

Keeping A Legacy of Shared Struggle

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KEEPING A LEGACY OF SHARED STRUGGLE

by Bell Hooks (Z Magazine (see bottom) Sept. '92) p. 23

Recently teaching Women's Studies courses for two months at a European university, engaging in intense discussions about race and racism, I found myself speaking much more about anti-Semitism than I ever did in the United States. Emphasizing connections between the global development of anti-Semitism and anti-black racism, I often referred to Ronald Sanders Book *Lost Tribes an promised Lands: The Origins of American Racism*. Within the European context to talk of white supremacy one must necessarily look at the history of Jews (white and non-white in the world) and make sense of that history in relationship to the development of racist thinking about black people. These discussions led me to reflect often on the growing antagonism between white Jewish people and black folks in the United States.

[There are black Jews either by birth or conversion. To respect their culture and faith throughout this essay when I am speaking about white Jews that is the term I will use. Usually folks refer

solely to the experiences of white Jews (i.e. when scholars and writers talk about the relationship between blacks and Jews).]

I remember heated arguments in classrooms at Oberlin when black students would talk about White people and white culture and

Jewish students would speak out and insist that they not be

included in this category of whiteness. What these discussions always revealed was that we lacked a complex language to talk about white Jewish identity in the United States and its relationship to blackness and black identity. It was hard and painful for some Jewish students to acknowledge that in a white supremacist society like the United States where race/ethnicity is often defined solely by skin color, the fact that whiteness can subsume allegiance to Jewish identity, religion etc. and overdetermine ones actions in daily life, or how one is treated. To some extent these students believe so deeply in the notion of democracy and individual rights that they are convinced that if they choose not to identify as "white" no one will see them that way. Their fierce denial of any allegiance or participation in constructions of whiteness seemed to evoke an equally fierce desire on the part of black students to insist that not only was the fact of whiteness more obvious than Jewishness, but that it was the denial of this reality that made it possible for Jewish students to be complicit with racism and remain unaware of the nature of that participation. When such conflicts arise it is always useful to send students to read *Yours in the Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*, especially the sections by Elly Bulkin.

In her section Bulkin asserts that she assumes that "all non-Jews, even those without institutional power, have internalized the norm of anti-Semitism in this culture and are capable of being anti-Semitic, whether through hostility or ignorance." Agreeing with that assumption, I have always deemed it significant that Bulkin chose to highlight that we are all capable of anti-Semitic thought and action, rather than to assert as some folks do, that we are all "naturally" anti-Semitic because we are born into an anti-Semitic

culture. By focusing on our "capability," she reminds us that we are able to act in ways that fundamentally resist and oppose anti-Semitism. Growing up in the segregated South the fundamental lesson that I was taught via the black Baptist church was that Jews all over the world had suffered exploitation and oppression, that we identified with them and took their struggle to be our own because of shared experience. Most importantly, we were taught that anti-Semitism and anti-black racism were fundamentally connected. One could not be raised in hard-core Klan country and not be aware of this connection. It was deeply embedded in our consciousness as southern blacks that we had to oppose anti-Semitism--always. Given these teachings, we knew as children that white Jews born and raised in the South often suffered at the hands of white supremacists. We also knew that in high school it bolstered the image of the "Jew" in the eyes of white supremacists when Jewish students would make a point of acting in a racist way towards black folks. Like us, many of these young Jews had been taught in the context of home and religious experience to identify with the oppressed, and therefore to recognize their connections with black folks. So early on, we all experienced contradictions in how we thought and how we behaved. Jewish white students who might be the most racist in front of other southern white folks might in a different context act in a non-racist manner. When we "reported" these contradictions in our segregated religious contexts, we were taught that no matter the actions of individual Jews, we were called by our faith and our destiny as a people to stand in solidarity with them.

Perhaps, it was solely due to the backwoods provincial

nature of my region and upbringing, but it was not until I left the South for college that I first heard black folks make anti-Semitic remarks. These were northern black folks who behaved and acted in ways that were completely alien to me. Indeed, it was those early years of college that shook up my notions of monolithic black identity. I learned that not all black folks thought the same way or shared the same values. And I learned that we did not always think alike on the subject of the relationship between blacks and Jews. I learned that not all black people were Christians. I learned this from the followers of Elijah Muhammad who sold their papers and spread their teachings on campus. And it was there as an undergraduate that I developed deep friendships and political alliances with young white Jews. Then, we did not feel that there was a need to define the nature of our solidarity; we accepted the bonds of history, a continuum of shared struggle. It was only when we began to look beyond our small circles of intimacy and fellowship that we had to think critically about the relationship between blacks and white Jews. Within feminist circles we focused our discussions on the relationships between women, not directing them to a larger audience. This may be why folks act as though women thinkers have no worthwhile perspectives to offer on the subject. Usually when relations between "blacks and Jews" are talked about what is really evoked is the relationship between black men and white Jewish men.

