Afriphobia in a Zionist and antisemitic feminist context

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This contribution is part of the collection 'Antisemitism, Anti-Racism and Zionism: Old Debates, Contemporary Contestations'.

My response to the important intervention made by Nira Yuval-Davis (1984) in her 1984 Spare Rib article 'Zionism, antisemitism and the struggle against racism: some reflections on a current painful debate among feminists' is to work with a similar framework, notwithstanding a different lens, primarily grounded in a concern coined in recent years as 'Afriphobia' (The Ligali Organisation, 2016). Afriphobia has been recognised since the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in South Africa in 2001, and, in its simplest form, could—not unlike antisemitism in relation to European Jews—be described as 'the fear of People and things Afrikan' (Sampong, 2015). It has affected and continues to affect the lives of Black, Caribbean and Mixed-race people, People of Colour and/or Jews of Colour in the UK.

In 2016, as the guest of African Hebrew Israelites in Jerusalem (AHIJ), I attended a writers’ conference in Dimona and Jerusalem where I began to reflect upon the notion of political solidarities with broader African sensibilities. Since then, I have become increasingly drawn to thinking about the interconnections of Afriphobia with Zionism, anti-Zionism and antisemitism in the wake of expressed concerns of antisemitism within the Labour Party in the UK. I know that by doing this, I risk further fracturing our joint struggles against all forms of racisms: whether the interests of feminist groups can meet at an intersection with the rights and interests of Africans south of the Sahara is as uncertain as it is between African, Asian and European feminisms. For example, the new framings and tensions between Black Lives

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1 The collection first appeared on the Feminist Review Blog on 4 December 2019, where it is also available at: https://femrev.wordpress.com/2019/12/04/antisemitism-anti-racism-and-zionism-contemporary-contestations/ [last accessed 15 June 2020].

2 See United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, https://www.un.org/WCAR/ [last accessed 1 December 2019].
Matter (BLM); US Zionist feminists; the growth of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which calls for a one-state solution; and Islamophobia suggest otherwise. However, I venture into this discussion not only because it is critically important to address and therefore work to fight against Afriphobia but also because I believe that doing so sheds necessary and urgent critical light on deeply disturbing problems of racialised sexism in contemporary Zionist thought and practices.

Reassessing Afriphobia in relation to feminist solidarity through an interweaving with Zionism and antisemitism is glaringly complex. In order to try and meet at their intersections, I return to analyses between antisemitism and Zionism, antisemitism and racism, and their relation to solidarity with international struggles against imperialism.

Firstly, an important connection between Afriphobia and antisemitism exists between the Kaiser’s Holocaust3 (part of the Maangamizi4) in South West Africa and the Shoah in Europe. Between 1903 and 1907, German death camps in Namibia destroyed about 80,000 (80 per cent) of the Herero people—the largest ethnic group—and 20,000 Nama people; this genocide was finally acknowledged by the German government in 2015, but without reparations. Not only were genocides against Africans and Jews committed by the same people, but it can be argued that the former served as a precursor to the latter. These shared atrocities should have united—not separated—Africans and Jews given that the Nazi period clearly was not an aberration, despite German history’s wont to record it as such.

Similarly, separate political, African struggles allow narcissistic male leaders to conjoin in oppressive international ‘unofficial’ agreements with the growing intensification of authoritarian nationalisms. In the face of our distinct radical feminist politics, a social contract has concretised in the form of a sexual contract between men: men agreeing to be ruled by men in order to secure all-male domination over all women (Pateman, 1988). In parallel, the racial (settler) contract of Europeans agreeing to be ruled by each other works to secure white racial domination.

Zionism and antisemitism

Zionism has arguably achieved its goal of becoming a diasporic nation state of Jews in all but name (Anderson, 1983; Cooper, 2015). The ‘Right of Return’ for some Jews across the diaspora and the increased number of European Jewish settlers participating in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory (the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) can be seen as evidence of this. But at what cost?

Descriptions of Israel as an ‘ethnocracy’ and not a ‘democracy’ (Yiftachel, 2006; Holzman-Gazit, 2016; Kedar, Amara and Yiftachel, 2018) reflect the nation-state’s policy to recognise full rights for some residents but not others, according to religious identification. Well-intentioned calls for a two-state solution (for example, by the UK Labour Party) may inadvertently affirm Palestine as a Bantustan rather than lead to its liberation. Israel has become an apartheid state in its resistance to Palestinian sovereignty.

3Kaiser Wilhelm (German Emperor, reign 1888–1918).
4‘Maangamizi’ is a Swahili term that speaks to the intentionality of the African holocaust of chattel, colonial and neocolonial enslavement.
But Zionist feminists do not see it this way. Some Zionist feminists claim that they reject the BDS movement (which was inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement; see Hanna, 2016) not because it supports Palestinians, but because they view BDS calls for ‘withdrawing support from Israel’s ... academic institutions, and from all Israeli and international companies engaged in violations of Palestinian human rights’\(^5\) as authoritarian and as breaking Israeli feminist solidarity (Freedman, 2017; see also Sharoni et al., 2015; Shire, 2017). Recently, American ‘modern Zionist’ feminists wearing Star of David badges, refusing to hear criticism of this gesture as insensitive and offensive coming from feminists from all sides, have responded by accusing their Jewish and non-Jewish ‘sisters’ of being antisemitic (Shire, 2017).

