

# Black Anti-Semitism and the Rhetoric of Resentment

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**T**he vicious murder of Yankel Rosenbaum in Crown Heights this past summer bore chilling testimony to a growing black anti-Semitism in this country. Although this particular form of xenophobia from below does not have the same institutional power of those racisms that afflict their victims from above, it certainly deserves the same moral condemnation. Furthermore, the very *ethical* character of the Black Freedom struggle largely depends on its spokespersons to condemn openly *any* racist attitude or action.

In our present moment, when a neo-Nazi like David Duke can win 55 percent of the white vote (and 69 percent of the white “born-again” Protestant vote) in Louisiana, it may seem misguided to highlight anti-Semitic behavior of black people—the exemplary targets of racial hatred in America. Yet I suggest that this focus is crucial precisely because we black folk have been in the forefront of the struggle against American racism. If these efforts fall prey to anti-Semitism, then the principled attempt to combat racism forfeits much of its moral credibility—and we all lose. To put it bluntly, if the Black Freedom struggle becomes simply a power-driven war of all against all that pits xenophobia from below against racism from above, then David Duke’s project is the wave of the future—and a racial apocalypse awaits us. Despite Duke’s resounding defeat, we witness increasing racial and sexual violence, coupled with growing economic deprivation that together provide the raw ingredients for such a frightening future.

Black people have searched desperately for allies in the struggle against racism—and have found Jews to be disproportionately represented in the ranks of that struggle. The desperation that sometimes informs the antiracist struggle arises out of two conflicting historical forces: America’s historic weak will to racial justice; and an all-inclusive moral vision of freedom and justice for all. Escalating black anti-Semitism is a symptom of this desperation gone sour; it is the bitter fruit of a profound self-destructive impulse, nurtured on the vines of hopelessness and concealed by empty gestures of

black unity. The images of black activists yelling “Where is Hitler when we need him?” and “Heil Hitler,” juxtaposed with those of David Duke celebrating Hitler’s birthday, seem to feed a single fire of intolerance, burning on both ends of the American candle, that threatens to consume us all.

**B**lack anti-Semitism rests on three basic pillars. First, it is a species of anti-whitism. Jewish complicity in American racism—even though it is less extensive than the complicity of other white Americans—reinforces black perceptions that Jews are identical to any other group benefitting from white-skin privileges in racist America. This view denies the actual history and treatment of Jews, wrongly assuming that Jews are always top dogs in a world in which black folk are underdogs. And the particular interactions of Jews and black people in the hierarchies of business and education cast Jews as the public face of oppression for the black community, and thus lend evidence to this mistaken view of Jews as any other white folk.

Second, black anti-Semitism is a result of higher expectations some black folk have of Jews. This perspective holds Jews to a moral standard different from that extended to other white ethnic groups, principally owing to the ugly history of anti-Semitism in the world, especially in Europe. Such double standards assume that Jews and blacks are “natural” allies, since both groups have suffered chronic degradation and oppression at the hands of racial and ethnic majorities. So when Jewish neoconservatism gains a high public profile at a time when black people are more and more vulnerable, the charge of “betrayal” surfaces among black folk who feel let down. Such utterances resonate strongly in a black Protestant culture that has inherited many stock Christian anti-Semitic narratives of Jews as Christ-killers. These infamous narratives historically have had less weight in the black community, in stark contrast to the more obdurate white Christian varieties of anti-Semitism. Yet in moments of desperation in the black community, they tend to reemerge, charged with the rhetoric of Jewish betrayal.

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Third, black anti-Semitism is a form of underdog resentment and envy, directed at another underdog who has "made it" in American society. The remarkable upward mobility of American Jews—rooted chiefly in a history and culture that places a premium on higher education and self-organization—easily lends itself to myths of Jewish unity and homogeneity that have gained currency among other groups, especially among relatively unorganized groups like black Americans. The high visibility of Jews in the upper reaches of the academy, journalism, the entertainment industry, and the professions—though less so percentage-wise in corporate America and national political office—is viewed less as a result of hard work and success fairly won, and more as a matter of favoritism and nepotism among Jews. Ironically, calls for black solidarity and achievement are often modeled on myths of Jewish unity—as both groups respond to American xenophobia and racism. But in times such as these, some blacks view Jews as obstacles rather than allies in the struggle for racial justice.

