politics. He now contends that Blacks deny this collective guilt by valorizing their own status as victims to the exclusion of all other victim claims: “through canonizing themselves as victims, blacks relinquished the courage to suffer. . . . Now they languished in the sentimental and self-righteous security of being victims” (*Ibid.*, 126). Lester depicts these feelings as devouring him. “Whatever life we had is swallowed whole and ingested by the metaphor of Auschwitz. It is as if it was always there, as if I knew about it from the instant of conception and the first word I spoke was not ‘Momma’ but ‘Auschwitz’” (1990a, 256). Did the horrors of the Holocaust so threaten Lester’s victim status that he longed to be born again crying out for “Auschwitz” rather than “Momma”? Or, is his fantasy of rebirth an escape from the guilt of his anti-Semitism? One thing is certain: in Lester’s mind the Holocaust is the original sin (here conflated with the primal scene) that renders us all guilty from inception.

The decisive public rupture with Black politics was occasioned by the Andrew Young affair of 1979—when numerous prominent African Americans claimed that Jews forced President Jimmy Carter to dismiss Young from his office as United Nations Ambassador for having met with members of the Palestine Liberation Organization. “[Blacks’] arrogance,” Lester wrote, “is a common fault of oppressed people when they believe their own status as victims gives them the advantage of moral superiority” (1988a, 128). The Black leadership’s attacks on Jews, he deduces, reveal “that blacks too can be Germans” (*Ibid.*, 130; 1990a, 143-5, 165). Reading his own words he observes, “I have written as if I’m a Jew” (1988a, 127). It is only when Lester writes as a Jew that he assumes a position outside Black politics, for there were previous occasions when he offered public criticism as an “insider” (e.g., 1974a, 127). However, Lester maintains that he had little choice in writing what and how he did. To do otherwise, he would be “guilty of murdering those [Jewish] children again” (1988a, 132).

Jews, as he discovered in the Sixties, are capable of being “Germans” (*Ibid.*, 61). In the Seventies he realized that the “Jews of America”—that is, Blacks—also could be “Germans” (*Ibid.*, 130). Then, in order to be a “Jew,” Lester would become a Jew.

Suffocating in the Womb

Lester’s preoccupation with the Holocaust is only one subplot of his conversion story. He also explains his drift from Black politics by the need to liberate himself from the “noose of race” (*Ibid.*, 112). His decision to join the Civil Rights Movement, as described some 25 years later in *Lovesong*, conveys considerable reluctance. For a long time he resisted the “Siren call of History,” but eventually “History claimed me for Itself” (*Ibid.*, 39; 1974a, 123). While the causal relationship between the two subplots remains unclear, the motivating force driving them both is the same: seduction (“siren call,” “claimed...for itself”), on the one hand, and guilt, sorrow and shame, on the other.

In *Lovesong*, Lester provides only scant details about his activities in the Civil Rights Movement because he came to view his years of political activism as a period of personal weakness. Joining the movement, he now writes, was akin to returning to the womb (“the womb-like security that comes when one belongs to a cause”). This womb obliterated his “identity.” Such is the nature of collectivities, he surmises: they provide a hazardous sanctuary that suffocates individuality (1990a, 98, 60-1, 66; 1974a, 124). Lester, therefore, sees identity as a process of individuation rather than affiliation, and, by implication, as the victim of identity politics. His use of the womb metaphor, with all of its misogynistic connotations, additionally suggests that Lester conflates the political womb with the biological one. This is only one instance (we shall pursue others) of Lester’s tendency to collapse the political into the personal.

In order to relieve himself of the burden of Black existence and Black memory, Lester immersed himself in what he considered to be a greater historical burden—the plight of 2,000 years of Jewish suffering in the Diaspora. Paradoxically, then, to guard his own individuality and separateness, Lester openly criticizes other Blacks for maintaining and reinforcing the boundaries between their sorrow and that of others; but instead of embracing the pain of the entire universe as he suggests African Americans should, Lester chooses to identify himself with another particularistic pain and alternative community boundaries. His newly discovered community is not, however, composed of other African American Jews.¹⁸ Though the name Julius Lester appears among most catalogs of prominent African American Jews, the congregants he joins are Ashkenazi. It is unlikely that this is simply a matter of circumstance, for as a Black man among whites he will always stand out; thus, Lester can enter into the “womb” of the Jewish collective and still preserve his individuality.

That Julius Lester

In *Lovesong*, Lester explains that as a youth, the constant need to present different personae to whites and to Blacks required him to lead a disembodied life.

I chose invisibility and walked as if I did not occupy my body, and talked in the polite tone of a string quartet. I even practiced breathing so that my chest would not rise and fall as I inhaled and exhaled. Nothing could mitigate the ontological terror of being damned in the flesh (1988a, 25).

Despite echoes of Du Bois, Ellison, and Fanon, for Lester the schizophrenic state of Black existence in the South transformed into ambivalence over being pushed to fulfill a role in Black politics in which he reportedly was never at ease. With the publication of his first book, *Look Out, Whitey!*, the media anointed Lester “a personal emissary of Black Power” (*Ibid.*, 43). Such a reception caused him great anxiety, confusion, and embarrassment, he later confessed. This section of *Lovesong* abruptly shifts to the third person. Lester explains that he is not “that Julius Lester” who conceals his doubts about Black Power and revolution by writing in “that black collective voice” (*Ibid.*, 44). Gazing at his nine books on a shelf above his desk, he feels only shame and regret. These books aren’t he; they represent a persona that others wanted him to be. “I have written books that, while not false, are not wholly true. I have lived the life others needed me to live. By doing so I have sold my birthright and I never knew what it was” (*Ibid.*, 74). Lester’s period of militancy, he asks us to believe, was simply a blackface performance.

Julius Lester’s role in 1960s Black politics, whether chosen or imposed, was to express Black anger, as a speaker, speechwriter, essayist and radio personality. This was the time when his vitriolic style and inflated rhetoric first emerged. His political activities (both before and after his conversion) reveal a compulsion to speak out. This stands in striking contrast to his self-depiction as a shy, aloof, unemotional and silent person (*Ibid.*, 7, 8, 133, 178-9, 222).

What did “that Julius Lester,” the Black militant, advocate? He repudiated Martin Luther King and SNCC (after he converted to Black Power) for asking Blacks to “play the role of the victim” by seeking forgiveness from whites (1968a, 4, 41, 105-6; 1969b, 19, 115).¹⁹ In contrast to this victim approach, he endorsed violence, disruption, and revenge (1968a, 57, 140, 26, 37, 74, 113; 1969b, 41-3). Encouraging Blacks to abandon the path forged by King, Lester directed them instead to the road paved by “field niggers,” Nat Turner and Malcolm X (1968a, 107, 30). As he explained: “You can’t do what you’ve done to blacks and not expect retribution. The very act of retribution is liberating, and perhaps it is not an accident that the symbolism of Christianity speaks of being washed in blood as an act of purification” (*Ibid.*, 137). This Lester (the angry Black

male) held that for Blacks to effect change they must be loud and threatening (1969b, 70-1, 97; 1974a, 128-9). "I can't ask other blacks . . . to forego the pleasures of hating. A part of me hates also. Sometimes, all of me. . . I want to drown [whites] in their whiteness" (1969a, 133). Thus, even as an advocate of the "revolution of the dispossessed," Lester preached some form of anti-victimism, though at this stage in his political metamorphosis Black power represents non-victimist politics. Still, in *Lovesong* Lester asks us to regard his forceful public style as literary skill rather than an authentic expression:

Because I can express black anger does not mean I am angry, and it certainly doesn't mean I hate white people. Because I articulate the experiences of many blacks does not mean I am writing autobiographically. I have never been in jail, lived on a Mississippi plantation, picked a boll of cotton, been beaten by a policeman . . . (1988a, 43).

He was never enraged; it was all merely a mask, a writer's exercise in using "angry, colloquial black English" (*Ibid.*, 42).

It is difficult to know how to construe Lester's disclaimers. He does not deny the pain he felt growing up Black in the South, only the connection between his suffering and detesting whites. The first instance in which Lester alleges to feel connected to his verbal eruptions is when he attacks Jews. It is surprising that Lester does not gloss over this episode of his past, especially since *Lovesong* is unquestionably meant to present a consistent and linear trajectory from his childhood in the South to his conversion in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, he dedicates many pages to describing in detail his collision with Jewish leaders in New York, never offering any strong apology or full retraction. Lester felt that his anger with Jews' paternalism and insensitivity was plainly justified:

I hear an anger within me, an anger that my suffering as a black person is not understood as I feel the suffering of Jews is. I am angry, too, that Jews, the people I thought most able to understand black suffering, do not understand, do not care, even, to try to understand. Once I see my anger staring at me, I cannot deny that part of motivation in airing the poem had been to hurt Jews as they had hurt me. If such unspoken anger becomes a comfortable habit, there is no way I can prevent myself from sliding into anti-Semitism as if it were a cool lake at the bottom of a grassy slope (*Ibid.*, 58).

He distinguishes between a legitimate expression of anger and an anger (unspoken in this case) that becomes second nature and slips into hatred and racism.

Such anger is somehow feminine—a watery abyss at the base of a moss-covered mound.²⁰ Perhaps the same female (the “siren’s call”) that seduced him into entering the Black collective womb, now threatens to lock him in the unyielding vagina that is Black identity.

