

Within and Without Antisemitism in the Anti-Racist Context

by Sandra Haar and Susan Nosov

L'inclusion de l'antisémitisme dans une définition globale du racisme pose des problèmes particuliers. Les auteures expliquent comment la mise sur pied d'ateliers sur l'antisémitisme et l'identité juive provoque des changements

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positifs et remédie à l'exclusion des femmes juives non seulement à l'intérieur du mouvement antiraciste mais aussi à l'intérieur du mouvement féministe.

Introduction

In early 1992, a feminist conference in Calgary was announced by the Calgary Status of Women Action Committee. The organizers put out a call for workshop proposals to address the conference theme of diversity on the women's movement. Throughout, they defined diversity based in differences of "sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, physical attributes, income level, religious affiliation, etc." Seeing an opening to address issues of antisemitism¹ and Jewish identity, we put together a series of workshops. We had both been dialoguing and working with other feminists involved in anti-racism work within feminism. We saw a need to address the complexities of the inclusion of antisemitism within a definition of racism. By developing workshops about antisemitism and Jewish identity, we were able, at this conference and elsewhere, to challenge and change the exclusion of Jewish women's issues that occurs not only in anti-racism work but within feminism in general. By presenting such workshops at conferences and other feminist settings we create a Jewish presence and a context to build community with other Jewish and non-Jewish women in a way that would include Jewish experiences of oppression in political work. Anti-racism workshops, in the past, had not adequately addressed this perspective. This article examines some of the reasons why.

We developed a series of workshops to include the examination of antisemitism and Jewish identity: dealing primarily with defining and confronting antisemitism; and focusing on Jewish consciousness and the difficulties in translating that consciousness into public identification

and/or action. The workshops themselves have been, in many ways, a "workshopping" of some of the ideas we present in this article. Therefore, the ideas presented in this text will include some details of our workshops, but will focus more specifically on the context of feminist anti-racism in which we have conducted workshops and the multiple effects we hoped this work would produce.

Some background: feminism and anti-racism

We define feminism as a movement of women who challenge the complexities of oppression based on the intertwining systems of imperialism and colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy. These systems affect all people, and additionally produce discrimination based on race, ethnicity, language, immigration status, and religion; class, physical ability, and age; gender, sexual practices, sexual orientation, and structures of family relations. We acknowledge that these discrimination-based factors operate independently, *and* are in service of systems of oppression. This is the foundation from which we work and is a necessary first step in making links with other women's struggles in challenging power structures.

In the past number of years, anti-racism as a goal has been outlined and developed by Black women and women of colour for the feminist movement. Presently, organizations are in various stages of either taking it up or resisting it. This ground-breaking work has created an opportunity for a wider and more applicable definition of feminism to lived reality. As well, anti-racism work has made room for women to openly define and identify their own racial/cultural identity/ies. While this has encouraged an important process of "naming," it has also slotted women into distinct categories that have masked the complexity of our racial privileges and oppressions within a system of white domination.

But because naming ourselves is the place where many of us may start, we will try to define "Jewish women" and outline some of the complications of current racial definitions.

Who we are and why we are here

"Jewish women" includes Ashkenazi, Sephardi and Mizrahi women.² In each of the three groups, her physical appearance may cause others to classify her as *white, mixed, or of colour*. In our workshops, the majority of Jewish women are of Ashkenazi descent. This is largely to do with the fact that in North America, approximately 90 per cent of the Jewish population is Ashkenazi. (By region this can vary; in Quebec, Sephardim are 20 per cent of the Jewish

population.) Though we do not specifically address Ashkenazi, Mizrahi or Sephardi women's issues, these each form a part of our overall analysis.

There is often confusion as to how these divisions relate to cultural and historical differences among Jews. Because we have been a diasporic people for 2000 years, the Jewish people is a group with many geographical, historical, cultural and physical differences. However, within this schema, a conflation between white=Ashkenazi and of colour=Sephardi is incorrect. Cultural or geographical background does not assume physical appearance. There are Jews from Morocco that have a lighter skin colour than

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Jews from Poland. Overlaying "white/of colour" onto "Ashkenazi/Sephardi" further serves to ignore the Jewishness of both groups and enforces a split along North American standards. Even though skin colour signifiers are an important component in determining one's position to privilege within white dominant societies, such signifiers are not necessarily relevant in determining divisions amongst Jewish women ourselves. Diversity amongst skin colour has much to do with factors of intermixing and assimilation and does not necessarily imply *origin* in a particular region. In other words, skin colour as sole signifier of "race" does not completely address experiences of racial oppression *as Jews or amongst Jews*.

