

The Struggle Beneath the Struggle

Antisemitism in Toronto Feminist Anti-Racist Movements

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Les auteures établissent un rapport entre l'exclusion historique des Juifs en tant que race et la prédominance ainsi que la complexité de l'antisémitisme au sein

du mouvement féministe antiraciste. Elles examinent la place des femmes juives au sein du mouvement féministe antiraciste prenant en considération le fait que l'oppression des Juifs n'est pas incluse

à l'intérieur des définitions antiracistes. Elles illustrent ces faits à partir de leurs expériences personnelles qu'elles situent dans un continuum plus complexe d'oppression contre le peuple Juif.

The ability of Jews to "pass" is used to justify the exclusion of anti-semitism as racism.

We are at a critical juncture in feminist movements. Debates over process, vital to our ends, polarize us while the right expands its power. One failure of feminism is its inconsistent commitment to inclusivity, and to identifying and challenging *all* forms of oppression.

Antisemitism from the left in no way poses as serious a threat to Jews as antisemitism from the right. Real power in this society is located in a white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal state. Yet while we *expect* antisemitism from the right, it is particularly troubling when we experience it from our "allies" on the left. If we are to advance progressive issues we must critically examine a movement which challenges oppression, but which allows antisemitism to go unchecked. The unwillingness of progressive movements to challenge antisemitism renders anti-racist efforts deeply deficient.

This article will examine the historical racialization of Jews, and its connection to the prevalence and complexity of antisemitism in femi-

nist anti-racist movements. We will explore the exclusion of Jews as stakeholders in feminist anti-racist movements, whereby Jewish oppression is placed outside of the boundaries of accepted definitions of racism.

This article is not intended to be a critique of women of colour or of white women. Rather, this article challenges a *movement* which has been constructed to exclude an analysis of antisemitism.

History of antisemitism as racism

The exclusion of Jewish oppression from an anti-racist framework is often justified by the suggestion that Jews are a "religious minority" or a "white ethnic group," not a race.

One justification for the exclusion of antisemitism from an anti-racist framework is the suggestion that "Arabs are semites too." While this is true, the term antisemite was coined by Nineteenth Century Europeans as a way to identify and define their hatred of Jews (Fleischner 39-41). This comment appears to be an attempt to ignore Jewish oppression, whatever it is called.

Ultimately, these claims are irrelevant, because historically Jews have been *racialized* by dominant cultures.

Jews were exiled from the middle east in 638 BCE, and have been expelled from many countries since. During the Spanish Inquisition, Jews were forced either to leave Spain and avoid execution, or convert to Catholicism. Jews were differentiated from dominant culture by their religion, and many Jews chose to convert—an extreme form of assimilation—in order to survive. Religious difference was eventually insufficient as a justification for Jewish oppression. Over time, the construction of Jews as "other" was expanded to include physical characteristics, such as the size of noses and cranium. Jews were demonized by a white Christian

culture which actively circulated rumours that Jews had Satanic horns and drank the blood of Christian babies (Fleischner 110).

The gradual racialization of Jews was supported by pseudo-scientists like Chamberlain and Gobineau in the nineteenth century. These men gave antisemitism a scientific aura by grounding it in genetic notions of race, rather than in religion (Fleischner 39-41). The idea that Jews were biologically different was supported by the Nazis. Their eugenics movement promoted a theory of racial purity that located the right to power and control in genetic "superiority." The racialization of Jews supported the Nazi policy which tautologically defined a Jew as one with Jewish "blood."

Jews are denied entry as stakeholders into the anti-racist movement ostensibly because we are members of the dominant white culture. Indeed, the history of Jewish oppression reveals that on occasion we have been granted entry into the power structures of a particular nation. Yet without fail, each acceptance has been partial. Eventually, our dubious privilege is revoked—1492 Spain, 1930s Germany, 1940s U.S. and Canada, 1950s Russia and 1990s Eastern Europe.¹ Access to power is precarious for Jews. It is granted conditionally, without guarantees. Although at this moment in Canada the light-skin of many Jews grants us a relative degree of privilege, when this no longer serves the purposes of the state, our access to it may simply be revoked.

