Title
I am Black AND Jewish: Black Jewish Women’s Experiences in “White” Jewish Communities in Brazil

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Afro-Brazilian Jewish Women: “Caught in the Crossfire”

Because Brazil has consistently made efforts to make Jews into symbols of otherness and at the same time rhetorically valued the *mulato* identity as a symbol of *brasilidade* (“Brazilianness”), Jews are seen as foreign parasites, light-skinned Blacks are viewed as “authentically” Brazilian, dark-skinned Blacks are invisible, and Jews and Blacks are irreparably separated from each other. The Brazilian state appropriates and utilizes beneficial aspects of racial others to advertise its modernity, while oppressing the unwanted parts (Larvie, 1999; Lesser, 2005; Lilly, 2007; Wolfe, 2005). The Brazilian state portrayed Jews as “economically desirable,” but “politically inexpedient,” according to Jeffrey Lesser, author of “Imagining Otherness: The Jewish Question in Brazil 1930-40” (2005, p. 36). Black women are valued for their physical labor, and *mulata* women are valued for their sexuality, but only through commodification and objectification, according to Kia Lilly, an anthropologist and author of *Negras in Brazil* (2007, pp. 51-52 & 61). Lesser argues that Jews who assimilated were accepted in Brazilian society as long as they were “a force for progress” and not “ideological or racial dissenters” (1995; pp. 9-10; 2005, p. 43). Brazil’s myth of racial democracy rhetorically values miscegenation. Brazil’s color classification system encourages people of African descent with lighter skin to identify as brown (*moreno* or *pardo*), the more accepted and “authentically Brazilian” racially category, rather than black (*negro*), the racially and politically conscious

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2 *Mulato* is a racist term derived from the word “mule” and is the name given by Portuguese colonizers to children of sexual unions between themselves and black enslaved women (Reichmann, 1995, p. 35).
3 According to Kia Lilly (2007), Black women are anonymous, devalued and invisible as Brazilian citizens (p. 1).
term. Because of these dual systems of oppression, Afro-Brazilians with lighter skin color assimilate into white Brazilian culture rather than allying with Afro-Brazilians of darker skin color (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 1999; Barcelos, 1999; Lilly, 2007; Pinto, 1993; Reichman, 1995).

The Brazilian state claims acceptance based on its appropriation and utilization of the Jewish or Black culture, but continues to enact racism and anti-Semitism (Barcelos, 1999, Barroso, 1999; Berdichevski, 2001; Chiavento, 1986; Freyre, 1999; Fulcher, 1995; Kniesmeyer & Brecher, 1995; Larvie, 1999; Lesser, 1995, 2005; Lilly, 2007; Needell, 1995; Reichmann, 1995; Skidmore, 1974).

Brazilian nationalism causes internal conflict within Jewish and Black communities and between the Jewish and Black communities. Since they cannot fight the oppressor nation, they fight each other. Jewish and Black groups create their own national subversive identities to combat the state nationalism. But these minority nationalisms recreate the “us” versus “them” dichotomies and continue to “other” members of their own communities or of other minority communities (Barcelos, 1999; Largman & Levine, 1986; Lesser, 1988; Rout, 1999).

Jews and Blacks do not have a foundation for alliance in the Brazilian context. Jewish communities see themselves as “others,” but do not seem to ally with similarly oppressed groups. Many white Brazilian Jews live among the non-Jewish white elite and from my observations, act like these white elites, and do not have any social ties to Afro-Brazilian communities (Largman & Levine, 1986, p. 170). Most Afro-Brazilians, from my observations, have very little knowledge about Jews or Judaism and when they meet practicing Jews find them to be as racist as other white people.

This historical context demonstrates why racism (including anti-Semitism) is so difficult to combat in Brazil and suggests a possible reason for Jewish communities’ mistrust of outsiders
and desire to remain insular. In addition, the rhetorical valuation of the “mulata” for her supposed sexuality and the devaluation of the Jews for their supposed foreignness and parasitic-nature, places Black Jewish women I interviewed (who are lighter-skinned black women) in between what is symbolically valued and devalued in Brazil, literally in the border between “us” and “them.”

When non-white people attempt to become part of “white” Jewish communities they experience resistance. Some Brazilian Jewish communities push prospective Jews away because of their rigid requirements for conversion.