Therefore, in referring to Jewish experiences in North America, we attempt to use a framework which allows all Jewish women to define identity and experiences of oppression which, crosses appearance, experience, cultures, languages, and places of origin. Moreover, this framework challenges Ashkenazi-centred perspectives as representing those of all Jews, while posing Jewish-centred questions to anti-oppression work.

Until most recently, Jewish women have been addressed within anti-racism work primarily, if not exclusively, as white women with white privilege and occasionally as oppressors within the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.³ These two perspectives are crucial; however, the missing piece is the oppression of Jews within a structure of white domination, commonly referred to as antisemitism. Without this latter piece, the historical nature of Jewish existence would be severely distorted and the experiences of Jewish women would be mis-recognized and mis-named. Most significantly, we would work within a model that has omitted a crucial piece of our identities. The inclusion of all of our experience eludes the neat categorization of us

as either privileged or oppressed that has typified examinations of racism in progressive movements. But, what our experience demands is the re-assessment of white supremacy, not as a two-part system (oppressor and oppressed), but one that has produced a much more complex set of social relations with infinite fluctuations in power. By the example of our lives and our histories, we do not believe the solution to be an expanding of the categories "white" or "of colour" to include Jewish women; rather, we challenge the way in which these categories have been divided.

By identifying who Jewish women are and how we are located within a framework of privilege and oppression, we can move toward a second point: a historical and present-day examination of antisemitism, within an anti-racism framework. We start from the position that oppression is universal and that individual and group experiences of oppression are tied directly to institutional and systemic power. While coming from a common denominator and with a common goal of power over, they do not necessarily manifest themselves on groups in the same way. We look at white domination as the *system*, and racism as one of its manifestations. Therefore respective histories of bigotry stemming from imperialism and cultural domination, rather than being an arena of comparison, become an opportunity to analogize and understand historical patterns of systemic racial oppression. By looking first at white domination *as a system*, we can understand the many manifestations of racism as part of the operation of that system and not be misled by apparent differences in effect.

The workshops

In keeping with an approach used by many feminists, and in particular feminist/anti-racist educators, our approach is partially one of deconstruction and personal/experiential validation. The workshops are structured to reveal and work with experiential information. As facilitators, we bring out historical information and ways of examining definitions, and encourage others to do so as well. We put into context theoretical and "real" situations, and understand these from a critical perspective by placing them in an historical context. This allows us to examine the specific issues as well as the patterns surrounding an event.

A primary component of our workshops is for Jewish women to hear one another's experiences of being Jews in feminist/political work. We sought to have a place where Jewish women could meet and discuss issues that pertain specifically to Jewish experience. The goal is to put these experiences into a critical context of diversity and to recognize where current theories on racism help us challenge ourselves, and where our experiences and struggles can in turn challenge current theories. Here Jewish women could seek to understand and uncover the process we undertake to identify, to define a Jewish agenda, to

pursue this agenda. Hearing one another's perspectives and viewpoints is empowering. It offers strength to go into mixed coalitions, name the gaps and omissions, and more importantly, offers concrete solutions as to how to meet across these gaps.

The task we lay out in the workshops when we address antisemitism is to understand it in its various manifestations, be they physical, psychological or emotional. We present an historical understanding of the Jewish experience of oppression that includes Jewish history in Canada as well as its recent global history.

Antisemitism as a phenomenon of hatred against Jews

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has resulted in genocide, expulsion, loss of citizenship rights, organized massacres, codified, as well as subtle humiliations, etc. It has also produced periods of relative "calm" or respite which have encouraged social mobility, assimilation, and loss of culture and group identity. Often we have been pressed to give "current" examples, when in fact, movements of hatred against Jews are cyclical. For most North American Jews, the experience of antisemitism is often placed in reference to, if not based in, the recent genocide in Europe—known as the Holocaust. What the demand for "currency" denies is the impact of history on a people, as well as assuming that our current reality can be severed from its past. Historically, antisemitism has been religiously- (specifically, Christian and Muslim) based; however, Jews have also been conceptualized as non-white in the racist doctrines that emerged in nineteenth century Europe, and continue to be primary targets of white supremacists groups such as the Heritage Front, Ku Klux Klan, and others. Thus Jewishness was integrated as a racial category within the system white supremacy.

On an individual level, workshop participants are challenged in their understanding of racism to include antisemitism as a function of white domination that has implications beyond more overt examples of jokes, stereotypes and expressions of hatred to include white/Christian assumptions and theoretical biases, and denial and exclusion of Jewish issues and perspectives.