Lester expected more of Jews than other whites, and he resented them for not fulfilling his expectations. Paul Berman describes this form of resentment, which he observes among other African Americans, as hatred for those who are neither Other nor brother, but “almost the same;” those whose resemblance “threatens to obliterate everything which is special about me” (Berman 1994, 5). For Lester, however, the way the pain of each group mirrors that of the other (the anger that stares him back in the face) entails not sibling rivalry so much as an interior rupture between two parts of a single self. (In this configuration Jews are positioned as an inattentive parental authority or alter ego, a construction that correlates well with his charge of Jewish paternalism [1988a, 61, 63; 1969b, 235].)²¹

Ten years later, at the height of the Andrew Young controversy, Lester writes the indignant “On the Uses Of Suffering” for *The Village Voice*, and observes a new congruity between his words and feelings. For the first time, he claims, he writes with “personal conviction,” as “a believer”: “something opened within me that I did not know existed” (1988a, 131). As a convert to Judaism, the person who claims he could not generate real anger at whites because he had not been imprisoned in a Southern jail or shot at from close range, now feels free to be angry at the enemies of the Jewish people as though he had personally experienced the Holocaust and two thousand years of pogroms.

Mirror Images

Lester began writing in earnest while studying among a predominantly white student body at San Diego State College. It was a difficult year, the first time he had not lived in a Black community. Lester recalls becoming excessively concerned with his hair during this period. Taming his locks involved lengthy grooming sessions. Despite hours spent in front of a mirror, he found that he could only see himself through others’ eyes: “I knew myself as a thought of others, and only in the way they conceived me to be” (1974a, 46). An inability to see himself as something other than how he was perceived compelled Lester to begin (re)creating himself through text (just as writing as a Jew would also prove to be a defining moment):

Some instinct told me to write, to put my self on paper where I could see it and touch it, to place it where it could not harm me, as it would if it remained wholly inside, to begin to create a self through words, one which would never again need others to tell it who it was (*Ibid.*, 50).

With perhaps the exception of his still unpublished novel *Michele*, however, Lester always abandons the self he has created through text. Once he puts his ideas and feelings into a palpable form, they become external to him. More threatening still, others can use his own words to confine and imprison him in a static identity. “I am almost fatally ill with people trying to impose their idea of me on me. I am not an idea, damn it! Anything anyone ventures to say about me will not be true. I will not be pinned by anyone’s words, particularly my own” (*Ibid.*, 312). Lester still rages against readers’ presumptions (1990a, 53).

If initially Lester sought to construct an image in writing that he could not observe in the mirror, he would later remark (often while standing before a mirror) that he could see beyond his own reflection; such moments are revelatory. Staring past his reflection, Lester can see something deeper: “[I]nstead of seeing myself, I saw who I had been . . .” (1974a, 243-4). Similarly, *Lovesong* opens with the declaration that Lester is no longer fooled by his mirror image: “I have become who I am. I am who I always was. I am no longer deceived by the black face which stares at me from the mirror. I am a Jew” (1988a, 1).

Lester’s descriptions of feeling internally divided and disembodied suggest that his newly found Jewish identity may be understood as a response to the specter of double consciousness that W.E.B. Du Bois so famously described as the duality of the condition of being Negro and American. “One feels his twoness,” wrote Du Bois, “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 1903/1997, 38). As part of the “talented tenth,” Lester’s personal struggles may exemplify the particular plight of the Black middle-class in contemporary America. Nevertheless, his reliance on the metaphor of the mirror directs us not toward Du Bois, but toward Fanon’s (or Lacan’s) formulation. His descriptions are reminiscent of Fanon’s depiction of the primal “racial epidermal” trauma that shatters the Black man into three—body, race, and history (Fanon 1952/1967, 109-16). It appears, moreover, that Lester has never fully resolved the splitting of the mirror stage. He describes experiencing himself on “two levels;” one level always monitoring the other. “I can’t integrate the two and it makes Julius seem like a hypocrite, a liar” (1974a, 84).

The more his prominence grows, the more stifled he feels by this persona; “that Julius Lester” turned the real one into “a prisoner of the black collective” (1988a, 66). To liberate himself from this “net of blackness,” Lester decides to live outside history, “to leap, blindly and joyously, into the void of ahistorical Time which is created only in the leap” (*Ibid.*, 67, 72). Other Blacks were clutching to a history of victimization with which they were committing murder:

Instead of leaping into the void, blacks are jumping to the other side, and in redefining ourselves as blacks, we impose racial definitions on the rest of humanity. Murder is commit-

ted when we define others as anything except a variation of ourselves and we of them. And the greater victim of that murder is the murderer. It is we who are the executioners of ourselves, and our paeans to blackness are like the rouge the morticians rub into the cheeks of the dead. Blackness is a cosmetic, obscuring the reality of human existence (*Ibid.*, 69).

Here Lester paraphrases Nietzsche's famous aphorism that murder "is a detour to suicide" (Nietzsche 1887/1974, 270). The murderous rage of Blacks, he warns, will lead them to exterminate themselves. But Lester's own Zarathustrian ideal of individuality also requires a suicide; Lester's rebirth as Jew occurs only by negating his Blackness.²²

Triangulating the Black/White Divide

Blacks are the ones who engage in "blackface," according to Julius Lester. They rub their blackness onto their faces and, in doing so, they assume the historical role of whites; they hate, exclude, and murder. The only countermeasure that enables Lester to clean blackness from his face, to remove the "mask" he wore as a political militant, is "Jewface." In order to eradicate one deception (blackface) Lester puts on another (Jewface). This is why, upon completing his conversion, Lester asserts that he can finally see beyond his black skin (1988a, 1).

Through Jewfacing Lester can transcend blackness, but he is not simply attempting to become white. His leap is a complex performance that triangulates the white/Black divide by making Jewishness a third vertex. Even today American Jews' status as "white" remains uncertain. On the one hand, Jews are often considered to be just another white ethnic group. And, as Rogin observes, Jewishness evolved into whiteness only by "wiping out all differences except black and white" (Rogin 1992, 447). On the other hand, American Jews defy racial classification because it is unclear whether Jewishness is a matter of race, ethnicity, or religion.²³ Bleaching one's epidermal melanin may be impossible (Michael Jackson notwithstanding), but there is a formal route for an individual to convert to Judaism. As importantly, Judaism offers Lester alternative tangible marks of difference to erase blackness, from the *yarmulke* and the *tallit* to his newly circumcised penis.

While ambiguity lingers over precisely how to classify Jews, for Lester, becoming a Jew is jumping to the symbolic "other side." Indeed, his identity play succeeds because it occurs at a historical moment when new antagonisms have overshadowed past empathies between African Americans and American Jews. Many agonize over and mourn this rift, though perhaps the perceived animosity of today is as exaggerated as the supposed romance of years past.²⁴ Nevertheless, in the racial geometry of post-1960s American politics, African Americans and American Jews have come to occupy opposing positions. Lester

is well aware of this divide, and reluctantly concedes that Blacks may understand his conversion to Judaism as abandonment and betrayal (1988a, 131, 142, 144, 145, 239). Furthermore, Lester himself was an active participant in events that deepened the enmity. A crucial part of his role as a militant Black was to attack Jews, just as much of his later Jewish self-conception involves criticizing prominent Blacks for their anti-Semitism.

By leaping into the void and becoming a Jew (i.e., symbolically non-Black) Lester may also suppose he is becoming a better “Black,” for he imagines that as a Black Jew he preserves his role as the eternal outsider, the role he claims other African Americans abandoned. He therefore employs Jewface not only for the purpose of making his Blackness fade, but also because the hybrid of the Black Jew will secure for him the status of ultimate pariah, forever hung between two worlds, each of which is itself a pariah status. He becomes a pariah (at least among some Black intellectuals) but at the same time insists upon being a Black voice by, for example, writing inspirational novels specifically for young African American readers.²⁵ Lester’s Jewface thus renders him doubly Black, doubly Jewish—Jew and “Jew”—or twice negated. In this sense he is doubly successful.

Lester’s craving for distinctiveness merges, once again, the personal with the political. The unique political status of African Americans as the quintessential pariah group does not fulfill his personal ambition for separateness and individuality, but Jewishness does. He connects the essence of being Jewish with separateness and Otherness: “[T]o be like everyone else is to cease to be a Jew. If Jews do not hold to separateness, Jews cease to exist” (*Ibid.*, 174). Jews, it seems, are better Others. Similarly, while Black history was too much of a burden to bear (hence his promotion of ahistoricity), Jewish history is something he yearns to call his own. Converting allows him to join “a people who are inseparable from [their] transcendent historical experience.” He declares: “I would die from the pain of not belonging to something so vast” (*Ibid.*, 173). Lester’s attraction to Jewishness and Jews thus goes beyond rejecting Blackness and verges on racial romanticism. He understands Jewishness in terms of tangible physical experiences that have to do not merely with the spirit, but with food and music and “living in the world through small [bodily] actions” (*Ibid.*, 6). “Judaism is not in the knowing,” he writes, “it is in the physicality of doing” (*Ibid.*, 167, 163, 193, 199, 211).

