When the Personal Became Political: Black-Jewish Intermarriage during the Rise of Identity Politics, 1960s-1970s
By Megan McKoy

While love is unfashionable
Let us live
Unfashionably.
…While love is dangerous
let us walk bareheaded
beside the great River.
Let us gather blossoms under fire.¹

In her January 1973 collection of poetry Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems, Alice Walker addressed her Jewish husband “Mel” in the poem “While Love is Unfashionable.” She described their love as “dangerous,” politically defiant, and even revolutionary. Despite the risk of remaining in an interracial marriage in Mississippi, she declared: “Let us live unfashionably.” Walker presented their interracial marriage not as an isolated relationship between herself and Leventhal. A number of influences, including dismissive community response and rising identity politics, made their love “unfashionable” and “dangerous.” Walker’s desire to remain married, though, was fleeting. Later that year, Walker and her husband moved to Brooklyn and legally separated.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, Blacks and Jews had maintained an important political and economic relationship in America. As Jewish allies supported and participated in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, Blacks and Jews closely interacted within the movement and within urban communities. Although interracial marriage was uncommon during the Civil Rights Era, Walker and Leventhal followed a small but significant trend of Black-Jewish marriages during the 1960s.

A number of other prominent Black writers and political leaders married Jewish partners, including Richard Wright, Lorraine Hansberry, Julius Lester, and Leroi Jones. This paper will
examine two of these marriages: between Leroi Jones, a Black writer who was later known as Amiri Baraka, and Hettie Cohen, a Jewish writer who adopted the last name Jones, and between Alice Walker, a Black writer, and Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights attorney. Because their Jewish spouses were less prominent figures, few accessible sources include their perspectives. As a result, this paper mainly explores the essays, novels, poetry, and autobiographies written by Jones and Walker to examine their interracial, interfaith marriages. An analysis of these sources reveals not only the interpersonal marital relations in both marriages, but also the community and political environments in which they existed.

Numerous historians have written about Black-Jewish relations during the Civil Rights Era but have mainly focused on political and economic ties. In Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century (2006), historian Cheryl Lynn Greenberg examined the impact of rising identity politics on Black-Jewish relations during the mid to late 1960s. She claimed that a number of Civil Rights leaders and organizations began to question the involvement of whites, including Jews. According to Greenberg, the decision to exclude Jews from Civil Rights efforts marked a departure from earlier Jewish funding and political involvement in the Black community. Greenberg analyzed the impact of this political and economic break on Black and Jewish communities nationally and regionally but did not delve into interpersonal sexual relations.

For Jones and for Walker, the line between political and personal was gray. The rise in identity politics largely shaped the community response and political climate of their intermarriages. In his marriage from 1958 to 1964, Jones contended with the ethnic and racial identity of his wife Hettie, as he became a prominent Black writer and racial separatist. Walker, who married Leventhal in 1967 and divorced him in 1976, contended not only with race but also
with gender, as she became a major figure in the Black feminist movement by the early to mid-
1970s. She contributed a gendered perspective that Jones failed to address. As a womanist, 
Walker advocated for racial and gender solidarity and desired a Black female independence 
outside of her marriage. The written work of Jones/Baraka and Walker presented a shift from 
the racial separatism supported by Black Nationalists during the 1960s to Walker’s articulation 
of womanism, a theoretical foundation of Black Feminism beginning in the 1970s.

