

## WHITE JEWS: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

David Schraub

**Abstract:** *“Intersectionality,” a concept coined and developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, examines how our various identities change in meaning and valence when placed in dynamic relation with one another. Instead of exploring identity traits like “race,” “gender,” “religion,” and so on in isolation, an intersectional approach asks what these various characteristics “do” to one another in combination. I suggest that an intersectional approach—asking “what does Whiteness do to Jewishness?”—can help illuminate elements of the Jewish experience that would otherwise remain obscure. The core claim is that Whiteness and Jewishness in combination function in ways that are not necessarily grasped if one atomizes the identities and holds them apart. What Whiteness “does” to Jewishness is act as an accelerator for certain forms of antisemitic marginalization even as it ratifies a racialized hierarchy within the Jewish community. Absent an intersectional vantage, many political projects and controversies surrounding Jewish equality will be systematically misunderstood.*

The subject of this essay is, as one might expect, White Jews. By that term, I mean to evoke two different conceptions that are clearly related but distinct in important ways. First, there is the matter of particular persons who, but for their Jewishness, would be (in the American context) unambiguously White. We might simply call those persons White, or we might say they are conditionally White, off-White, functionally White, or “White but not quite.” The intersection of Jewishness and race has a long and fraught history over several dimensions; there were and remain significant questions regarding whether Jews (at least those of proximate northern European descent) should be considered “White.”<sup>1</sup>

The author wishes to thank Wendy Brown, Shawn C. Harris, Rob Jennings, Kristine Kay, Ainsley LeSure, Richard Jeffrey Newman, Elizabeth Robinson, Sarah Song, and Sunny Yang, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their helpful feedback. This article also benefited from comments following presentations at the Berkeley Institute for Jewish Law and Israel Studies, the Berkeley Graduate Student Workshop in Political Theory, and the Western Political Science Association’s intersectionality section.

1. The concept of the Jew as even being potentially White is of relatively recent vintage. As racial discourse began to emerge in Europe in the seventeenth century, the general (though not universal) view was that Jews were at the very least racially Other and perhaps even “Black.” This went hand in hand with Jewish subordination—Jewishness and Blackness reciprocated and reinforced one another, as both served as markers of disease, ugliness, and inferiority of all sorts. Sander L. Gilman, “Are Jews White? Or, the History of the Nose Job,” in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2000), 229–37; Marla Brettschneider, *The Family Flamboyant: Race Politics, Queer Families, Jewish Lives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 25. As time passed, it became more common to see Jews in the American context as at least

Conditional Whiteness may be the most comprehensive describer: an American Jew whose grandparents immigrated from Austria might unambiguously benefit from White privilege when passing a highway patrol car, but not enjoy it in any way whatsoever when White supremacists are looking for a target to harass. Nonetheless, I do not wish to be hung up on the precise nomenclature.<sup>2</sup> Suffice to say, there are many Jews whose ancestry proximately traces to European countries, whose status as White in America would be relatively uncontroversial save for whatever complications are posed by their Jewishness. For simplicity's sake we can refer to these Jews as "White Jews."

But, of course, not all Jews fit this description. There are Jews whose ancestry is not European: Sephardic Jews from Turkey or Latin America, Mizrahi Jews from Iraq or Tunisia, Indian Jews, Ethiopian Jews, African American Jews, and others. Yet, in most conversations or discourses that purport to be about "Jews," the archetypical Jew that is imagined as the subject of discussion does not look like those Jews and does not include their history. What counts as a "Jewish problem" or a "Jewish experience" or a "Jewish history" is often in fact particular and partial to the specific problems and experiences of the Jews described in the first paragraph: the White Jews.<sup>3</sup> The merger of Jewishness into Whiteness places

---

somewhat—though perhaps not unambiguously—White. See, e.g., Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews," in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 171–99. For a recent critique of the "Whitening" of Jews in critical Whiteness literature, see Balázs Berkovits, "Critical Whiteness Studies and the 'Jewish Problem,'" *Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialtheorie und Philosophie* 5, no. 1 (2018): 86–102.

Note that following the *Chicago Manual of Style*, *AJS Review* style usually calls for adjectives and nouns describing ethnicity, like "white," "whiteness," "black," etc., to be lowercase. With the editors' permission, I have used capital letters here, as these words as concepts and categories are doing analytical work.

2. I am persuaded that "White-passing" is generally poor terminology that falsely conflates White Jewish experience with that of, for example, pale-skinned Jews of African American descent who are "passing" as White in a more traditional way. Nylah Burton's suggestion of "functionally White" emphasizes how, in many, albeit not all, American contexts, White Jews do enjoy the prerogatives of Whiteness even in cases where others are perfectly aware of their Jewishness. Nylah Burton, "White Jews: Stop Calling Yourselves 'White-Passing,'" *Jewish Daily Forward*, July 2, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/404482/white-jews-stop-calling-yourselves-white-passing/>; see also Tema Smith, "Are Jews White? American History Says It's Complicated," *Jewish Daily Forward*, January 9, 2019, <https://forward.com/opinion/417274/are-jews-white-american-history-says-its-complicated/>.

Another advantage of "functionally White" or "conditionally White" is that, unlike "White-passing," these terms are not primarily associated with the African American racial experience and thus can be developed in a manner specifically attuned to Jewish experiences without implicitly or explicitly claiming that Jewish and Black experiences in America are coterminous. Since I will be using the simple "White Jews" going forward, I cannot pursue this point further here.

3. In speaking of "Jewish experience" or "perspective," I do not mean to suggest that all Jews have similar life stories or that they agree on even important questions of Jewish meaning, politics, or identity. Neither do I want to assert that these concepts are wholly incoherent or irretrievably

non-White Jews in a double bind—“split at the root,” to use Adrienne Rich’s evocative phrase.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, the discrete experiences, problems, or histories of non-White Jews will not be recognized as Jewish insofar as they are non-White (since Jewishness is understood as a White experience).<sup>5</sup> And on the other, insofar as these experiences, problems, or histories *are* recognized as Jewish, then they will cease to be acknowledged as non-White (since, again, Jewishness is understood as a White experience).<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the second conception meant to be evoked by “White Jews” is the vision of the Jew as White in the public imaginary. Even granting all of the qualifications present in the preceding paragraphs, the figure of the Jew is currently imagined as White—certainly in the Anglo-American world, and perhaps globally as well. The prototypical Jew is someone whose ancestors lived in Europe; if they did not remain there it is because they moved at some point to America or Israel due to some type of European oppression—Russian pogroms, the Nazi Holocaust, the Dreyfus affair, and so on. Jews who do not fit this narrative are often not acknowledged. Even where they are, their image is not the one that is initially evoked when people (very much including those in the overwhelmingly Ashkenazic and generally pale-skinned American Jewish community) talk about Jews. Put another way, “White Jews” are just “Jews”; if one is to talk about non-White

---

fragmented. I find Iris Marion Young’s concept of “perspective” to be of great service: noting that “differently positioned people have different experience, history, and social knowledge derived from that positioning,” which in turn “attunes” certain people “to particular kinds of social meanings and relationships.” Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136. Perspective does not dictate specific content, but rather helps create the set of questions and assumptions from which we begin to reason. Young offers the example of the *Pittsburgh Courier* as a newspaper that adopts an identifiably African American perspective even as its writers offer a wide range of often-conflicting opinions and ideologies; the *Jewish Daily Forward* would have served just as well as an example.

4. Adrienne Rich, “Split at the Root,” in *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck (Boston: Beacon, 1982), 67–84.

5. A particularly striking case of this occurred at the 2016 Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly, where JFNA President Jerry Silverman, speaking of the situation in Ukraine, informed the audience that “for the first time since World War II, we actually have Jewish refugees.” Speech at Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly by President and CEO Jerry Silverman, video at <https://vimeo.com/192622967>. This completely overlooks the mid-twentieth-century experience of many Middle Eastern Jews who were forced from their homes as conditions for Jews outside of Israel deteriorated in the years and decades after Israel’s establishment.

6. For example, after Michael Twitty, an African American Jewish author, tried to connect his Jewishness and Blackness as part of a singular whole (“For me, being Black was a great preparation for becoming Jewish.”), he was rebuked by Kwame Zulu Shabazz, a professor of Africana studies at Knox College. Shabazz wrote of Twitty: “We want to be everything but our African selves.” Twitty rejoined: “I’m Jewish. Deal with it. Being Jewish doesn’t make you less Black. Deal with it. Being Black doesn’t make you less Jewish. Deal with it.” Naomi Pfefferman, “A Taste of Black History and a Side of Jewish Culture,” *Jewish Journal*, March 30, 2017, [http://jewishjournal.com/culture/food/passover\\_food/217338/taste-black-history-side-jewish-culture/](http://jewishjournal.com/culture/food/passover_food/217338/taste-black-history-side-jewish-culture/); K. Z. Shabazz, Twitter, June 9, 2017, <https://twitter.com/kzshabazz/status/873201063008100354>; Michael W. Twitty, Twitter, June 9, 2017, <https://twitter.com/KosherSoul/status/873283647993982978>.

Jews, a specific modifier is needed.<sup>7</sup> So “White Jews” also refers to the figure of the Jew as it is currently conceptualized in the public imagination—a figure that is imposed upon the lives of all Jews, whether (individually) White or not.<sup>8</sup>

The object of this essay, then, is to think about White Jews as individuals, and White Jews as a concept, and interrogate how the two constituent elements, “White” and “Jew,” interact with one another. The methodological approach is (to complete our march through the title) an intersectional one;<sup>9</sup> the idea is to think about how Whiteness and Jewishness in combination function in ways that are not necessarily grasped if one atomizes the identities and holds them apart. My claim is that when Jewishness—whether as a conceptual matter or as embodied in individual persons—is understood primarily as a subspecies of Whiteness, it obscures important features of Jewish experience for White and non-White Jews alike, while often accentuating or accelerating antisemitic tropes. In doing so, it perpetuates a form of antisemitic marginalization at the same time as it ratifies, even promotes, a racialized hierarchy within the Jewish community.

#### PLACING JEWS AND INTERSECTIONALISTS IN CONVERSATION

There could not be a more pressing time for a renewed and reinvigorated analysis of the contemporary operations of antisemitism. The growth of White nationalist and neo-Nazi sentiment has put the issue of antisemitism back on the American radar screen in an unprecedented way. Yet there is a consistent worry felt among many Jews—progressive Jews included—that left-wing critics deprioritize the fight against antisemitism, viewing it as a marginal issue, a distraction from more immediate concerns, or a fight that (but for a few stray cranks) has already been won.<sup>10</sup> This fear is exacerbated by a noticeable lacuna surrounding

7. See Tamar Manasseh, “Stop Calling Me a ‘Black Jew,’” *Jewish Daily Forward*, January 14, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/392099/stop-calling-me-a-black-jew/>; Brettschneider, *Family Flamboyant*, 10.