In Lester’s idealized vision, Jews are an ebullient, colorful people. He pictures himself as part of a world reminiscent of a Chagall painting: “. . . I see myself dancing in the middle of a brick-laid street. A brown yarmulke is on my head and I am dancing . . . in a circle, my arms extended like the wings of an eagle. I am a Chasid and I am grinning and laughing, dancing, around and around and around” (*Ibid.*, 160). Several passages in *Lovesong* echo and invert the fantasies of the late 1950s-early 1960s “White Negroes” (e.g., Jack Kerouac, Norman Podhoretz, and Norman Mailer). But in Lester’s narrative the role played in those fantasies by the sexuality of the sensuous Black body is replaced with

the smells of baking *Challah*, *borsht* and *gefilte* fish, and the rhythmic, dark tone of jazz becomes the sweet melancholy of klezmer music and the soul-searching melody of the “*Kol Nidre*” (*Ibid.*, 143, 167, 20, 37, 117, 192, 203). The *shtetl* replaces the “jungle.”²⁶

Circumcision is perhaps the most physical component of Lester’s Jewish experience. As he sees it, the final barrier to joining the Jewish community is his foreskin. He envisions being shamed in a synagogue bathroom when someone notices that he is not circumcised: “[S]uddenly the entire congregation rises up and chases me out of the *shul* and down the street, yelling, ‘He has a foreskin!’” (*Ibid.*, 206). As this image indicates, Lester is consumed by the idea that others are fixating on his penis. But of course his real fantasy is that the Jewish gaze is completely color-blind, that he can be exposed as a convert only by revealing his genitals. In removing his foreskin, he imagines he will be losing his color. After the circumcision Lester claims to feel “whole” as though “something within me has been set free” (*Ibid.*, 215).

Likewise, Lester reports that in the 1960s—much before contemplating conversion, and even before Ocean Hill-Brownsville—he would spend hours watching Hassidic Jews in New York’s Riverside Park. Staring at the older ones, he imagines that he can see the blue numbers stenciled on their arms, only to notice later that “I am rubbing my forearm as I stare. It is my suffering and theirs I want to avenge and give voice to—for them and for me” (*Ibid.*, 37). Arguably, this, as so much else in *Lovesong*, should be treated with some skepticism. In his previous autobiography, *All is Well* (1974a), published more than a decade earlier, Lester makes no mention of any interest in the Holocaust or, for that matter, in any Jewish topic or theme. Nevertheless, even as a fantasy about a fantasy, the anecdote is intriguing. The dream of the tattooed arm is a dream of a white arm (the “color” of the arms that were marked in this way). The rubbing may therefore aim not at erasing, but instead at inscribing the numbers and their silent death-camp testimony onto Lester’s own body (just as he states Blacks rub their blackness on their faces). His fascination with the tattooed forearm additionally signifies the range of ambiguities that govern Lester’s relationship to Jews, from his Jew-hating to Jew-becoming days—identification, fantasy, and desire.²⁷

Jewish history is as potent as Judaism itself in providing a new burden that will relieve Lester of his own, old one. He compares the “centuries” of Black suffering and the “millennia” of Jewish pain, only to find the latter overpowering the former. Thus, the Black child who was threatened by lynch mobs in the segregated South believes that he is shamefully fortunate when comparing his plight to that of Jewish children in the death camps of Nazi Europe (1988a, 32-3). As importantly, Lester believed he could embrace Jewish victimhood with pride; that, as James Baldwin observed in his essay “Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White” and contemporary writers have echoed in various ways, in America Jews’ suffering is privileged over other collective sufferings.²⁸

Personal Politics

As we have seen, *Lovesong* deflects attention from the political to the personal. It is not an ordinary autobiography. It was meant not to sum up Lester's career, but rather to tell the story of a spiritual journey culminating in conversion. He includes in this account his childhood memories, family relations, and sexual fantasies in a surplus of detail, suggesting that he regards his conversion in these psychosexual contexts, or prefers us to understand it that way. Let us now, therefore, turn to a third subplot of his conversion story, the personal that propels the political.

Lester informs us that his father was a commanding figure. His authority derived not only from his powerful personality (even his mother referred to him as "Reverend Lester"), but also from his relatively advantaged status as a Black minister in the segregated South of the 1940s. The Lesters were different from other Black families because they did not depend on whites for their economic survival. Such privilege, however, entailed rigorous obligations, constraints, and a good deal of compunction (*Ibid.*, 9, 23, 7). Lester remembers his father as always dressed formally. "Anybody can tell that Daddy is a preacher," he contends. "He always dresses in a suit and tie. They are as natural on him as his black skin" (*Ibid.*, 9). Lester and his brother also had to distinguish themselves from other children their age, forgoing all sorts of activities and games. "I cannot do what other kids do. . . . We represent Daddy and he represents God" (*Ibid.*, 6). As a consequence, Lester spent much time alone and was perpetually lonely. "I am a child yearning to be with children," he recalls, "but these wear dirty torn clothes. How am I supposed to play with someone whom dust coats like roach powder?" (*Ibid.*).

Exceptionally high standards of tidiness and cleanliness were instilled in the young Lester, standards he continues to observe throughout his life. The official reason for such fastidiousness was his father's status, but in a parenthetical remark Lester speculates that "It is almost as if the memories of slavery in our blood demanded perpetual cleanliness as expiation" (*Ibid.*, 14). Nowhere in his writings does Lester explicitly identify the connection, which to the reader may seem obvious, between cleanliness and being white. But years later he comments that he believes he pays homage to his ancestors when working in the dirt in his garden (*Ibid.*, 103). (Recall also that the mature Lester experiences guilt for playing in the dirt as a child, while Jewish children were exterminated in death camps in Europe [*Ibid.*, 120].)

It was Lester's mother, whom he claims was often mistaken for white, who established and maintained the standards of cleanliness. She never allowed him to get dirty and forbade him to use the filthy "colored" bathrooms (1974a, 17). In comparison with the dominant presence of his father, Lester's mother figures very little in his autobiographies. Lester's mother, however, was his biological link to the Jewish people. A reserved, quiet, strict, and formal woman, she and her mother are described as surrounded by silence. The silence of the two women

blends with a mystery, a strange name written in black capital letters on his grandmother's mailbox, ALTSCHUL. He describes one vivid memory of his mother:

One afternoon we are sitting in the porch swing next to each other. She is telling me about the orchard and her voice is soft like moonlight on magnolia blossom and I want to melt into her and without thinking, my voice soft like a fuzz on a bee's back, I ask, "Momma? Who is A-L-T-S-C-H-U-L?" (1988a, 8).

His mother dodged the questions; it was his father who informed him that Altschul was the family name of his great-grandfather, a Jewish peddler who, he claimed, did "the Christian thing even if he was a Jew," by marrying an ex-slave. Of course, as Lester would later discover, anti-miscegenation laws of the South would have made it virtually impossible for such a union to occur, and, in fact, the two were not officially married (*Ibid.*, 11, 218).

Lester never met his great-grandfather, and the family stories that he retells in *Lovesong* do not indicate that Adolph Altschul was an observant Jew or educated his children in Judaism. But later in his life, Lester will use his great-grandfather's Jewishness to legitimize his own conversion (*Ibid.*, 217, 220). Indeed, *Lovesong* includes a sequence of photographs that commences with a picture of Adolph Altschul's tombstone in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, continues with a photo of Altschul's daughter (Lester's maternal grandmother), and ends with a facsimile of his great-grandfather's handwritten will and a copy of the notice of his death that appeared in a local newspaper.

White Mama

Lester's mother referred to her fair skin as a constant burden. She tells young Julius that as a child she was beaten by Black children for looking different, and ostracized by white people because "we looked white but weren't" (*Ibid.*, 7). Femaleness and whiteness merge in Lester's mind, not only because of his light-skinned mother, but also because for him his father, and thus masculinity, signified Blackness. Lester identifies more with his mother; to relate to his father, especially the "bitterness" he felt towards whites, Lester has to try to imagine "putting [him]self inside his [father's] black skin (which he really is)" (1974a, 12-3). Other than family members, *Lovesong* includes no mention of Black women, but does describe in excruciating detail Lester's enduring attraction to white women (1988a, 37, 113, 114, 138, 143, 114; 1969a, 185, 189, 191).

Lester's attitude towards women, white women in particular, is ambivalent at best. He credits an early encounter with a white girl for having instilled in him a life-long faith in the humanity of whites (1974a, 19, 207). And years later, it is

the fear he believes he has aroused in a young white woman that leads him to realize he has become a “captive of blacks,” and to decide never again to “let [Blacks] use me as a club in their battle against anguish” (*Ibid.*, 164). Perhaps most importantly, his marriages to white women contributed to his growing estrangement from militant racial politics (1988a, 233, 144; 1990a, 137-9).

While attracted to white women, Lester also fears them. “White women are the deepest terror,” he divulges in *Lovesong*. “What a white woman says is truth even when it is a lie. How do I assert my existence if nothing I say is believed as truth, if death has blue eyes, long yellow hair glistening like destiny, and skin as pale as hope?” (1988a, 25). The title of the book that propelled Julius Lester into notoriety in the heyday of his career in militant Black politics in the late 1960s included the warning, “Black Power’s gon’ get your Mama!,” and the particulars he provides suggest that we should interpret this declaration as more than a figure of speech.

