

**Transfiguring Black and Jewish Relations:
From Ignatius Sancho's *Letters* and Olaudah
Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* to David
Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*
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I. Introduction¹

Featuring poetry, lectures, and music, the culture jams called “The Art of Resistance” (Los Angeles, 2007 and 2008) were the result of a fruitful collaboration between the Sephardic American writer Jordan Elgrably and African American author Michael Datcher. “The Art of Resistance” fostered mutual understanding and created cross-cultural alliances not only between Jews and blacks but among Jews, blacks, and Arabs (The Levantine Center). Grassroots events like this beautifully reflect the application of Stuart Hall’s concept of the “act of imaginative rediscovery” (Mirzoeff 22-23) in the sense that neither black nor Jewish identities are perceived as essentialist, static, monolithic, and separate, but are subject to a sensitive unveiling of the past, “re-imagination” (Mirzoeff 22–23), and “(re)production” (Mirzoeff 22).

While there is already considerable research on such famous eighteenth-century writers of African descent in Britain as Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, the investigation of black and Jewish relations, as well as (shared) memories, in the eighteenth century and contemporary literature is still in its incipient stage. Keith Sandiford, Paul Edwards, James Walvin, Gretchen Gerzina, David Dabydeen, Vincent Carretta, and, more recently, Sukdhev Sandhu, as well as Lyn Innes, have extensively and insightfully commented on the complexity and polyphony of Ignatius Sancho’s and Olaudah Equiano’s subject positions.²

Whereas Paul Edwards correctly conjectures that Sancho is “both attached to, and detached from” eighteenth-century values (“Black Writers,” 53), Innes compares the different perspectives Sancho writes

from to role-playing (*History* 33–35), and Sandiford aptly calls Sancho’s shape-shifting “self-fashioning” (77). Edwards and Walvin touch to some degree on the representation of interethnic relationships, such as Equiano’s representation of Indians (84–86), but none of these critics discuss Sancho’s and Equiano’s comments on Jews in great detail. I will argue that Sancho’s views on Jews reflect to a large extent complicity with the religious, political, cultural anti-Semitism percolating in eighteenth-century white British culture. Equiano, on the other hand, emphasizes similarities between Jews and blacks; however, as Vincent Carretta has pointed out, those analogies are positioned in the larger context of a Eurocentric-Christian world picture (“Introduction” xxvi–xxvii), that is, Equiano sees Judaic and African traditions as precursors to superior Christianity and Western/British civilization, which he at the same time implicitly criticizes in many parts of the book. Thus, Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* is to some extent marked by ambiguity and polyphony. Although there has already been considerable research on the reconfiguration of Africans from Hogarth’s series of paintings to the representation of Mungo, the African protagonist of *Harlot’s Progress*, only very few critics, such as Lars Eckstein, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, and Christine Pagnouille, have commented on Jewish-black relations in Dabydeen’s novel. Eckstein especially not only incisively elaborates on Dabydeen’s aesthetic principle of “imaginative transformation” when analyzing the reconfiguration of the Jewish merchant Sampson Gideon in Hogarth’s paintings in Dabydeen’s *Harlot’s Progress* (*Re-Membering* 139–41) but also insightfully investigates Dabydeen’s “aestheticizing of suffering” (156).

Expanding on Eckstein’s, Kowaleski-Wallace’s, and Pagnouille’s findings, I will show the extent to which Dabydeen’s novel can be read as a prism which captures, probes, and dismantles the intricate and multi-layered psychological construction and manifestation of eighteenth-century anti-Semitism and racism in Britain, in particular in white, black, and visual cultures. Equally important, *Harlot’s Progress* also refracts and transfigures anti-Semitism and racism by subverting static and unified subject positions and exploring the complexity and paradoxes of white–Jewish relations, and of black–Jewish, Jewish–black, as well as of white–

black alliances. Thus, resisting a linear, homogeneous representation of memory and history, the novel portrays multifaceted interethnic relationships and heterogeneous, contradictory post-memories, i.e. several versions of the past, re-imagined from the theoretical vantage point of the late twentieth century.³

II. African Jewish Relations in Eighteenth-Century Black Literature: Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano

As many historians have shown, the low status of blacks and Jews in the European “chain of being,” which served as reference point to justify social hierarchy from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period, and the eighteenth century, unfortunately, still lingers in many contemporary discourses (Lowe 10; Philipson xviii). Kate Lowe astutely points out:

In the intensely status-conscious and hierarchical societies of fifteenth-century Europe, powerful stereotypical representations of the ‘other’ (the Jew, the Moor, the African) were already elaborately crafted from classical and medieval sources, and it is not difficult to locate the sub-Saharan African within this taxonomy. Later, Jews and black Africans may have clashed over their place in this pecking order, as happened in other eras and situations when two ‘immigrant’ communities competed for resources and survival. (10)

In the eighteenth century, the rise of the sciences created a new foundation for a “scholarly” justification of racism and white supremacy (Schorsch 255). At the same time, however, eighteenth-century London was a relatively multicultural city, and apart from Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews and blacks from Africa, the Caribbean, and North America, this metropolis saw an influx of Sinti and Roma, Welsh, Scots, and Huguenots (George 132–33; Glassman 119).

Blacks and Jews often developed a “double consciousness”: on the one hand, there was a longing to be part of the white, upper-class Enlightenment; on the other hand, many Jews and blacks felt alienated and repelled by white British culture (Philipson xxi). Many immigrants were subject to xenophobia, racism, and discrimination by the white

British. James Walvin succinctly comments, “The English had traditionally regarded foreigners (be they Irish, Scots, French or Jews) with a curiosity and disdain rooted in insularity and encouraged by stereotypical views of outsiders” (*Passage* 33). As Bernard Glassman suggests, many eighteenth-century white British found it difficult to open themselves to the Other: “The farther away in time that the Jews were, the more they were admired by the majority culture. For the Blacks the greater the distance they were from England’s shores, the more promise and compassion they received” (108).