The barriers to understanding antisemitism and taking Jewish issues seriously include the uncritical adoption of stereotypes of overarching power, over sensitivity, "Jewish privilege," etc. These must be historically located and deconstructed, concurrent with an understanding of the facts of antisemitism. It is necessary therefore to look at antisemitism in its own context and to critically examine

what we have defined as oppressed via the system of white supremacy.

In all of our workshops women are encouraged to identify tangible instances of antisemitism; acknowledge and examine the difficulties they have in confronting it, both personal and practical; and to share strategies among themselves. Participants have the opportunity to explore complex emotional issues in confronting an oppression which they are not subject to. Non-Jewish women confronting antisemitism face ambivalence, difficulty in recognizing antisemitism, hesitation based on lack of information which leads to lack of confidence, and other such emotions relating to confronting and deconstructing internalized dominance. We return the focus to the effects of antisemitism on *Jewish women*. Jewish women are encouraged to work through feelings of dismissal, self-rejection, rejection of other Jews, confusion, anger, and other feelings related to internalized oppression. We recognized that exploring these feelings is important, as one of the many steps to taking action. Participants can continue to think about how to incorporate antisemitism and racism into their feminist and political work, at the same time as they begin to make links to other systems, definitions, and issues of internalized oppression and domination that all women feel.

Within and without

We continue to struggle to participate as *Jewish women* in organizing within anti-racist feminism; to have our own agendas welcomed and respected, and integrated into the overall theory and practice of anti-racism. We hope not to overwrite work already done or being done by other women but to include, link and understand our identities in relation to other women, all of whom live in different relations to power. Jewish experiences of antisemitism can provide important perspectives on passing, assimilation, genocide, witnessing and testimony, cultural loss and adaptation to the overall understanding of racism.

Jewish struggle against racism, historically, has been undertaken for our community and for others. Sometimes, the motivations and the benefits of this work have not been so simple to discern. Working for others is often working for yourself as well, and this realization can create the most meaningful solidarity. We see that anti-racist work, within feminist contexts, to have many purposes: to create a movement for *all* women; to bring the feminist movement closer together with other movements so that all have the same, varied principles that speak to the issues of all oppressed peoples; and ultimately challenge and alter systems of power be they white domination, patriarchy or capitalism.

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Susan Nosov is an Ashkenazi Jewish feminist activist. She has recently moved to Québec where she enjoys the outdoors with her lover and step-minor. She is also a member of the editorial collective of the Bi-Sexual Women's Anthology soon to be published by Sister Vision.

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¹Antisemitism was created as a term in Europe in the late nineteenth century as a term of self-identification for people who openly hated Jews. We spell it as one word without hyphens or capitals. This form has been suggested to avoid the confusion that antisemitism was based on something called "Semitism."

²Ashkenazi Jews trace their ancestry to fifteenth century Germany and sixteenth century Eastern Europe; Sephardi Jews, to Spain before the Inquisition and Expulsion (1492). Following the Spanish Expulsion, Sephardim settled predominantly in North Africa and the Middle East. Jews who are neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardi, most often Arab Jews, have sometimes used the term "Mizrachi," meaning "of the East." These distinctions are never precise, particularly with the intermixing of Spanish, Arab and Asian Jews in Africa and the Middle East after the Spanish Expulsion. Other communities, in for example India and Ethiopia, have their own specific designations.

³Here we assume the overall conception of all Jewish women as Ashkenazi and/or light-skinned. Sephardi and Mizrachi women's issues have generally either been ignored or used to point to the "whiteness" of Ashkenazi women.



Erica Findlay

DONIA B. CLENMAN

Peace

In precious moments of stillness
a faint laughter may be heard.
Love planted aeons ago
refuses to be extinguished.
A one-winged dove
plucks a green branch from the flood
and carries it across the wasteland.

There are few safe harbours
little refuge in human hearts
and souls of un-lived lives
Everywhere.

She forgets nothing.
Neither the flood nor the pyre.
Whenever she sees a Wall
with flaming lists of Names
extending over the horizon—
her poor wing trembles.
"We are all survivors," she says
"Custodians of this precious globe."

And rising on a torrent of hope

A prayer-filled chant
The never-ending tale

She waits for a new dawn to break
to bless the world with Peace.

SHALOM
(Hebrew)

PACE
(Latin)

SALAAM
(Arabic)

KATHIMIKAN.
(Filippino)

शान्ति

"Shanthi"
(Hindi)

和平

"Wo Ping"
(Chinese)

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