

*Missing from the Map:  
Feminist Theory and the Omission of Jewish Women  
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**Introduction**

This paper examines a topic at the beginning stages of its investigation. It attempts to shed light on an apparent omission within feminist theory in the United States and discusses its implications for contemporary feminism – as well as for feminists who are American Jewish women.

As described below, feminists of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have developed theoretical models which articulate their uniquely situated standpoints in relation to the sexism of their respective racial/ethnic groups on the one hand, and what has been termed "mainstream" or "white" feminism on the other. This is not so when it comes to Jewish women, notwithstanding the involvement of many Jewish women in the women's movement including as leading theorists, leaving a gap in both feminist and multicultural theory, as well as in identity studies. This paper presents a comparison of existing theoretical approaches and demonstrates the absence of a comparable depiction of Jewish women as case studies within multicultural feminism. It poses the query:

If one were to try to develop a theoretical model of multicultural Jewish feminist identity where there now is none, how would one do so? How might such a theory explain the following questions:

- a) If Jewish women are missing from the map of feminist theory – both as subjects and as authors – why might this be, and where do they place *themselves* when it comes to their Jewish and feminist identities?
- b) Is one possible explanation of this absence from the map that Jewish women locate themselves within so-called mainstream feminism, that is, as white, and unencumbered by an extraneous identity of any consequence?
- c) If so, how do Jewish feminists view expressions within the women's movement that pertain to Jewish issues or Israel, including expressions which appear to be Antisemitic? How do their identities as mainstream members of this movement coexist with their identities as members of the Jewish people?

This paper draws upon Black feminist theory as a point of contrast with current scholarship related to feminism and American Jewish women. With that contrast in mind, the paper puts forth the thesis that while there may be an overall identification with the feminist mainstream, the position of Jewish women in the women's movement may nevertheless reflect the eternal puzzle of Jews viewed as 'Other' – as a race, as a religion, as both, as neither, as a composite projection of the host population's fantasies. This absence of theoretical model reflects the absence of a secure standing within the movement as an ideological home. While this specific paper will not grapple with the issue of 'Jew as Other' in this age of multiculturalism, it will conclude with the sketching of a road map for exploration which, however preliminary, can act as a starting point for additional research in the future.

### **Background**

My journey into the world of Gender studies originated with the wish to understand a certain trait among numerous contemporaries and friends – women, some of whom live in Israel like me, some who don't. I noticed what struck me as an inconsistency between a strong conviction, on the one hand, on behalf of women's issues, and a conviction regarding the delegitimation of the State of Israel and how to fight it on the other. My own deep conviction held that the two issues – both based on the principles of equal opportunity and self-determination, and both facing the threat of Islamist fundamentalism – go hand in hand. Yet often, these friends did not seem to recognize threats facing Israel as on par with problems facing women, or, that concern for Israel was parochial compared to the more universal condition of gender issues, and therefore ranked as a less immediate priority. I wondered why this might be.

My studies of feminist theory, enlightening on many levels, brought a particular revelation in my encounter with Black feminist and multicultural feminist thought. Black feminist and multicultural theorists initiated an abrupt departure from leading feminist theorists of the day in the 1980's, who had defined the challenges to all women in uniform terms stemming from their own perspectives as white middle class women. Black feminist thinkers asserted that the experience of being female – however universal it is in many respects – differs significantly depending upon one's racial, ethnic, cultural and socio-economic background.

Thinkers such as bell hooks (sic; 1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1991), Audre Lorde (1984), Barbara Christian (1987) and others pointed to the history and experience of African American women which resulted in a distinct social condition with an equally distinct set of needs. In recognizing that these differences had been overlooked and discounted by feminists who had claimed the experience of middle class white women as the norm and as the mainstream, and in articulating a theoretical model – an "Afrocentric feminist standpoint" (Collins 1991, 115-117) – Black feminists' landmark contribution enriched feminist theory as a whole. Their writings spoke to the enduring nature of the ties that bind many people to their own ethnic, racial or national groups, observed that these ties often claim an allegiance over political or ideological affiliations, and that this may be seen as both natural and legitimate. Their message was one of validation, the validity of staking ground for one's own group, bringing benefit to that group but to others as well in the process. In the words of writer Sonia Sanchez, "I've always known that if you write from a black experience, you're writing from a universal experience as well...I know you don't have to whitewash yourself to be universal (Tate 1983: 142)."