Jewish assimilation in Canada

The ability of some Jews to "pass" in a white racist society is commonly used both to justify the exclusion of antisemitism as race/ism, and to ignore the antisemitism in feminist anti-racist movements. For many Jewish feminists, this exclusion erases our

experiences of overt and systemic oppression, both within dominant culture, and left movements. Anti-racist Jews are expected to participate as allies and supporters, but never as stakeholders.

It is true that many Jews in Canada have successfully assimilated into the white mainstream, but at a devastating cost. Assimilation, the internalization of the values of dominant cultures, entails the gradual loss of culture, language and identity.

Assimilation affects all Jews to some degree. Indeed, the shrinking numbers of self-identified Jews reflects its genocidal nature. Assimilation in its various

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forms is insidious for all oppressed peoples, because it is at once necessary for, and destructive to, survival.

Genuine assimilation for Jews is actually an illusion; at any moment our relative privilege can be revoked by those with genuine power in our society. The "success" of some members of any marginalized community generally exists within boundaries determined by the modern hegemonic state. The American activist and writer Michael Lerner provides this perspective on the location of Jews in Western society:

Jews have been systematically set up in intermediate positions between those with real power and those without. Jews appear to have power, and hence are a convenient locus....for anger that might otherwise be directed at ruling elites. No matter how much economic security or political influence individual Jews may achieve, they can never be sure that they will not once again become the targets of popular attack (Lerner 64-65).

The assimilation of Jews is perpetuated by an anti-racist framework which excludes Jewish oppression. This framework constructs Jews as

white-skinned and privileged, assimilating us into the dominant white majority. Yet at the same time, the white mainstream refuses us complete access to their culture. Although some Jews may be visible, as Jews, in feminist anti-racist movements, our experience with oppression is erased.

The access to relative power that some Jews have as a result of our white skin is very real, and the purpose of this article is not to suggest otherwise. Rather, it is to suggest that racism is a complex construction that goes beyond skin colour. That Jews are a primary target of a white-power ethos and white-supremacist groups is a clear indication of the limitations of the "white/of-colour" categories. As James Baldwin observes, "whiteness" is as much a construct as anything else. "No one was white before he/she came to America" (145). For Jews, our skin colour is no more absolute than the access to power it provides us.

The accepted anti-racist framework reproduces the construction of racial categories that has been provided by a white western tradition. We need to question the rigid categories we preserve through our definitions of racism. How revolutionary and liberating is our vision, if its framework is so narrow that it erases another oppressed group's experiences with racial violence? Why deny Jews access as stakeholders, if only to maintain the movement's fragile identity boundaries?

Antisemitism in feminist anti-racist movements

Antisemitism in feminist anti-racist movements must be challenged because it is oppressive, and because it weakens our struggles by excluding potential allies. Consider the following accounts of antisemitism, recently experienced by Jewish women in Toronto. The list is not exhaustive.

•January 1990, the second night of the Gulf War. While Angela Davis was speaking at the University of Toronto, she announced that Tel Aviv had just been bombed. Some mem-

bers of the audience erupted in applause and cheering.

•March 1992, at an International Women's Day (IWD) rally. While providing a "history" of IWD, a speaker referred to the oppressive working conditions for women of colour and immigrant women in garment sweat shops at the turn of the century. The speaker told the story of how these women eventually resisted and unionized. The fact that the vast majority of the women were Jewish was omitted.

•November 1992, at an international feminist anti-racist conference, organized by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW). The original working title of the conference included antisemitism, which was later removed without explanation. Of 52 workshops, three were organized by Jews, as Jews. The first explored Palestinian oppression. The second workshop was intended to address, in part, antisemitism in women's studies programs. It did not. It focused instead on the racism of a Jewish feminist professor. The third workshop was for Jewish women only. Although the facilitators provided three distinct proposals, CRIAOW conflated them in the conference program and summarized them as follows: "Issues of identity, passing, erasure, and power based in culture and class in the Jewish community." Through its stereotypical focus on the passing, power, money, and privilege of Jews, the summary did not reflect the intentions of the presenters. The Jewish Women's Caucus provided a written, detailed account of these and other experiences of antisemitism, and requested a response. CRIAOW never responded.

•November 1992, at an Anti-Racist Action demonstration. Included in a list of groups targeted in the Holocaust were: queers, people with disabilities, communists, people of colour, and trade unionists. Members of the crowd called out "Jews, what about the Jews?"² The speaker replied, "Oh yeah, and the one we all know about."