Some Sephardic Jews, such as the wealthy financier Samson Gideon, closely interacted with the British upper class (Endelman 49, 66). The majority of Jews were poor, however, and subject to anti-Semitism and racial attacks. The number of physical assaults on Jews actually spurred mushrooming self-defense classes of which the Jewish Prize fighter Daniel Mendoza (1763–1836) was a product (Endelman 58). According to Todd Endelman, many wealthy upper-class Jews and many poor Jews gave up their traditions quickly (58). Many affluent—often Sephardic—Jews were crypto-Jews, officially converted to Christianity, and had considerable contact with upper-class British while trying to blend in with the flamboyant, upper-class lifestyle by living in proximity to the affluent white British neighbours in Southwest London, Richmond, or by giving lavish parties (Endelman 57, 66). In a similar vein, many Jewish poor mingled and developed relationships with fellow poor (Endelman 67; Glassman 107), be they white, Christian, black, Sinti or Roma. Peddlers, servants, beggars, pickpockets of various ethnic backgrounds often formed a counterculture and lived in the same neighborhoods, drinking and eating together, as well as intermarrying (Endelman 67). Thus, it is not surprising when Ignatius Sancho’s biographer, Joseph Jekyll, points out that Ignatius Sancho lost his clothes to a fellow Jewish card player and Sancho, probably due to poverty, had to quit shuffling cards: “—Cards had formerly seduced him [Sancho], but an unsuccessful contest at cribbage with a Jew, who won his cloaths, had determined him to abjure the propensity which appears to be innate in his countrymen—” (Jekyll 6). If we take Jekyll’s comment at face value, which—as Brycchan Carey reminds us—could be problematic,⁴

this incident might provide some explanation for Sancho's anti-Semitic comments since immigrants were competing for resources and many poor Jews earned some money with peddling (Felsenstein 62).

Sancho's *Letters* exhibit some common eighteenth-century anti-Semitic stereotypes, such as Jews relentlessly proselytizing Christians. In Letter V (Volume I), Ignatius Sancho keeps his fellow servant in the Montagu family, James Kisbee, who was away, informed about what was going on in the Montagu Villa in Richmond (Carretta, Letter V, Footnote 1, 261). The letter conveys gossip and then uses irony to make fun of the vapidness of the upper-class life of leisure:⁵

The good Marquiss [the only son of the duke and duchess of Montagu] is with us—and has been ever since you left us. — Are you [Mr. Kisbee] not tired? This is a deuced long letter. — Well, one word more, and then farewell. Mrs. M— is grown generous—has left off swearing and modeling. S— is turned Jew, and is to be circumcised next Passover. W— is turned fine gentlemen—and left off work—and I your humble friend, I am for my sins turned Methodist. (34)

Vincent Carretta points out that most of the servants in the Montagu household to whom this letter refers are unidentifiable (Letter V, note 1, 261). More importantly, however, Carretta also argues that these lines are “probably mocking irony. Jews were frequently falsely accused of trying to convert Christians, and Sancho's references to turning gentleman and Methodist seem clearly ironic” (note 10, 263). Even though Carretta's explanation seems plausible, it is still noteworthy that Sancho refers to the stereotype of Jews proselytizing Christians. Historically, Jews were under tremendous pressure to convert to Christianity since following Judaism meant being barred from Naturalization, which included receiving the sacrament (Endelman 74). The truth is that during the readmission under Cromwell, Jews had no intention of converting Christians to Judaism (Felsenstein 112). On the contrary, it was often philosemitic Christians who encouraged Jews to convert to Christianity; ironically, this frequently caused Christian anti-Jewish sentiments and the *angst* of being subverted by Judaism (Felsenstein 112). Sancho's

Letter V indicates that W's and Mrs. M's refraining from scheming, as well as W turning gentleman and not having to work, are improvements in their lives and hence positive. The letter depicts that becoming a Jew, on the other hand, seems an unlikely and even senseless choice for a Christian since the letter is imbued with the anti-Semitic discourse of possible punishment—circumcision—for those Christians wanting to pursue Judaism. Gentiles in the Middle Ages but also after readmission in the eighteenth century often associated circumcision with the alleged barbarism of Jews (Felsenstein 124–25): “What began for the Jews as the seal of an enduring covenant between God and the sons of Abraham has become in gentile eyes the intractable mark of an almost anthropological difference. In the popular imagination, circumcision connotes the perpetual stigma of the Jewish people in their self-inflicted Otherness” (Felsenstein 147). Sancho refers to this common eighteenth-century stereotype about Jews which frequently triggered castration anxiety in many gentiles and served to create a dichotomy between Christians and Jews (Felsenstein 37, 124).

Another anti-Semitic stereotype conjuring the alleged dissimilarity between Jews and Christians (Felsenstein 125) was the association of Jews with uncleanness and beasts. The most pertinent example of this kind of anti-Semitism surfaces in Sancho's Letter L. Sancho, who is obviously very poor at this point in his life, first thanks his fellow servant Mr. Meheux for the pig he had sent had sent because it kept his family from starving. Expressing gratitude to his friend, Sancho in a witty and grotesque manner sees Mr. Meheux's letter as a *memento mori* which makes him reflect on the ephemerality of human life. After detailing how the pig provided a feast for his family, Sancho states: “Now, to say truth, I do not love pig—merely pig—I like not—but pork coined—alias—salted—either roast or boiled—I will eat against any filthy Jew naturalized—or under the bann” (98). This anti-Semitic stereotype of the dirty Jew goes back to medieval anti-Semitism but was still prevalent in the eighteenth century (Felsenstein 124). Felsenstein insightfully conjectures: “Only in the abusive conjunction of Jews with a certain common domestic or, more properly, farmyard animal, forbidden to them by biblical code and expressly proscribed by their dietary laws, is it possible to argue that an

association is forged in the popular imagination that, however perversely, links God's chosen people with unclean beasts" (Felsenstein 125).