With these ideas in mind, I set out in search of the equivalent academic literature regarding Jewish women's experience of their connections to their Jewishness and their feminism, looking for ways to apply the theoretical model I would find to the situation of my friends and myself. This, I ventured, would bring theoretical underpinning to a project which seemed to require justification, namely, seeing the fight for the legitimation of Jewish self-determination and women's self-determination as linked.

To my great surprise and puzzlement, however, the comparable body of literature was nowhere to be found. Despite existing research on the subjects of feminist identity and of multicultural feminist studies, few studies look at Jewish women as case studies in this context (Friedman 2002). Put differently, the experience of Jewish women, whose role in the women's movement has been highly visible and active, is not reflected in scholarship of multicultural feminist theory. Jewish women are simply missing from the map.

This paper explores why this may be so.

### **"Jewish Feminism"**

Saying that Jewish women are missing from the map of multicultural feminist theory does not mean to say that a search combining the words "Jewish" and "feminism" will yield nothing. To the contrary. Within popular literature, one finds personal accounts describing examples of Jewish women's activism in the battle for women's rights and in the feminist movement (Plaskow and Berman 2005, Schneider 1985, Pogrebin 1991, Levitt 1997). Further, when it comes to academic scholarship, searches linking the words "Jewish" and "feminism," do yield studies – pertaining primarily, though, to the theme of women within the Jewish world: women and Jewish religious law, ritual and communal life. The term "Jewish Feminism" itself describes attempts by Jewish women to find a place within or alongside normative Jewish tradition. Scholars such as Rachel Adler (1999), Judith Plaskow (1991, 2005), Susanna Heschel (1983), Elyse Goldstein (2008), Tova Hartman (2003, 2008), Blu Greenberg (1991), Rivka Haut (1992) Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (2007), Tamar Ross (2002), Danya Rutenberg (2001, 2009), Lynn Resnick Dufour (2002), and others have contributed toward attempts to realize and define a Jewish religiosity, spiritual fulfillment, dignity and inclusion for Jewish women in the contemporary Jewish world.

Jewish feminism in the above context has its parallel in works by feminists of other faiths – Christian, Moslem, Hindu – who struggle with similar issues of women's participation, ordination or of changes in theologies and liturgy which range from standard androcentric to outright misogynist. Within Jewish feminism, thinkers and theorists have inspired notable changes in religious and communal life, prompting Sylvia Barack Fishman to remark that these "profound transformations have already become so mainstream as to appear unremarkable (2001)." Indeed, these changes are apparent in areas such as synagogue worship, with egalitarianism common practice in the vast majority of American congregations; the integration of female-centered rituals into Jewish life; as well as within the organized Jewish community (Fishman 1989, 1995, 2008).

### **Black Feminist Thought – Dual Perspectives**

If existing Jewish feminist scholarship emphasizes issues of women within the Jewish world, Black feminist theory – despite the substantial difference between the experiences of the two groups – provides a relevant point of contrast. For the latter, feminist struggle takes place within African American society while extending well beyond the "home" community to American society as a whole. Black feminist theorists have explored and reflected African