The discussion of black/Jewish relationships in the United States has mainly been an exchange between male thinkers. It has often been dominated by northern voices. *Yours in Struggle* was published in 1984 and it did not lead to a growth of literature by black women (some of whom are Jewish) and white Jewish women.

It was impossible to read Henry Louis Gates' recent New York Times editorial "Black Demagogues and Pseudo-Scholars" and not notice that all the critical thinkers mentioned are males. However, I assume that he includes black females when he asserts: "While anti-Semitism is generally on the wane in this country, it has been on the rise among black Americans. A recent survey finds not only that blacks are twice as likely as whites to hold anti-Semitic views but-- significantly--that it is among the younger and more educated blacks that anti-Semitism is most pronounced." This assertion is dangerously provocative. I wanted to know how, when, and who had conducted such a survey. And whether or not this was equally true for blacks in different regions--if there were any differences of opinions based on gender. Unlike Gates, I do not believe that anti-Semitism is on the wane in this country. Anyone who has followed the campaign of David Duke and the rise in white supremacist groups, would do well to question such an assertion. Since I see anti-Semitism as connected to anti-black racism, which is on the rise, I can only assume that anti-Semitism is also gaining new ground. From my perspective, it is precisely the rise in conservative thinking that advocates and supports white supremacy that has created a climate where anti-Semitism and racism are both flourishing.

The Gates piece paints a graphically harsh portrait of black anti-Semitism that does not include a concomitant picture of black resistance to anti-Semitism. By so doing he runs the risk of further perpetuating a schism between blacks and Jews. Though his critique of recent black anti-Semitic thought and his citing of specific scholars is useful, his article tends to construct a monolithic black community that can be and/is easily duped by outspoken black males (mostly self-appointed leaders) who are pushing anti-

Semitic thinking. And even though Gates cites work written by white males as central to the development of anti-Semitic thought among some blacks, he does not identify them as "white" influences, which really does distort the issue. There is a profound link between white fascism in this society and black fascism, white conservatism and black conservatism. Black folks who are anti-Semitic are not just under the influence of "crazed" black male leaders, they are also guided by the anti-Semitism that is rampant in the culture as a whole. To refuse to see this as a force that shapes the thinking of conservative black folks, in conjunction with that anti-Semitic teaching that is an aspect of some Afrocentric thought, is to fail to understand the problem. And if we do not accurately name how anti-Semitism is taught to young black minds we will not be able to honestly confront, challenge, and change the situation. Concurrently, if black anti-Semitism is to be eradicated and not merely evoked in ways that pit one group of black folks against another, that make one group of black folks the "darlings" among white Jews and another the "enemy," we must create critical spaces for dialogue where the aim is not to cast "blame" but to look more deeply at why two groups who should and must maintain solidarity are drifting apart.

In my classrooms I can see that one of the primary tensions between young educated black students (some of whom are Jewish) and white Jews is engendered by the blacks that many Jews who have class privilege, who are able to use white skin privilege in a white supremacist society like this one, no longer identify with the oppressed (if they ever did) and more importantly often act in a "colonizing" manner in relation to black experience. As with other black folks in the larger society who no longer see Jews as allies in struggle, they feel the legacy of solidarity has been betrayed.

Contrary to the Gates piece, they see Jews as breaking that connection in the interest of further assimilation into mainstream white culture. Their hostility at this perceived betrayal is often expressed via anti-Semitic comments. Yet, when probed, I find they do not see that dangerous connection between making these comments and complicity with those who would institutionalize exploitation and oppression of Jews globally. Not only do they not recognize how systems of domination are maintained, they are ignorant of the ways those of us who are relatively "powerless" can act as agents upholding forms of oppression inimical to our own interest.

However wrong minded, it is not surprising that black youth, many of whom are from materially privileged backgrounds, who feel their chances of gaining economic success are continually thwarted by systems of racial injustice make the mistake of targeting their rage at with Jews. This is part of the way racism works--it is easier to "scapegoat" Jews (especially when one has concrete racist encounters) than to target larger structures of white supremacy. To seriously challenge this anti-Semitism we must have a better knowledge of institutionalized white supremacy. That includes consciously understanding the way white supremacist culture promotes black anti-Semitism. For example from whom do young black folks get the notion that Jews control Hollywood. This stereotype trickles down from mainstream white culture. It is just one of many. In his NYT article, Gates never acknowledges a link between white Christian fundamentalism that perpetuates anti-Semitic thinking and the fundamentalist thinking of narrow black nationalists. It is a distortion of reality to act as though any form of black anti-Semitism, however virulent, exists in isolation from the anti-Semitism that is learned whenever anyone absorbs without question the values of mainstream white culture, values that are taught via mass media, etc.