Leroi Jones and Racial Separatism

In the fall of 1964, Leroi Jones traveled to Washington, D.C. without his wife, Hettie. 
Howard University was hosting a performance of his play *Dutchman*, and his friend Marion 
Brown, a saxophonist, had invited him to attend his jazz set. The trip marked the beginning of 
the end of his marriage. Two decades later in *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones*, Amiri Baraka 
recalled his decision to leave his wife behind in their New Jersey home. He felt a resentment 
towards whites that was usually “other-directed” but now, as he explained, “it had settled in me, 
directed at my wife.” Baraka concluded that “I had begun to see her as white!”\(^2\) The anger he 
felt towards other whites had gradually seeped into his relationship with Hettie. The racial 
tension between Leroi and Hettie, though, encompassed more than their personal relationship. 
His interracial marriage with a white woman conflicted with his public image as a Black 
Nationalist who supported racial separatism. Hettie Jones’s 1990 autobiography, *How I Became 
Hettie Jones*, confirmed that in 1964 her husband would not let her travel with him because she 
was white. While other Blacks had often called her “the white woman,” “his white wife,” and 
“the Devil,” his words pained her the most.\(^3\) Though devastated, Hettie described her husband’s 
decision to leave her as inevitable, in large part because both Black and Jewish communities had 
been unaccepting of their interracial marriage.
At the beginning of their relationship in 1957, racial difference drew Leroi to Hettie. According to Baraka, their inexperience in interracial sex added to a mutual sexual desire. He admitted, “There was sex, fueled up a little higher maybe by the mutual curiosity each of us felt about the other.” While Baraka viewed race as a factor in sexual attraction, Hettie argued that she considered race only after they became sexually involved. Reflecting on their relationship, she described herself as “amazingly naïve about interracial sex” when they initially met. Only after she read Jewish writer Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” (1957) did she begin to consider race. Mailer’s essay described the appeal for white hipsters, such as Hettie, of Black culture, music, and sex. Specifically, Mailer animalized the Black man as a body fulfilled only by the sexual and musical orgasm. The white hipster, who desired an escape from white civilization, became a “white Negro” in search of the Black orgasm. In mentioning Mailer’s essay, Hettie suggested that perhaps she had subconsciously considered race when she began a sexual relationship with Leroi.

Hettie’s ethnicity added to her appeal. While Leroi viewed Hettie as white, her Jewish ethnicity was just as apparent to him in the early stages of their relationship. Reflecting on their first meeting in Greenwich Village in 1958, Baraka described Hettie as “a Jewish girl from Long Island trying to make it in the Village.” He emphasized Hettie’s continual struggle for acceptance in the American middle-class, where she found “only Jewish middle-classdom.” Baraka claimed that white America barred both Blacks and Jews from cultural inclusion into the middle-class. He consequently felt connected to Hettie in their shared experience of white oppression.

Attracted to their racial and ethnic differences, Leroi married Hettie in 1958. They were one of the few interracial, interfaith married couples in America. Despite a dramatic increase in
intermarried Jews in the 1960s, interracial marriage remained comparatively rare. Among all Jewish unions, the percent of interfaith marriages jumped from 6 percent before the 1960s to 31.7 percent by the late 1960s. Intermarriages across all races comprised only 0.7 percent of all national marriages by 1970. Of the handful of interracial marriages in America, Black-Jewish marriages made up a small fraction.

At the time, sociologists and historians argued that Black-Jewish marriages were common, particularly in New York City. In a 1967 *Reconstructionist* article “The Interracial Jewish Child,” sociologist Werner Cahman suggested that Black men who chose white wives often chose Jewish women. Based on data he collected in New York City during the mid-1960s, Cahman estimated that about 70 to 80 percent of white partners of black men were Jewish women. Historian Keren McGinity later agreed that in New York City Jewish women married Black men at a comparatively higher rate than elsewhere. According to McGinity, large populations of Jewish women and Black men lived in the city but did not begin to interact as sexual and marital partners until the 1960s when white women experienced greater sexual freedom and religious difference became less important. She argued that with the persistence of racial prejudice, the image of black men as “forbidden fruit” likely contributed to their appeal, similar to the sexual appeal that Norman Mailer ascribed to Black men in “The White Negro.”

Rising Jewish intermarriage became a major cultural crisis in the Jewish community. Jewish leaders viewed the trend as an endangerment to the growth of Jewish families, and numerous publications added to fears of a shrinking Jewish population. In 1964, *Look* magazine ran a cover story titled “The Vanishing American Jew” that invoked a “Threat to Jewish Survival.” The article suggested that the American Jewish population would disappear by the twenty-first century if intermarriage rates continued to climb. In the midst of this cultural crisis,
McGinity argued Jews, particularly intermarrying Jews, began to question their Jewish identity and experienced “insecurity about being Jewish.”

In the context of these critiques of intermarriage, Hettie Jones experienced a sense of insecurity in her own Jewish identity. Both Hettie and Baraka discussed her struggle to maintain her identity as a Jewish woman. Baraka admitted that one night he read in her journal, “‘I think I’m losing my Jewishness.’” Referring to the same journal entry, Hettie’s memoir explained that she felt “haunted by the problem of remaining a Jew.” She did not know how to remain a Jewish woman outside of a Jewish marriage. As Hettie Jones, she struggled to hold onto the Jewish culture and ancestry that her family prized.