8. See Walter Isaac, “Locating Afro-American Judaism: A Critique of White Normativity,” in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 512.

9. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

10. The even deeper anxiety is that some on the Left may link up with or outright endorse certain antisemitic social currents. These concerns are exemplified in controversies surrounding the ongoing antisemitism scandals in the UK Labour Party, or the fulsome praise some leaders of the Women’s March have showered on Louis Farrakhan. See Dave Rich, *The Left’s Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel, and Antisemitism* (London: Biteback, 2016); Elad Nehorai, “Memo to the Left: Denounce Anti-Semite Louis Farrakhan,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, March 2, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/395675/memo-to-the-left-denounce-anti-semite-louis-farrakhan/>; David Schraub, “No One Who Praises an Anti-Semite Like Louis Farrakhan Can Call Herself ‘Progressive,’” *Haaretz*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-when-leftists-celebrate-satanic-jews-louis-farrakhan-1.5868809>.

antisemitism in progressive scholarship about contemporary issues of discrimination, oppression, and identity-based marginalization. Vigorous theoretical accounts of how antisemitism currently manifests in Western societies lag behind the excellent work focused on other oppressions. And though in theory intersectionality has much to offer Jews as an analytical tool for untangling some of these questions, in practice intersectional theorists have largely ignored the Jewish case. While intersectional approaches to Jewish difference are not unheard of,<sup>11</sup> they are exceedingly rare. Reviewing the literature on intersectionality in 2016, Marla Brettschneider found virtually no mention of Jews as a subject of inquiry. What's worse, the main exceptions are reactionary—authors who make sure to include “Jewish fundamentalists” alongside Christian or Muslim peers, or who emphasize (Orthodox) Jewish opposition to same-sex marriage as part of broader discussion of antigay religious practices while eliding the fact that Jews are disproportionately proponents of marriage equality.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, “intersectionality” has also become a term of significant discussion within the popular Jewish press, much of it negative.<sup>13</sup> It has taken the blame for promoting the marginalization of Jewish—particularly Zionist or Zionist-identified Jewish—persons in progressive coalitions, and is held ideologically responsible for acts of antisemitic exclusion in left-wing spaces that are supposed to be the locus of resistance to emergent racism and antisemitism.

While I understand where this critique comes from, I do not share it. Intersectionality is a tremendously powerful analytical tool that, when deployed properly, does far more to undermine these exclusionary practices than it does to warrant them. Yet the theoretical gap in intersectionality analyses largely overlooking the Jews is not fully accidental. Specifically, the association of Jews

11. See Marla Brettschneider, *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016); Jessica Greenebaum, “Placing Jewish Women into the Intersectionality of Race, Class and Gender,” *Race, Gender & Class* 6 (1999): 41–60; Analucia Lopezvoreda and David Schraub, “An Intersectional Failure: How Both Israel’s Backers and Critics Write Mizrahi Jews out of the Story,” *Tablet*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/197169/an-intersectional-failure-how-both-israels-backers-and-critics-write-mizrahi-jews-out-of-the-story>.

12. Brettschneider, *Jewish Feminism*, 149 and n. 13.

13. See, e.g., Bari Weiss, “I’m Glad the Dyke March Banned Jewish Stars,” *New York Times*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/opinion/im-glad-the-dyke-march-banned-jewish-stars.html>; Joshua Scharf, “Intersectionality’s Demonization of Jews,” *Algemeiner*, April 30, 2017, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2017/04/30/intersectionalities-demonization-of-jews/>; James Kirchick, “How Intersectionality Makes You Stupid,” *Tablet*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/196754/intersectionality-makes-you-stupid>; David Bernstein, “The Anti-Israel Trend You’ve Never Heard of,” *JTA*, January 4, 2016, <http://www.jta.org/2016/01/04/news-opinion/united-states/op-ed-the-anti-israel-trend-youve-never-heard-of>; Gabriel Noah Brahm, “Intersectionality,” *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 157–70.

For defenses, see Lopezvoreda and Schraub, “An Intersectional Failure”; David Schraub, “Why Jewish Feminism Should Embrace, Not Fear, Intersectionality,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, January 18, 2017, <https://forward.com/sisterhood/360303/why-jewish-feminism-should-embrace-not-fear-intersectionality/>; Benjamin Gladstone, “It’s Time for Intersectionality to Include the Jews,” *Tablet*, March 20, 2017, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/227837/its-time-for-intersectionality-to-include-the-jews>.

with *power* as an antisemitic trope functions to classify Jews not just as “White,” but as exemplifying or embodying Whiteness. Insofar as Jewishness is not understood as existing as a materially distinct category from Whiteness, the failure to consider Jews as a case of a *marginalized* identity is not intuitively felt as an absence.

Discourses about power (control, dominance), as well as discourses about hegemony (omnipresence, invisibility), can center both an intersectional analysis of the Jewish case as well as a meta-argument as to why Jewishness is often left untheorized in intersectional work. At one level, both power and hegemony are critical elements in exploring what Whiteness does as a social category. More than just a phenotype, Whiteness is a facilitator of social power and status, yet it is typically rendered unmarked. Consequently, the privileges and opportunities afforded to persons racialized as White are often not recognized as such—they are woven into the basic operating assumptions of society, such that their beneficiaries do not even perceive their existence. An important goal of much antiracism discourse is thus to unsettle the presumption of Whiteness as a neutral, objective vantage point and instead reveal or uncover the ways in which it provides specific and substantive power to those racialized as White.

For Jews, however, these concepts have a different social valence. Antisemitism frequently manifests as a concern over putative Jewish hyperpower. Whereas White individuals are often seen as an unmarked category (“just” individuals), Jewishness is very much a marked identity—and the markers quite frequently center around beliefs about Jewish power, domination, or social control. The Whiteness frame by design is meant to draw attention to these attributes, revealing things that otherwise go unseen or unspoken. But when it operates on the Jewish case—where these attributes are not unmarked but instead are exceptionally visible and salient—its cultural impact can be quite different. Instead of unsettling and particularizing a hitherto “neutral” identity, it can promote, even accelerate, deeply antisemitic tropes.

An intersectional approach—showing how Whiteness and Jewishness change in valance when conjoined together—can illuminate facets of antisemitism and oppression that otherwise might remain obscure. It allows us to see how an understanding of “White Jews” cannot be grasped simply by placing “Whiteness” and “Jewishness” side by side. The union of “White” and “Jew” is more than the sum of its parts. And indeed, since the “White Jew” is in part an *imagined* identity projected on all Jews (regardless of how they racially identify or—were they not Jewish—would be identified), the interrelation of Jews and Whiteness has impacts that extend well beyond those who, assessed individually, would be considered “White Jews.”

Ultimately, the goal of this essay is in large part one of reconciliation. By demonstrating the utility of an intersectional lens in illuminating otherwise hard-to-articulate forms of antisemitic exclusion, I hope that I can model the inclusion of Jewish issues in the intersectional canon, encourage more Jewish writers to view intersectionality as an important tool, encourage more non-Jewish writers to view Jewish issues as significant components of intersectional work, and dissipate

some of the Jewish skepticism and anxiety that is currently associated with intersectionality's importance in contemporary social activism.

#### INTERSECTIONAL METHODS AND INTERSECTIONAL GAPS: RELATING WHITENESS AND JEWISHNESS

Today, intersectionality is sometimes deployed whenever a scholar or activist wishes to evoke multiple axes of identity-based discrimination. In its initial formulation by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, however, "intersectionality" sought to tackle a much more specific problem.<sup>14</sup> The issue was not just that, for example, racial oppression and gender oppression were often held out as separate inquiries. It was that even an inquiry that incorporated both an analysis of racial and gender oppression might still fail to adequately encompass the experiences of (say) Black women, to the extent that "racial oppression" was viewed through the lens of Black *men*, and gender oppression through the vantage of *White* women. Where that is the case, Crenshaw observes, the exclusion of Black women is not solved "simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."<sup>15</sup> The core of the intersectional insight is that the experience that lies at the *intersection* of race and sex is not simply the combination of what are taken to be the "simpliciter" cases of race and sex, precisely because the "simpliciter" case is in actuality a discretely White (for women) or male (for Blacks) experience.

Hence, intersectionality is not a matter of building coalitions between groups combatting various forms of identity-based oppression: antiracist groups should also oppose sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and so on. This practice, sometimes dubbed the "additive" approach, simply ladles different marginalized identities on top of one another in the hopes that their summation will sufficiently include all persons in the full panoply of their diverse identities.<sup>16</sup>

14. Jennifer Nash has criticized what she terms an "originalist" approach to intersectionality, where new contributions to the field are judged by their perceived fidelity to Crenshaw's initial foundational texts. Jennifer C. Nash, "Feminist Originalism: Intersectionality and the Politics of Reading," *Feminist Theory* 17, no. 1 (2016): 3–20. While her critique carries considerable weight, it also comes with some peril—particularly given the general exclusion of Jews from the development of intersectionality as a field or as a category of intersectional analysis. This absence should give us pause about the utility of simply cross-applying the broad set of disciplinary insights developed under the auspices of "intersectionality" to the Jewish case without first laying out a distinctively Jewish groundwork. Consequently, it strikes me as worthwhile to begin at the beginning, articulating some initial ways in which core intersectional insights can illuminate facets of Jewish experience that might otherwise be obscured, with the hopes that it presents the beginning rather than the end of a much more involved conversation.

15. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 140.

16. Patricia Hill Collins, "Symposium on West and Fenstermaker's 'Doing Difference,'" *Gender & Society* 9, no. 4 (1995): 493; Lisa Bowleg, "When Black plus Lesbian plus Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The Methodological Challenges of Qualitative and Quantitative Intersectionality Research," *Sex Roles* 59 (2008): 314; Nicole M. Else-Quest and Janet Shibley Hyde,

The instinct behind such moves is typically noble and is not entirely unrelated to the problems intersectionality seeks to confront: a movement advocating on behalf of women that leaves aside matters of racism and homophobia would not be providing for the liberation of *all* women since, of course, many women are non-White and/or nonstraight. Yet such practice, while well meaning and often quite valuable, is not itself intersectional. It takes as given the status quo understandings of concepts like “racism” or “homophobia” that are culled from the experiences of the “otherwise-privileged members of the group.”<sup>17</sup> For example, a conception of sexism that focuses on the exclusion of women from the workforce stems from a particular White (and middle-class) experience—it does not necessarily resonate with the Black (or working-class) women who frequently worked outside the home well before the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> If this conception is what sexism is imagined to be, then “adding” it to the antiracism mix will do little to rectify the exclusion of Black women.