Indeed, if we were to investigate why masses of black youth all over the United States know who Louis Farrakhan is, or Leonard Jeffries etc. we would probably find that a white-dominated mass media has been the educational source, not those black bookstores that Gates writes about. Again I want to strongly state that the anti-Semitism expressed by such leaders in public forums is irrevocably linked to the anti-Semitism of those whites who provide the forums but who are not overtly spreading anti-Semitic thinking. It would be a grave mistake for white Jewish readers of the Gates piece to come away imagining that the group that they must see as enemies and armor themselves against is young educated black folks, or black people in general. It is significant that narrow nationalist black leaders who push anti-Semitic thought tend to also push sexist domination of women. The majority are male unless they are the female followers of Farrakhan. It would have been interesting had the Gates piece raised the question of gender for it is not apparent whether or not black women, young and old, educated or not, are as taken with the black male scholars and leaders he identifies as spreading anti-Semitic thinking as are black males.

The only black woman mentioned in the Gates piece is evoked as a figure of ridicule. Referred to as the "dreadlocked woman" who spoke "angrily" at a dialogue between blacks and white Jews saying to one of the white female organizers: "I don't want an apology. I want reparations. Forty acres and a mule, plus interest." Whether one is speaking in a heated manner to an audience that includes white Jews or not, why is the rage of black folks about white supremacy made to appear ridiculous, even if the direction that rage is targeted at is not an appropriate one? Surprisingly, even though Gates evokes Martin Luther King to emphasize the need for us all to remember that white Jews and black Americans are "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," this understanding does not lead to the recognition that since both groups are accountable for perpetuating conflict, hostility, and xenophobic/racist thinking about the other, then both groups must work to create the space for dialogue and

reconciliation.

Many black folks want white Jews to confront and change their racism. Elly Bulkin writes passionately and honestly about the need for white Jews to confront anti-black racism acknowledging: "...we do not yet know how to raise the issues of Jewish oppression and racism in the best possible way, or, given the history and complexity of both, in ways that will assure us not only that we have done it well, but that we are likely to be heard." The existence of Jewish racism does not justify or excuse black anti-Semitism. However to honestly name and assume accountability for it does not heighten our awareness that not all Jews have been or are friends and allies to black folks. It allows us to face the reality that there are real circumstances in which Jewish racism manifested in daily life encounters leads some black folks to see white Jews as enemies and to imagine that they gain power over this threat by expressing anti-Semitic thought. Gates suggests that "many Jews are puzzled by the recrudescence of black anti-Semitism in view of the historic alliance" but he does not respond to this puzzlement by sharing that it is for some black folks a defense against anti-black racism on the part of Jews.

Solidarity between blacks and white Jews must be mutual. It cannot be based on a notion of black people as needy victims that white Jews "help." It cannot be based on gratitude extended by black to white Jews for those historical moments when they have been steadfast comrades in struggle furthering black liberation. It has to be rooted in a recognition on the part of both groups of shared history, shared struggle, and the ways in which our past and future destinies both connect and diverge. It has to be rooted in an ongoing political recognition that white supremacy relies on the maintenance of anti-black racism and anti-Semitism, hence there will never be a time when these two struggles will not be connected. No matter how many or how strong the ties Jewish

political parties make with white South Africa, thereby condoning the maintenance of white supremacy, this reality will remain. Whenever there is white supremacy, there will be anti-Semitism and racism.

The failure of blacks and white Jews to engage in critical dialogue that does not reflect prevailing racist hierarchy has meant that it is unclear in what context either group can be critical of the other without being labeled racist or anti-Semitic. Where is the context where blacks can come together with white Jews and talk critically about Jewish appropriation and commodification of black culture? Where is the context where Jews can come together with black non-Jews and talk about the sense of betrayal of a historical legacy of solidarity? What is the context in which black people can be critical of Zionist policies that condone the colonization and exploitation of Palestine? Where is the context in which Jews can question black folks about our attitudes and opinions about Israel, about Jewish nationalism? Unless these contexts exist we will not be able to create the kind of critical thinking and writing that can challenge and transform black anti-Semitism or white Jewish racism. Targeting our critiques solely at anti-Semitic black leaders (who represent a small fragment of black populations) does not enable masses of blacks and white Jews to understand both the historical and present day connections between the growth of white supremacy, the development of anti-Semitic thought and practice globally, and the spread of anti-black racism. It is this knowledge that would enable folks from both groups to understand why solidarity between us must be nurtured and sustained.

Black people are not more responsible for eradicating

strains of anti-Semitism in black life, than in the culture as a whole.

However, we must stand against anti-Semitism wherever we encounter it. It is the task facing any of us who work for freedom.

To honor our bond of inescapable mutuality, black people and white Jews must share in the *collective work of* creating theory and practice that can counter the anti-Semitic biases of the culture, in whatever location those biases speak themselves. Working equally to eradicate anti-Semitism, we work to end racism.

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Z Magazine, // 116 St. Botolph St // Boston MA 02115 //
(617)787-4531
(For subscriptions)(no longer "150 W Canton St., // Boston MA 02118")

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Z is a project of the nonprofit Institute for Social & Cultural Change

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