Another stereotype that is closely associated with the preceding one and hinted at in Sancho's letter is the view that Jews, although not willing to change their dietary laws, (for example, the prohibition of pork), are eager to enjoy the forbidden food: "By extension, perhaps as a grotesque reflection of the eccentric belief shared by many Christians that despite their obduracy the Jews actually nurtured a deep desire to convert, it was not uncommon to depict them as secret lovers of pork, openly despising that for which they supposedly had the greatest craving" (Felsenstein 127). In addition to this common stereotype of Jews longing for pork, Sancho mentions the naturalization of Jews, which reflects his awareness of the Jew Bill (1753) and his subconscious ambivalence about making Jews British citizens. Here Sancho's attitude, on the one hand, shows that he identifies with and, thus, echoes the "mainstream" eighteenth-century British anti-Semitic stereotype that the naturalization of Jews would jeopardize and shatter Christianity as well as the stability and "order" of the British state (Felsenstein 192). Although critical of the wealth the white British amassed through slavery (46), Sancho's political conservatism is also apparent in his opposition to the Gordon Riots and his belief in law and order (215–20).

One could argue that the debate surrounding the naturalization of Jews might have triggered feelings of envy, resentment and anti-Semitism in Sancho since blacks were not even granted freedom, but regarded as subhumans and chattel to their masters. Paul Edwards and James Walvin—among others—have shown that it was enormously difficult for slaves to be manumitted, escape abuse and kidnapping after manumission in England, and stay free on English soil.⁶ Walvin conjectures: "As long as colonial slavery persisted, the black community would never be secure in whatever partial freedom it had secured. Furthermore the great majority of those who were, after a fashion, free, were obliged to live a marginal existence, their lives characterised by poverty and distress and their future constantly in doubt" (Edwards and Walvin 34). It was not before the mid-1820s that the British recognized that blacks have "the same rights as all free-born Britons" (Edwards and Walvin 51).⁷

In addition to religious and political anti-Semitism, Sancho exhibits cultural anti-Semitism in Letter XLIII. Sancho's *Letters* are replete with references to Shakespeare. As is commonly known, Sancho often went to the theater, and was a friend of the actors Garrick and Henderson. He admired their performances as Shylock (93), and jokingly compared himself to a black Falstaff. Sancho was so fascinated by Othello that he wanted to play Othello but could not follow through with this dream because of a speech impediment (Jekyll 7). Questioning Jekyll's statement, Brycchan Carey notes that Sancho's wish "to act the parts of Othello and Oroonoko cannot be tested since the attempt came to nothing" (3). Sancho's knowledge of Shakespeare's plays, on the other hand, clearly surfaces in many references to and quotations from Shakespeare. In a playful and jocular letter to Meheux, in which Sancho expresses his support for him, Sancho inserts a quote by Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*: "I hate thee (as the Jew says) because thou art a Christian" (Shakespeare I, 3, 43 qtd. in Sancho 184). Here Sancho uses the quotation ironically and makes it a statement of affection or appreciation of Meheux's personal qualities. Similarly, Sancho seems quite comfortable appropriating an anti-Semitic discourse from "high" culture, evincing that he has the conversational skills to appear socially adept in "educated" upper-class white British circles. Felsenstein strikingly points out that the association of Shylock with greed and miserliness were part of a general anti-Semitic discourse that crossed class boundaries (158–59).

On the other hand, Sancho's anti-Semitic remarks are somewhat counterpoised in Letter XLVII to Mr. Meheux in which Sancho questions "eternal Damnation" (93) through a more democratic understanding of Christianity. Sancho first mentions the derogatory phrase "Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics," which goes back to 1548 in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Jewish Theological Seminary 42) and is applied to all non-believers who are doomed to go to hell. This form of abuse for non-Christians was still widespread in the eighteenth century (Felsenstein 49). Sancho, practicing image reversal, however, uses those words to create a somewhat subversive and inclusive concept of Christian salvation that crosses ethnic and religious lines:

I am reading a little pamphlet, which I much like: it favours an opinion which I have long indulged—which is the improbability of eternal Damnation—a thought which almost petrifies one—and, in my opinion, derogatory to the fullness, glory, and benefit of the blessed expiation of the Son of the Most High God—who died for the sins of all—all—Jew, Turk, Infidel, and Heretic; —fair—sallow—brown—tawney—black—and you [Mr. Meheux]—and I—and every son and daughter of Adam. — You must find eyes to read this book—head and heart—with a quickness of conception thou enjoyest—with many—many advantages—which have the love—and envy almost of yours, I. Sancho. (93)

Here Sancho is also implicitly taking a stand against slavery and the ‘chain of being’ by arguing that all humans are equal in the eyes of God and that Christianity is a religion for all ethnicities and, thus, possibly a source of crosscultural bonds.