One of the key benefits of intersectional approaches is that they encourage us to look into how the function and operation of our identity categories change when placed, as they always are, in dynamic relation with one another. Crenshaw’s observation that, for example, Black female oppression is “greater than the sum of race and sex” is applicable across a wide range of cases. Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix provide a more general formulation of intersectionality, associating it with “the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis [sic] of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts.”<sup>19</sup> This aspect of intersectionality explains why I draw on it in a case that is—in more ways than one—unorthodox.

Recently, Cynthia Levine-Rasky began applying intersectionality theory to Whiteness as a marked category.<sup>20</sup> The basic insight of intersectionality proceeds on the assumption that the “otherwise-privileged” member of a group—the woman who is White, for instance—sets a neutral baseline by which other members of the group are measured. This observation is frequently valid as a descriptor, but a deeper dive allows it to be unpacked, disassociating Whiteness from neutrality and instead recognizing it as a distinct “color” with particular properties, associations, and characteristics—albeit ones that emerge out of historically

---

“Intersectionality in Quantitative Psychological Research: I. Theoretical and Epistemological Issues,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2016): 162.

17. Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection,” 140.

18. *Ibid.*, 156.

19. Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, “Ain’t I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004): 76.

20. Cynthia Levine-Rasky, “Intersectionality Theory Applied to Whiteness and Middle-Classness,” *Social Identities* 17, no. 2 (2011): 239–53. See also Devin Carbado, “Colorblind Intersectionality,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 811–45.



situated processes and forces.<sup>21</sup> By fleshing out Whiteness as a cohesive analytical category in its own right, Whiteness can be thought of in a textured and variegated way—an observation which, in turn, suggests that Whiteness can operate differently in conjunction with different social categories, “doing” different things to, say, a recent east European immigrant, a working-class Irishman, an upper-class WASP, or a Jewish college student. Through this lens, we can begin to answer Levine-Rasky’s penetrating set of questions: “[W]hat does whiteness ‘do’ for Jews? How does it confer or deprive them of power or privilege? What does it ensure or endanger?”<sup>22</sup>

#### WHITE + JEW ≠ “WHITE JEW”

An example can help further illuminate the problem I wish to explore. In 2016, as the Stanford Student Council debated a resolution condemning antisemitism, one senator objected to a particular clause identifying claims that “Jews [control] the media, economy, government and other societal institutions” as a form of antisemitism. The senator argued, “[The clause] says: ‘Jews controlling the media, economy, government and other societal institutions’ [is] a feature of anti-Semitism that we theoretically shouldn’t challenge. I think that that’s kind of irresponsible foraying into another politically contentious conversation. Questioning these potential power dynamics, I think, is not anti-Semitism. I think it’s a very valid discussion.”<sup>23</sup>

The senator’s comments were widely condemned as antisemitic or an apologetic for antisemitism; he ultimately withdrew his bid for reelection.

I agree that the statement in question was antisemitic in nature. And perhaps its utterance can be explained simply by there being some people who possess antisemitic attitudes. Yet I think one can reconstruct the thinking behind the senator’s statement in a way that explains how—at least not knowing the particular history of the trope of Jewish hyperpower—one might have not instinctively recognized the problem. The line of argument would go as follows:

It is standard practice in opposing White supremacy to note the power and significant control White people, as compared to people of color, have in institutions like the media, economy, government, and other social bodies. So how can it be that the same argument made all the time with respect to White people generally—and acknowledged to be valid and progressive in that case—suddenly becomes a form of bigotry when applied to a particular *subset* of White people (i.e., the Jews)? Indeed, we frequently see White

21. Much of the work marking Whiteness was done under the auspices of the “critical Whiteness studies” movement. See generally Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *Critical White Studies: Looking behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

22. Cynthia Levine-Rasky, “White Privilege: Jewish Women’s Writing and the Instability of Categories” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 7, no. 1 (2008): 59.

23. Fangzhou Liu, “ASSU Senate Continues Discussion of Anti-Semitism Resolution, Executive Update,” *Stanford Daily*, April 6, 2016, <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2016/04/06/assu-senate-continues-discussion-of-anti-semitism-resolution-executive-update/>.

people try to deny they possess this power and instead take on the role of the victim; how is this any different?

If we view the issue through the lens of Whiteness, the need to question distributions of power—who has it, how is it exercised—is unremarkable, even essential. Under this framework, the objectors' claim of bigotry or bias looks worse than inapposite, it looks familiar. It echoes larger efforts to dismiss or deny the real power and privileges White people, as a class, possess in important societal institutions.<sup>24</sup>

Contrast the framing that emerges if we looked at the matter from a Jewish lens:

It is a standard form of antisemitism and anti-Jewish bigotry to argue that Jews have power and control over institutions like the media, economy, government, and other social bodies—power they exercise to the exclusion of and detriment of non-Jews. So why should such claims suddenly cease to be antisemitic simply because they cloak themselves in the garb of “antiracism” or “progressivism”? Indeed, historically speaking, there is no oddity in such a connection; antisemitism of this form has not just occasionally but frequently manifested precisely in this way—leftist self-identification and all.

Adopting the Jewish perspective, we encounter a familiarity of a different kind. Antisemitic tropes focusing on Jewish domination and control are standard-issue, and there is nothing uncommon in them being clothed in progressive language. Nor is there anything unfamiliar in dismissing Jewish objections to such stereotypes by labeling them further proof of Jewish power and censorial instincts.<sup>25</sup>

Hopefully, this illustrates the sense of talking past one another that seems to explain at least part of this affair. The senator is talking about Jews no differently, he thinks, from how he talks about other members of the White community. How can it be that the argument shifts from valid to illicit simply because the subject is Jews? Meanwhile, the Jewish objectors think that the senator is talking about them in a way no different from any other antisemite. How could the same argument gain legitimacy simply because the senator thought his approach was antiracist in nature?

More importantly, it is clear that one cannot fully understand what was happening in this case if one insists on holding “Jewish” and “White” apart from one

24. Teun A. van Dijk, “Denying Racism: Elite Discourse and Racism,” in *Racism and Migration in Western Europe*, ed. John Solomos and John Wrench (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 181: “Denials challenge the very legitimacy of anti-racist analysis, and thus are part of the politics of ethnic management: As long as a problem is being denied in the first place, the critics are ridiculed, marginalised, or delegitimated: denials debilitate resistance”; Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.

25. David Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2017), chap. 1. On the general practice of dismissing claims of bias or oppression as made in bad faith to suppress critical conversations, see David Schraub, “Playing with Cards: Discrimination Claims and the Charge of Bad Faith,” *Social Theory & Practice* 42, no. 2 (2016): 285–303.

another. The incompatible narratives emerge because they seek to analyze the “Jewish” and “White” dimensions of the issue separately. One cannot simply add the two analyses back together at the end; the result would be gibberish. It is evident, rather, that something specific happened at the point of intersection. Discourses of White power and privilege—valid as far as they go—acted as a sort of accelerant for prejudiced tropes of Jewish power and privilege. The Whiteness of the Jewish figure served to cleanse, even validate, arguments that otherwise would reek in their antisemitic familiarity.

#### TROPES OF JEWISHNESS; TROPES OF WHITENESS

The above example illustrates that Whiteness and Jewishness do not simply sit side by side as social categories. Rather, Whiteness seems to be *doing* something to Jewishness.<sup>26</sup> “White Jews” are not “White” and then also “Jews.” Jewish Whiteness seems to inflect, in serious and fundamental ways, the understanding of what it means to be Jewish—or what Jewish experience could possibly be. At the extreme, it subsumes Jewishness entirely—Jewishness cannot be understood but through the interpretive frames offered by Whiteness.

Why does this happen? What is it about Jewishness that appears to make it particularly vulnerable to this sort of elision? “Why,” as Jessica Greenebaum asked, “is this oppression different from all others (or not)?”<sup>27</sup> And what are the impacts of the “White Jew” concept on actual Jewish persons (of any racial background)? Part of the difficulty is that Jewishness crosses over and blurs categories that theorists—particularly nonintersectional ones—often wish to keep separate. It is simultaneously national, racial, ethnic, and religious in character, but not reducible to any of these. As Albert Memmi, the renowned Tunisian Jewish anticolonialist writer, wryly observed, it is the “sociologists’ lack of imagination” that renders them unable to latch on to the peculiarity of the Jewish case and instead sees them grasping about for a more familiar box in which to place Jews.<sup>28</sup>

Yet there are answers to be had upon a close look at the relationship between tropes about Whiteness and tropes about Jewishness. Viewed apart from one another, we can talk about Whiteness in a particular way and Jewishness in another way, without ever coming to grips with how these respective discourses interact. By placing them in a dynamic relationship, it becomes evident how Whiteness and Jewishness operate upon each other in particular and often troublesome ways.

26. Levine-Rasky, “White Privilege,” 58–59; Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, “Notes from the (Shifting) Middle: Some Ways of Looking at Jews,” in *Jewish Locations: Traversing Racialized Landscapes*, ed. Lisa Tessman and Bat-Ami Bar On (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 116.

27. Greenebaum, “Placing Jewish Women,” 42.

28. Albert Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jew*, trans. Judy Hyun (New York: Orion, 1966), 288. And, as Evelyn Torton Beck observes, “If the concept ‘Jew’ does not fit the categories we have created, then ... we need to rethink our categories.” Evelyn Torton Beck, “The Politics of Jewish Invisibility,” *National Women’s Studies Association Journal* 1, no. 1 (1988): 101.

Start with Whiteness. Identified with control, privilege, dominance, and exclusivity, “Whiteness,” writes Abby Ferber, “is a privileged status. To be White is to have greater access to rewards and valued resources simply because of one’s group membership.”<sup>29</sup> In Cheryl Harris’s influential formulation, Whiteness is treated as a property right—giving value to a racialized elite and protecting that value from challenge as a form of legalized entitlement.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Whiteness—at least in a contemporary “color-blind” sense—is invisible. It exists as a default category, simply the way things are. There’s no “White” media because it’s just media, there’s no “White” history because it’s just history. Whiteness is a hegemonic presence that is so pervasive it need not be spoken of. As a hegemonic identity, Whiteness is simultaneously unobserved and omnipresent.

