

“Multidirectional Memories of Du Bois and Ellison”

HUM 110

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I. **Relationship between Jewish and Black experiences:**

- a) “Political defense is becoming less and less available, and economic defense is still only partially effective. But there’s a patent defense at hand, – the defense of deception and flattery, of cajoling and lying. It is the same defense which the Jews of the Middle Ages used and which left its stamp on their character for centuries... is it not rather the only method by which undeveloped races have gained the right to share modern culture? The price of culture is a Lie” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 138)
- b) “Little dark baby,
Little Jew baby,
Little outcast,
America is seeking the stars,
America is seeking tomorrow...
Out of yesterday,
The chains of slavery;
Out of yesterday,
The ghettos of Europe;
Out of yesterday,
The poverty and pain of the old, old world,
The building and struggle of this new one...” (Hughes, “America”)
- c) “Her nose was aquiline, Semitic. If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta” (Cane, “Fern,” p. 21)
- d) “But underneath broken words, childish imagery, peasant simplicity, lies, as Dr. Du Bois pointed out, an epic intensity and a tragic profundity of emotional experience, for which the only historical analogy is the spiritual experience of the Jews and the only analogue, the Psalms” (Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 200)

II. **“After Auschwitz” moment and multidirectional memory:**

- a) “We must join... in condemning Nazi terror because what happens to one minority can happen to another – a lesson which Jews, Negroes, and all minorities must learn in sheer self-defense” (Walter White, head of NAACP, 1939)

- b) *Multidirectional memory*: “rhetorical and cultural intimacy of seemingly opposed traditions of remembrance... remembrance cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites” (Rothberg, p. 7, 11)

III. **Du Bois’s essay as a spatial, temporal, psychological, and intellectual journey of discovery to hell:**

- a) “I had been telling him of the race problem in America, which seemed to me at the time the only race problem and the greatest social problem in the world”
- b) “a new race problem... gradually I became aware of the Jewish problem of the modern world and something of its history”
- c) “... at midnight I entered Poland. It was dark – dark not only in the smoke, but in the soul of its people, who whispered in the night as we rode slowly through the murk of the railway yards”
- d) “Then finally, three years ago I was in Warsaw. I have seen something of human upheaval in this world: the scream and shots of a race riot in Atlanta; the marching of the Ku Klux Klan; the threat of courts and police; the neglect and destruction of human habitation; but nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw in 1949. I would have said before seeing it that it was impossible for a civilized nation with deep religious convictions and outstanding religious institutions; with literature and art; to treat fellow human beings as Warsaw had been treated. There had been complete, planned and utter destruction. Some streets had been so obliterated that only by using photographs of the past could they tell where the street was. And no one mentioned the total of the dead, the sum of destruction, the story of crippled and insane, the widows and orphans”
- e) “Then, one afternoon, I was taken to the former ghetto. I knew all too little of its story although I had visited ghettos in parts of Europe, particularly in Frankfurt, Germany. Here there was not much to see. There was complete and total waste, and a monument. And the monument brought back again the problem of race and religion, which so long had been my own particular and separate problem. Gradually, from looking and reading, I rebuilt the story of this extraordinary resistance to oppression and wrong in a day of complete frustration, with enemies on every side: a resistance which involved death and destruction for hundreds and hundreds of human beings; a deliberate sacrifice in life for a great ideal in the face of the fact that the sacrifice might be completely in vain”
- f) “The result of these three visits, and particularly of my view of the Warsaw ghetto, was not so much clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in the world as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem... No, the race problem in which I was interested cut across lines of color and physique and belief and status

and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men. So that the ghetto of Warsaw helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph and broaden in the world”