Lester’s dread of white women, at times of all women, typically manifests itself in a profound resentment of expressions of female might, especially feminism. He associates women’s influence over men with slavery (*Ibid.*, 91). Warned by a female schoolteacher that his eldest son, Malcolm, is too aggressive and violent, Lester suspects that she is intimidated by Malcolm’s “power of the masculine.” The incident elicits a long lament about the dire fate awaiting his son growing up in a world where “feminism roams the streets with all the intelligence of a lynch mob” (*Ibid.*, 90). For Malcolm to respect and love his masculinity, he will need to learn to defend himself against the “feminist tyranny.” “If he doesn’t, he’ll find himself hanging from a non-sexist lamp post, crows pecking at his penis” (*Ibid.*, 91). Feminists, specifically their pro-choice politics, also police Lester’s organ. “Sometimes I think children cry out from the trunk of my penis to be born and it angers me when I hear women say it is their right to do as they wish with their bodies. How came it to be *theirs*? That body was put in their keeping, but it is not their property” (*Ibid.*, 97, 116). Feminists, according to Lester, are as rational as an enraged mob on a lynching expedition. Women as a group do not even merit classification within the German/Jew dichotomy, so central to his understanding of politics.

The intense anxiety about feminism expressed in *Lovesong* is notably absent from Lester’s earlier writings. In several of his articles for the *Guardian*, for instance, Lester not only voices pro-feminist sentiments, but also explicitly criticizes those Black activists (he does not name them) who ridicule women’s liberation. He reproaches detractors for “blaming the victim,” and warns them that men will not be liberated until women are as well (1969b, 132-5, 140-3, 188). How might Lester’s decision to become a Jew relate to his anti-feminism, to his growing unwillingness to credit feminists with representing legitimate grievances of women or, for that matter, from seeing women as an oppressed group?

Another Triangle?

By including an excess of intimate information about his relationship with his parents, Lester averts his readers' attention from the racial triangle—Blacks, whites, Jews—to the Oedipal one. He states that his father's death freed him to become himself: "Is that what Freud meant, that a son cannot be himself truly until the father is dead, until the son stands in that void the father leaves and knows that the only other human being who can fill that space is himself?" (1988a, 159). It is the son's rebellion against his domineering father and his own attraction to his mother that led him, around the time of his father's death, to convert to Judaism (his maternal great-grandfather's religion). Lester feels responsible in part for his father's death, associating his own rejection of Jesus with his father's illness (*Ibid.*, 152, 155, 183-4). Furthermore, the autobiography suggests that the allure of white women may be connected to the whiteness of his own mother and thus to the Jewish element in his ancestry. By choosing Judaism he chooses, by way of displacement, to reunite with his mother, to "melt into her," as he fantasized as a child. Might it be that "Auschwitz" has not replaced "Momma," but instead acquired her? In his Black Power mode Lester "got" Whitey's women by sleeping with them. Now he "gets" his own white Momma by becoming a Jew. Choosing Judaism resolves the double embarrassment embedded in secrecy and the mystery that Lester carries as a burden since childhood: his attraction to his mother, and the Jewish identity of his maternal great-grandfather.

Depicting his conversion as a process of shedding external identities (and, as we saw, skin color) imposed on him, and recovering (by divine wish) an authentic self, may merely serve Lester as an excuse for breaking with other Black men, for his rejection of Black politics was motivated in part by the tension generated by his various liaisons with white women (*Ibid.*, 95). In this context, the militancy of Black activists functions like a father figure standing in the way of his sleeping with his mother-substitutes. Lester's testimony about the period of his conversion enhances such an interpretation. He writes, "The joy is there each morning when I awake. I not only see it smiling at me like a lover when I open my eyes but it takes me in its arms and strokes my body" (*Ibid.*, 161). Perhaps then, Lester does not "get" his own white Momma, but some idealized version of her. As against the actual, cold, disciplining Black Mother, he claims to have found a warm Jewish one (*Ibid.*, 179; 1974a, 13-4). The text, moreover, is rich with additional allusions to Judaism as a sexual female lover. He reports, for example, that the sound of a Hebrew feminine noun gives him an erection (1988a, 215; cf. also 163, 168, 170, 183, 202). And we should not forget that he characterizes his conversion as a love song.

The Woman Within

Lester describes his process of becoming a Jew in terms of descent.²⁹ “I will not be converting to Judaism,” he declares, “I’m becoming, at long last, who I always have been. I am a Jew. I’m only sorry it has taken me 42 years to accept that” (*Ibid.*, 160). Lester takes issue with the concept “convert” as misrepresenting his returning to his “original” Jewish identity, “the name by which God calls me” (*Ibid.*, 1, 172). He is captivated by (and quotes at length) a letter he received from a California Rabbi who learned about the conversion from one of Lester’s articles. The Rabbi suggests that Lester is *gilgul* (Hebrew for reincarnated)—a Jewish soul trapped in a Gentile’s body. Lester is intrigued, but refuses to commit himself to the idea because of its obvious “irrationality” (*Ibid.*, 217). However, in his previous memoir, *All is Well*, he reports that concealed within his male body lives a female self. Lester never mentions his inner-woman in *Lovesong*. Like his Jewish identity, Lester also attributes his female self (which may be one and the same) to his mother.

When he was a child, his mother informed him that she had actually been hoping for a girl. The young Julius Bernard, who was named after his mother, Julia Beatrice, so identified with her, or at least so desperately wanted to satisfy her yearning for a daughter, that he believed he was female. “I felt myself to be her not as she was in the roles of my father’s wife, or my mother, but the woman-her, who existed outside social definitions” (1974a, 9). Lester christened his female self “Michele.”

I pretended to be a boy. . . . all the while envying the girls. . . . Michele was (is?) the real me, and that boy called Julius was the fantasy, a preconceived identity for which I could not be faulted, or held responsible. My sex and name were considered to be me, but my childhood fantasy was an inner language telling me that my definition of who I was was more important than the womb’s or the world’s (*Ibid.*, 10).

Michele’s primary function was to discipline Julius’s organ. While she taught him not to treat women as mere sexual objects, her indifference to his libidinal desires ultimately brought him to hate women. As a youth he wrote a series of short stories (as yet unpublished) whose common plots revolve around young artists so distracted by “a world seething with feminine pulchritude that they became murderers of women” (*Ibid.*, 35).³⁰ Michele sought to regulate Julius’s sexuality in other ways as well, perhaps suppressing homoeroticism. “Michele hated boys . . . and . . . swore that no boy would ever stick it to her” (*Ibid.*, 34). Lester attempts to resolve this tension by considering himself a “male lesbian” (*Ibid.*, 169). Unfortunately, his “third leg” kept tripping him up.

I particularly hated that thing dropping from the end of my torso like a fat worm, pulsating to an aching hardness as if it lived wholly independently of me. I wanted to cut it off and throw it to a passing dog. I envied Michele, whose organ was invisible to her . . . unable to embarrass her as mine did, protruding against my pants with such rigidity that sometimes it felt like a third leg (*Ibid.*, 35, cf. also 83).

Lester's description of his youthful identity play follows precisely the same lines as his adult conversion. It seems he has never relinquished his childhood fancy that he could transcend the "world's" and the "womb's" definitions. His fantasy is not only that he was female, but also that he could become his own mother and give birth to himself. He presents his most significant intellectual influences in these terms. The English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, for example, helped him conceive the "embryo of a new identity," which Jean-Paul Sartre "midwifed" (*Ibid.*, 24, 28).

The Kindest Cut

Long before these seminal intellectuals impregnated him, Lester had discovered a literary role model in none other than Shakespeare's anti-Semitic caricature of a Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*. Reading the play on Christmas Day, 1951, he found himself infuriated with the way Shylock was mistreated because he was a Jew (1988a, 21-2). It is likely that part of what enraged young Lester was how the trickery of the gentiles echoed the deceptiveness of whites, but Lester proffers that there was more to his intense connection with Shylock. He identified with Shylock rather than Black figures such as Du Bois, Johnson, and Langston Hughes because "they are models of success and I need a model of suffering" (*Ibid.*, 22). Because he can be angry for Shylock, he feels he has permission to begin to feel angry for himself. In this way, Lester projects back to childhood what would become a characteristic of his adult public expressions of anger during his militant days in the 1960s: ventriloquism, donning a mask. Shylock's agony also resonates with Lester because Shylock is a victim mistakenly perceived by others as a victimizer. Decades later during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers' strike, when a Jewish leader of the United Federation of Teachers demanded the suspension of the Black teacher who first read the Jew boy poem on Lester's broadcast, Lester retorted: "What does he want, two pounds of flesh?" (*Ibid.*, 54). Jews and Jewish symbols thus serve Lester as both an object of and a vehicle for expressing anger. His evolution from anti-Semite to Jew gives new meaning to Baldwin's reflection that "in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself" (Baldwin 1960/1985).