Antisemitism is present in its exclusion as a form of racism.

•April 1993, at a presentation by American activist Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz who was speaking on where to include antisemitism in anti-racist movements. During the question period, an active Toronto anti-racist activist commented: "You will probably call me antisemitic but..." She went on to suggest that Jewish women have done nothing in the struggle against *Showboat*, and that Jewish women benefit unfairly by

Employment Equity. Her comments went publicly unchallenged. Later, she was reminded of the anti-racist work of Jewish women such as Michelle Landsberg and Judy Rebick. She replied

that, in her view, Landsberg and Rebick are "white," not Jewish.

•April 1993, at a Jewish Feminist Anti-Fascist League (JFAFL) rally commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. When asked if she planned to attend, a respected Toronto anti-racist feminist responded: "What are *they* doing about *Showboat*?" and "*Theysellarms* to South Africa."

•June 1993, The International Women's Day (IWD) committee mail-out. The information included a "history" of IWD, recounting events which took place in New York in 1910. It read: "Clara Zetkin, a German socialist leader proposed that March 8 be observed each year as International Women's Day in memory of the struggles." The fact that Clara Zetkin was Jewish was omitted.

•June 1993, a conversation with a member of the World Majority Lesbians who is asked if Jewish lesbians may participate in the group. She answers "No, not unless they are Jewish women of colour." When asked if all Latina and Arab women are invited to participate, she responded, "Yes, of course."

•November 1993, the call for submission to a feminist anthology on assimilation in Canada. Submissions

by "non-white and mixed-race women" are requested. When asked if Jewish women may submit their experiences, the editor responded no, "Jewish women can pass."

•December 1993, at an Anti-Racist Action Centre (ARAC) Task Force meeting. The centre's mandate, defining racism *only* on the basis of skin colour, was challenged by the Jewish women on the Task Force. The Jewish women were accused of trying to "destroy the work of the centre." They were told that "not all Jews are semites," and that "Arabs are semites too." It was explained that, like labour groups, Jews are expected to participate as allies, not stakeholders. They were told that because Jews were never invited to participate in the beginning stages of the Centre, we "should not expect to be included now."

Antisemitism manifests itself in a number of ways. It is present when Jews, who are *consistently* targeted by the extreme right, are excluded from the left's list of oppressed groups. It is present when history is revised to omit Jews. Jews are left out both as victims, and as resisters of oppression—both as stakeholders and allies in progressive movements.

Antisemitism is present when anti-racist movements systematically ignore Jewish oppression and issues, in Canada and globally.

Antisemitism is present when progressive groups spend a disproportionate amount of time criticizing Israel (Lerner 97). It is present when the behaviour of Israeli citizens, and of Jews in the diaspora, is conflated with the policies of the Israeli state. It is present when Jews are pitted against each other in a "good Jew/bad Jew" dichotomy, which only welcomes into the left Jews who are willing to be virulently critical of Israel and the established Jewish community.

Antisemitism is present when others decide for themselves when to define a Jew as Jewish, and when to define her as "white." In this way, the work of progressive Jews goes unnamed. Yet when a member of the

larger Jewish community acts in an oppressive manner, Jews are named publicly and loudly. Antisemitism is present in the assumption that one Jew represents the entire community. Thus, while Judy Rebick and Michelle Landsberg are "white women," Garth Drabinsky (producer of the North York production of *Showboat*), and Mel Lastman (mayor of North York) are *Jews*.

Antisemitism is present in the expectation that Jewish feminists should hold ourselves accountable for the behaviour of every oppressive Jew, while members of other communities are not held accountable in this same way. It is present when Jewish women are welcomed into feminist anti-racist movements as "oppressors," but never as the oppressed.³

Antisemitism is present in the perpetuation of stereotypes of Jews as loud, pushy, rich, cheap, capitalist, and powerful.

Antisemitism is present in the belief that Jews take up too much space, and in the fear that, if given the opportunity, Jews will dominate a movement or organization. It is present in the belief that progressive Jews have a separate agenda from other anti-racists; that our only concern is anti-semitism, and not other forms of racism. This is no more true for Jews than it is for members of any other non-white community.