Whereas Sancho partly builds his identity against the Othered (Jews), Olaudah Equiano highlights such affinities as circumcision, washings, sacrifices, patriarchy, and the custom of revenge between Jews and blacks (Equiano 41, 44). However, he also comments that Jews and blacks are both inferior to Western Christian cultures: “Like the Israelites in their primitive state, our government was conducted by our chiefs, our judges, our wise men, and elders” (44). In many passages of his *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano argues from a Christian perspective, which he equates with spiritual homecoming. Among many critics, Walvin points out that Equiano’s tone has been interpreted by some critics as docile and obsequious: “A superficial reading [of Equiano’s] *Narrative* might give the impression, in his avowals of respect for white civilisation, his providential view even of his life as a slave, and his adoption of postures of humility and submissiveness that he was something of a timeserver” (Edwards and Walvin, *Black* 79). Walvin also correctly acknowledges, though, that the reader always needs to take a second glance: “In the early stages of the *Narrative* Equiano acknowledges, in all seriousness, his belief in the workings of divine providence, but unlike

the earlier black writers, he adopts along with this an ironic posture towards the complacency which would see the benefits of baptism but not the intolerable cruelty of enslavement" (*Black* 79).

As Vincent Carretta notes, Equiano was familiar with the religious debate of whether blacks and Jews were part of Europe or Asia, a discussion that served as another justification to keep non-Christians and 'Others' in their place. The debate referred to blacks and Jews being descendants of Ham, "who was cursed for daring to look at his naked and drunken father Noah" or Cain (Herzog 298). Presenting a counter-argument to this discourse, Equiano uses the analogy of the early stages of European civilization and Africans to remind Europeans of their roots and use those as an argument against slavery: "Let the polished and haughty European recollect that *his* ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Did Nature make *them* inferior to their sons? and [sic] should *they too* have been made slaves?" (45) Thus, *Interesting Narrative* is characterized to some extent by polyphony, masquerading, and subversion. Keith Sandiford comments, "By such strategies of indirection and implied criticism, Equiano debunked the myths of Western cultural superiority" (131). On a similar note, Paul Gilroy mentions that Equiano's passages concerning the similarities between Jews and blacks laid the foundation for the black appropriation of a diasporic consciousness from Judaism (*Against Race* 125).

Charles T. Davis's and Henry Louis Gates's comments about the slave narrative, which "represents the attempts of blacks to *write themselves into being*" (xxiii), is fine-tuned by Dabydeen, elaborating on Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*:

What distinguishes Equiano's writing is not the subject matter (the turmoil of slavery) but his joy in using words and making a book. He frees himself from bondage by glimpsing the beauty in words and by revelling in the aesthetic challenge of composing his life in words. In a sense he writes himself out of slavery, even though the words he uses are of the language of his slave-masters. ("Painterboy")

III. David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*

i. Probing the Construction of Anti-Semitism and Racism

Juxtaposing multiple points of view and arranging non-linear layers of time, *A Harlot's Progress* relies on polyphony, meta-fiction, and self-reflexivity to trace the formation of anti-Semitism in literature: readers encounter the multiple narrators immersing themselves in an anti-Semitic political discourse, absorbing the anti-Jewish sentiments circulating in the eighteenth-century political discourse; the narrators and the visual artists represented in the novel create and perpetuate anti-Semitism themselves.

Specifically, through Pringle, the narrator dismantles white British anti-Semitism as a political and literary construct. In the beginning of the novel, the omniscient narrator already gives insight into Mr. Pringle's outline of Mungo's book, which is based on a linear narrative portraying Mungo's journey from Africa, his being "brought to England by Captain Thomas Thistlewood and sold into the service of Lord Montague, then passed on to the notorious Jewish trickster Mr Gideon" (3), a common anti-Semitic stereotype (Felsenstein 4–5). Further into the novel, the narrator shows how Mr. Pringle's adherence to common eighteenth-century anti-Jewish sentiments, such as the depictions of Jews as stockjobbers, money grubbers, and merchants, undermining England's political stability, surface in his account of the washerwoman Betty's life. Mungo intimates that Pringle's version of Betty's story will be linear, sensationalist pulp fiction with longer passages on Jews who are seen as the source of England's corruption and, finally, England's decline from power:

Mr. Pringle's account of Betty will be an ordinary tale. She is a heartless thief, scrimping on the already meagre provisions given her for the care of hapless Negroes.... Deceit and betrayal motivate people at the highest level, by their example the poor are corrupted. Jews and Jacobites and Papists and their spies are everywhere, threatening the stability of England. The ruination they cause by speculation in stock, or in creating false

Bubble schemes, is a grander version of Betty's crime.... True, the Jew is worse, his money-making being part of a conspiracy with Papists and Jacobites to create chaos. He finances their plots to overthrow King and Parliament and the commercial system on which the security of the nation depends. (142–43)⁸

Given Mr. Pringle's agenda, it comes as no surprise then that one part of his written account of Mungo's life is blatantly anti-Semitic. The reader can peruse fragments of Pringle narrating Mungo's story. In Pringle's writing, "the Jew" is referred to as lewd housebreaker, Christ-killer, Shylock, and thief, all common anti-Semitic eighteenth-century British stereotypes (Felsenstein 30–31, 118, 158): "*Mary, I beg, don't trust Jews, they'd come at night and try to steal the very stone they rolled at our Lord's tomb to sell it at some other funeral. O let the Jews do what they want with the rich, rob them blind and wreck their lives, but not my Mary's*" (129). Avoiding a simplistic binary opposition of cunning Mr. Pringle and selfless Mungo, however, the narrator has Mungo partially comply with Pringle's anti-Semitism and his boundless desire for self-promotion since Mungo, too, will profit from Pringle's project and increase his own and the other slaves' status in Britain: "And I, Mungo, am to prick the nation's conscience by a testimony of suffering, which Mr. Pringle will compose with as much intelligence as a Jewish conspiracy. For I am to become a crucial instrument in Mr. Pringle's scheme to rescue England from its enemies" (144).