In his first autobiography, *All is Well*, although proudly reporting on all of the books he owned as a child and young adult, Lester never mentions possessing, or even reading, *The Merchant of Venice*. Because Shylock only appears in

Lovesong, we may assume that this anti-Semitic characterization of the Jew is somehow crucial to Lester's connection to Judaism and Jews. Leslie Fiedler's interpretation of this Shakespearean drama may be helpful here. Fiedler construes Shylock's insistence on a pound of flesh as a substitute for the mohel's removal of the foreskin (Fiedler 1991, 18-21). The circumcised penis, he adds, not only marks the male body as Jewish, but also creates a "memory that persists not in the head or heart, but in the blood" (*Ibid.*, xvii-iii). The blood that Jewish men share is, according to this reading, not what has passed from parents to children, but the blood spilled during circumcision. By submitting his penis to the knife, Lester can partake in this blood-bond. Sacrificing his foreskin will also connect him to Jews in another way: he will no longer need "to remember that of which [he has] no memory" (1988a, 189). Like other Jewish men, he will possess a site of memory that can never be "re-membered." Circumcision allows Lester to inscribe Auschwitz on his own flesh. (The Hebrew term for circumcision, *millah*, also means "word.") It will provide him with the wound he shamefully claims he doesn't carry from his childhood or his years working with SNCC in the South. The mohel's cut will, in short, make Lester a worthy victim.³¹

The source of Lester's ambivalence about his organ may be tied to his childhood experiences, but 1960s racial politics endowed it with new meaning. His hatred of his genitals for marking him as Black speaks to concerns raised, for instance, by Frantz Fanon, who depicted the Negrophobe as "no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into penis. He is penis" (Fanon 1952/1967, 170). It may be that Lester finds the idea that Black men are defined by their genitals so alluring because it deflects the embarrassment of his desires onto the white man's gaze. Or perhaps Lester is trading in one liability for another. With the rise of Black Power, the Black penis was reclaimed as the phallus (in homophobic and misogynist ways).³² Having participated in that development, Lester had to give his up. At the same time, Lester perceives the circumcised penis as the real phallus, since it gives Jews the authority that he, as a Black man, envies. One way or another, inoculating his penis through Jewish circumcision would guard Lester from both his shame and the racist rendering. Like the signs placed over Jewish homes to protect them from the final punishment God inflicted on Pharaoh's Egypt, the "embodied sign" will prevent Lester from being overtaken by his penis.

"Cutting off" his penis (as he fantasized as a child), or just cutting it through circumcision, also assists Lester in liberating himself from the gendering of his body. Lester believes his genitalia make him vulnerable. He contends that it was only because of his marriages to white women that he was able to resist the seductive hatred he observed "stroking at the loins" of other Black men (1974a, 135). Interracial sex inoculates Lester against his own penis by threatening to eliminate it, for his marriage causes such rage in Black women that they want to "cut off [his] dick" (*Ibid.*, 210). His white wives, however, are also potential castrators, or so Lester imagines in his dreams (*Ibid.*, 168, 261). Circumcision

was therefore a necessary supplementary measure for Lester to become a “Jew.” The Black penis threatened with castration will now be protected by a partial castration.

Given the amount of attention Lester devotes to the issue, it may be instructive to recall Freud’s discussion of the castration complex. According to Freud, the castration complex is “the deepest unconscious root of anti-Semitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis . . . and this gives them the right to despise Jews. And there is no stronger unconscious root for the sense of superiority over women” (Freud 1909/1955, 198). Building upon Freud’s recoding of anti-Semitism as sexism, Daniel Boyarin attempts to theorize the “Jewish male femme.” His conception of the Jewish “sissy” suggests another connection between Lester’s feminine and Jewish identities. Boyarin hypothesizes that cross-gender identification may be “constitutive of Jewishness” (Boyarin 1997, 84-5).³³ Becoming a Jew, therefore, may have helped Lester appease his inner-female. However, even after his conversion and his circumcision, Lester remains preoccupied with castration. In the novel, *All Our Wounds Forgiven* (1994a), this fantasy assumes an interracial, homoerotic, and sadomasochist hue, when a white male sheriff humiliates a Black civil rights worker by arousing his penis with a knife (1994a, 118-9).

Jesus Envy

Interpreting Lester’s conversion to Judaism in psychosexual terms is greatly assisted by Lester’s own construction of his life story in *Lovesong* and his need to expose himself, to disrobe in front of the reader, his public. His autobiographies unfold as verbal stripteases imitating through text Lester’s conversions as sheddings of superimposed identities. Both autobiographical unrobings result in nakedness. He offers us so many anecdotes and remarks that promise to shed light on his private life that the reader is sometimes left wondering what this exhibitionism is meant to hide, and from whom. Having considered a range of possibilities with respect to his parents, we might add that Lester’s relationship with Jesus always had a hint of sibling rivalry.

The young Lester felt uneasy about the images of Jesus in his father’s church. He held a grudge against Jesus for monopolizing suffering, for preventing others from carrying their own crosses (1988a, 17):

Why should I give my sins to Jesus? They were my sins. It was my task to meditate on them . . . To carry my cross. To lift my stone. To live with the suffering that comes to me, whether as a consequence of my actions or being born black. To live with the suffering that comes to me because I was born (*Ibid.*, 148-9).

It may seem odd that Lester finds Jesus to be the most unacceptable element of Christianity, while his views on the need to accept suffering and forgive your tormentors seem so befitting to the man of the cross, but Lester believes that he too is holy. He reports learning this when he was only a boy: “. . . a fear crawls over my flesh like a long-legged spider and I understand in the hollows and crevices and caves of my soul: God has chosen me for himself” (*Ibid.*, 19).

Being pinned is a recurrent trope in Lester’s prose. He is pierced by the music of the Jewish prayer of atonement, “*Kol Nidre*.” “[B]eauty and pain become a piercing that hold me pinioned and I feel old like ‘In the beginning,’ old as if I was never born and will never die” (*Ibid.*, 20). “In the beginning” holiness was secured for Lester long before Jesus and Christianity intervened, since as Lester tells us in the very beginning of *Lovesong*, “I was robed in the mantle of holiness even before the first diaper was pinned on my nakedness” (*Ibid.*, 6). And, as we have seen, Lester complains that his writing also pins him (1974a, 312). Stripping off his pinned diaper became a necessary step for Lester to reclaim his rightful holiness. After he stripped for us, too, at the end of *Lovesong*, on the back of the dust jacket, Lester is pictured robed in the Jewish prayer shawl.

Moving in the opposite direction, from Christianity back to Judaism, the child chosen by God for himself ultimately joins the chosen people. At first Lester had difficulty with the concept of chosenness (1988a, 170-1, 174-5, 165-6, 243). Such an idea, he explains,

is as repugnant to me as when blacks tell whites they cannot know what it is to be black. It is a statement that negates literature, art and music, nullifies the realm of the imaginative and says it is impossible for human beings to reach out from one loneliness to another and assuage both (*Ibid.*, 172).

Eventually, however, he comes to embrace it. He continues to reject similar claims made by African Americans, “but Jews,” he concludes, “are different” (*Ibid.*, 172, 17; 1990, 244-50). At various junctures, and in striking contradiction to his ardent advocacy of chosen identifications, Lester asks us to believe that he did not choose to become part of the chosen people (*Ibid.*, 22, 27, 29-31, 159).

The View From the Outhouse

Lester presents his conversion as a process vital to healing his unbridgeable dividedness and achieving wholeness (holiness). It is therefore intriguing that both of his major autobiographies feature the same anecdote in which he describes a fleeting moment of body/soul unison. He also refers to this episode as his most vivid memory of his years as a civil rights activist:



Figure 2: Lester, twenty years later, as he appeared in *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (1988). Photo by David Gahr. Courtesy of the photographer.

May 1966. Lowndes County, Alabama. I go to the outhouse. It is a three-sided tin structure without a roof, and a board over a deep hole. I sit, the warm breeze soft on my exposed buttocks. In the distance a man plows a field. In the tree above me, birds chirp. I am whole again, at peace and at One with God. Time drops away like an oversized garment, and the poverty and the pain and the death all around me vanish as if they have never been (1988a, 41; 1974a, 293-5).

This paradise, reminiscent of biblical imagery as well as the sort of epiphany that Martin Luther experienced, unites the “hole in the ground” with holiness, defecation with “wholeness,” and identifies anal pleasures as oneness with God (cf. Erikson 1962, 204-6). Such an ideal scenario could happen only in the solitude of the outhouse that allows escape from society and human company into the color-blind heavenly nature. For Lester the outhouse is the outsider’s sanctuary. He remarks that the pariah’s perspective is comparable to the view from the outhouse (1968a, xi; 1974a, 293; 1990a, 138).³⁴

The episode in the outhouse in May 1966 is only the most striking example of how Lester processes his emotional and spiritual experiences through sensations originating in his abdomen. He claims his ulcers are his most enduring inheritance from years in the Civil Rights Movement (while his soul remained unaffected by his political activities) (1988a, 38). Listening to the “*Kol Nidre*” prayer evokes a painful yearning in his stomach (*Ibid.*, 20). Likewise, when he enters synagogue for the first time, he has trembling in the pit of his stomach (*Ibid.*, 175). Upon hearing his Jewish name in his official conversion ceremony, he again experiences an “undeniable physical feeling, a sudden warmth in my abdomen” (*Ibid.*, 217). And finally, Lester celebrates his Jewishness through Sabbath feasts. “[H]ow can I not love a religion in which the enjoyment of food and wine is an act of holiness and the dinner table an altar?” (*Ibid.*, 143).

The connection between holiness and the pleasures in the outhouse (or in his Sabbath dinner preparations) correlates to his relationship to writing. On the one hand, Lester declares that “writing is the means by which I seek to render myself holy” (*Ibid.*, 207). On the other hand, he constantly distances himself from his own emissions, for which he refuses to accept any responsibility. His texts suggest that Lester writes when his belly is full; he writes to release rather than to reflect, and he has no desire to scrutinize what he has produced. It is as if once he relieves himself, the product should simply be flushed away. Perhaps this is why he tells us that the sound of a flushing toilet is “sacred,” “a Bach prelude proclaiming that all is well” (*Ibid.*, 89).