While an individual decision between Leroi and Hettie, their marriage was also a public statement of interracial intimacy, one that bothered her family and Jewish community members. Her familial response was not uniform. After she told her parents of her first pregnancy in 1959, her father advised her to fly to Mexico to get an abortion, but her mother consulted a rabbi on how to accept a mixed-race child into the family. The couple continually contended with negative community responses to their intermarriage, for which Hettie remained largely unprepared. When walking in public with Leroi in their neighborhood, she recalled that she often deferred to her husband’s judgment if others harassed them. Her instinctual response to catcalls and jeers was “to fight or preach,” but Jones quickly taught her to avoid conflict and possible violence. As a Black man, he knew how to limit his emotional reaction to avoid conflict. As family and neighbors increasingly dismissed her intermarriage, Hettie tried to diminish the influence of their opinion. “Race disappears in the house--in the bathroom, under the covers,” she wrote. “It was a joke to us, that we were anything more than just the two of us
According to Hettie, race was not a reason for tension in her marriage, and she rarely noticed any racial differences when alone at home with Leroi.

By the mid-1960s, escalating frustration with economic disparities led to a rise in identity politics within urban Black communities. Leaders such as Malcolm X, whose doctrine Jones ardently followed, emphasized Black consciousness as the best strategy in the fight against white oppressors. A number of political organizations and Black leaders who expressed Black Nationalist views severed their alliances with Jews. Despite years of receiving significant financial support from the Jewish community, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) rejected further Jewish involvement. In December 1966, SNCC voted to expel white members, because Black separatists within the organization desired “to purify SNCC of all white influences.” SNCC separatists argued that their decision to do so was not “antiwhite,” but rather because “each race had its own job to do.” A number of Black leaders took a similar stance toward Jews. In 1967, James Baldwin strategically published the article “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White” in the New York Times, which had a high Jewish readership, to defend against charges of Black Anti-Semitism. He clarified to readers that the “Jewishness” of Jews did not make them any different from white Christians and that the “Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American white man.” According to Baldwin, Blacks’ resentment of Jews simply reflected a general anti-white attitude. He saw no need for any white assistance in attaining economic and political progress for Black communities.

The ideological transformation not only weakened political ties between Blacks and Jews but also strained interpersonal relationships, including the marriage of Leroi and Hettie. During the mid-1960s, the rise in identity politics fueled racial tensions between Blacks and Jews that
were hard for them to ignore, especially as Leroi’s prominence within the movement grew. His political participation in Black Nationalism was a gradual process. In the early 1960s, he expressed his apprehension toward becoming directly involved. In a September 1961 letter to his friend Edward Dorn, a white poet, Leroi described his internal debate between remaining an artist and becoming a Black political leader. He always viewed himself as a poet who wanted “soft music and good stuffy purity,” she wrote. Despite his desire to remain an artist, the police often targeted Jones as a Black man. As a victim of white harassment, he had personal motivation to become more politically involved in the Black community. He viewed his art, in particular, as a means of fueling intellectual vitality among Blacks. Despite these reasons, he remained conflicted about joining the cause, in part because many Black Nationalists opposed his marriage to Hettie. Leroi asked himself, “Do I owe these people that much? Negroes, I mean. So, some foulmouthed prick nationalist gets up on a box and denounces me for having a white wife! Brrr.”  

Leroi Jones increasingly interpreted the opposition as a valid response to their marriage. By the early to mid-1960s, his notoriety as a writer and activist had grown considerably, and he received more backlash from other Blacks. As he became well known in activist circles, political leaders continually questioned his commitment to the Black Nationalist cause while he was still married to Cohen. As an emerging leader in the movement, Leroi’s marriage to a white woman contradicted his public call for black self-determination. When Black women discovered he was married to a white woman, they immediately rejected his sexual advances. Leroi internalized this dismissal of their intermarriage. Commenting on the contention of marrying across racial lines in the 1960s, he wrote, “The running bohemians of the black-white hookups I knew didn’t (I didn’t think) get married….The black-white thing wasn’t no normal US shit, it
Baraka drew a line between casual “black-white hookups” and interracial marriage. While interracial sex was common, especially within his Bohemian circle, intermarriage was far less common.