In addition to unveiling the construction and circulation of anti-Semitism in white British upper-class culture and slave narratives written down and censored by a white abolitionist, the novel clearly shows the connection between slavery, anti-Semitism, and capitalism. Reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the brutality of slavery in *Harlot's Progress* is not restricted to the Caribbean but extends to England. The Kurtzian character Captain Thistlewood saves the clothes of the slaves who did not survive the Middle Passage and takes the teeth of the deceased to sell in England. Lars Eckstein, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, and Christine Pagnouille have perceptively noted how the novel thus creates affinities between the slave trade and the

Holocaust (Eckstein, *Re-Membering* 139–41, 156; Kowaleski-Wallace 249; Pagnouille, note 19, 203). This becomes evident when the washerwoman Betty states, “He [Thistlewood] was worse than the Jew. He’d even save their teeth.... Each time he had a bag with him, full of slave teeth. A storm must have battered them out of their poor mouths. Or else he must have took pliers to them, who knows?” (130). The irony is that Betty—although condemning “the Jew” and calling Thistlewood immoral—is complicit with Thistlewood’s business practices by selling the slaves’ teeth in Cheapside. While bragging about being part of a supposedly refined civilization, she avoids taking responsibility but instead justifies her involvement in the slave trade with the pressure to earn a basic living: “I [Betty] should have complained, but what would that do? He [Thistlewood]’d take his business elsewhere, and I’d starve, so I traded in teeth” (131).

Betty’s words insinuate that in addition to uncovering not only eighteenth-century white, upper-class anti-Semitism, such as Lady Montague’s fantasy of Jews and blacks as vermin (231), anti-Jewish sentiments, xenophobia, and racism cross class boundaries, which is historically accurate (Felsenstein 159). When Betty goes to Johnson’s Coffee House which attracts not only locals but immigrants, such as Huguenots, to “sell” Mungo, she talks to poor customers who are anti-Semitic, envy the Huguenots’ financial success, and deem slaves to be better off than the local poor. Seeing Mungo in the Coffee House, one poor, white British patron exclaims, “He [Mungo]’ll be alright in the end, so long as a Jew don’t buy him. Make sure a Christian gentleman gets him, then he’ll not suffer many blows.... At least he [Mungo]’ll only be carrying trays and teapots, us lot [white servants] are doomed to carry plump-arsed gentlefolk” (162).

In *Harlot’s Progress*, the internalization of racist and anti-Semitic prejudices is like a cancer that has spread rapidly and, thus, infected not only the white British but also Gideon and Mungo. Gideon is perplexed when the servant Mungo, who looks so different from him, opens the door to usher him to his patient Lady Montague (Pagnouille 186). The omniscient narrator imparts:

He [Gideon] beholds Perseus [Mungo] with momentary alarm, as if the door had opened to an inevitable fate. Recovering his [Gideon's] composure, he attempts a benign smile and announces himself modestly as Mr Sampson Gideon. He waits politely for Perseus to stop gaping, then follows him to Lady Montague's chamber, bemused by the boy's [Mungo's] soft growling in a Negro language which sounds bizarrely like dog-Latin. (227)

Mungo later explains that he thinks that the reason why Gideon had a bewildered look on his face when they met at the entrance of the Montague household was because Gideon "seemed to have known that the true patient was not my Lady [Mrs Montague] but myself [Mungo]" (254). While this might be true, Gideon seems nevertheless startled by Mungo's language which is both alien and familiar to Gideon—as the quotation shows.

On a similar note, Mungo is aware that although he wants to be friends with Gideon, he projects the image of Jew/moneygrubber onto him. After Mungo finally runs away from the Montague household, he plans to take Gideon up on his offer to work with him. Mungo states, "Reckoning on his [Gideon's] greed (in spite of his previous refusal of a physician's fee), I bring with me tribute from the Montague household: ornaments and specimens of England's noble civilization. If as a philistine he [Gideon] cannot appreciate such articles of faith, he can at least sell them for pieces of silver" (253–54). Offering Gideon gifts, stolen items from the Montagues, Mungo is surprised by Gideon's lack of interest: "But Mr Gideon puts away the sack of treasures. I [Mungo] had doubted him, thinking he would be tempted by it, but he put the sack away as the possessions of the living, useless to him, useless to the company of ghosts who are his disciples" (254–55).⁹

Similar to *Slave Song* and *Coolie Odyssey*, *Harlot's Progress* portrays the effects of the internalization of the white supremacist 'chain of being,' which is made up of racial self-hatred and self-degradation. When Mungo describes Lady Montague's physical and mental deterioration and her doting on him like a pet, he identifies with the oppressor, the

sadistic Lizzie who used to torture him relentlessly. Seeing himself and Gideon as inferior to the “master race,” Mungo states, “And the other servants, now that Lizzie dismiss and is not here to bully them, slacken in their tasks and laze and disrespect, for Mistress don’t care for nothing more worthy than a nigger-boy and she let a Jews unsex her, she truly gone mad” (240).

In addition to probing and dismantling eighteenth-century anti-Semitism in written discourses, the novel scrutinizes the power of paintings, exhibiting their potential to stir anti-Jewish and racist sentiments in the viewers. It is not that startling that Dabydeen focuses on visual discourse when investigating the construction of racism and anti-Semitism. Deploring the absence of a widespread visual culture in Guyana, Dabydeen describes his fascination with the visual arts in an interview with Eckstein:

And I am not musical anyway. And therefore, another sense has been developed, which is the visual. But in a cultural context, it would be practically the absence of pictures in Guyana. The only pictures there are of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and Christian pictures of Jesus, and so on. You don’t really get Indian art, or African art, because that memory has been more or less wiped out. So I suppose it’s the absence of the visual in terms of the fine arts in Guyana that triggered off this great, widening passion that I have for looking at pictures. I can look at pictures all day. (28)

Waiting for Lady Montague’s doctor, Sampson Gideon, Perseus (Mungo) expects “to find a crooked-back and bearded Jew, hook-nosed, darkly complexioned, his hands worn by a lifetime of counting money, like one of the Magi in Galdi’s *Adoration* which came in the coach with Perseus (or was it a *Pietà* that the postillion had brought into the house that fateful day when they arrived from the auction at Johnson’s?)” (227). Perseus is surprised to meet, instead, a “fresh-faced man, dark-haired, handsome, in his mid-twenties” (227).

