Exile, Incarceration and the Homeland: Jewish References in French Caribbean Novels

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From Desmond Dekker’s ‘The Israelites’ (1969) to Bob Marley’s ‘Exodus’ (1977), the Caribbean story of exile and the struggle for freedom has frequently compared itself to the Old Testament account of the Jewish people. In the early twentieth century, the Jamaican Marcus Garvey’s ‘Black Zionism’ movement used Jewish Zionism as a template for the Caribbean aspiration to return to Africa; and some Rastafarians consider themselves to be ‘the Twelfth Tribe of Judah’. In ‘Deux figures du destin’ – his introduction to ‘Mémoire juive, mémoire nègre: deux figures du destin’ (the 1998 issue of Portulan) – Roger Toumson points out that this parallelism extends to the whole of the Americas: ‘The Old Testament narrative of exile has, since the first chronicles of transportation, become an obligatory reference for the destiny of black people in the Americas’ (11). On the narrower issue of France’s attitude towards its Caribbean colonies, Toumson shows how these two exemplary manifestations of the Other have long been closely interconnected: the ‘Code noir’ of 1615 is mainly concerned with regulating the treatment of African slaves in the French Caribbean, but its first article ‘[enjoins] all our officers to chase out of the Islands all the Jews who have established their residence there’ (11); conversely, the Abbé Grégoire in the eighteenth century became famous as much for his castigation of anti-Semitism as for his defence of Negro slaves, and, as Toumson describes it, for ‘arguing by analogy, posing and resolving in the same terms the problem of the civil condition of the Jews and that of the servile condition of the Negroes’ (12).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, these parallels assume a rather different form. In the 1950s and 1960s, Europe was both coming to terms with the Jewish holocaust and witnessing the beginnings of large-scale immigration from the Caribbean. Now, in other words, the
focus is less on Jewish exile in Egypt and more on Jewish incarceration in concentration camps; and the Caribbean experience of diaspora is less that of the original exile from Africa than the new migrations from the Caribbean to Europe. In France, the racism encountered by Caribbean immigrants has obvious similarities with – as well as important differences from – an older anti-Semitism. Frantz Fanon’s analysis of the anti-black racism of the French in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986 [1952]) makes frequent use of Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1947) – and Sartre himself followed this text, published in 1947, with ‘Orphée noir’ in 1948.1 For Fanon, despite the difference in racial stereotypes2 and the distinctiveness caused by the inescapable visibility of the black man’s blackness – as opposed to the Jew who can pass for Gentile (115–16) – the mechanisms of racism are identical in both cases; the identity of the racists is the same (‘an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro’ (122)), and this creates a necessary solidarity between their victims: ‘I joined the Jew, my brother in misery’ (122).

This does not of course mean that black and Jewish communities have in reality always co-existed harmoniously, either in France or elsewhere; in particular, the equation of the holocaust with slavery has recently, in the general context of Islamic anti-Zionism, been vehemently rejected by right-wing Jewish writers such as Alain Finkielkraut.3 But from the Caribbean point of view, the long-standing familiarity with Old Testament narratives of the exile of the Jews – deriving from the massive influence of Christian churches in the islands – formed a natural basis for the appropriation, in the post-war years, of the imagery of the Jewish holocaust as a means of representing the Caribbean diaspora in France. The comparisons with which I am concerned here are thus not strictly speaking between two diasporas – nor, indeed, between Caribbean and Jewish uses of the image of the holocaust – but rather interrogate the way in which the French Caribbean ‘imaginaire’ turns to the situation of another diasporic people in order to construct a representation of its own situation and, perhaps, to claim recognition of its own suffering through this appeal to the exemplary image of suffering offered by the holocaust. In their ambivalent status as both a gesture of solidarity with the Jews and a possibly rather presumptuous imaginary appropriation of their situation, the texts that I shall be considering do nevertheless illustrate the interconnectedness of different diasporic cultures, and show how these connections are actively put to use in the structuring of individual and collective experience.

The conjunction results in one particular phenomenon, which is the main focus of this article: in certain texts, the French Caribbean