Although Leroi felt dismayed over Nationalist disapproval of his marriage, he gradually became more invested in the movement. Over the next few years, he realized the political power he possessed in his written work. In a 1970 interview with biographer Theodore R. Hudson, Jones – then Baraka – reflected on his transition into Black Nationalism and explained that his “work kept changing steadily and I kept being aware of how it was changing and what it meant.”

In the early and mid-1960s, he expressed Black Nationalist views in a series of political essays. In the 1962 essay “‘Black’ Is a Country,” Jones called for blacks to “act upon” white exploitation in an “extreme Black nationalism.” He described this Black Nationalism as “independence from the political, economic, social spiritual, and psychological domination of the white man.” During the mid-1960s, his political support for Black Nationalism only intensified. Similar to Baldwin’s beliefs, Jones argued that Blacks in New York City needed to prepare for economic independence from Jews. Addressing Black Harlem residents in the essay “The Legacy of Malcolm X and The Coming of the Black Nation” (1965), he urged Blacks to help transfer back businesses into Black hands as soon as Jews decided to leave Harlem after the next race riot or “disturbance.” By the mid-1960s, the political climate of Black Nationalism and his written work had converged. He no longer expressed apprehension about his role in the movement.

As Leroi Jones became more invested in Black Nationalism, he increasingly referred to Hettie as white instead of Jewish. Over the course of their marriage, Hettie’s Jewish identity became less significant in their relationship, as he no longer viewed her as the “Jewish girl from
Long Island." His contention with Hettie as a white woman appeared throughout his fiction. *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, two plays he collectively published in 1964, likely reflected Leroi’s view of Hettie, especially his growing perception of her as white rather than as a Jew. *Dutchman* is a one-act drama set on a New York train. A white woman named Lula makes advances at Clay, an Ivy League-educated Black man, and urges him to conform to her vision of the Black man as a “hip field-nigga.” Her taunts push Clay to reveal his true identity under his “Ivy League” façade. He tirades about black oppression, and the play ends with Lula stabbing Clay in retaliation. In a 1972 review, the black novelist Sherley Anne Williams explored the implications of the plot. The play, she wrote, suggested that “the survival of the Black man in America” was “predicated upon his ability to keep his thoughts and his true identity hidden.”

This theme recurred in his 1964 “A Poem for Willie Best,” in which Jones further described the “mask” covering the Black man’s “true identity” in a white environment. He wrote that the Black man remains “A renegade/ behind the mask. And even/ the mask, a renegade/ disguise.” In both works, Leroi suggested that the Black man could not express his true identity, especially with a white woman.

In *The Slave*, the Black man vindicates the death of his true identity in *Dutchman*. The play is a two-act science fiction that takes place in the future, during the middle of a race war in the 1970s. A black man named Walker Vessels visits his white ex-wife, Grace Easley, with whom he had a child. Walker decides to take away his child and murders Grace and her white husband Brad. Both Hettie and Baraka contended that their marriage inspired both *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. When Leroi decided to leave for Washington, Hettie stated that she embraced the role of the white murderer and referred to herself as “Lula the murderer.” When she saw *The Slave* on stage for the first time, she recalled that the actress who played Gracie thanked Hettie
for creating the role. Baraka himself described *The Slave* as a play that Hettie particularly disliked, because “it was so close to our real lives.” Both Hettie and Leroi agreed that the two plays paralleled their relationship, particularly his perception of her as the white enemy, an identity that Hettie herself had accepted by 1964.

The rise in identity politics and his growing involvement with Black Nationalism largely contributed to Leroi’s divorce from Hettie. In a 1978 interview with novelist CWE Bigsby, he described his decision to leave Cohen as a necessary step in practicing the Black Nationalist views he advocated. He told Bigsby, “I felt I was not being actually true to what I felt, or what I was beginning to feel.” His marriage to a white woman directly conflicted with his belief in Black self-reliance. Reflecting on their divorce in her autobiography, Hettie also emphasized the influence of identity politics on their relationship. She stated that their divorce “fit right in with dissolving black-white political alliances.” Their marriage was not the only interracial relationship to end in divorce in the mid-1960s. She observed that “there was pressure on all black people to end their interracial relationships.” While their marriage was a private relationship, it existed within an intensifying political climate that influenced Jones to choose between his white wife and his Nationalist, separatist beliefs. By 1967, Leroi, as Amiri Baraka, had chosen Black Nationalism.