The power of paintings to manipulate politically becomes especially evident by the end of the novel when Hogarth appears and Mungo real-

izes that his appearance in a painting is commodification: “He [Hogarth] lied about Mr Gideon, making him whore Moll, the Virgin Mother, so that you, dear reader, will be roused once more to ancient hatred of the Jew” (272). While admitting that Mungo feels proud about being visible and immortalized in a work of art, Mungo resents the misrepresentation not only of himself as slave but the fixed identities of Gideon as Shylock and Moll as a prostitute, and the effect of visual stereotyping on future generations (273).

ii. Transfiguring Anti-Semitism and Racism

While the novel explores mutual stereotyping, it also counters racism and anti-Semitism through complex, sometimes paradoxical character development, the transfiguration of prejudice, and interethnic alliances. Reconfiguring the anti-Semitic portrayal of the Jewish merchant in Hogarth’s painting, Dabydeen’s Jewish character Sampson Gideon is not driven by money but a genuine desire to help the most destitute women and becomes, as Dabydeen (Eckstein, “Interview” 30), Eckstein (*Re-Membering* 139–41), and Kowaleski-Wallace (249–50) have argued, a Christ-like figure (259–60). The narrator states, “But it was the Jew who sought out the tragedy of my [Mungo’s] people, who sacrificed his life to free us from hatred of the whiteman and the Christian. Mr Gideon acted thus not because he wanted personal glory, nor to redeem his race for nearly two millennia of condemnation. He acted out of ordinary human feeling” (272–73). After his support of extremely poor, terminally-ill patients in London, Gideon chooses to work as a doctor on a slave ship, and the spirits of Ellar and Manu remember him as a very gentle person, who tried to alleviate their pain by massaging them and giving them a powerful cordial. However, Gideon’s powers are limited because he is getting sick as well and is eventually tossed overboard with the slaves (197, 252–53).

Questioning the image of Gideon as an exclusively selfless healer, Eckstein, Kowaleski-Wallace, and Pagnouille insightfully maintain that there is a certain ambiguity surrounding the Jewish doctor since it is not completely certain whether Sampson Gideon is a serious doctor or a quack (Kowaleski-Wallace 248–49; Eckstein, *Re-Membering* 139–40;

Pagnouille 186). Purposeful ambiguity and paradox subvert the image of Gideon as a stock character. Because of the non-linear polyphony of the novel, the reader cannot be completely certain whether the Jewish character(s)—servant Mary’s seducer, Lady Montague’s lover, Lady Montague’s doctor, and the physician on the slave ship—are one and the same person.

In addition to Gideon’s indeterminacy as a character, I would maintain that through Gideon, the novel uncovers the psychological impact of slavery and capitalism on the slaveholding class and implicitly questions one of the foundations of the Enlightenment—the unwavering insistence on reason and science. Furthermore, echoing *Slave Song*, *Harlot’s Progress*—through Gideon—explores the “pornography of Empire” (qtd. in Binder 168), that is, slavery’s and anti-Semitism’s effect on the psychological condition and bodies of the colonizers and colonized.

Lady Montague as a representative of the slaveholding class is severely ill. As Gideon shares with Mungo, however, she primarily suffers from “hysteria” (233). Her condition is not that surprising since her husband does not respect her as his intellectual equal. Depression is partly a subconscious response to the cruelty of slavery outside of Britain of which she is well aware. Informing her husband and his friends about the Thistlewood Case during a dinner party (Thistlewood jettisoned slaves over board in order to benefit from insurance money) and, thus, transgressing her role as a wife/homemaker/hostess, creates estrangement in their marriage (192–93). At the same time, she is entangled in slavery because her husband “purchased” Mungo to distract her from illness caused by her unhappy marriage, her loneliness, and the death of her pet monkey. Lady Montague’s depression is also a reaction to the sadism and dysfunction in her own house, such as Lizzie torturing Mungo, as well as Lord Montague and Lady Montague’s Jewish lover wanting to sleep with her servant Betty. Furthermore, Lady Montague applies a double moral standard by having an affair with someone she clearly regards as inferior because he is Jewish.

Before Sampson Gideon begins to treat Lady Montague, the reader gets to know him through a number of letters of recommendation that extol the healing power of Gideon’s Eastern Cordial and his skills as a

doctor. Initially, Gideon's prescriptions give Lady Montague some relief from her pain (232). Later on, though, her disease worsens despite the elixirs Gideon prescribes, and Gideon starts treating her like a guinea pig: "He makes a plaster of Genoa soap, olive oil and ceruse, and applies it to her navel. He parts her thighs and inserts a finger, feeling for any growths. More scandalously he turns her on her belly and studies her insides through a looking-glass. He takes a specimen of her bowels with a long-handed silver spoon normally used to serve truffles" (232). While Gideon's medical experiments on Lady Montague reflect the layer of superstition in eighteenth-century medicine,¹⁰ they are also a grotesque critique of the Enlightenment's obsession with science because Gideon's probing does not improve Lady Montague's health. On the other hand, bearing in mind that Dabydeen wants to intimate the Holocaust in this novel (Eckstein, "Interview" 30), we have a role reversal which ascribes agency to Gideon. Instead of a gentile performing a grueling experiment on a Jew, here the Jewish doctor is in charge. Reminiscent of some poems in *Slave Song*, which exhibit the slaves' sadistic fantasies of raping a white woman,¹¹ Gideon's treatment of Lady Montague could be seen as Gideon's subconscious retaliation for years of anti-Semitism and oppression.

