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Interracial and Interfaith Intimacies: Black and Jewish Romantic Relationships in the Black Freedom Movement

“My people were brought in chains,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed the American Jewish Congress in May 1958. “Your people were driven here to escape the chains fashioned for them in Europe. Our unity is born of our common struggle for centuries...to make oppression of any people by others an impossibility.”¹

Black and Jewish communities’ common struggle produced interracial and interfaith alliances that were essential to dismantling racial discrimination and segregation in mid-twentieth century America. This has been, and continues to be, well documented in extant scholarship on the Black Freedom Movement. Missing, however, is a thorough examination of how shared oppressions, activism, and commitment to social justice and equality often became the foundation for romantic relationships between Blacks and Jews, especially from the 1930s through the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these relationships were brief and informal: Florence Howe had a brief relationship with the Black director of a Freedom Summer school in 1964; and Joan Nestle dated a Black divinity student she met in Selma, Alabama.² Other relationships resulted in marriage: LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Hettie Cohen in 1958; Nancy Stoller and Donald (Kwame) Shaw in 1966³; and Alice Walker and Melvyn Roseman Leventhal in 1967. (National statistics on Black-Jewish intermarriage do not exist, but these couplings are said to have made up a disproportionate number of interracial marriages for the better part of the twentieth century.⁴)

Using oral history interviews, personal papers, and FBI records, this paper considers the journey of couples who navigated the complexities of interracial and interfaith relationships and offers new insights into the ways that romantic love and unions may have been driving forces in the fight for social change in the twentieth century. This paper situates these relationships within the context of the Black Freedom Movement, examining how they intersected with political activism, community organizing, and the quest for a more inclusive society. It also addresses the pressures and tensions that arose within both Black and Jewish communities in response to these relationships, revealing the intricacies of allyship, solidarity, and the negotiation of multiple identities.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Address to the American Jewish Congress’s National Biennial Convention,” Miami, Florida, May 14, 1958.

² Debra Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (NYU Press, 2001): 116.

³ Nancy Stoller, *Southern White Girl Seeks Social Change: A Twentieth Century Memoir* (Bright Stuff, 2019).

⁴ Renee C. Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White in Postwar America* (University Press of Florida, 2003): 123.