In 1967, Leroi Jones became Amiri Baraka. When he visited activist Ron Karenga in Los Angeles, Jones converted to Islam and became an advocate of Kawaida, an African philosophy dedicated to “cultural revolution” and “radical social change.” In the completion of his conversion to Islam, he adopted the name Amiri Baraka, or “the Blessed Prince.” His new name represented a major shift in his political belief system, a process that had begun towards the end of his marriage to Cohen. In his autobiography, he reflected on the inner transformation he
experienced when he became Amiri Baraka. He stated that when he adopted his new name, he
was “now literally being changed into a blacker being” by “discarding my ‘slave name’ and
embracing blackness.”

Alice Walker and Womanism

In the summer of 1973, Alice Walker, Melvyn Leventhal, and their daughter Rebecca left
Jackson, Mississippi to search for a new home in Brooklyn. After a week, they decided to buy
and repair a dilapidated brownstone. In a short memoir written decades later, The Way Forward
Is With a Broken Heart, Walker alluded to the “ruin” of both their new home and their dissolving
marriage. During a long renovation process, she recalled that “our blood went into that house.
And the last shred of the love that had so characterized our life.” Despite their efforts to repair
their home and marriage, by 1973 both Leventhal and Walker agreed that their marriage was
heading towards divorce.

When reflecting on their relationship years later, though, they gave different reasons for
completing their divorce in 1976. In an interview with journalist Evelyn C. White, Leventhal
pointed to “race” as the main reason why they “drifted apart.” Walker agreed that the “racism”
they experienced as an interracial couple contributed to their divorce. Similar to the experience
of Leroi and Hettie Jones, many Black and Jewish family members and friends dismissed Walker
and Leventhal’s marriage. Living in the Deep South, the Leventhals also faced terror and
violence, specifically of the Ku Klux Klan during the height of the Civil Rights Era. Race,
however, did not fully explain Walker’s feelings of isolation within their marriage. Along with
racism, “sexism” served as an equally significant factor. Throughout her fiction, essays, and
poetry written in the early 1970s, she expressed her dismay with the sexist rhetoric of Black
Nationalism and encouraged other Black women to explore their own identity independent of
men. As she became a prominent figure of Black Feminist literature and politics, her marriage to a white man no longer fulfilled her identity as a Black woman. Walker’s contention with both race and gender as a Black woman in the 1970s complicates the racial and ethnic tension that Jones and Cohen illustrated in the 1960s.

When Walker and Leventhal began their relationship in 1966, both were conscious of the public and political backlash they would receive as an interracial couple. As Civil Rights activists living in the Deep South, they frequently witnessed and experienced racial harassment and violence. If they wanted to continue their interracial relationship in Mississippi, Walker felt it was important to marry Leventhal legally and obtain marital rights. Walker explained in an interview that, as husband and wife, they did not fit into the “long tradition of white men having black mistresses.” Their marriage publicly challenged years of interracial affairs that were often unacknowledged in the South. Walker and Leventhal decided to marry not only because of the love and admiration they shared. Their marriage was also a political and public statement that directly challenged the southern social order.

As a married couple, Walker and Leventhal contended with the disapproval of family, friends, and white townspeople, similar to the experiences of Jones and Cohen. While Walker’s family generally accepted her marriage to Leventhal, a number of her family members and friends struggled to accept a white Jew into their family. She recalled that her mother, who was a devout southern Christian who lacked any understanding of Judaism, called her husband a “Christ-killer” when her mother first met him. Aside from her mother, many disapproved of Walker’s marriage because of her husband’s race. In an interview with journalist White, Walker’s brother Bobby recalled his dismissal of her marriage to a white man, for he did not understand why “she couldn’t find a Black man.” Addressing “her young husband” in her
memoir, Walker recalled that Leventhal “struck an ancient terror” of deadly racial violence among her Black family and friends. Although Leventhal worked as an attorney to secure the legal rights of Blacks living in Mississippi, Walker’s family and friends immediately associated him with a southern legacy of white racism.