The manifestation of violence in white British culture, such as slavery abroad and sadism in the Montague household is so pervasive that the psychological and physical damage done is too vast to be "fixed." Neither Gideon nor Mungo are able to rise beyond their human limitations to undo the harm that has been caused. In such a lost battle of fighting the effects of atrocities committed in the Empire and at home, the best help the poor patients, prostitutes, beggars, or slaves on the slave ship, can get is a dignified death. So, one could argue that Gideon endeavors to make the poor women's transition from life to death bearable. On the other hand, Gideon clearly skirts the line between medicine and murder, acting against the Hippocratic Oath, which forbids euthanasia. Gideon is not a victim. Ironically, he almost becomes an *übermensch* who justifies euthanasia, or the poisoning his female patients, as follows, "I cannot do more for them,' Mr Gideon says, confessing his failure to me [Mungo]. 'They [women] are beyond the genius of England's best

physicians. The most I can do is to make their exits swift and painless.' He hangs his head in guilt" (261). Thus, through Gideon, the novel explores moral ambiguity and the limits of science.

Although both Gideon and Mungo are confined in their powers to save their patients' lives, Mungo feels close to Gideon since they are both artists, one healing the sick and the other writing a book. By contrast, Mungo is quite pessimistic about their work and their legacy: "He[Gideon] makes his cures like I make my book but of what use? My book lies. The whores die" (257). This defeatist statement is later on counterpoised by Mungo's optimism and admiration for Gideon's stamina, praising Gideon's desire to transfigure history through small and seemingly insignificant acts:

History will forget him [Gideon]. History will continue to be a chronicle of massacred Jews. But in attempting to succour a single life aboard the slaveship, by applying a single salve to a single wound, he begat the moment of a new history. And however unseen his deed, because of the blanket darkness of the hold, or witnessed only by Negro eyes (and therefore unworthy or untrustworthy of record), the deed will be the potential brightest star of a new firmament. (273)

Besides portraying indeterminacy, paradox, and the "pornography of Empire," the novel explores the intricacies of inter-racial relationships. Sampson and Mungo are drawn to each other because they are both outsiders in a predominantly white society. Somewhat echoing Olaudah Equiano, Mungo conjectures:

Why I seek out the Jew? I can't tell. Is it that he once say to me, 'Come follow me'? Is it that from the time I land in England all I hear is curse, but after a while I too believe: vile Jew, rich Jew, rob—and—cheat Jew, Jew carpenter who shave and plane the wood into Christ's Cross, then charge extra for the nails? Everybody scorn him, is that why I got to meet him, to find a soulmate, two tribes in the same craft and storm that bring us to the same soil, soiling? (250–51)

In the beginning, Mungo is calculating and driven by self-interest when he wishes to become friends with Gideon: “My plan is to make some compact and alliance with him, the only alien I am familiar with in the realm, the only address known to me” (253). Over time, however, Mungo and Gideon inspire and support each other. Although Mungo expects to become Gideon’s slave (251), a sign of his low self-esteem and internalization of the Jew as superior and power-hungry, their relationship develops and is marked by reciprocity. Mungo knows that he has an impact on Gideon (258). Gideon, in a similar vein, states that Mungo’s story inspired him to work for the poor and on a slave ship (258).

Mungo, although aware of Gideon’s darker side and his own stereotypes, believes in Gideon’s talent and transcends ethnicity by inviting him to become a member of his tribe and family. Mungo feels very grateful and gets what he has desired for a long time: being seen in his humanity (70-71): “He [Gideon] looks upon me not as a foreigner but as a fellow man” (261). Again, echoing but at the same time transcending Olaudah Equiano in pinpointing affinities between Jews and blacks and creating families based on choice, Mungo enthusiastically exclaims:

Go to my mothers.... He is a Jew, therefore without family, except a community of curses; ... He will find the blessings of family among my tribe. He will free the ache from their feet as from his own mother’s.... The love that radiates from him will be the light they surge towards, breaking their chains to catch the raining of it for their parched mouths. He will part the sea to show an ancient trail leading back to Africa; ... Guided by the light of previous wrecks, they will reach home. (261–62)

In addition to deconstructing partly the binary opposites of Jewish vs. black, *Harlot’s Progress* also undermines the dichotomy black vs. white through prostitute Moll and Mungo’s relationship. When Mungo meets Moll, she—similar to Lady Montague—does not suffer from an apparent physical illness; instead, she is traumatized by the effects of wealthy clients ravaging her body: “She [Moll] was in no obvious physical pain. Outwardly there was nothing doleful about her. She was not a picture of Bedlam distraction. He [Gideon] could not appreciate her inner sick-

ness, but as soon as I saw her I recognized the imprisonment of her spirit” (265). In contrast to Gideon, who in this last part of the book appears more like a traditional scientific doctor and does not sense possible reasons for the woman’s distress, Mungo can relate to Moll’s pain and intimates why she is in such bad shape: “Thinking her healthy, except for such oddity of mind, he [Gideon] was glad to leave her in my care, so as to attend to more urgent cases. Only I knew the extent of her plight” (266). Similar to Gideon, Mungo is relatively powerless but tries to relieve her pain. Mungo and Moll have a somewhat symbiotic relationship: Mungo shows the psychosomatic signs of trauma—green blotches—that Moll has bottled up, on his skin; conversely, Moll does not have any outward physical symptoms but becomes mad. Mungo follows Gideon’s footsteps of poisoning Moll when he recognizes that he is powerless in the face of death.