Trading Places

Despite the chronic inconsistencies in Lester's self-presentation (which he seems to relish as an Emersonian virtue) the preceding analysis points to an underlying coherence in Lester's life story, or at least in his construction of it. As we saw, becoming a Jew is only one among many plots of conversion and self-making in Lester's biography; for instance, his trajectory into the politics of Black militancy and his fantasy of possessing an inner-female. There is great affinity among these and other decisive points in Lester's private and public life where bursts of aggression give way to moments of guilt and remorse, and fierce tensions are resolved through triangular gestures. Importantly, Lester's sense of identity is grounded in the corporeal. This multilayered physicality is evident in his rejection of his Black skin as well as in the bodily desires and sensations that accompany his process of self-fashioning. The primacy of the embodied is also central to his preoccupation both with the violent rupture of the Holocaust, on the one hand, and with his own circumcision, on the other. Through circumcision Lester achieved Jewishness in all of its concrete and metaphoric permutations. It was the palpable apex of his racechanging performance.

But how might we comprehend Lester's conversion in the larger contexts of identity politics today? What politics does this stream of titillating private anecdotes obscure? Exposing the political concealed by the idiosyncratically personal is not an easy task. After all, Lester is fantastically eccentric and more than a bit of an exhibitionist. The richness of his narrative and the abundant quantity of his prodigious outpouring of prose permit diverse readings. We might, for example, construe Lester's leap into the "void" as an act of defiance against the fixity of identity, a subversive challenge to hierarchical distinctions based on racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes.³⁵ There are a few indications of this sort of identity play in his writing; for example, his poem, "Who I Am" (1974b):

I am who I am./ Must I give a name to that?/ Must I say /I am
black/ I am a man/ I am a writer?/ Those are statements of
fact/ (the sky is blue. water is wet. snow is cold.)/ But what is
black?/ Not even the color of my true love's hair/ (which is
red)/ What is a man?/ The figment of a penis' imagination/
What is a writer (doctor/lawyer/Indian chief)?/ What do you
put in the space of income tax forms/ that says OCCUPA-
TION _____./ So who am I?/ I am/ who I am/ and if that
leaves you perplexed, will you accept that/ I am you?

In exploring the numerous ways others might define him, Lester rejects them all except for the vague, universalizing "you" in the last line.

Elsewhere Lester insinuates that we should not take him too literally (or even too seriously), that there is much in his writing that is purposefully contrived to mislead. For instance, he alleges that in order to reclaim himself from

the public persona he had created by writing *Look Out, Whitey!*, he had to remove his Black mask. Doing so, he concludes, requires divulging even more of his inner self through writing:

Because my name was now a public possession, I could no longer allow it to represent someone who did not really exist. Who I was in the interior chambers of my heart had to be exposed for all to see its pulsations. There was no other way to reclaim myself (1974a, 181, 275).

What did Lester present of his true, “pulsarating” self? What was the content of this act of self-exposure?—a fictional interview with an interracial couple. He contentedly reports that no one knew for certain whether the interview was fact or fiction (*Ibid.*, 181-21). Can it be that Lester is just a trickster playing with his readers’ own prejudices about race, gender and identity?

Compelling as these interpretations may seem in an age that celebrates hybridity and queering, we have observed that Lester subverts neither rigid identities based on presumptions of authenticity, nor the ranking of those identities. Indeed, his conversion thrives on these very distinctions. As opposed to what Stuart Hall describes as “the logic of coupling,” Lester reifies a hierarchy of identification, insisting that Jewishness, not Blackness, is his authentic identity (Hall 1992, 29). In his autobiography he offers two opposing conceptions of identity to support this remarkable assertion. First, he associates identity with interiority, a hidden self that is in need of discovery. Accordingly, he contends he was always a Jew (a claim supported by his Jewish ancestry), but had to struggle to shed his false Black mask in order to reclaim his true self, his inner-Jew, if you will. Second, he describes his life story as a valiant adventure of self-invention in the Zarathustrian sense, an individual wrestling with grave choices about his Being. Both conceptions are predicated on a robust notion of authenticity. Both are problematic in other ways as well: in one case, identity is opportunistically attached to a remote ancestor; in the other, to notions of extreme individualism, unencumbered will, and violence (specifically, the Holocaust and circumcision). More troubling still, Lester deploys his notions of authenticity to prize Jewishness (whether discovered or chosen) over ordinary Blackness. He maintains that as a whole Blackness is an inferior and ultimately inauthentic source of identification.

There has been much recent rumination about the Black/Jewish divide, especially from the Jewish side of the fence. Lester’s story represents both the attraction and the aversion that has characterized the relationship between these two groups. The evolution of Black/Jewish relations from presumed fraternity to assumed animosity moves in an apparently opposite path of Lester’s trajectory. In this sense he may have fulfilled his ambition to live outside history. At the same time, as I have suggested, his conversion was predicated upon the

widening gap between the two groups. *Lovesong* is not a gesture of reconciliation; in many ways it redraws the line, it's a symptom of the divide.

Lester's conversion is indicative of the deep roots that the Holocaust has taken in American collective consciousness. The Americanization of the European Holocaust has coexisted with, if not contributed to, new divisions, competitions and resentments between African Americans and American Jews. Studies suggest that fear of future anti-Semitism (including anti-Semitism among African Americans) and the Holocaust loom large, and may even be constitutive of Jewish secular identity today (Bershtal & Graubard 1992; Young 1993).³⁶ Similarly, Peter Novick (1999) has assembled compelling historical data indicating that since the 1970s, the Holocaust as a symbol of Jewish suffering has been purposefully recruited to secure and sustain Jewish continuity in the face of secularism, assimilation, and intermarriage. Of course, the European Holocaust could be incorporated into American culture with such force only with the cooperation of non-Jews as well. Such support was forthcoming, Vivien Patraha (1997) proposes, because focusing on the European Holocaust as symbol of oppression and atrocity allows Americans to affirm American democracy (it could never happen here), while occluding the nation's more shameful past (what did happen on this soil). The intensifying commemoration of the Jewish Holocaust in the 1980s and 1990s has contributed to what Novick terms "Holocaust envy." He observes that such ambivalence is most prevalent among African Americans (Novick 1999, 192). One way or another, there are indications that the Holocaust has seeped into the imagination of African Americans other than Lester. The Holocaust has become a template of remembering, coloring the memories of other historical injustices. Consider, for instance, Patricia Williams's description of a dream she had in which she inserted her great-great-grandmother (a slave) into the bare patch of canvas left in a painting by an Auschwitz survivor (Williams 1995, 209).³⁷

Employing the Jews of the Holocaust as symbols of victimhood is certainly not unique to Lester. However, in contrast to Lester's literal appropriation of Jewish suffering, the "Jew" more commonly serves as a recognizable signifier to articulate the oppression of other groups. This is the context in which real and metaphoric Jews populate feminists' writings, for example, from Simone de Beauvoir's reference to "Jewish character," and Betty Freidan's comparison of suburban existence in 1950s America to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, to Naomi Wolf's allusion to the Holocaust to emphasize the severity and prevalence of eating disorders among American women (de Beauvoir 1952/1974; Friedan 1963/1983; Wolf 1990). The Jew as a trope has also been used to highlight the political potential of Otherness: whether Hannah Arendt's analysis of the Jew as a "conscious pariah," Isaac Deutscher's "non-Jewish Jew," Jean-Paul Sartre's "authentic Jew," or Jean-François Lyotard's "the jews" (Arendt 1978; Deutscher 1968; Sartre 1948/1976; Lyotard 1990). As problematic as such constructions may be for, among other things, effacing real Jews, espe-

cially religious Jews, as well as for circumventing the differences among disparate systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, anti-Semitism, and racism), the Jew-as-victim metaphor is employed in these works to facilitate a collective emancipatory project, whereas Lester's "Jew" is formulated as a rejection of precisely this sort of politics.³⁸ His conversions coincided with his adoption of a more conservative set of political stances in other ways as well.

In Lester's conversion story the anti-Semite becomes a Jew with the same radical ease with which Jews, Nazis, victims and victimizers trade places. This is a central feature of victim discourse in contemporary American politics. Like those they ridicule, anti-victimists present America as fundamentally and irreconcilably divided between victims and victimizers. But in their depiction roles are often reversed so that the victimist is revealed to be the victimizer, and the reputed victimizer, the real victim. As it turns out, most condemnations of the proliferation of victimism amount to little more than attempts to situate oneself (or one's group) in a Manichean world conceived through the victim/victimizer divide. Lester is a fine example of this political psychology.³⁹

According to Lester, victimhood, like any other status, is a choice. Just like Lester, Blacks, whites, victims, and victimizers can just choose to identify or "nonidentify" with their race and/or condition (1968a, 139,142; 1969b, 44-7). Echoing Sartre, Lester asserts that individuals choose who they want to be, and how they want to be defined. Such choice includes not only what one's present and future will be, but also how to interpret one's history, what will be "definitional" (1969a, 194). To deny this choice and attribute it to the past is "bad faith" (Sartre 1943/1992, 68, 707-9). "We are never so much the victims of another," writes Lester, "as we are victims of ourselves" (1974a, 260). The womb and the world may try to impose an identity upon you, but only the weak, only the victimist, will allow himself to be defined by others (to be trapped in the womb of identity). There are no excuses, he declares; victims must accept responsibility for their own actions ("the evil they have wrought"), as well as responsibility for what they have suffered on account of others' actions ("the evil they have endured") (1990a, 103).⁴⁰

Placing Lester's narrative in the context of Sartre's writings suggests that Lester's radical conversion may have been his effort to fulfill the Sartrean idea of a "radical conversion in his being-in-the-world" (Sartre 1943/1992, 585). In Sartre's writings, it seems, Lester found a path to "authenticity," to overcome "seeing himself as others see him" (Sartre 1948/1976, 78-9). Perhaps then, interpreting *Anti-Semite and Jew* literally, Lester believed that the only route towards "authentic identity" was Judaism; that to be an "authentic Jew" he must first become a Jew.