In addition to coping with familial disapproval, Walker and Leventhal faced the overt harassment and violence of the Ku Klux Klan, a challenge that Baraka and Cohen did not confront in the North. In her 1976 article “Lulls: A Native Daughter Returns to the Black South,” Walker explained that they “were often afraid our house would be attacked.” Because Klansmen and white townspeople often attacked or bombed the homes of Civil Rights activists, they remained terrified, especially as an interracial couple. Often, they depended on their Black neighbors to warn them if a “car full of strange people” circled around their house. While Baraka and Cohen experienced public harassment in New York, Walker and Leventhal coped with a more constant, open threat of racial violence while living in Mississippi.

Similar to Cohen’s initial response to communal opposition, Walker attempted to ignore the discrimination. While Cohen was initially oblivious to racial harassment, Walker was completely aware of the racism that she and Leventhal would experience as an interracial couple. Walker, however, actively discounted any opposition when they married. Addressing Leventhal in her memoir, she described how at first their “love made us bulletproof, or perhaps invisible.” Their “bulletproof” love protected them when they walked down the street, according to Walker, and the “bullets that were the glances of the racist onlookers seemed turned back and sent hurtling off into outer space.” They often believed that they “outwitted racism and racist laws.” Their shared love and sense of protection was short-lived, however. Walker reflected
that “living interracially, attempting to raise a child, attempting to have a normal life, wore us out.”

Despite Walker’s effort to ignore familial disapproval and racist townspeople, by the early 1970s “living interracially” had significantly strained their marriage. In the 1973 essay “Choosing to Stay at Home: Ten Years After the March on Washington,” Walker argued that the white South was gradually becoming more accepting of interracial couples by the 1970s, claiming that “the racial climate is as good as it is in most areas of the North.” Even with a better “racial climate,” however, Walker concluded that she “cannot forget and will never forgive” the racial harassment and intimidation she experienced. Walker insisted on leaving Mississippi, in spite of her husband’s desire to continue his job and remain in the South.

While Walker and Leventhal did not move to New York until 1973, Walker was fully aware of the growth of the Black Nationalist movement throughout the North. Although she supported the Black Nationalist call for self-determination, she also condemned the movement as sexist. Before she left the South, she wrote in 1973, “News from Black movements in the North is far from encouraging.” She believed Black identity politics were currently moving “backward from the equalitarian goals” of the Civil Rights Movement. She often called Black Nationalist leaders hypocritical for supporting racial equality while suppressing the rights of Black women.

Walker’s writings fueled several other critiques of the movement. In Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (1978), Black feminist Michele Wallace claimed that Black Nationalism was largely unsuccessful in attaining racial equality, because the movement did not fully involve Black women. She specifically called out Amiri Baraka for supporting “Black Macho,” which she defined as “the moral and physical superiority of the black man.” Wallace condemned “Black Macho” because the philosophy maintained that “Black men had been more
oppressed than Black women” and “Black women had contributed to that oppression.”

Wallace raised the question of Black female liberation in the face not only of sexist white men and women but also of sexist Black men. Wallace contributed to a rise in political discourse among Black women that was largely rooted in Walker’s earlier works.

Walker’s poetry conveyed her criticism of the movement. Published in her 1973 poetry collection *Revolutionary Petunias*, “Women” illustrated Black women as revolutionaries in the fight for racial equality. She explained how Black women of her mother’s generation “battered down/ doors” and “led/ armies/…to discover/ books/ desks/ a place for us.”

Walker emphasized the leadership of women that was often overlooked by men in Black political movements. Although she did not directly mention Black Nationalism, she published the poem in 1973 during the movement’s peak. Walker additionally expressed her dismay over the influence of Black Nationalism on perceptions of interracial dating in Black communities. While a number of male Black Nationalists engaged in interracial sex with white women, Walker argued that they hypocritically harassed Black women who dated white men. As a result, Black women exercised limited sexual agency within the movement and within their own communities.

In a 1973 interview, Walker expanded on a poem, “The Girl Who Died #2,” which she had written after a Black female student committed suicide at Sarah Lawrence College, Walker’s alma mater. Intimidated by her family and friends, the girl became severely depressed because she “refused to limit her interest to Black men,” according to Walker. In both poems, Walker criticized Black Nationalist leaders for perpetuating the political and sexual subjugation of Black women.