Sara Ahmed’s essay “A Phenomenology of Whiteness” identifies race as “a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with.”<sup>31</sup> And, it turns out, those who are White (qualified, of course, by other relevant aspects of their social identity—class, sex, sexuality, and, of course, religion) can do quite a lot. Much is in their reach; spaces and practices and behaviors and opportunities are open to them that are closed to or beyond the grasp of others. Moreover, in a nominally color-blind system, such opportunities are not viewed as the product of any sort of special accommodation towards Whiteness, but rather proceed as an unnoticed default. “Spaces are orientated ‘around’ whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen.”<sup>32</sup>

Turn now to Jewishness. While perceptions about Jews are varied and diverse, antisemitism frequently manifests particularly as a putative criticism of Jewish power. In her influential pamphlet *The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere*, April Rosenblum identifies several themes common to antisemitic narratives, including:

- Jews are mysterious, or act secretly behind the scenes;
- Jews have abnormal or supernatural amounts of power;
- Jews are disloyal to, or seek the destruction of, the society they live in;
- Jews are disproportionately the cause of harm in the world;
- Jews are unlike the rest of humanity (at best); or inherently evil, or tied to the devil (at worst);
- Jews are wealthy or greedy;
- Jews are the “brains” behind the action.<sup>33</sup>

29. Abby L. Ferber, “The Culture of Privilege: Color-Blindness, Postfeminism, and Christonormativity,” *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 64.

30. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1707–91.

31. Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 154.

32. *Ibid.*, 157.

33. April Rosenblum, *The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere: Making Resistance to Anti-Semitism Part of All of Our Movements* (April 2007), 4, available at <https://thepastinfo.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/past-read.pdf>. See also Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, “In Struggle: A Handbook for Recognizing and Resisting Anti-Semitism and for Building Jewish Identity and Pride,” in *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women’s Anthology* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 334–46.

What these themes all share is their presentation of the Jew as distinctively empowered compared to humanity in general.<sup>34</sup> In the antisemitic imagination, Jews are hated specifically because they are presumed to be dominant. “Anti-Semites,” writes Phoebe Maltz Bovy, “weren’t —aren’t—just people who think they’re better than Jews. They’re people who think they’re being *oppressed* by Jews.”<sup>35</sup> As Moishe Postone thus observed, “Anti-Semitism, consequently, can appear to be antihegemonic.... the expression of a movement of the little people against an intangible, global form of domination.”<sup>36</sup>

The antisemite views the Jew as an omnipresent, world-spanning character—distinguished by his or her unrivaled ability to act, control, dominate, or take over. As Frantz Fanon observed, “Jews are feared because of their potential to appropriate. ‘They’ are everywhere. The banks, the stock exchanges, and the government are infested with them. They control everything. Soon the country will belong to them.”<sup>37</sup> This power is distinguished by being both extraordinary (they *control everything*, nothing is outside the Jewish grasp) and illicit (they gained such control through trickery, deceit, or other underhanded or illegitimate means). Viewed through Ahmed’s frame of what is “within reach,” the answer given by the antisemite regarding the Jews is “everything.” Jews are marked by their exceptional, even superhuman, capacities—there is nothing they can’t do, no institution or community that is insulated from their tendrils.<sup>38</sup>

Narratives of ill-gotten Jewish power convert basic Jewish political participation into a “Kosher conspiracy.”<sup>39</sup> It is presumed that Jews are persistent and perpetual winners in the political game, such that the proper orientation towards Jews in society is to rein in their exceptional influence and leverage.<sup>40</sup> To the extent Jews are even recognized as marginalized, they are taken as a model of

34. I do not mean to suggest that antisemitism *only* manifests as a critique of putative Jewish power. There are longstanding antisemitic tropes of Jews being abject and pathetic, or diseased and pestilent. But even these often cross-pollinate with the narrative of Jewish hyperpower—for example, explaining Jewish resilience in spite of their abject status by reference to their supposed cunning and uncanny ability to manipulate social affairs to their advantage. In any event, the narrative of Jewish hyperpower is of central importance to how Jewishness intersects with Whiteness.

35. Phoebe Maltz Bovy, “Not So Post-Racial After All,” *What Would Phoebe Do*, May 6, 2013, <http://whatwouldphoebedo.blogspot.com/2013/05/not-so-post-racial-after-all.html>.

36. Moishe Postone, “History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 99.

37. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 2008), 135.

38. Consider the Christian deicide charge in this light. After all, to kill God himself is a feat well beyond the capacity of your typical mortal.

39. The phrase “Kosher Conspiracy” was on the cover of a 2002 *New Statesman* (UK) article, illustrated by a gold Star of David impaling a prone Union Jack flag. This image was specifically called out in the British Parliament’s 2006 All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism, as it “evoked a number of classical anti-Jewish stereotypes: gold implying Jewish wealth; the charge of conspiracy; and the piercing of the Union Jack implying an accusation of disloyalty.” *Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism*, September 2006, 35, available at <http://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=1274>.

40. Recent research has suggested that, controlling for class and other confounding variables, Jews may actually be *less* civically engaged and active than other Americans. Kenneth D. Wald,

legislative and social protection—the out-group that’s in.<sup>41</sup> Other groups seek the bounty that Jews are assumed to already possess. So, for example, Didi Herman documents the use of the Jewish case as justification for expanding the Race Relations Act (the United Kingdom’s major antidiscrimination law) to other out-groups such as Sikhs and Muslims. Shouldn’t they enjoy the same protections as Jews?<sup>42</sup> And surely the answer is yes—but what was overlooked was that Jews had *never* actually won a reported case under the Race Relations Act against a non-Jewish defendant. The image of the Jew as modeling protection completely overwrote a reality of continued vulnerability.

The point here is not that Jews are somehow distinct from other minority groups in receiving often-inadequate protection from formal or informal legal sources. That, of course, is an experience quite common to political out-groups. What may well be distinctive is that, in seeking out these protections, Jews lose even as—or perhaps because—they are thought of as winners.

#### WHAT DOES WHITENESS DO TO JEWISHNESS?

##### 1. Jewish Power

We can finally zero in on Levine-Rasky’s question: What does Whiteness *do* to Jewishness?<sup>43</sup> In its critical manifestation, Whiteness as a lens of analysis is designed to elevate or accentuate certain aspects of experience that might otherwise go unnoticed. A middle-class, Christian, suburban man thinks of himself, and is thought of as, “just a person.” He does not see himself, and society does not portray him, as particularly powerful, or privileged, or influential. He works for what he gets, sometimes struggles or faces hardships “like anyone else,” and otherwise is presented as simply “normal.” The goal of Whiteness studies is not necessarily to fully falsify these stories as much as it is to provide a counterweight. It emphasizes opportunities that the man as White receives, or treatment that he gets, or spaces he can move in that others do not or cannot. Peggy McIntosh’s “Invisible Knapsack”<sup>44</sup> is an effort to draw out the privileges of Whiteness as a *contrast* to a deracinated, individualistic perspective that is blind to these particular sets of racialized advantages.

---

“Politically Hyperactive? The Civic Participation of American Jews,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 4 (2016): 545–60.

41. Nasar Meer, “Semantics, Scales and Solidarities in the Study of Antisemitism and Islamophobia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 508.

42. Didi Herman, *An Unfortunate Coincidence: Jews, Jewishness, and English Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 126ff; see Meer, “Semantics,” 511.

43. Levine-Rasky, “White Privilege,” 59.

44. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” (1988), available at <https://www.deanza.edu/faculty/lewisjulie/White%20Priviledge%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf>.

But in the Jewish case, something different happens. Jews are *not* seen as “normal,” everyday persons.<sup>45</sup> As discussed above, the prevailing view of Jews—the view that *subordinates* Jews—is precisely that they are “particularly powerful, or privileged, or influential.” And so, when the Whiteness frame—which by design draws attention to these attributes—is overlaid upon the White Jew (as a body or a concept), it serves not as a counterweight but as an accelerant. The hope in applying the Whiteness frame to a gentile White is to unsettle received understandings of the White experience—to make people see things they had not seen before. By contrast, the effect of applying Whiteness to Jewishness is confirmatory: “I always thought that Jews had all this power and privilege—and see how right I was!”<sup>46</sup>

Bryan Cheyette, commenting on the absence of antisemitism in many academic works dealing with oppression, attributes the gap to Jewishness being folded into an untextured Whiteness that operates indiscriminately upon Jews and non-Jews alike. “Where,” he asks, “within this supposed ‘common culture’ does ‘the Jew’—other than as an aspect of dominant ‘white’ oppression—fit?”<sup>47</sup> And the problem is worse than he lets on: Jews are not just another flavor of White. They *epitomize* Whiteness, they exemplify its vices as “the iciest of the ice people.”<sup>48</sup> Jewishness is perceived as “a form of almost hyperwhiteness,” its ultimate avatar.<sup>49</sup> Pushed to its limit, “Jewish simply displaces white.”<sup>50</sup> Jews, as *inherently* avaricious, deceitful, domineering, and possessive, stand in for those Whites who are irredeemably supremacist in orientation; we end White supremacy at the point where Whites stop acting like Jews.

It is no accident, then, that the latest Far Right gambit to enlist people of color into antisemitic projects is to promote the idea of “Jewish privilege” as

45. As Sartre observed, the antisemite views himself as “an average man, modestly average,” in contrast to the Jews he recognizes as in many ways exceptional. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 22.

46. Consider Phoebe Maltz Bovy’s remarks on the “cliché overlap” between the proverbial “White Lady” and the Jewish American Princess: “The traits for which I’m to invite a gentle punch up are the very same ones that, in a slightly different context (and context won’t always be clear) constitute a slur.” Phoebe Maltz Bovy, *The Perils of Privilege* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2017), 183.

47. Bryan Cheyette, “Jews and Jewishness in the Writings of George Eliot and Frantz Fanon,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 29, no. 4 (1995): 4.

48. This phrase was used by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to characterize the thesis of Michael Bradley in the latter’s *The Iceman Inheritance: Prehistoric Sources of Western Man’s Racism, Sexism, and Aggression*, where he contended that Whites were brutal because they descended from Neanderthals, and Jews were especially vicious because they were the “purest” Neanderthals. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Black Demagogues and Pseudo-Scholars,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1992.