IV. *Invisible Man* as the novel of cross-literary and cross-ethnic intersections:

- a) “Should Fascism come to America with all its organized terror, the Jews and Negroes will meet a common fate” (Ellison, 1939)
- b) “He was an American writer who was black. I was a Jew and an American and a writer, and I believed that by being described as a “Jewish writer,” I was being shunted to a siding. This taxonomy business I saw as an exclusionary device. Ellison had similar objections to classification” (Saul Bellow)
- c) “But you were concerned with that old couple,” he said with narrowed eyes. “Are they relatives of yours?” “Sure, we’re both black,” I said, beginning to laugh. He smiled, his eyes intense upon my face. “Seriously, are they your relatives?” “Sure, we were burned in the same oven,” I said. The effect was electric. “Why do you fellows always talk in terms of race!” he snapped, his eyes blazing” (*Invisible Man*, p. 292)
- d) “*That* is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts spilling out, the trip to the chamber with the deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean – only it's worse because you continue stupidly to live. But live you must, and you can either make passive love to your sickness or burn it out and go on to the next conflicting phase” (*Invisible Man*, pp. 576-6)
- e) “The simultaneity of estrangement and insight that Du Bois locates in the black experience of modernity certainly finds its analog in twentieth-century Jewish history...” (Rothberg, p. 130)

Select bibliography

Locke, Alain, *The New Negro An Interpretation* (Martino Publishing, 2015)

Meyer, Adam, “‘A Basic Unity of Experience’: The Jewishness of Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man*” (*Prospects* v. 25, 2000: 663-682)

Rothberg, Michael, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, 2009)

Key Dates about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Holocaust Encyclopedia)

Warsaw ghetto established by the Germans on October 12, 1940

July 28, 1942

Jewish Fighting Organization established

In the midst of the first wave of deportations from Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka killing center, the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB, Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa) is established. On July 22, 1942, the Germans begin massive deportations which last virtually without stop until September 12, 1942. During this time more than 250,000 Jews from the ghetto are deported or killed. The ZOB, formed by members of Jewish youth organizations, calls for the Jews of the ghetto to resist deportation. Reports of the massacres of Jews by mobile killing units and in killing centers have already filtered into the ghetto. However, the ZOB is not yet ready to stage a revolt. After deportations end in September, the ZOB expands to incorporate members of underground political organizations and establishes contact with the Polish resistance forces who provide training, armaments and explosives. Mordecai Anielewicz is appointed commander.

January 18–21, 1943

Germans encounter resistance

The Germans renew deportations from the Warsaw ghetto. This time however, they encounter resistance from the ZOB (Jewish Fighting Organization; Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa). The early morning roundups take the ZOB organization by surprise, and individuals take to the streets to resist the Germans. Other Jews in the ghetto retreat into prepared hiding places. The Germans, expecting the expulsions to run smoothly, are surprised by the resistance. In act of retaliation they massacre 1,000 Jews in the main square on January 21, but suspend further deportations. The Germans were able to deport or kill 5,000-6,500 Jews. Encouraged by the results of resistance actions, the Jews in the ghetto plan and prepare a full-scale revolt. The fighting organization is unified, strategies are planned, underground bunkers and tunnels are built, and roof-top passages are constructed. The Jews of the Warsaw ghetto prepare to fight to the end.

May 16, 1943

Ghetto destroyed, uprising ends

After a month of fighting, the Germans blow up the Great Synagogue in Warsaw, signaling the end of the uprising and the destruction of the ghetto. On April 19, 1943, the Germans under the command of SS General Juergen Stroop, began the final destruction of the ghetto and the deportation of the remaining Jews. The ghetto population, however, does not report for deportations. Instead, the ghetto fighting organizations have barricaded themselves inside buildings and bunkers, ready to resist the Germans. After three days, German forces begin burning the ghetto, building by building, to force Jews out of the hiding places. Resistance continues for weeks as the Germans reduce the ghetto to rubble. Although there are only about 50,000 Jews left in the ghetto after the January 1943 deportations, General Stroop reports after the destruction of the ghetto that 56,065 Jews have been captured; of those 7,000 deported to the Treblinka killing center, and the remainder sent to forced-labor camps and the Majdanek camp. Some of the resistance fighters succeed in escaping from the ghetto and join partisan groups in the forests around Warsaw.