These three elements of black anti-Semitism—which also characterize the outlooks of some other ethnic groups in America—have a long history among black people. Yet the recent upsurge of black anti-Semitism exploits two other prominent features of the political landscape identified with the American Jewish establishment: the top dog military status of Israel in the Middle East (especially in its enforcement of the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza); and the visible *conservative* Jewish opposition to what is perceived to be a major means of black progress, namely, affirmative action. Of course, principled critiques of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, of Israeli denigration of Palestinians, or attacks on affirmative action *transcend* anti-Semitic sensibilities. Yet vulgar critiques do not—and often are shot through with such sensibilities, in white and black America alike. These vulgar critiques—usually based on sheer ignorance and a misinformed thirst for vengeance—add an aggressive edge to black anti-Semitism. And in the rhetoric of a Louis Farrakhan or a Leonard Jeffries, whose audiences rightly hunger for black self-respect and oppose black degradation, these critiques misdirect progressive black energies arrayed against unaccountable corporate power and anti-black racism, steering them instead *toward* Jewish elites and anti-black racism in Jewish America. This displacement is disturbing not only because it is analytically and morally wrong; it also discourages any effective alliances across races.

The rhetoric of Farrakhan and Jeffries feeds on an undeniable history of black denigration at the hands of Americans of every ethnic and religious group. The delicate issues of black self-love and black self-contempt are then viewed in terms of white put-down and Jewish

conspiracy. The precious quest for black self-esteem is reduced to immature and cathartic gestures that bespeak an excessive obsession with whites and Jews. There can be no healthy conception of black humanity based on such obsessions. The best of black culture, as manifested, for example, in jazz or the prophetic black church, refuses to put whites or Jews on a pedestal or in the gutter. Rather, black humanity is affirmed alongside that of others, even when those others have at times dehumanized blacks. To put it bluntly, when black humanity is taken for granted and not made to prove itself in white culture, whites, Jews, and others are not that important; they are simply human beings, just like black people. If the best of black culture wanes in the face of black anti-Semitism, black people will become even more isolated as a community and tarred with the brush of immorality.

For example, most Americans wrongly believe that the black community has been silent in the face of Yankel Rosenbaum's murder. This perception exists because the moral voices in black America have been either ignored or drowned out by the more sensationalist and xenophobic ones. The major New York City newspapers and periodicals have little interest in making known to the public the moral condemnations voiced by Reverend Gary Simpson of Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn (with 10,000 black members), Reverend James Forbes of Riverside Church (with 3,000 members), Reverend Carolyn Knight of Philadelphia Baptist Church in Harlem, Reverend Susan Johnson of Mariners Baptist Church in Manhattan, Reverend Mark Taylor of the Church of the Open Door in Brooklyn, Reverend Victor Hall of Calvary Baptist Church in Queens, and many more. Black anti-Semitism is not caused by media hype—yet it does sell more newspapers and turn our attention away from those black prophetic energies that give us some hope.

**M**y fundamental premise is that the Black Freedom struggle is the major buffer between the David Dukes of America and the hope for a future in which we can begin to take justice and freedom for all seriously. Black anti-Semitism—along with its concomitant xenophobias, such as patriarchal and homophobic prejudices—weakens this buffer. In the process, it plays into the hands of the old-style racists, who appeal to the worst of our fellow citizens amid the silent depression that plagues the majority of Americans. Without some redistribution of wealth and power, downward mobility and debilitating poverty will continue to drive people into desperate channels. And without principled opposition to xenophobias from above *and* below, these desperate channels will produce a cold-hearted and mean-spirited America no longer worth fighting for or living in. □