The harassment described in “The Girl Who Died #2” mirrored Walker’s experience while living in New York with Leventhal. Despite moving to the North in 1973, Walker and
Leventhal were unable to escape community disapproval, this time not from their families or white residents, but also because Black Nationalism and Black Power rhetoric directly challenged their interracial marriage. Decades later in her own autobiography, their daughter Rebecca analyzed the influence of black identity politics on her parents’ marriage. “With the rise of Black Power, my parents’ interracial defiance…is suddenly suspect.” She continued, “Black-on-Black love is the new recipe for revolution…and being down means proving how black you are, how willing to fight, how easily you can turn your back on those who have kept black folks enslaved for so long.” Although her father worked as a Civil Rights attorney for several years, Rebecca defined him as a political outcast by the early 1970s.53

While Leventhal became ostracized from the Black community, Black Nationalism pushed Walker to reconsider her marriage to a white man. Although Walker criticized the Black Nationalist movement, her poetry and fiction reflected a firm belief in racial pride. To many of her readers, her public image consequently conflicted with her decision to remain married to a white man. In an interview decades later, Leventhal recalled their growing distance in New York during the height of Black Power. As Walker “became better known” as a Black writer, he believed that “our marriage did make her feel like a traitor.”54 Similar to the political pressure Jones experienced in the mid-1960s, Walker’s growing notoriety among the Black community further strained her intermarriage. Although Jones was directly involved in the Black Nationalist movement, both Jones and Walker contended with similar marital and relationship expectations. Walker’s marriage to a white man did not fit into her public and political image as a prominent Black writer.

As a Black woman, though, Walker grappled with more than racial politics. For Walker, her gender was just as significant as her race. Through her poetry, essays, and fiction published
in the early 1970s, Walker examined the intersection of gender and racial politics. In the 1971 essay “Coretta King: Revisited,” Walker called for the politicization of Black womanhood. “Black women have been antagonistic toward women’s liberation,” she wrote. “I do not understand this because Black women among all women have been oppressed almost beyond recognition—oppressed by everyone.” Walker believed many Black women aligned themselves with Black politics and disapproved of “women’s liberation.” She argued, however, that both their gender and race were central elements of their identity as Black women. She consequently urged them to support women’s rights. Two years later in “Choosing to Stay at Home,” she called for Black women to toss “‘white only’ signs and ‘men only’ signs on the same trash heap,” just as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and other Black women had in history. Throughout the early 1970s, Walker used her political essays to push for a Black feminist consciousness.

Walker’s novel *Meridian* stressed the importance of political and sexual independence for Black women. Although Walker published the novel in 1976, she began writing the story in the early 1970s and had a full draft by 1973. *Meridian* followed three main characters: Meridian Hill, a Black female activist; Meridian’s lover, Truman Held, who is a Black Nationalist; and Lynne Rabinowitz, a Jewish woman who Truman marries after leaving Meridian. Through the protagonist Meridian, Walker asserted that black women should pursue an identity independent of patriarchy. Meridian attains this independence only after she ends her relationship with Truman and reconciles with Lynne. When Meridian has an abortion and Truman returns to see her, he continues to make sexual advances towards her. Instead of reciprocating his feelings, she resists his attempts. As he calls her “beautiful” and a “stone fox,” she views herself as a stone fox that “was heavy, gray, and could not move.” In order to
maintain her own sexual independence, she becomes physically immobile and decides to no longer consume herself with Truman’s sexual attention. After Meridian ends her relationship with Truman, she eventually reconciles with Lynne, the white Jewish activist whom Meridian initially envies. After the death of Lynne’s daughter with Truman, Walker wrote, “The absence of the child herself was what had finally brought them together.”59 Their shared suffering allows both to understand each other as women across racial lines.

In a 1983 article, Walker expanded on this “unspoken bond” between Black and Jewish women. She argued that Black and Jewish women shared an “awareness of oppression and injustice” that white Christian women did not have.60 According to Walker, both experienced a “double bind” of ethnic discrimination and sexism.61 By the end of the novel Meridian, Meridian forgives Lynne for sleeping with Truman and experiences an inner transformation. Describing Meridian’s revelation, Walker wrote, “She understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life as to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death.”62 Meridian finds a new meaning of life not in Truman but within herself. Through Meridian, Walker encouraged black women to seek a greater consciousness separate from men.