Sartre maintained that the Jew was the creation of the anti-Semite, whose views the Jew internalized; hence the Jew was "overdetermined from within." Building upon Sartre's insights, Fanon saw Blacks (unlike Jews) to be "overdetermined from without," perceiving themselves only through the reflec-

tion of the white colonizers' gaze. Lester's decision to become a Jew is one expression of his desire to be colorless, to defy others' efforts to impose an identity upon him. Unfortunately, he seems not to have fully addressed being overdetermined from within or from without, for in bowing to the demands of his colleagues, the University removed Lester from the Afro-American Studies Department and relocated him in the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department. Pointing to the irony of the University's decision is not, however, to endorse it. To the contrary, in reassigning Lester, the University, much as the Afro-American Studies Department, relied upon the same assumptions about authenticity and identification that Lester promotes and that I have sought to destabilize in this essay.

Notes

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1. "Action at UMass Prompts Cries Over Censorship," *The New York Times*, (May 29, 1988), 22. See also "Ambush at Amherst," *The New Republic*, (June 27, 1988), 10.

2. See Lester 1988a 134, 137, 140, 208-9, 211.

3. This comment by one of Lester's colleagues was quoted in *The Chicago Tribune*, (June 19, 1988).

4. Cf. *The Springfield Union News*, (May 28, 1988); *The New York Times*, (May 29, 1988); "Black Professor Accuses His Colleagues of Censorship and Anti-Semitism," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (June 8, 1988); *The Boston Globe*, (June 19, 1988); "Ambush at Amherst," *The New Republic*, (June 27, 1988); "Black Massachusetts University Professor Stirs Censorship Issue," *Jet*, (June, 1988); W.J. Weatherby, "A Storm in a Teacup at the University of Massachusetts," *Guardian*, (July, 4 1988); *The Los Angeles Times*, (July 10, 1988); Lehman 1990, 321-25.

5. *The Los Angeles Times*, (July 10, 1988); see also *The New York Times*, (May 29, 1988).

6. For example, Lester 1988a, 1988b, 1988c, and "The Responsibility of the Black Intellectual" in Lester 1990a, 180-227.

7. Angela Dillard (2001) coined the term "multicultural conservative."

8. Founded in 1995 by Robin Washington, son of a Jewish mother and Black father, the Alliance of Black Jews estimates that there are 200,000 Black Jews in the United States (Michael Gelbwasser, "Organization for Black Jews" *Boston Jewish Advocate*, April 10, 1998, 1). Other estimates, such as those offered by the Council of Jewish Federations in New York City, are more modest, suggesting that approximately 2.4% of 5.5 million self-identified Jews are Black (though the National Jewish Population Survey cautions that this datum probably still overestimates the number since Iranian, Yemenite and Latino Jews may count themselves as "Black"). For more about Black Jews generally, see Azoulay 1997 and www.blackandjewish.com; for Black Jewish women in particular, see www.sistahplace.com.

9. Lester characterizes his memoir as simply "relating my spiritual odyssey to Judaism" (1988b, 17); see also 1988a, 1, 26-7, 72, 74-86, 207, 244.

10. Since racial masquerade typically conjures up whites in blackface, Susan Gubar's term, "racechanging," may be more appropriate here, for racechanging refers to "the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan racial mutuality" (Gubar 1997, 5).

11. See also Rogin 1996, 1992a, 1992b; Saxton 1990; Lott 1993.

12. "Ethnic transvestism" is Werner Sollers's term to refer to faux Jewish novelists (1986, 252).

13. Roger Wilkins, "Turning Points: The Spiritual Odyssey of Julius Lester," *The Washington Post*, (February 14, 1988), X1.

14. Lester's memoir may additionally be considered part of a genre of narratives by displaced leftists, most typically white men, who seek a place for themselves within a reconfigured

new radical politics, whether Left or Right. A common feature of these works is the centrality of the authors' recovering, uncovering, or discovering how they too are victims. Tom Hayden's book, *Irish on the Inside* (2001), in which he attempts to de-whiten Irishness in an effort to reclaim a place for himself on the post-New Left Left, offers one example. But David Horowitz's anti-victimist writings, where demonstrating how minorities victimize the white majority serves to justify abandoning progressive politics and embracing neo-conservatism, are the far more common storyline (e.g., Horowitz 1998). At the same time, blending a "declaration of selfhood" with political critique may also be regarded as part of African American literary tradition. As Henry Louis Gates contends: "'I write myself, therefore I am' could very well be taken as the motto of 'the race' in this country" (1991, 7). And, as Angela Dillard demonstrates in her study of multicultural conservatism, the genre prevails regardless of the authors' particular political affiliations (2001).

15. *The New York Times*, (May 29, 1988), 22. For Lester's reaction to reviews of *Look Out, Whitey!*, see 1974a, 148-50.

16. Prior to more recent events, such as the Crown Heights affair, this was considered the "most racially polarizing event in the city's history" (Berube & Gittell 1969, 164). For more examples of the anti-Semitism aroused by the conflict, see *Ibid.*, 1969, 163-214; see also Green & Levinson 1970, 247-75.

17. See Kalish, "Julius Lester: The 'Anti-Semite' Who Became a Jew," *Newsday*, (March 10, 1988), 4. The story of what Lester had done not only aroused the interest of the national press (becoming front-page news), but also reportedly provoked several Jewish organizations, in particular the Jewish Defense League (JDL), to threaten Lester's life (1988a, 55, 65). For Jewish militants' perspective on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville confrontation, as well as their mimicry of Black Panthers, see Dolgin 1977, 28-30, and Berube & Gittell 1969.

18. Even though Lester makes virtually no gesture towards identifying these fellow travelers, only mentioning the most famous African American Jew by choice, Sammy Davis, Jr., in passing, it might be interesting to consider Lester's religious conversion within the context of other prominent African American Jews, such as novelist Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua-born Jew by choice), novelist Walter Mosley, singer Lenny Kravitz, writer Rebecca Leventhal Walker, actor Yaphet Koto, and actress Lisa Bonet.

19. Equating non-violence with playing the victim, owes much, I believe, to *The Wretched of the Earth*, especially Sartre's preface. By way of an introduction to Fanon's work, Sartre explains that advocates of non-violence are grossly mistaken if they believe that they forged a middle path, "saying that they are neither executioners nor victims. . . . [T]he whole regime, even our non-violent ideas, are conditioned by a thousand-year-old oppression, your passivity serves only to place you in the ranks of the oppressors" (1963/1992, 25).

20. Observe also how Lester assumes a female voice at his most furious: "We've had our love affair with white America and our virginity is gone. We're tired of whoring so you can wash your guilt in our blood. We're tired of being raped by racism and hatred" (1968, 106).

21. See also where Lester reduces the history of Black-Jewish relations to one of mutual projections: "The story of blacks and Jews in America is a story of projections. At one time, the projections were almost all positive; now they are almost all negative. What remains constant is the fact of misperception, for by their very nature projections are not concerned with muddy reality and its murky truths. *Projections use another in an attempt to make oneself whole*" (Emphasis added, Lester 1995, 68).

22. One way for Lester to justify such violence against himself may actually come from his interpretation of Fanon's ideas (1990a, 135). In *Revolutionary Notes*, Lester, echoing Fanon, wrote, "A man who sees himself only as a reflection in the eyeballs of another is not a man. The colonized must kill themselves and awaken unborn within, before they can address themselves directly to the colonizer" (1969b, 153). Whatever ambiguity there was in Fanon's imperative, Lester seems to take it literally. Self-negation is the prescription Lester offers for all Blacks, even though he positions himself in stark opposition to the Black political movement laboring to bring Blacks onto the stage of history. He regards himself as fulfilling the mission of his race by jumping into the "void" of (an imagined) ahistorical time where race does not matter. (Jumping away from history would ultimately be achieved for him by converting to Judaism.) Thus, Lester endorses the idea that race is solely a racist construct that must be eradicated entirely. He asks us to appreciate him for being a pioneer in dismantling the racial trap. But there is no consistency between his trajectory and the prescription he offers, for Lester does not allow for the possibility (remote as it may be) that all Blacks may also become Jews. Indeed, despite his advocacy of chosen identifications, he makes much of the fact that he has some Jewish heritage, and often explains his decision to convert as a matter of predestination, not personal preference.