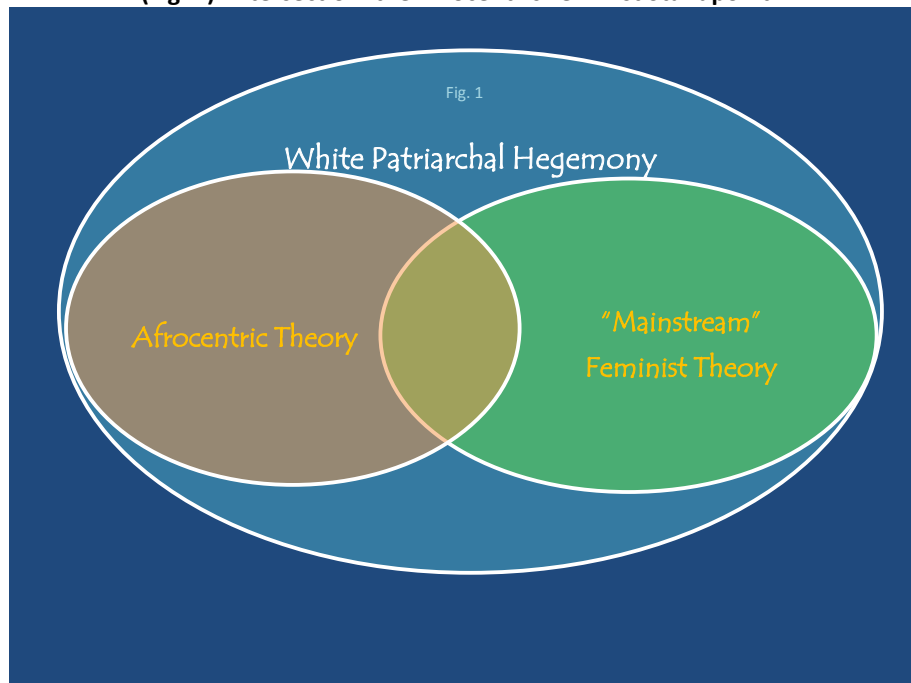
American women's perceptions of their unique position at a nexus of discrimination on the basis of race, gender and class. In coining the term "matrix of domination," Patricia Hill Collins spoke of creating a new paradigm. "The significance of seeing race, class and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions...and the economic, political and ideological conditions that support them (1991:232)."

Black feminist theory also emerges from a recognition that the condition of Black women is distinct from that of African Americans as a group as well as from women as a group; therefore, their solutions emanate from neither Afrocentric theory nor from feminist theory but from a uniquely Afrocentric feminist position. Ultimately, the goal of Black feminist theory is to articulate Black women's **standpoint**, making full use of their

access to both the Afrocentric and the feminist standpoints ... [expecting that it] should reflect elements of both traditions, but be distinct – a search for the distinguishing features of an alternative epistemology (Collins, 2006).

If one were to attempt to depict this objective of Black feminist theory as a diagram, it would look like this (Fig. 1):

**(Fig. 1) Intersection: the Afrocentric Feminist Standpoint**



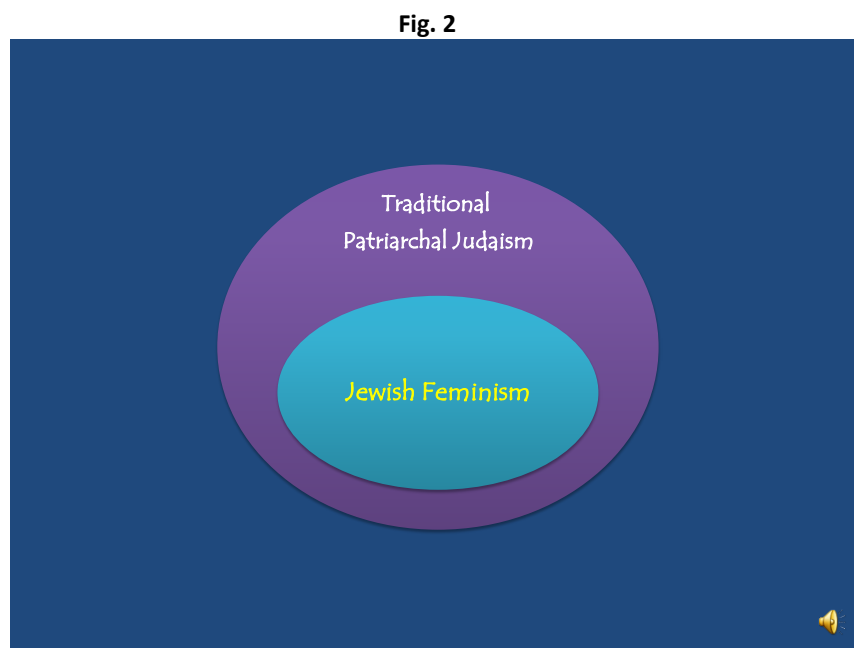
and its caption might quote bell hooks' observation:

"White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by

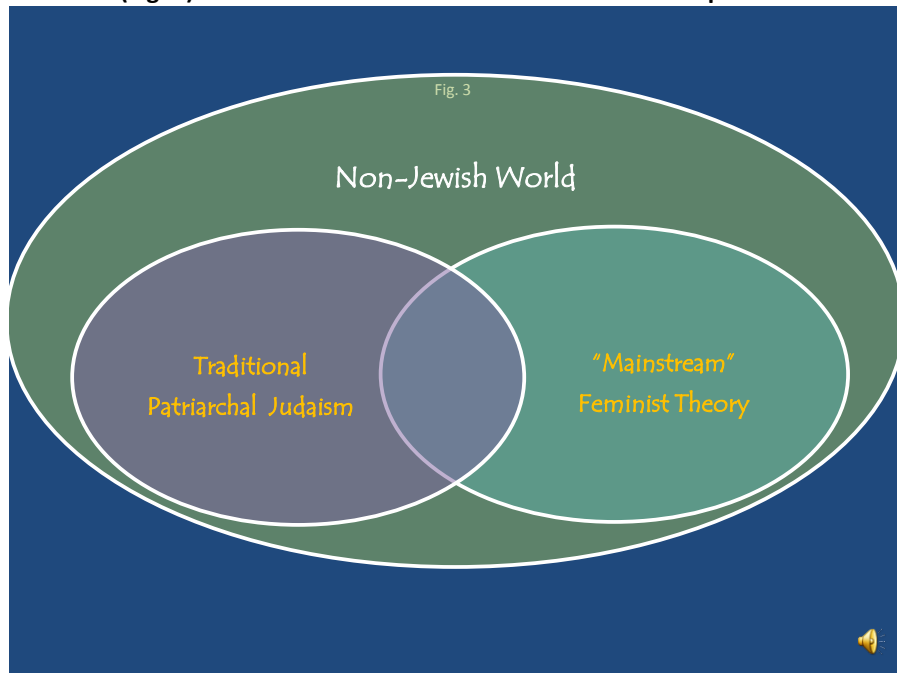
sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Both groups have led liberation movements that favor their interests and support the continued oppression of other groups (1984:15)."

The intersection of the two inner-circles above depicts what Collins termed "accessing both the Afrocentric and the feminist standpoint while maintaining distinctiveness" – all three sections operating within the general context of the system's white patriarchal hegemony. Feminist theorists of other racial and ethnic backgrounds have reached similar conclusions and prescribe a theoretical model which combines a similar dual focus – on sexism within their respective racial/ethnic group as well as on the racism which flows from mainstream white feminism (see for example Geok-lin Lim 1993, Ling 1987, Anzaldua 1987, Martin and Mohanty 1986, Sanchez, 1992).

A schematic representation of Jewish feminism, in contrast, might look more like this (Fig. 2):



reflecting its focus as rooted within the Jewish world. Missing is the comparable "oval," the attempt at self-definition vis à vis traditional androcentric Judaism, *and* vis à vis non-Jewish feminism, with the attempt to identify a standpoint unique to Jewish women. Such a model would be represented as follows (Fig. 3):

**(Fig. 3) Intersection: Feminist Jewish Women's Standpoint**

### Where Do Jewish Women – Jewish Feminists – Locate Themselves?

This contrast in orientations is all the more intriguing when one considers the active role which Jewish women have played in the women's movement, including thinkers and writers whose works hold a central place in the canon of feminist and gender theory. A selected list includes Betty Friedan (1964), Adrienne Rich (1976), Susan Moller Okin (1989), Andrea Dworkin (1991); ground-breaking feminist readings in the disciplines of History (Gerda Lerner 1986; Natalie Zemon Davis 1997, Joan Wallach Scott 1999), Literary criticism (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar 1979; Elaine Showalter, 1985), Psychology (Nancy Chodorow 1978, 1991; Phyllis Chesler, 1972, Carol Gilligan, 1982), feminist research methodology (Shula Reinharz 1992) and Queer theory (Judith Butler 2004, 2006; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990). Yet, we do not see a body of scholarship comparable to that of Black feminists' describing the encounter between Jewish women and feminism, echoing observations regarding the "conspicuous absence of theory and research [related] to the Jewish people within the literature on multiculturalism (Friedman 2002)."

How might this situation have come to be? One explanation may be that this search for a "Jewish women's feminist standpoint" simply was not necessary. At first glance, this point may seem so obvious as to be barely noteworthy. In as race-conscious a society as the United States, a Black woman – or man – will face a greater level of discrimination than someone

white. If Jewish women's feminism has not involved the same kind of differentiation and self-definition as Black women's, this may well reflect the lack of a sense of urgency to do so: an absence of that same experience of discrimination and just as surely, a sense of identification with the American white majority. The fact that works of the Jewish theorists cited above were incorporated into the core feminist oeuvre provides further evidence of their identification and sense of belonging within the feminist white mainstream.