49. Ari Feldman, “Is a String of Attacks against Brooklyn Jews Really about Anti-Semitism?,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, December 5, 2018, <https://forward.com/news/national/415385/is-a-string-of-attacks-against-brooklyn-jews-really-about-anti-semitism/>. The quote comes from Mark Winston Griffith, executive director of the Black Movement Center in Brooklyn, discussing antisemitic attacks targeting the Jewish community.

50. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *The Issue Is Power: Essays on Women, Jews, Violence and Resistance* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1992), 116.

the true and ultimate manifestation of “White privilege.”<sup>51</sup> The phrase “Jewish privilege” itself occupies a peculiarly interstitial space between Far Left and Far Right.<sup>52</sup> It emerged from ultra-Right sources like the *Occidental Observer* and David Duke’s website.<sup>53</sup> But it has also been enthusiastically endorsed by writers on the Far Left, such as Philip Weiss and Adam Horowitz; journalist Rania Khalek went as far as to mock as “paranoid” any objections to “addressing Jewish privilege.”<sup>54</sup> This overlap signals a larger bridging function antisemitism can play between right- and left-wing ideology, where Jewishness stands in for a shared understanding of illicit and all-encompassing power. Eric Ward, a researcher with the Southern Poverty Law Center and an African American man, relied on this presumed commonality as a means of staying incognito while conducting research at a Far Right convention. He recounts a White supremacist who affirmed his presence there and approved of “temporary alliances with ‘the Blacks, the Mexicans, the Orientals’ against the real enemy, the federal government controlled by an international conspiracy.” As Ward observes, “He didn’t have to say who ran this conspiracy because it was obvious to all in attendance.”<sup>55</sup>

The “bridging” function of the “Jewish privilege” concept, in turn, reveals an interesting overlay between “Jewish Whiteness” and more traditional White supremacist iterations of antisemitism. White supremacists, of course, deny Jews are White. But—despite the claims of “supremacy”—White supremacists also tend to portray Whiteness as a threatened, besieged category. White supremacists do not view themselves as having power or control in American society—to the contrary, they are concerned to the point of obsession with how they have (in their minds) “lost” these things. And the explanation, very often, comes in the

51. Antisemitic flyers posted at the University of Illinois at Chicago made this link explicit: “Ending white privilege starts with ending Jewish privilege.” Stephen Gossett, “Anti-Semitic Flyers Found on UIC Campus for Second Time in a Week,” *Chicagoist*, March 20, 2017, [http://chicagoist.com/2017/03/20/more\\_anti-semitic\\_flyers\\_found\\_on\\_u.php](http://chicagoist.com/2017/03/20/more_anti-semitic_flyers_found_on_u.php).

52. For a broader discussion of the history and problematic nature of the label and concept “Jewish privilege,” see Maltz Bovy, *Perils of Privilege*, 216–24.

53. See Mark Green, “My Smackdown with Anti-White Crusader Tim Wise,” *Occidental Observer*, March 7, 2010, <http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/authors/Green-Wise.html>; Patrick Slatterly, “Want to Get into Harvard? Tell Them You’re Jewish!,” *DavidDuke.com*, December 20, 2012, <https://davidduke.com/want-to-get-into-harvard-tell-them-youre-jewish/>.

54. See Philip Weiss and Adam Horowitz, “‘The Nation’ and the Privileging of Jewish Voices on Israel/Palestine,” *Mondoweiss*, December 23, 2013, <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/12/privileging-voices-israelpalestine/>; Rania Khalek, “Paranoid student says addressing Jewish privilege is dangerously anti-semitic, like accusing Jews of world domination,” Twitter, December 8, 2014, <https://twitter.com/raniakhalek/status/542052042727260160?lang=en>.

55. “And,” he continued, “despite the widespread tendency to dismiss antisemitism, notwithstanding its daily presence across the country and the world, it is obvious to you, too.” Eric K. Ward, “Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism,” *The Public Eye*, June 29, 2017, <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism/#sthash.XyKG17XX.X2D1PWJp.dpbs>.



form of the world-dominating, conspiratorial Jew—as exemplified by *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>56</sup> Jews, in this view, have replaced or supplanted Whites—and, adding insult to injury, they can frequently *pass* as Whites. Ironically, even as White supremacists are the main deniers of the “White Jew” as a concept, they do much to reinforce and retrench that view insofar as they are particularly wedded to tropes of Jewish domination, power, and privilege.

## 2. Jewish Hegemony

Thus far the key trope linking Jewishness and Whiteness has been power, and power as a very visible thing—Jews are actively thought of and recognized as powerful. But Whiteness as a *hegemonic* concept also speaks of power as frequently cloaked or invisible, disguised as normal. It is so omnipresent, one absorbs it without effort. When provocateurs demand, “Why don’t we have a *White History Month*?,” the answer is that *every* month is a White History Month. We learn of White history, and culture, and practices every day—without marking it, just by moving through a world in which Whiteness is default.

This aspect of Whiteness, too, intersects with Jewishness in ways that demand unpacking. It is not for nothing that Evelyn Beck’s pathbreaking article on the exclusion of Jews in feminist movements was titled “The Politics of Jewish Invisibility.”<sup>57</sup> Writing in 1988, Beck observed that while there were many Jewish women writing as feminists, very few feminist works spoke specifically to or about Jewish themes—including those that held themselves out as multicultural in orientation.<sup>58</sup> Things have improved somewhat since then,<sup>59</sup> but by considerably less than one might hope—in part because the Jewish feminist and multicultural work that has been produced often remains isolated from larger conversations. On that note, there are a plethora of articles exploring why Jews seem not to be included in the “multicultural” pantheon, and nearly all suggest part of the reason is the perception of Jews as “White.”<sup>60</sup> Ward likewise identifies this discourse as key to the

56. On the centrality of antisemitism to White supremacist ideology, see *ibid.*

57. Beck, “Politics of Jewish Invisibility.”

58. *Ibid.*, 93–95. Or as T. Drorah Setel put it: “I am unseen as a feminist among Jews and unseen as a Jew among feminists.” Quoted in Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “Anti-Semitism in the Women’s Movement,” *Ms. Magazine*, June 1982, 66.

59. Consider, e.g., Brettschneider, *Family Flamboyant and Jewish Feminism*; Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1991).

60. See, e.g., Michael Galchinsky, “Glimpsing Golus in the Golden Land: Jews and Multiculturalism in America,” *Judaism* 43, no. 4 (1994): 360–68; Peter F. Langman, “Including Jews in Multiculturalism,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development* 23, no. 4 (1995): 226–36; Dan Ian Rubin, “Still Wandering: The Exclusion of Jews from Issues of Social Justice and Multicultural Thought,” *Multicultural Perspective* 15, no. 4 (2013): 213–19; Rubin, “Whiter Shade of Pale: Making the Case for Jewish Presence in the Multicultural Classroom,” *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 19, no. 2 (2017): 131–45.

resistance he encounters in certain progressive communities when he tries to explain the centrality of antisemitism to White supremacist movements.<sup>61</sup>

Why is it that “Whiteness” serves to obscure Jewishness in this way? Consider two possibilities for how we might account for an absence of distinctively “Jewish” contributions or discourses. The first account says they are excluded—they are not desired, or not recognized, or not valued. But the second account holds that they are already included—they exist as part of the implicit background of dominant, hegemonic conversation. Jewishness is seen as adding nothing to a multicultural conversation; it is already implicitly included as part of the hegemonic “White” conversation. As one Jewish feminist related being told (at a conference that featured presentations by Black, Latina, and Irish Catholic women), “Jewish women are just White middle-class women.” Consequently, her interlocutor went on, “There is nothing that differentiates them from the ruling majority. There is no reason to treat them as a specialized minority or to devote any of our time to their particular experience.”<sup>62</sup> To demand significant time and attention be devoted to the Jewish case is little different from demanding still more resources and consideration be accorded to White people—that is, an insistence from those who already have so much that they should be given yet more.<sup>63</sup> In turn, the belief that this will be the reaction when Jews attempt to put “Jewish issues” on a multicultural or intersectional agenda is a major reason why many Jews are deeply reticent to do so.<sup>64</sup>

In short, the politics of Jewish invisibility is predicated on a presumption of Jewish omnipresence. Jews are not heard from because everyone assumes they have already heard from Jews—heard enough, perhaps heard too much, perhaps it is time to allow others to talk.<sup>65</sup> Because Jews are thought to be everywhere, the possibility that there is in fact a gap or quietude around Jews becomes almost inconceivable. After all, if there is one thing Jews *are not*, it’s “quiet.”

In 1967, James Baldwin wrote that “Jewish history, whether or not one can say it is honored, is certainly known.”<sup>66</sup> Can we be so confident? It seems Jewish

---

For a proposal on how Jewish experience might more fruitfully be included in a feminist pedagogy, see Jonathan Branfman, “Teaching for Coalition: Dismantling ‘Jewish-Progressive Conflict’ through Feminist & Queer Pedagogy,” *Frontiers* 40, no. 2 (forthcoming, 2019).

61. Ward, “Skin in the Game.”

62. Quoted in Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 130.

63. See Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew,” 119 and n. 10.

64. Beck, “Politics of Jewish Invisibility,” 94; Brenda Cossman and Marlee Kline, “‘And If Not Now, When?’: Feminism and Anti-Semitism beyond Clara Brett Martin,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 5 (1992): 314.

65. Rosa Pegueros recounts an experience where two mentions of Jewishness on a listserv for contributors to Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating’s *This Bridge We Call Home: Visions for Radical Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2002) sufficed to elicit complaints about Jewish takeover of the space. Rosa Maria Pegueros, “Radical Feminists—No Jews Need Apply,” *Nashim* 8 (2004): 174–80. Her experience coheres with my own.