Antisemitism is present in the notion that light/white-skinned Arab and Latina women experience racism, while light/white-skinned Jewish women do not.

Antisemitism is present in its exclusion as a form of racism and in the accusation that Jews are somehow *destroying* the work of the anti-racist movement by trying to include it.

Ultimately, modern antisemitism is informed by the historical racialization of Jews. Yet it is reflected in the left, ironically, in a refusal to acknowledge that very construction.

Conclusion

Many Jewish feminists experience a paralyzing fear within feminist anti-

racist movements, which prevents us from naming and challenging antisemitism. Within these movements we are not only silenced, but immobilized: by fears of being labeled pushy, of being alienated from and rejected by our allies, and of being called racist.

Again and again, Jewish anti-racist feminists discuss our experiences of antisemitism—of feeling isolated and at times outraged. Yet when we raise

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the issue of antisemitism we do so hesitantly, often apologetically. Indeed, we often rationalize the antisemitism of others. Thus many Jews have internalized the values of an anti-racist framework which erases our experiences. We allow antisemitic stereotypes to inform our own willingness to place Jewish oppression at the bottom of the "list."

There is a notion in feminist anti-racist movements that if antisemitism is included in a definition of racism it would allow too much space for Jews, and thereby damage the work of those defined by the movement as women of colour. The reluctance to include antisemitism is an indication of the fact that antisemitism, like racism, is present in *all* communities. We live in a culture which promotes white-supremacy as one of its fundamental values. The stain of this historical legacy leaves no one untainted.

It is further assumed that if situated within definitions of racism, Jews would expect our oppression in Canada to be recognized as equal to other forms of racism. By taking Jewish oppression seriously, the logic goes, racism experienced by people of colour, is diluted.

Jewish anti-racist feminists do not claim to experience the same oppression as people of colour. However, we do expect anti-racist feminists to acknowledge antisemitism—their own and that of others. And we expect the movement to expand the boundaries of a model which func-

tions to erase our oppression, and which is therefore antisemitic.

Until the left creates real space for an analysis of Jewish oppression, progressive non-Jews will continue to engage in antisemitic behaviour, which will continue to go unnamed and unchallenged. In order to create a strong, truly progressive, feminist anti-racist movement, we need to incorporate antisemitism into our conceptual analysis. We need to be as rigorous in our critique of antisemitism, as we are with other forms of racism. By working to understand the different oppressions faced by *all* historically marginalized groups, we can develop the tools to fight our real enemy—the right.

The authors want to thank the Jewish Feminist Anti-Fascist League, for inspiration. Nikki Gershbain would like to acknowledge Ellen Flanders for her inspiration and ideas.

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¹By 1940 American and Canadian governments had full knowledge of the genocide that was taking place and nevertheless denied Jews access to North America. In fact, boatloads of Jewish refugees were turned away from the shores of this continent. As well, the second half of the twentieth century has seen increased oppression, discrimination, and persecution of Soviet (Russian) Jews. Further, Jewish communities exist today in many Eastern European countries. With the dismantling of the Eastern block, there has been a rise of virulently antisemitic right wing nationalism. For example, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman recently published a book questioning the holocaust.

²Jews were the focus and largest target of Nazi genocide. Six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, one-third of all Jews in the world at that time.

³Even the call for submissions for this issue named Jewish women only insofar as we are organizing with Palestinian women. Antisemitism was not actually identified as a potential topic.

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In the First Person: Room of One's Own First Annual Writing Contest

Geography of Gender

Room of One's Own welcomes unpublished works on how space and place shape women's lives. Share with us your stories about the places women play in, work at, avoid, take our lovers to, feel most at home in, and remember from the past. What kinds of spaces do we move through quickly? Where do we linger? How are we restricted from certain spaces? What does "being put in one's place" and "placelessness" mean to you? Women's experiences bear strong ties to place, and we, in turn, shape place by both our presence and absence. **Contest guidelines:** Blind judging; type name and address on separate sheet of paper only. Entry fee of \$20 must accompany all entries. **Entries must be postmarked by June 30, 1994.** Winners will be published in the December 1994 issue of *Room*. Prizes: \$300 first prize, \$150 second prize, \$75 third prize. Entry fee: \$20. All entrants receive a one-year subscription to *Room of One's Own*.

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