Likewise, feminist Jewish women's viewpoint is virtually indistinguishable from the mainstream in the context of multicultural feminist theory. Much of multicultural feminist theory relates to the negotiation of women's standing alongside a multitude of cultural contexts. It upholds the avoidance, as in Black Feminist theory, of "white solipsism" (Rich, 1979:275-310; Alcoff 2005), that is, the implicit tendency to take white perspective as universal. It focuses, rather, on the issue of women's rights in societies and cultures around the world in their respective contexts. Accordingly, one finds calls for greater awareness of the diversity among American Jewish women with appeals for greater sensitivity and inclusion of Jewish women of color, for example, or of Sephardic women, in keeping with a spirit of multiculturalism (Brettschneider & Rose 2004:180-188, Shoshana 2004:154-164, Pegueros 2004:174-180).

### Whiteness: the Fluidity of Race Categorization

It bears recalling, therefore, that Jews as a group have only recently come to be considered white. As demonstrated by Jacobson (2002), Gilman (1994, 2002), J. Boyarin, (1994), Brodtkin (1999) and Cheyette (1995), race is a "social construct," and a remarkably fluid form of categorization over the past centuries. Gilman notes that

for the eighteenth and nineteenth-century scientist, the "blackness" of the Jew was taken as fact and as mark of racial inferiority [in addition to]... an indicator of [his] diseased nature [*Blackness of skin, incidentally, was thought to be a result of congenital syphilis.* - jr] ... By the midcentury, being black, being Jewish, being diseased and being 'ugly' came to be inexorably linked...one bore the signs of one's diseased status on one's anatomy, and by extension, in one's psyche (2002: 370).

Gilman underlines that "the boundaries of race were one of the most powerful social and political divisions evolved in the science of the period." Ironically, Jewish in-marrying, rather than marking Jews a pure race, marked them as impure and considered "mongrel" due to interbreeding with Africans during the period of the Alexandrian exile (1994:369-70).

Literature documenting race in America dates the designation of Jews as white as recently as the 1920's – recalling the contrast Al Jolson drew of himself between blackface entertainer as opposed to white cantor's son in "The Jazz Singer" (below) –



**Fig. 4**

or the period following World War II. With the awareness and horror of Nazi Germany's racial policies, "the 1940's produced a profound revision in the taxonomy of the world's races" (Jacobson, 188). This is reflected in examples such as Arthur Miller's 1945 novel *Focus* or Laura Z. Hobson's 1947 *Gentleman's Agreement*, later adapted into the film starring Gregory Peck (Fig. 5), whose message was that Jews are not only difficult to tell apart from non-Jews, but that their similarity to "real" Americans reflects their essential worthiness of racial equality as well.



**Fig. 5**

Expanding the definition of "whiteness" brought obvious benefits in terms of relative power within American society. The perceived differentiation from other racial groups coupled

with the identification with mainstream white America positioned Jews to attain greater financial security and power during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet in sources even more recent, Jews are described as "not quite white" or as "a different shade of white," in other words, not quite blending in. A telling study involving white American women on the subject of their white identities (Frankenberg 1993), notes statements by Jewish participants indicating that

several points must be made about the intersection of Jewishness and whiteness...Ashkenazi Jews for much of this century in the US and Europe have been placed at the borders of whiteness, at times viewed as cultural outsiders, at times as racial outsiders, but in any case never as constitutive of the cultural norm (216, 224).

Frankenberg's study is revealing in other ways as well. In the relatively short section she devotes to the Jewish aspect of those women among her participants who were Jews (numbering 11 out of 30), the theme of experiencing Antisemitism arises among every single one of them. Frankenberg picks up on statements by the Jewish women in her interviews which describe their senses of identity as Jews over different stages in their lives.

This study is significant in that it is among the only ones I have been able to locate which explore women's identities together with their Jewish identities, not on the subject of their religiosity or spirituality but in the context of the wider world. Another equally informative study (Kaufman 2005) indicates how much one can glean when one asks questions which pertain directly to the missing parts of the Venn diagram in Fig. 3, in that she alludes to exactly this intersection of identities. When Kaufman's subjects express that their identity as Jewish women "is grounded in their experience as 'the Other' within Judaism," for example, it speaks directly to and in concert with the experience of being a Jewish woman vis à vis Jewish men, as well as vis à vis the world at large with its perception of the Jew as Other.