66. James Baldwin, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic because They’re Anti-White,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1967.

history is “known” only in a deeply distorted way, refracted through a “Judeo-Christian” frame that frequently serves more to obscure than to illuminate. (To exemplify how Jewishness is erased within the conceit of “Judeo-Christian,” first ask what is considered the “traditional Judeo-Christian view” on abortion or the death penalty; then ask which Jewish sources and texts are typically used to arrive at that answer.) Christian supersecessionism in particular denied that Jews had anything worth saying or hearing about Jews—it insisted that one could more reliably know Jewish experience based on what Christians said about Jews than from what Jews said or did.<sup>67</sup>

Consider how one article articulates the concept of what the authors call “Judeo-Christian privilege.”<sup>68</sup> First of all, they attribute the concept to an earlier essay by Jewish author Lewis Z. Schlosser on *Christian privilege*; Schlosser never uses the term “Judeo-Christian privilege.”<sup>69</sup> They warrant the existence of “Judeo-Christian privilege” because “Christians and Jews share many beliefs because of the use of the Old Testament”—a tremendously thin and misrepresentative rendering of Jewish theological orientations even if it did not use an exclusively Christian label for the Hebrew Bible—“and both groups may experience White middle-class privilege.” They do allow that “Christians and Jews experience very different aspects of Judeo-Christian privilege” because “antisemitism remains a problem.” (They provide no further elaboration.) Finally, they conclude by asserting that “Christians unwittingly foster an environment that marginalizes different religions”—but presumably not Jews, as they have been transformed into the beneficiaries of this joint Judeo-Christian (but really just Christian) privileged status.<sup>70</sup>

As a statement of the Jewish condition in America, this is incomprehensible. It only works because “Whiteness” and “Judeo-Christian” assimilate Jewishness into dominant categories—Jewishness contributes nothing but nonetheless is taken to be included. And we might justly ask what was motivating the authors here. Why was it so important to append “Judeo-” to “Christian” in this discussion—so much so that they retroactively managed to locate it inside an article by a Jew identifying Christian privilege? What did it add? The answer seems to be a perceived need to insist upon Jews as insiders—Jews as basically White, basically middle-class, basically Christian, and so basically already spoken for.

To be sure, the misplaced confidence that one knows about the Other is hardly limited to antisemitism—a common feature of racism is that it generates a sort of malformed epistemology where those with power simply assume they

67. Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 70.

68. William Ming Liu, Theodore Pickett Jr., and Allen E. Ivey, “White Middle-Class Privilege: Social Class Bias and Implications for Training and Practice,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 35 (October 2007): 194–206.

69. Louis Z. Schlosser, “Christian Privilege: Breaking a Sacred Taboo,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 31 (2003): 44–51.

70. Liu, Pickett, and Ivey, “White Middle-Class Privilege,” 198–99.

have requisite knowledge regarding subordinated others.<sup>71</sup> But Jews are hit with a double erasure. To put it crudely, there is an erasure from the Right (at least, the more mainstream Right that does not endorse overt antisemitism) that assimilates Jewishness into White and “Judeo-Christian,” thereby denying the existence of an independent Jewish perspective, and a parallel erasure from the Left that validates this assimilation and accepts that it adequately and accurately represents Jews.

In the former case, the faux inclusion always carries with it the undertone of threat—there is no mystery as to what the status of Jews would be for their right-wing “friends” if they *did not* acquiesce to being seen as a sort of “quirky Protestant sect.”<sup>72</sup> Jews offer up a patina of diversity to both hegemonic Christianity and hegemonic Whiteness—but only on the condition that they keep quiet and not disturb White and Christian narratives about Jews. The latter case, by contrast, agrees to cede Jews to “White” and “Christian” so that it need not think about them any further, or any differently than it does “other” Whites or Christians.

The license to speak about Jews without having to “think any further” about them explains another important role Jews or Jewish entities sometimes play inside discourse about Whiteness. As discussed, much of the point of Whiteness discourse is about getting White people to reckon with privileges or powers or advantages that they have but would rather not think about. At the most basic level, this sort of self-critical reflection is an essential starting point (though rarely a conclusion) for overturning the systems and practices that produce these hierarchies. Moreover, such self-examinations and critiques by Whites about Whiteness avoid the difficult messiness of criticizing across cultural difference and hierarchy, arenas where Whites often lie at an epistemological disadvantage even as their (mis)interpretations are accorded disproportionate social weight.<sup>73</sup>

The drawback, of course, is the loss of privilege inherent in a non-negligible *self-critique*. But because Jewishness is coded as a constituent element of Whiteness—part of the shared cultural patrimony of White people generally—Jewish spaces can serve as a convenient space for a putative “self”-critique by non-Jewish Whites. Jews exist in a liminal space where they are (assumed to be) sufficiently familiar to stand fully “known” to Whites, and included enough to fall within a broader category of Whiteness, yet alien and distant enough to absorb the actual tangible impacts of the critique without materially disturbing the bulk of White lived experience.

71. George Yancy, “Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12; Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.

72. Stephen M. Feldman, *Please Don't Wish Me a Merry Christmas: A Critical History of the Separation of Church and State* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 260.

73. See Mills, *Racial Contract*, 18. For those Whites seeking to avoid reaping an ill-gained epistemic bounty in discourse about racial inequality, there may be further attraction in focusing on their own bodies or activities, where their self-conceptions are at least further legitimated (if certainly still not fully reliable).

Certain discourses surrounding Israel and Palestine fall into this pattern. A full accounting of how racialized practices and ideologies implicate practices in and around Israel (including, among other things, Israel's treatment of Palestinian Arabs under occupation, the status of non-Jewish African asylum seekers, and domestic distinctions between Ashkenazic European Jews, Mizrahi Jews, Ethiopian Jews, and Palestinian citizens of Israel) is well beyond the scope of this article.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, it seems clear that tropes of Jewish Whiteness are quite implicated in how Israel is talked about *outside* of Israel. Even as Whiteness opens some doors for Israel (just as it does for Jews)—emphasizing a supposedly shared set of cultural values with dominant Western powers, for example—it also facilitates other discursive practices that are significantly limiting or restrictive, obstructing the need for understanding it in a distinctively Jewish context and instead relocating it as uncritically and undifferentiatedly European in character.

Explaining his “obsession” with Israel and the deep anger he feels at actions taken by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, English writer Robert Fowke says that Israel is “almost an English county planted on the Mediterranean shores.” It is not a “foreign” country like Thailand or Uzbekistan, but a Jewish country, and since he “[has] many Jewish friends” and views them as fully English, he feels comfortable calling it “my country too.”<sup>75</sup> One need not question Fowke's averred Jewish friendships or his sense that Jews are fully English to identify how dangerous this sensibility is. Fowke believes that for him to sharply critique Israel is akin to sharply critiquing England—in either case, it is an indictment of “[his] country.” But, of course, when Fowke critiques Israel it is *not* the same as a Jew (much less an Israeli or a Palestinian) doing it, or equivalent to Fowke lambasting England. It is, in fact, an external critique, a critique of an Other across difference and hierarchy, with all the complexities and difficulties that entails. The problem is that as a “self”-critique, it need not activate whatever checks or guidelines we might normally use to guard against inadvertent cultural prejudice or bias. Instead, Jews are thought to stand fully known to Whites because they *are* White.

That Israel is viewed either as a subspecies of European colonialism or as a European cultural vanguard, rather than something at least arguably *sui generis*, is reflective of the broader view of Jews as basically White.<sup>76</sup> Note that locating

74. While I think these “local” controversies can sometimes be usefully analyzed through the lens of race, I am skeptical of the utility of using very specifically Euro-American typologies of race that map poorly on to, for example, Mizrahi Jews. Where these concepts are read into local/regional (as opposed to international or Euro-American) discourse, it frequently comes off as cherry-picked and opportunistic.

75. Robert Fowke, “Why This Obsession with Israel and the Palestinians,” *The Guardian*, June 22, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jun/22/obsession-israel-palestinians-conflict>.

76. For example, Santiago Slabodsky declares that “[v]ery few ... would deny that Israel has come to fulfill the role of a Western representative in the Middle East.” Given this supposedly universal agreement, contemporary discussants on Israel can be neatly divided into “supporters” of Zionism, who view Israel's Western character as defining its greatness, and “detractors,” who view Israel's Westernness as equally central but constituted through its settler-colonial and expropriative character. Santiago

Israel or Zionism in a specifically Jewish context does not forestall critiques of either Israeli government policy or Zionism more broadly.<sup>77</sup> Plenty of actors have leveled critiques (of either type) that are fully informed by and cognizant of Jewish history and experience. But such critiques by necessity are more textured precisely because they take that history and experience into account. The appeal of “Whitening” Jews and, by extension, Jewish institutions is that it can avoid this additional texture as superfluous and unnecessary; persons who lack the requisite background or knowledge regarding Jews are still validated as legitimate speakers about Jews-read-as-White. For those who feel confident that they “know” Whites but may lack specific competency with respect to Jews, the Whiteness of Jews allows them to dispense with considerable epistemic labor.

Consider a critique of Zionism as “White supremacist” versus as “Jewish supremacist.” Neither label is exactly common, but the former term is certainly more respectable and mainstream compared to the latter. Zionism as “White supremacist” is found on prominent feminist websites, endorsed by campus activist groups, and alluded to by Jewish Voice for Peace.<sup>78</sup> Zionism as “Jewish supremacist” remains primarily associated with radical right-wing antisemites like David Duke.<sup>79</sup> Many persons who would use the former appellation would blanche at the latter.

---

Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 146.

To be sure, Slabodsky is not drawing out of thin air: Herzl himself imagined the Jewish state as “the portion of the rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism.” Theodor Herzl, *The Old-New-Land*, trans. Lotta Levenshon (New York: Bloch, 1941), 96. But there is and always has been a countertradition. See Nissim Ya’acov Malul, “Our Status in the Country, or the Question of Learning Arabic,” in *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, & Culture, 1893–1958*, ed. Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 69; “Sephardic and Mizrahi Communal Response to Jewish Voice for Peace,” *JIMENA*, January 23, 2019, <http://www.jimena.org/sephardic-and-mizrahi-communal-response-to-jewish-voice-for-peace/>.

77. One might also note that disassociating Israel from the status of European sociopolitical outpost would not preclude viewing it positively. Again, this is the other half of the double bind where the political Right “includes” Jews only by vigorously denying Jewish difference.

78. Mahroh Jahangiri, “#METOO: Gender Violence Does Not Exist without White Supremacy,” *Feministing*, October 17, 2017, <http://feministing.com/2017/10/17/metoo-gender-violence-does-not-exist-without-white-supremacy/> (claiming that Zionism is “built to uphold white supremacy”); Yvette Alt, “Tufts University Group: Hillel Promotes White Supremacy, Exploits Black Voices,” *Jerusalem Post*, September 8, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Tufts-University-group-Hillel-promotes-white-supremacy-exploits-black-voices-504593> (campus “disorientation” guide says Hillel “supports a white supremacist state”); Naomi Dunn, “Richard Spencer Might Be the Worst Person in America. But He Might Also Be Right about Israel,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, August 17, 2017, <https://forward.com/opinion/380384/richard-spencer-israel/>.