Meanwhile, Zionist feminists commit breaches of female solidarity time and again when they do not call out antisemitism or defend their non-white Jewish sisters subjected to Afriphobia. In contrast to all other Jews throughout the world, Ethiopian Jews—or Beta Israelis—require ‘special approval’ by the government before they can return ‘home’. This is the case even though 140,000 Ethiopian Israelis, of whom around 50,000 were born in Israel, also represent about 4 per cent of Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldiers. In 2013, the Ministry of Israeli Health admitted to the carrying out of targeted involuntary sterilisation of Jewish women of Ethiopian origin over a period of ten years (Knutsen, 2013). In both instances, there has been no Zionist feminist outcry about the injustices and violations committed against, and no support for, Ethiopian-Israeli Jewish women. These are a few amongst many instances of contemporary European Zionist and Jewish feminisms not addressing racialised sexism and therefore failing to situate it in relation to Jewishness. As such, we can see how and why Palestinian-American feminist Linda Sarsour draws the conclusion that Zionism and feminism are incompatible, and that Zionist ‘feminism’ undermines the oppression of Palestinian women (JTA, 2017).

In relation to antisemitism, Afriphobia and feminism, then, *which Jew* and *which women* are we talking about when it comes to solidarity? If Zionism is the ongoing struggle for Jewish self-determination, *which Jew* is allowed to seek self-determination according to Zionism? While I infer that there is a bias in Zionism that favours white Jews, this is not to ignore or dismiss European Israeli women having documented their lack of agency in a country where the state and orthodox Jewish institutions are conflated—and conflated by both—literally and in patriarchal practice (Épstein, 2016). Unquestionably, anti-Zionism can be a cover for antisemitism (Herf, 2013); however, what emerges here is that so too can liberal, socialist and feminist Zionists undermine the interests of African Jews. There remains the need to question the ‘Law of Return’ policy and the treatment of African Jews and residents, the rights of Hebrew Israelis and Israeli women and, indeed, the entire ‘democratisation’ of Israel.

**antisemitism and racism**

In order to obtain state recognition as Jewish, Beta Israelis are required to undergo a humiliating religious ‘conversion’ where their genitals are inspected. This rule does not apply to other ethnic groups. Most succumb to this demand for fear of losing their formal identification as Jews but deeply resent it. Whether or not they are Jewish, modern Zionists describe African refugees as ‘infiltrators’ and ‘terrorists’, just as they do Arab-Palestinian refugees (Sani, 2013). Meanwhile, Arab-Palestinians, who

\(^5\) BDS Movement, ‘What is BDS?’, https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds [last accessed 1 December 2019].
themselves are oppressed and vilified by Zionist discourse, describe Africans as ‘drug-takers’ or ‘dangerous and menacing’ (Suárez, 2016).

In 1967, many African Americans left the US—or the ‘Land of the Great Captivity’ as they prefer to call it—to settle in Israel, the land they believed to be their ancestral home, as African Hebrew Israelites in Jerusalem (AHIJ) (Esensten, 2017; Markowitz, 2017). AHIJ choose not to convert to Judaism in their claim to be the authentic descendants of the Tribe of Judah, thereby challenging the land rights of both Palestinians and European Jewry. In turn, their interests have been hotly contested (Esensten, 2017). In 2003, the state of Israel agreed to recognise AHIJ as permanent residents in exchange for completing military service in the IDF, and they are the only minority group recognised by the state as non-Jewish for whom military service is compulsory. Yet, this does not make AHIJ full citizens in the eyes of the state. Only a few Hebrew Israelites have since received Israeli citizenship and most are therefore unable to vote in national elections or obtain Israeli passports. The agreement was a compromise between the peaceful aspirations of AHIJ and their survival (ibid.). However, given the current ethnocratic emphasis in Israel, in serving the IDF, the AHIJs—and likewise the Beta Israelis—could be described as Zionists working against their own broader interests.

In a country devoid of even the pretence of Montesquieu’s separation of powers, the conflating of state and religion in the absence of a bill of rights creates fertile ground for the growth of racism and sexism. Where national political concerns eclipse the universal interests of girlhoods and fight against all forms of racism—including antisemitism and Afriphobia—progress towards equality and social justice will always be not only compromised but also, in fact, defeated.

**solidarity with international struggles against imperialism**

With its over-reliance on the US and its hatred of Africans and Palestinians, in its drive towards achieving safety and security for only some of the Jewish people, Zionism has failed to achieve safety and security for anyone. Zionists’ ignoring of Namibian atrocities allows for the most grotesque side of German imperialism to go unaccountable. Israeli Afriphobic practices not only collude with those who have oppressed Jews but also undermine the values and suffering of all Jewry. In effect, Zionism works with its imperial masculine abuser.

It is not human nature to be Afriphobic any more than it is to be antisemitic. We have the opportunity here and now to be part of a postcolonial political project of belonging that finds new solidarities, which joins international struggles against imperialism instead of being a part of it. Despite recent attempts to block it and its being vilified as antisemitic and tied to terror, the non-violent BDS movement is gathering force to suggest change is only a matter of time.

In this article, I have focused on the Afriphobic practices of Zionism, and Zionist feminism in particular. However, it is important to acknowledge that there is much evidence of Jewish feminists showing solidarity with Palestinian and African interests. It is also important to accept that it is absurd to have a homogenised notion of feminist solidarity. Some feminisms might be helping to empower some women who hate Jews, just as some Jews might be helping to empower some women who hate Arabs and Africans.
Ultimately, we should be asking not so much whether feminism can accommodate Zionism, but rather if Zionism can accommodate equal rights and social justice for all its residents.

Approaches that focus only on the equality of the few have spectacularly failed and will continue to do so. I have stressed the impact of Afriphobia in a Zionist and antisemitic feminist context not because it should be the most important to you, but to argue that international solidarity that focuses upon the equality of all human beings is where we must all ultimately arrive.

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Marlene Ellis's research areas include Africa, race, post-compulsory education, identity politics, feminism, gender, social class and sexuality. She currently teaches education at Exeter University, UK.

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