By the mid-1970s, Walker’s writings contributed to the birth of the Black Feminist movement. In her autobiography, her daughter Rebecca explained Walker’s significance in shaping the movement’s rhetoric. “It isn’t that my mother wasn’t feminist before,” Rebecca recalled, “but now she is surrounded by the Feminism she is helping to create.” As she advocated for Black female independence, Alice Walker gained her own independence and found “a life defined not by male desire but by female courage.” According to Rebecca, Walker’s “courage” was “exactly what it [took] to leave” her father Mel Leventhal.63
Alice Walker strongly urged Americans to build political and social coalitions across all races and genders. Soon after she divorced Leventhal, she published her 1976 essay “Saving the Life That Is Your Own,” in which she expanded on her beliefs in universal equality. “What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective,” she wrote. “The straining to encompass in one’s glance at the varied world that common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity…that enlarges the private and the public world.” Walker believed that the views of one group or individual did not have to silence other perspectives. Specifically, she asserted that Black women should focus on how the advocacy of their own rights fit into a “common thread” and “immense diversity.” The 1977 statement of the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminist lesbians, also stressed the importance of adding to a “common thread.” The statement read, “We feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand.”

Despite the discrimination that they experienced as Black lesbians, they advocated for racial and gender solidarity.

Echoing the Collective’s stance against separatism, Walker’s creation of the term “womanist” supported the uplift of all Americans. In her 1979 short story ‘Coming Apart,” Walker first used the term but later on defined it. In the preface of In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose, a 1983 collection of her essays and interviews, Walker proposed womanism as an alternative to feminism. It addressed the concerns of Black women, who were often marginalized by men and white women. To Walker, a “womanist” referred to a feminist of color but also included any men or women who were “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people.” She explicitly described a womanist as “not a separatist.”

Her beliefs contrasted with the racial separatism advocated by Leroi Jones after his divorce from Hettie.
Although Walker was silenced as a Black woman during the rise of white feminism and Black Nationalism, Walker presented the “womanist” as a social advocate for all people.

As emerging Black writers during the 1960s and 1970s, Leroi Jones and Alice Walker stood in the crossfire of rising identity politics. The growth of Black Nationalism not only severed national Black-Jewish relations but also influenced the personal marital relations of both Jones and Walker. Their interfaith, interracial marriages to white Jews unraveled before family, friends, community members, and their literary audiences. In 1964, Leroi Jones divorced Hettie Jones in the face of disapproval from her family and the Black community. In 1976, Alice Walker divorced Melvyn Leventhal after years of familial and community disapproval and racial harassment. While both Jones and Walker were married to Jewish spouses, their personal decision to file for divorce was rooted in differing political ideologies. While Jones believed his marriage to a white woman conflicted with his belief in racial separatism, Walker longed for Black female independence, which her marriage to a white Jewish man could not fulfill. Walker accused Black Nationalists, such as Jones, of degrading Black women and supported the uplift of all Americans regardless of race and gender.

The marriages of Jones and Walker additionally blurred the line between art, life, and politics. Their written work reflected the political ideologies they were contending with in their marriages. Both Leroi and Hettie acknowledged that the *Dutchman* and *The Slave* reflected Leroi’s growing white resentment, particularly for his white wife. *Meridian*, a novel about a Black female activist who finds liberation in her friendship with a white woman, revealed Walker’s personal journey to find Black female independence as a womanist. For Jones and for Walker, art became an expression of both their political views and their personal life.
4 Baraka, Autobiography, 146.
5 Jones, How I Became, 35.
6 Baraka, Autobiography, 141.
7 Ibid., 145.
10 McGinity, Still Jewish, 117.
12 McGinity, Still Jewish, 143.
14 Jones, How I Became, 36.
15 Ibid., 63-64
16 Jones, How I Became, 37.
17 Ibid., 36.
19 Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century, (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 221.
22 Baraka, Autobiography, 147.
23 Ibid., 148.
27 Baraka, Autobiography, 141.
30 Jones, How I Became, 219-220.
31 Baraka, Autobiography, 288.
39 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 33.
42 White, *Alice Walker*, 156.
46 Ibid., 30.
47 Ibid., 29.
49 Ibid., 170.
51 Ibid., 161.
57 White, “Alice Walker,” 276.
61 Ibid., 354.
63 Walker, *Black, Jewish & White*, 60.