Mungo anticipates transformation and rebirth, which is reiterated in the ending. After Moll’s death, Mungo is left behind, but the novel ends with fierce Ellar gaining the upper hand over trauma and death. Subverting the Christian message of traditional slave narratives, the novel evokes the power of Hindu spirituality, celebrating survival, resilience, and a new beginning after utter destruction and devastation. In an interview, Dabydeen explains: “I would say, at the end of the day I am much more interested in the idea of soul, an old-fashioned word like soul. I am much more interested in a kind of spiritual dimension, in a metaphysical dimension to art, than I am in the sociological, ultimately. Even though you have to deal with the sociological. But I only try to deal with it so as to transcend it” (Eckstein, “Interview” 36).

IV. Conclusion

In Dabydeen’s latest novel, *Molly and the Muslim Stick* (2008), Molly, the main character, states, “The everlasting life of the jungle is a strange comfort. I am gladdened that the flowers, the mora trees, everything that grows here will survive me, that long after I’m dead these beautiful (and dreadful) scenes will be as vivid as ever in the imagination of newcomers” (154). Like *A Harlot’s Progress*, *Molly and the Muslim Stick* traces the way characters perceive and create beauty in the face of adversity and probes

the construction of anti-Semitism (*Molly* 27–28, 130–31, 155), as well as “othering,” especially manifesting itself in narrow-minded British patriotism (143–45), Islamophobia (112–13), and racism (141, 143–45, 147).

While Ignatius Sancho’s *Letters* partly reflect the anti-Semitism of “mainstream” eighteenth-century British culture, Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* investigates and re-imagines white, black, and Jewish subject positions and relations. Scrutinizing anti-Semitism and racism, the novel foreshadows the Holocaust and creates parallels between the suffering of slaves and Jews. *Molly and the Muslim Stick* also refers to the Holocaust, but more in the context of a metaphor for the abuse and oppression of women (*Molly* 156–57). Breaking the silence of female slaves and their descendants, Dabydeen’s earlier works, such as *Slave Song* (1984) and *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), to some extent anticipate the polyphonous juxtaposition of powerful female voices in *Molly*.

Although ambiguous, *A Harlot’s Progress* highlights the characters’ yearning and potential for reconfiguration and interethnic bridges. While *Molly* portrays interracial friendships and the creation of family beyond blood relations, it strongly foregrounds the power of the imagination as the essence of life and writing as an alchemical process. In ways similar to *Slave Song*, *Coolie Odyssey*, and *The Intended*, Dabydeen constructs a strong intertextual web of references to Shakespeare’s works. Echoing the novel *The Intended*, *Molly* is open-ended since we do not know what paths in life the main character will embark upon. Implicitly referring to Wilson Harris’s works¹² and extolling the enormous power of the imagination and Nature, however, *Molly* overcomes the passage of time. While *Harlot’s Progress* transcends human suffering through spirituality, *Molly* ends with Nature transforming the ephemerality of humans and art, evident in the main character’s reflections: “The Demerara jungle has embraced Stick in a new kinship and adventure into life. A thousand years after I’ve turned to dust it will bear witness, as a living tree, to the love, to the grief, which stops us now from speaking words which have become needless” (177). Perhaps Dabydeen’s next book is going to elaborate in even greater detail on the magic of Nature and, thus, in a comprehensive manner “transfigure” (Dabydeen, “On Writing” 47) British Romanticism.

Notes

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- 2 Research report on Ignatius Sancho, compare Innes, "Eighteenth-Century Men of Letters" 17–24.
- 3 In Jewish Studies, critics, such as Geoffrey Hartman, Dominick LaCapra, Andreas Huyssen, Marianne Hirsch, and James Young, distinguish between the immediate experience of the Holocaust by the first generation of survivors and the "generation after, but not beyond" (Hartman 8), that is the children of Holocaust survivors whose imparted or indirect memory of the Shoah might take different shapes than their parents'; in contrast to "primary memory" (LaCapra 20), "secondary memory" (LaCapra 20–21) or "post-memory" (Hirsch 8–9) implies temporal distance to the Shoah and self-reflexivity about the genre of Holocaust literature; applied to slavery, "post-memory" refers to the memories of the slaves' descendants who did not personally go through slavery but have to live with its psychological baggage. African-American scholars, such as Joy Degruy Leary, have aptly called this phenomenon "post-traumatic slave syndrome" (114–43); this passage is taken from Schamp (Footnote 13, 111).
- 4 On the question of Jekyll's reliability as Sancho's biographer, compare Carey. Carey astutely comments, "Jekyll's biography is unverifiable at best and in places directly contradicts Sancho's own self-representation" (1). Carey also points out that most of the incidents Jekyll tells about Sancho's life are "almost certainly untrue" (1).
- 5 On similarities between Sterne's style and Sancho, compare Sandhu's insightful essay "Ignatius Sancho" 97–102.
- 6 On the Somerset case, see Walvin, "Ignatius Sancho: The Man and his Times" 99–103.
- 7 Carey points out that Sancho was the only African who voted in a British election (4).
- 8 On a similar note, Mungo states "'A beginning, a middle, and end,' is what he [Pringle] demands, promising a novel story. I know though that he will chain me to the old firmament of stars, making me familiar in my Christian hatred of the Jews, my Christian distress at the sexual sin he financed and made me slave to" (275).
- 9 On Mungo's anti-Semitism as a consequence of hopelessness and despair, compare *Harlot's Progress* 278–79, also 273.
- 10 On quacks in eighteenth-century medicine, compare Syson.

- 11 Compare "Slave Song" 26–27, 50; "Nightmare" 31, 55–56.
12 Sandhu, "Wisdom of Wood" par. 5.

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