23. On the inadequacy of "ethnos," "race," and "religion" for classifying American Jews, cf. Horowitz 1995. On Jews' racial status from the 19th century to the post-civil rights era, see Waters 1990; Alba 1990; Gilman 1991, 168-93; Lerner 1993; Kaye/Kantrowitz 1996; Azoulay 1997; Boyarin 1997; Brodtkin 1998; Biale, et. al. 1998. See also Jen 1996, for an engaging novel

about a daughter of Chinese immigrants who converts to Judaism in order to more fully assimilate as American.

24. There is a rich literature on the relationship, past and present, between African Americans and American Jews. For a sampling of writings not mentioned elsewhere in this essay, see Carson 1984; Daughtry 1997; Geltman 1970; Halpern 1971; Hentoff 1969; Kaufman 1988; Lerner & West 1995, 1996; Salzman 1999. Jeffrey Melnick provides an insightful critical overview of this literature, comparing the two waves of interest (from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, and then reemerging in the 1990s) and demonstrating how both waves focus on the political alliance and disillusion, eliding economic and cultural tensions between African Americans and American Jews. Melnick also rightly points out that the idealized vision of alliance (shared oppression and political alliance) and subsequent disappointment presently “is organized and mobilized to serve a neo-conservative agenda” (1993, 114).

25. Lester has written numerous award-winning books for children. Some are compilations of slaves’ stories culled from northern abolitionist groups before the Civil War and those gathered by the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s (e.g., *To Be a Slave* [1968b], *Long Journey Home: Stories from Black History* [1972b]); others are fictional narratives about Black tricksters—from his controversial reissuing of four books of Uncle Remus’s Tales, and his *Sam and The Tiger* (1996) (a retelling of the infamous *Little Black Sambo*), to the more revered *Black Folktales* (1991a). Children’s literature is the one genre in which Lester claims he writes “as a black for blacks” (1968b). He remarks that he hopes to teach Black children the lessons he learned from Amos ‘n’ Andy (who were “not stereotypes, but models of survival”) (1974a, 14).

26. See Ross 1989, especially chapter 3: “Hip and the Long Front of Color.”

27. For an interesting fictional account of a women’s decision to tattoo numbers on her arm in order to participate in the venerated victimhood of concentration camp survivors, see Prager 1991.

28. For Lester on Baldwin, see “James Baldwin (1924-1987)” in 1990a, 94-122. Lester admires Baldwin, but criticizes him for having suffered “a failure of moral nerve” in the 1960s for taking refuge in his victim status and allowing himself to become “a prisoner of race.” Anti-Semitism was part of this imprisonment (*Ibid.*, 97). Note, however, the similarities between Baldwin’s and Lester’s understandings of roots of the Black anti-Semitism. The reason Blacks are anti-Semitic, or at least espouse anti-Semitism, according to Lester, is because Jews are the only ones who will listen (1994b, 171). Cf. Baldwin 1967/1969. See also Sleeper, who makes a similar point about what motivates Leonard Jeffries’s anti-Semitism (Sleeper 1994, 250).

29. Jewish identity is conventionally divided between Jews by descent and Jews by choice. Although the convert to Judaism is a Jew by assent, i.e., belief, in Jewish law, *Halakhah*, being Jewish is determined by maternal descent. For a discussion of this distinction, see Krausz 1993, 264-278. See also Biale, et al., 1998, who argue that in a post-ethnic era, all Jews are Jews by choice. Of course, it is not uncommon for converts or those who return to religion to characterize their transformations in terms of rebirth, but in Lester’s description his journey into Judaism often sounds like a womb, a pre-natal state (see, for example, 1988a, 165, 175). Lester appears to want to convince the reader (and probably himself) that his Jewishness was a matter of predestination determined by forces greater than himself (*Ibid.*, 22, 27, 29-31, 159).

30. This sort of explicit violence against women is usually absent in Lester’s other writing. He typically situates sexual matter in traditionally “romantic” settings. See, for instance, *Two Love Stories* (1972a). Still, it makes one wonder about his newest children’s book, *When Dad Killed Mom* (2001).

31. On circumcision as an archive, see Derrida 1996, 1993; as an embodied sign, see Boyarin and Boyarin 1995; as a practice that destabilizes masculinity, see Boyarin 1992, 496; 1997, 6.

32. Cf., e.g., Wallace 1979; Cleaver 1968. Cleaver, for instance, describes rape as “an insurrectionary act.” “It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women. . . . I felt I was getting revenge” (Cleaver 1968, 28). See also Fanon’s discussion of the therapeutic benefits for Black men of interracial sex, 1952/1967, chapter 3. For more on the complicated relationship among skin color, genitals, and the phallus, see Fuss 1989, chapters 1, 4; Bergner 1994; Boyarin 1997.

33. Boyarin finds feminist potential in Jewish men as a “third sex,” since the cross-gender identification he envisions involves neither female impersonation nor appropriation, but rather a destabilizing of masculinity and femininity. Lester, by contrast, finds anti-feminism. Perhaps, then, Lester’s transformation may be better understood through Derrida’s reading of circumcision. Whereas the primal father is central to Freud’s conception of circumcision as a symbolic substitute for castration, Derrida turns the mother from an object of desire to one of betrayal by emphasizing the role of Moses’s wife Zipporah (Derrida 1993). For more on racializing sex and sexualizing race, see Pellegrini 1997. Also note Patra’s (1997) provocative reading of the Washington, D.C. Holocaust museum’s portrayal of Jews and Jewish history as the feminized victim allowing the United States to assume the role of the masculinized liberator.

34. The outhouse may also signify the closet, concealing hidden anal eroticism. As a child Lester developed a great talent for “willed constipation,” because his mother would not allow

him to use the dirty bathrooms designated for “coloreds” (1974a, 17). Such masterful control of his bowels was convenient while he lived in New York City, since he reportedly never used the bathroom after dark (1969a, 147). Thus, defecation is a forbidden pleasure and one that renders him vulnerable (at least to the rats at night). Moreover, as we saw, Lester’s alter ego, Michele, is especially concerned that some man might try to “stick it to her.” Lester repeatedly writes that he fears being pinned or pierced, images that are similarly suggestive of sexual penetration. And, we should not forget that he fantasizes achieving “oneness” with a God who has chosen Lester “for Himself.” For more on the relationship between Jewishness and homosexuality as closeted identities, see Itzkovitz 1997.

35. For examples of race-bending, cross-dressing, and border-crossing as politically subversive, see Anzaldúa 1987; Butler 1993, 1990; Garber 1992; Gubar 1997.

36. See also, Dershowitz 1991, 130-181; Pogrebin 1991, 94, 117, 139, 160, 195, 210, 216, 252, 303-4, 331.

37. Beyond the symbolic power of “the Jews” after the Holocaust, African Americans have long identified with the suffering of Jews in the Old Testament; some even claim to be the “true Jews” (Baldwin 1948/1985; Lester 1994b, 169; Lester 1990a, 160-2; Gates 1994, 227). Khalid Abdul Muhammad, the national assistant of Minister Louis Farrakan and the Nation of Islam, for instance, asserts that Blacks “are the true Jew. [Blacks] are the true Hebrew. [Blacks] are the ones who are in line with the Bible prophecy and scripture” (Berman 1994, 2, 22-3; cf. also ben-Jochanna, 1988, 1991). In even more abridged terms the Jew boy poet reiterates this sentiment: “Jew boy you took my religion and adopted it for you. But you know that black people were the original Hebrews” (1988a, 51).

38. For additional examples of Holocaust metaphors in the works of feminists, specifically women as “Jews,” see Dworkin 1972; Brownmiller 1975; Daly 1978; MacKinnon 1987. For an important critique of ways in which even progressive constructions of “the jew” occlude “spiritual” Jews, see Boyarin and Boyarin 1993, and Itzkovitz 1997. On the problems with analogic thinking, see Spelman 1988, 1997.

39. Lester differs slightly from the other anti-victimists who retell his story (e.g., Steele, D’Souza, Carter, Sykes), for he does not promote the entrepreneurial, self-made, liberal individual as the antidote to the oppressive collectivism of victim politics, preferring instead Zarathustrian individualism. Otherwise, Lester fully participates in the recent demonization of victims. Like the other anti-victimists, what Lester finds especially troublesome about victim politics is that victims exhibit a certain kind of feminine behavior, for the victimist’s might and weakness are decidedly that of the stereotypical woman—emotionally incontinent, manipulative, and dependent. For more on anti-victimist politics, especially within feminism, see Cole 1999.

40. Lester explores the theme of forgiving victimizers through a fictional account of the life of Martin Luther King. In *All Our Wounds Forgiven* (1994a), Lester alters King’s real biography by fusing it with his own. Specifically, “John Calvin Marshall,” while married to a Black woman, found real love and comfort in the body of a white woman. “She and Cal were joined by pain” (*Ibid.*, 68). Where the young Lester criticized King for asking Blacks to play Jesus when they could not, claiming that adhering to King’s philosophy of non-violence required denying Black men’s manhood, the older Lester now embraces King’s legacy by reducing his vision of racial integration and equality to sexual intercourse (1969b, 153; 1974a, 234-5). As the ghost of Lester’s King asks in the novel: wasn’t the “real work of the Civil Rights Movement . . . interracial sex?” (1994a, 71). In the novel Lester not only promotes liquidating race and racism through miscegenation, as Norman Podhoretz famously proposed, but also counsels that victims must heal themselves (Podhoretz 1964/1994, 91; Lester 1994a, 56, 125, 178, 198, 224, 212-3).

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