79. David Duke, *Jewish Supremacism: My Awakening to the Jewish Question* (Mandeville, LA: Free Speech Press, 2003). One academic figure who has vigorously promoted the label is Joseph Massad: see “The Ends of Zionism: Racism and the Palestinian Struggle,” *Interventions* 5, no. 3 (2003): 440–48; “On Zionism and Jewish Supremacy,” *New Politics* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 89–101. Recently, the term “Jewish supremacist” has been applied in more mainstream sources

The shyness around “Jewish supremacist” is understandable. In part this is due to its association with neo-Nazis, and the efforts, noted above, of such groups to redirect leftist concepts like “White supremacy” and “White privilege” towards a supposedly paradigmatic Jewish subject. But it also emerges because when Zionism is identified as *distinctively* Jewish—shorn of the epistemic crutch “Whiteness” offers as an interpretive mechanism—non-Jews (and particularly non-Jews on the Left) are more likely to recognize the possibility of gaps in knowledge or historical complexities that demand more fine-grained consideration. What the Left is willing to assert confidently about “Whites” it is far more uncertain about when it comes to “Jews.” Hence, even though, to the extent Zionism is “supremacist” of any kind, “Jewish” is clearly a more specific and accurate label than “White,” the preference for “White” as a descriptor is entirely rational. The ability to freely substitute “White” in for “Jewish” is facilitative and productive: it enables certain discursive practices that would otherwise be viewed as reactionary, ill informed, insufficiently attuned to historical context, or simply antisemitic.

I am not suggesting that non-Jews should not critique Israel, whether moderately or sharply. I am suggesting that such critiques are neither critiques of the self nor of an undifferentiated “(Judeo-)Christianity,” “Western-ness,” or “Whiteness,” and ought not be conceptualized that way. When non-Jewish Whites assimilate Jewish entities or practices into Whiteness for purposes of criticizing them, they circumvent the need to put in the hard work of understanding Jewish experience as a distinct entity that they do not simply “know” by virtue of an assumed shared Whiteness. They also substitute out the genuinely necessary work of *self*-examination in favor of a literal Jewish scapegoat.<sup>80</sup> It is a product of Jewish Whiteness that allows it to occupy this ambivalent role—included so that it can be virtuously excluded.

#### JEWISHNESS OUTSIDE OF KYRIARCHY

The problem should now be evident. The Whiteness frame looks at its subjects and asks that we see their power, their privilege, their enhanced societal standing. So far so good—it is important to unpack all of these things. But stereotypes of Jewishness sound many of the same notes: they too look at Jews and point out their putative power, privilege, and domination of social spaces. The issue is not that (some) Jews do have power or privilege along certain dimensions in American or Western society—for example, insofar as they are White, or male, or heterosexual, or economically well-off. But in those cases, the power that

---

specifically as a descriptor of Far Right Israeli political parties like Jewish Power. See Hannah Weisfeld, “Netanyahu Legitimises Jewish Supremacists to Keep His Job,” *Times of Israel*, February 21, 2019, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-legitimises-jewish-supremacists-to-keep-his-job/>.

80. Recall that the term “scapegoat” comes from the practice of placing human sins upon the head of a goat, then gaining absolution by casting it out into the wilderness. (It is the goat, of course, who pays the penalty.)

they have is as Whites, or men, or straight, or wealthy—it is not by virtue of being Jewish that they hold these benefits.

Normally, acknowledging multiple distinct axes of oppression yields the unremarkable conclusion that the same person can be advantaged along one dimension while marginalized along another. A White woman may be privileged through her race while subordinated through her sex; vice versa for a Black man.<sup>81</sup> And in theory, antisemitism and racism could operate the same way—the White Jew reaps the benefits of White supremacy while being oppressed by antisemitism, and likewise the non-White non-Jew stands superior over the Jew along the axis of antisemitism even as she suffers under White supremacy. (One need not think that the “advantages” conferred to non-Jews under conditions of antisemitism cancel out the advantages conferred to Whites through White supremacy to accept this formulation—indeed, in the American case it is clearly the case that racial oppression is far more extensive than antisemitic marginalization.) The concept of kyriarchy—that dimensions of power and marginalization are cross-cutting, such that all of us simultaneously stand in both positions across various social identities and locations—would seem an easy fit.<sup>82</sup>

Yet the kyriarchical frame is definitively not how we talk about “White Jews.” Antisemitism is cast as an intramural divide *within* White populations, something that alters or degrades the status of Jews vis-à-vis *other Whites*. Harold Cruse made this point explicit: antisemitism may be a problem for Jews, but it is, he contended, “a problem for [Jews] to settle with other whites with whom they share political, economic, and cultural power.”<sup>83</sup> It is not seen as impacting Jewish standing qua Jews compared to non-Jews as a whole. Indeed, the rare attempts to make this kyriarchical observation are beset with anxiety—as when Brenda Cossman and Marlee Kline laboriously articulate what they are *not* saying when they *are* saying that Jews continue to face antisemitism. (We are not saying Jews are *more* oppressed than others, we are not saying Jews are oppressed *identically* to others, we are not saying that Jews do not necessarily possess advantages as White or wealthy or well-educated, nor are we saying that all Jews necessarily *do* possess those advantages.)<sup>84</sup> It is a preemptive defense against the assumption that discourse about antisemitism is in reality a “burst of victim-competition” where Jews “will deny both responsibility for racism and privileges derived from it.”<sup>85</sup>

For many White Jews, the upshot of all of this is the denial of antisemitism’s status as a unique and distinctive axis of marginalization, one that neither displaces

81. See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 16.

82. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 8.

83. Harold Cruse, “My Jewish Problem and Theirs,” in *Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism*, ed. Nat Hentoff (New York: Schocken, 1972), 184.

84. Cossman and Kline, “And If Not Now, When?” 314–15.

85. Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew,” 119.



nor is displaced by racism.<sup>86</sup> Instead, writers act as if the operative question about *antisemitism* is whether Jews are properly labeled *White*.<sup>87</sup> If they are not, or if they were in eras when they were not, then Jewish claims of marginalization make sense. But if/when Jews are White, they lose access to claims of ever being outsiders *even as Jews*.<sup>88</sup> In effect, Whiteness absorbs Jewishness, removing it from the kyriarchical field and cordoning it off from any sort of system-wide reckoning of privilege and marginalization. All that is left of antisemitism, under this view, is a sort of internal jockeying for position among White people.

Additionally, this framing has important marginalizing effects on non-White Jews, both as Jews and as non-Whites. “The Whitening of Jews,” writes Lewis Gordon, meant “that large groups of nonwhite Jews simply disappeared, or at least disappeared *as Jews*.”<sup>89</sup> So it is for Fanon, who, in a striking passage where he begins by declaring the Jew “a white man,” writes, “Of course the Jews have been tormented—what am I saying? They have been hunted, exterminated, and cremated, *but these are just minor episodes in the family history*.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Corey Balsam goes so far as to say that “the simple attribute of being Jewish functions to whiten Sephardic and other non-white Jews”—putting them in a position of relative power by virtue of their Jewishness.<sup>91</sup> All Jews are “White Jews” in this sense—non-White Jews are deemed White *in their Jewishness*; Jewish problems are assumed to be White problems regardless of which particular Jew is the one experiencing them.

For many Jews from outside Europe, the persistent identification of Jews as White (or Western) obscures or mischaracterizes their experiences in ways that go beyond simply “forgetting” their existence. On the one hand, Jewish Whiteness is what impedes the acknowledgment of (for example) Middle Eastern Jews as *authentically* Jewish; on the other, Jewish Whiteness is likewise what impedes the acknowledgment that Middle Eastern Jews are *authentically* Middle Eastern. Rachel Wahba, an Indian-born Iraqi Jew, complains bitterly of how the understanding of all Jews as European—a view promoted by both Jews and non-Jews, inside and outside of Europe—boxes out her story as a Middle

86. See Brettschnider, *Family Flamboyant*, chap. 1.

87. See Cheryl Greenberg, “Pluralism and Its Discontents: The Case of Blacks and Jews,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 59–60; Michael Lerner, “Jews Are Not White,” *Village Voice* 38, May 18, 1993, 33–34.

88. Beck, “Politics of Jewish Invisibility,” 100.

89. Lewis R. Gordon, “Rarely Kosher: Studying Jews of Color in North America,” *American Jewish History* 100, no. 1 (January 2016): 106.

90. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 95.

91. Corey Balsam, “The Appeal of Israel: Whiteness, Anti-Semitism, and the Roots of Diaspora Zionism in Canada” (unpublished thesis, August 2011), available at [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Corey\\_Balsam/publication/234135270\\_Balsam\\_C\\_2006\\_The\\_Appeal\\_of\\_Israel\\_-\\_Whiteness\\_Anti-Semitism\\_and\\_the\\_Roots\\_of\\_Diaspora\\_Zionism\\_in\\_Canada/links/02bfe50f798f5163e0000000.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Corey_Balsam/publication/234135270_Balsam_C_2006_The_Appeal_of_Israel_-_Whiteness_Anti-Semitism_and_the_Roots_of_Diaspora_Zionism_in_Canada/links/02bfe50f798f5163e0000000.pdf), at 112.

Eastern Mizrahi Jewish refugee.<sup>92</sup> The story of Jews is a White, European story, which means any Jewish refugee story is also a White, European story, which then raises the question of (as Wahba imagines it) “What do the Arabs have to do with what Europe did to the Jews?”<sup>93</sup> The Mizrahi narrative is ignored not just as a Jewish story, but as a Middle Eastern story as well. Ruth Knafo Setton describes her experience of being kicked out of Morocco for being Jewish, being denigrated by American and Israeli Jews for being Moroccan, and finally being excluded by American non-Jews for being Jewish *and* Moroccan.<sup>94</sup> Any individual element of these stories might be assimilable into orthodox Middle Eastern or Jewish narratives. But they tend to be adopted in quite partial and opportunistic ways—those who are interested in tales of antisemitic oppression of Mizrahi Jews in Morocco or proud Mizrahi identification with Zionism are often less invested in the important influence and value such Jews place on Arab culture and identity or the serious discrimination they faced in Israel; and vice versa.<sup>95</sup>

Non-White Jews thus experience a double bind effectuated through the fact that “Jew,” as a category, is read as White: on the one hand, their discrete problems or experiences may garner less attention (typically from non-Jews) to the extent they seem assimilable into dominant conceptions of “Jewish,” and hence “White,” issues. (One might ask Cruse whether the antisemitism they experience is something they should “settle with other Whites.”) On the other, their concerns may garner less attention, typically from White Jews, to the extent they cannot be so easily assimilated, and hence fail to register as “Jewish” issues at all. And—shorn of a strong understanding of the conceptual linkage between “White” and “Jewish” on a theoretical level—efforts to remedy this exclusion often end up retrenching or even accentuating it. Either non-White Jews are presented as functionally nondifferentiated from the “Jewish” (read “White Jewish”) category as a whole (they have to be, so as to be truly “Jewish”), or they’re cast as in radical antagonism to that category—filling the role of “exceptional Jew”: “not like the others, not like ‘the Jews’ as [a] collective category” (they have to be, so as to be truly non-White).<sup>96</sup> Both erase non-White Jewish identity under the guise of including it. In the former case, “Jewish experience” is identical to what it was

92. Rachel Wahba, “Benign Ignorance or Persistent Resistance,” in *The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage*, ed. Loolwa Khazzoom (New York: Seal, 2003), 57–59.