### *An Uncertain Sisterhood – the Women's Movement and Antisemitism*

A brief examination will reveal that the experience of feeling like a "cultural outsider" (Frankenberg) and "Other" (Kaufman) is far from uncommon within the women's movement itself, leaving one to wonder what tenuousness may accompany Jewish feminist women's identification and sense of belonging within the mainstream of the movement.

One such strand is evident within Christian feminism (Daum 1989:298-307, Heschel 1995: xix, Plaskow 1989:303-309). Judith Plaskow critiques the myth which accuses the Jews of inventing and inflicting patriarchal religion on the world, banishing the Goddess who had "reigned in matriarchal glory." The myth continues, she states, claiming that when Jesus then tried to "restore egalitarianism, [he] was foiled by the persistence of Jewish attitudes within Christian tradition" (298). This portrayal of "the Hebrews as ruthlessly supplanting Goddess worship with the monotheistic male Hebrew deity" acts as a feminist incarnation of the old charge of deicide (Daum 304-5; Heschel xix). "Christian feminism gives a new slant to the old theme of Christian superiority... deeply rooted in Christian theology," (Plaskow), while "singl[ing] out [Jews]... as the source of society's sexism" (Daum).

Within feminist activism, Jewish-targeted enmity commonly takes the form of anti-Zionism and vituperative hostility toward Israel, the interconnected nature of these two bigotries demonstrated by Kaplan and Small (2007). Examples include the exclusion or expulsion of Israelis and Jews from participation in conferences or organizations (Chesler 2003:67, 70; Pegueros 2004), the exclusion of material which depicts Israel in a favorable light from feminist publications,<sup>1</sup> the adoption of anti-Israel and anti-Zionist resolutions in conferences convened to discuss women's issues (Chesler 53, Cottin Pogrebin 1982, 1991, 2003:15-19), the formation of women's organizations whose central purpose is the defamation of Israel and is invoked as an actual expression of feminism ([Coalition of Women for Peace](#), [Women in Black](#), [Code Pink](#)).



(Fig. 6) From the Code Pink website

<sup>1</sup> "Ms. Magazine's Moment of Truth: Ms. magazine's refusal to print pro-Israel ad raises questions about the 'Palestinianization' of the women's movement." (2008). [http://www.thejewishweek.com/viewArticle/c36\\_a2011/News/New\\_York.html#](http://www.thejewishweek.com/viewArticle/c36_a2011/News/New_York.html#); also "Ms. Magazine Blocks Ad on Israeli Women," <http://www.ajcongress.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6709>

The message, implicit and explicit, is that vilification of Zionism is integral to feminist ideology, to the point that the two goals are deemed indistinguishable. The option of being a feminist and a supporter of Israel is rendered mutually incompatible, a contradiction in terms.

Painting Jews as responsible for egregious forms of racism (adding responsibility for the slave trade to the indictment to boot, see Chesler, 57) would be almost comical were it not so stinging. Scholars of American Jewry relate the overwhelming degree to which American Jews identify with left wing and liberal ideologies (Cohen and Fein 1985:75-88, Cohen and Liebman 1997:405-430, Podhoretz 2009), the Jewish communal establishment in the 1960's going so far as to maintain that a Jew's position on the issue of civil rights formed a primary measure of his very Jewish identity (Cohen, 1997). That being a member of the Jewish community could mark one as suspect of racism calls to mind the condition termed by Steven M. Cohen as "the unbearable whiteness of being Jewish" (ibid). Or, as Gilman, noted in observing this irony, "multicultural discourse has marginalized Jews while using Jewish experience as one of the models for the multicultural" (2006: 179).

### Supplementing the Gap in Theory – and Substance

How, then, do Jewish women deal with this situation? On a more fundamental level, if Jewish women experience animosity, how do they describe its impact, a rejection by sisters within the sisterhood?

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a postcolonial feminist theorist, observes a frequent conflict between feminism and the "home" community, criticizing allegiance to the home community as "revisionism [that] severely limit[s]...feminist inquiry and struggle." She describes

the risk of rejection by one's own kind, by one's family, when one exceeds the limits....*The fear of rejection by one's own kind refers not only to the family of origin, but also to the potential loss of a second family, the women's community, with its implied and often unconscious replication of the conditions of home* (2003, 103-104, emphasis added).

Personal reflections of Jewish women regarding this conflict between their Jewish and feminist ties provide telling and poignant expressions of this very sense of loss of their "second family [in] the women's community." Letty Cottin Pogrebin, referring to the anti-

Israel and Antisemitic diatribes at the 1980 United Nations Women's Conference in Copenhagen, states,

Jewish women have two battles to fight: Against sexism and against anti-Jewish beliefs...identifying as Jews within the feminist movement with as much zeal as we identify as feminists in Judaism (1982).

Others, like Phyllis Chesler, decry the demonization of Israel and of Jewish self-determination as an abandonment of the feminist struggle itself, sacrificing the well-being of Islamic women – and of all women – in the face of encroaching Islamist fundamentalism on Western shores in a rush of appeasement which stands to imperil all (Chesler 2003: 12; see also Greenfield 2008).

Testimonials of this kind cast light on this under-studied area in scholarship. A more complete "feminist Jewish standpoint" in the model of Black feminist thought would serve to illuminate the anatomy of Antisemitism in the women's movement and its effect on Jewish women. We lack more studies such as Debra Kaufman's and Ruth Frankenberg's to augment the data on how Jewish women experience these meeting points in their own words. To go back to our original question regarding the missing theoretical model describing Jewish women's multicultural feminist identity, a more comprehensive understanding of the points of encounter between Jewish women and the non-Jewish world would complement the existing works related to women within the Jewish world. The present situation, Jewish women's absence from feminist theoretical models, underscores an element of "homelessness." To borrow Elaine Showalter's image in her essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," without a theoretical basis, Jewish women risk remaining "an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm" (1981: 180). Bereft of theoretical belonging or anchor, not even the most loyal, committed or radical feminists are exempt from bias, slurs and innuendo. An increased analysis and awareness could serve to right this imbalance.

My doctoral dissertation project undertakes just such an objective. It is based on the analysis of interviews with a select sample of Jewish women in both the United States and Israel. The questions invite them to describe their multiple senses of identity as women, Jews, feminists.... and to describe by what means they resolve or manage tensions or conflicted feelings between identities, be they through compartmentalization or splitting, resolution or estrangement. In examining transcripts of these narrative interviews, the

dissertation will look at patterns and themes which emerge from the women's own words. The analysis will aim to assess the intersection of identities in light of existing theories in Black and multicultural feminism, identity studies and studies of Jewish identity. These findings may increase awareness and understanding of current trends regarding the impact of feminist ideology as it relates to the connection between feminism – a movement conceived in order to fight bias – and the age old bias of Antisemitism.

### Conclusion

The above documentation illustrates the lack of correspondence between the basic focus of "Jewish feminism" within the Jewish world and between Black feminist thought and that of other racial and ethnic groups, oriented both within their respective ethnic groups and beyond their groups to deal with "mainstream" feminism. Jewish women as a whole may have felt no need for such a dual orientation, evidenced by a sense of belonging and identification within mainstream feminism. Yet one need not scratch very deeply beneath the surface to behold an undercurrent which can prove unsettling to Jewish women. Expressions of anti-Zionism and of outright Antisemitism raise the question of how Jewish women experience an apparent attack which calls their feminist allegiance into question. The proposed research, with its aim of recording and analyzing Jewish women's perceptions in their own words, stands to add new dimension to what we currently know about Jewish women's experience and identities.

Back in 1984, bell hooks wrote incisively of mainstream feminism at that time, saying

Feminism has its party line and women who feel a need for a different strategy, a different foundation, often find themselves ostracized or silenced (9).

Could an equivalent body of scholarship by feminist Jewish women create a space for a distinct standpoint that addresses the concerns of women within the Jewish world as well as within the world of mainstream feminism? The answer to this question is complicated, given that it is linked to persistent efforts through the centuries to see the Jew as Other in every conceivable context. The anatomy of Antisemitism in the women's movement lies within feminist theory itself. A new theoretical model to supplement what is currently missing may act as a starting point for additional exploration in the future and as a source of change in rhetoric as well as in practice.

☼  
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