93. *Ibid.*, 58.

94. Ruth Knafo Setton, “The Life and Times of Ruth of the Jungle,” in Khazzoom, *Flying Camel*, 5–9.

95. Lopezvoredore and Schraub, “An Intersectional Failure.”

96. Robert Fine and Philip Spencer, *Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 3. Consider Rachel Tsuna’s description of her brother, “who looks more like Hasan Minhaj than Jason Schwartzman”: he “has been shut down from identifying as nonwhite from his Jewish friends (*who don’t see him any differently than us*—so progressive) and his non-Jewish friends (‘If you’re Jewish, you’re white’).” Rachel Tsuna, “A Mizrahi Jew, from Memphis to Hillel,” *Lilith Magazine*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.lilith.org/blog/2018/11/a-mizrachi-jew-in-memphis/>.

understood to be before the “inclusion”—their “inclusion” adds nothing to the category. In the latter case, “non-White experience” is identical to what it was understood to be before said “inclusion”—again, this “inclusion” is as a result functionally superfluous. Much as (absent an intersectional frame) “Black women” ceases to exist as a meaningful category, falling into masculine understandings of Black and White iterations of womanhood, the non-White Jew is eliminated because the supposedly constituent categories are read as radically antagonistic to one another.

#### CONCLUSION: IS GAL GADOT WHITE?

The “White Jew,” as a figure, does more than ask that pale-skinned Jews who immigrated from Europe reckon with how and where they enjoy White privilege. It seems to step forward and subsume Jewish identity entirely: Jewishness is *only recognizable* as an empowered, even hyperpowered, status. Even—especially—when speaking of antisemitism, Jews “are recognized as *only* the privileged, the powerful, the oppressors.”<sup>97</sup> Any parallel discourse that might otherwise emerge about Jewish marginalization is rendered unintelligible.

That Whiteness seems to absorb Jewishness and seems to make Jewishness disappear as a distinctive category appears to be at least partially the reason some pale-skinned, European-descended Jews insist that they are not White in any capacity.<sup>98</sup> This debate—which never seems to lose its luster in the Jewish press—recently flared up again as a question of whether Israeli actress and *Wonder Woman* star Gal Gadot is “White.”<sup>99</sup>

The initial spark for the controversy was an article by Matthew Mueller titled “Wonder Woman: There IS a Person of Color in the Lead Role.”<sup>100</sup> Mueller’s piece was framed as a response to several Black women who were unhappy about the relative lack of women of color in superhero-type movies. As a contribution to *that* debate, telling a group of Black women concerned about racial representation in cinema “Good news—Gal Gadot is *Israeli!*” comes off as more than a little ridiculous.

97. Cossman and Kline, “And If Not Now, When?,” 314; see also Glynis Cousin and Robert Fine, “A Common Cause: Reconnecting the Study of Racism and Antisemitism,” *European Identities* 14, no. 2 (2012): 178–80.

98. See Cheryl Greenberg, “‘I’m Not White—I’m Jewish’: The Racial Politics of American Jews,” in *Race, Color, Identity: Rethinking Discourses about ‘Jews’ in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Efraim Sicher (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 35–55.

99. For a sampling of commentary, see, e.g., Noah Berlatsky, “Gal Gadot’s Wonder Woman Is White—Let’s Not Pretend Otherwise,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, June 2, 2017, <http://forward.com/culture/film-tv/373658/gal-gadots-wonder-woman-is-white-lets-not-pretend-otherwise/>; Dani Ishai Behan, “Yes, Ashkenazi Jews (Including Gal Gadot) Are People of Color,” *Times of Israel*, June 4, 2017, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/yes-ashkenazi-jews-including-gal-gadot-are-people-of-color/>; Mark Tseng Putterman and Rebecca Pierce, “What Jews of Color Hear When You Say Gal Gadot Isn’t White,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, June 16, 2017, <http://forward.com/opinion/world/374935/what-jews-of-color-hear-when-you-say-gal-gadot-isnt-white/>.

100. Matthew Mueller, “Wonder Woman: There IS a Person of Color in the Lead Role,” *Comic-book*, June 1, 2017, <http://comicbook.com/dc/2017/05/31/wonder-woman-person-of-color/>.

This raises the question of why any Jew would be invested in identifying Gal Gadot as non-White—and, more broadly, why many Jews possessing pale skin, whose immediate ancestors lived in or immigrated from Europe, and who are in most day-to-day interactions (particularly with state actors) racially perceived as White, nonetheless passionately resist the label. One answer is that doing so serves to elide Jewish enjoyment of White privilege. And that may well be a sizeable part of the explanation. But Tamar Herman offers up another angle to the story that is quite illustrative. Forthrightly agreeing that Gal Gadot is White, she nonetheless declares that “Gadot isn’t just another white woman on screen, and it’s dismissive to say so.”<sup>101</sup> Herman’s essay speaks movingly of how important and meaningful it was to have someone so openly and distinctively *Jewish* on screen in this sort of role—it genuinely mattered that someone *like her* was on screen, in a way that it would not if she were “just another white woman.” Those correctly insisting on Gadot’s Whiteness, Herman suggests, sometimes acted as if that meant she did not count as a representational victory of *any* sort—even as a Jew, and in particular, a noticeably accented non-American Jew. It seems plausible that at least some of the Jewish writers arguing that Gadot was not White were reacting to the sense that the “White Jew” concept impedes, even obliterates, the recognition of a distinctive Jewish qua Jewish experience. Contesting their Whiteness is a means for White Jews to create space to talk about their Jewishness.

One need not find this decision to be analytically sound or ethically warranted to think that it is reacting to genuine social phenomena. Yet if complete denial of Jewish Whiteness ends up obscuring the ways in which White Jews enjoy and have in some cases helped propagate White privilege as against their non-White peers (Jewish and not),<sup>102</sup> that only underlines the need for an alternative approach that affirms the legitimacy of Jewish articulations of Jewish experience as existing in relation with, but not displacing, a nuanced and complex understanding of Jewish Whiteness for those Jews who are of

101. Tamar Herman, “The Gal Gadot Representation Conversation We’ve Been Missing,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, June 13, 2017, <http://forward.com/sisterhood/374555/the-gal-gadot-representation-conversation-weve-been-missing/>.

102. While, of course, Jews have always been victimized by White supremacist violence, it is simultaneously true that Jews—particularly in circumstances where they have been able to effectively grasp onto a “White” identity or at least successfully integrate into spaces and communities reserved for Whites—can and have played a role in buttressing White supremacy. Examples include preserving formal or informal agreements barring African Americans from purchasing houses in suburbs that began admitting Jews; maintaining ownership but withdrawing capital and investment from largely Black neighborhoods in urban centers; and exhibiting reticence at ceding control over civil rights organizations concentrating on African American civil rights to Black activists. These practices often coexisted with genuine and tangible support for the “civil rights movement,” usually conceptualized as resistance to overt Jim Crow racism in the American South. This phenomenon has not been ignored or unnoticed by either Jewish or Black communal leaders, who very much understood that the Jewish relationship to White supremacy could not be reduced into either “implacable opponents” or “unadulterated beneficiaries.” See Dollinger, *Black Power*, chap. 1, for a good overview.

European descent.<sup>103</sup> Accepting that, in their relations with African Americans and other people of color in America, White Jews are indeed White<sup>104</sup> should not be taken to negate the existence or importance of antisemitism as a distinctive axis of marginalization—one that cannot always be fully disassociated or disentangled from Whiteness as a social concept. In this way, grasping how Whiteness and Jewishness intersect not only can further illuminate certain mechanics of antisemitism, but also can facilitate Jewish acknowledgment of the ways and contexts in which they *are* White and *do* benefit from White privilege.

As noted at the outset, White Jews—at least in the American context—surely enjoy many of the hierarchical benefits of Whiteness. We can debate the precise degree to which White Jews receive these boons and how “conditional” they might be, but there is no serious dispute that, over the past fifty or so years, pale-skinned, European-descended Jews have received a great number of the perks accorded to Whites in America. Nor should anyone object to the implied ethical command that White Jews should seek to undermine White supremacy and pursue racial justice, in part because they are directly implicated in and often beneficiaries of our racist systems.

The purpose of this essay, rather, is to offer a critical presentation of the interplay of Whiteness and Jewishness. In contrast to either the wholesale denial that White Jews enjoy some form of White privilege, or the complete subsuming of Jewishness into Whiteness, there is virtue in “illustrat[ing] the dangers of *unambivalent* readings with particular regard to the presumed ‘whiteness’ of European Jewry.”<sup>105</sup> Without careful attention to the particular social location that exists where Whiteness and Jewishness intersect, the Whiteness frame can reinscribe—even accentuate—deep antisemitic tropes of Jewish power, hegemony, and dominion.

David Schraub  
University of California, Berkeley

103. Helene Meyers characterizes Jews as “off-White” as a means of getting at this phenomenon: seeking a middle position that “refuse[s] to use race as a means of obliterating Jewish difference or establishing it as absolute.” Helene Meyers, *Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 15, see chap. 4.

104. The American Jewish Congress’s Nathan Edelstein, speaking in 1960, forthrightly stated that—for purposes of interracial alliances between Blacks and Jews, Jews (by which he almost certainly had exclusively Euro-American Jews in mind) “are part of the white community.” Quoted in Dollinger, *Black Power*, 34.

105. Cheyette, “Jews and Jewishness in the Writings of George Eliot and Frantz Fanon,” 5.