Despite these difficulties, there are people of color who convert or return to Judaism and remain active in mainly “white” Jewish communities. These community members became my research participants. Their stories about their journeys to Judaism and the struggles they faced me chamaram. The women’s stories stood out. White Jewish men seem to date and marry non-

4 Cross Borders: Afro-Brazilian Jewish women are at the crossroads of multiple and conflicting identity categories: Afro-descended, Brazilian, Jewish, Latina, women, etc. As Levins Morales (1998) writes, “Borders are generally established in order to exercise control, and when we center our attention on the historical empowerment of the oppressed, we inevitably swim rivers, lift barbed wire, and violate ‘no trespassing’ signs” (p. 38).

5 I place “white” in quotes because Jews of West or Eastern European descent may not self-identify as “white”, even though they may be assigned to the white category by non-Jews in the current Brazilian context. Thus the “white” inside quotation marks denotes the conflict between racial identity and racial assignment, which often makes Jews into racial middle people, as Karen Brodkin explores in her book How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America (1998). Jews in Brazil were not always considered white. In addition, there are Sephardic Jews in the communities I visited who might not be considered white here in the U.S., but in the Brazilian context they may be viewed as white. Because this project addresses the experiences of Afro-Brazilian women and men, it is important to designate the difference between them and people who are light-skinned or white in the community. Although they may not self-identify as “white”, they are white to Afro-Brazilian Jews and non-Jewish Afro-Brazilians.

6 I have decided to use the Portuguese here because it more closely represents the feeling I am trying to evoke. Chamar refers to the telephone’s ringing, shouting to a friend to come chat, and calling attention. The stories of the Jews of color I spoke to called to me and I had to answer.
Jewish women including Black, non-Jewish women, more frequently than white Jewish women date or marry non-Jewish men. This is the reverse pattern that is found in the U.S. and I wanted to investigate why.  

Kia Lilly (2007) addresses the gendered aspects of interracial relationships in Brazil. “While the bodies of Afro-Brazilian women have long been available to white men, interracial sex between Afro-Brazilian men and white women has traditionally been regarded with disdain” (p. 40). Luzia, a white woman in her sixties who I met at the São Paulo airport, who was not Jewish, but whose sister had married a Jewish man and was raising Jewish children, told me something very similar. “It is not looked upon well when white women go out with black men. White men can be with black women, but white women cannot be with black men” (Luzia, personal communication, July 24, 2007).

In response to my question about Jewish feelings about the same issue, she said that Jewish communities are also like this. She thought there would be little interaction between Jews and Blacks, like a Spanish woman in her forties or fifties I met on a bus in São Paulo, who told me she thought Jewish families would have more prejudice than her Spanish family would. She had married a black man, and her family had not accepted him. She thought Jewish-Black relationships would be nonexistent (personal communication, July 17, 2007).

Luzia told me about a girlfriend of hers who was supposed to come visit Luzia in Rio de Janeiro, but never arrived. Later Luzia discovered that her friend had been embarrassed to visit because her friend’s husband was an African-American man she had met in Philadelphia, while

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7 Centering Women Changes the Landscape: According to Aurora Levins Morales (1998), “We need to ask, ‘If women are assumed to be the most important people in the story, how will that change the questions we ask?’” (p. 26).

8 Restore Global Context: According to Levins Morales (1998), “One of the tasks, therefore, of medicinal history is to show that all parts of the world coexist and always have” (p. 35-6).
living in the U.S. and she was ashamed that he was Black (Luzia, personal communication, July 24, 2007).

Women are more likely to convert than men, according to one research participant, because women do not have to undergo circumcision. I did meet men who converted or returned to Judaism, but their reasons for doing so were different. Women are more likely to convert because of their partner, whereas men convert because they discover Jewish ancestors. Women become responsible for raising Jewish children, even though their Jewish male partners have been Jewish for longer. This project is about the struggles Black/"morena" women face - racism, sexism, and classism - within their Jewish communities, but also about the reasons they continue to practice Judaism and choose to raise their children Jewish.

Through this series of monologues and short scenes, I hope to educate Jewish communities in both the U.S. and Brazil about the need to value racial, class and sexuality-based diversity and to eliminate sexism within our synagogues, camps, and organizations. Jewish communities need to expand to include those who want to join, not close their gates to those who

9 I place “morena” in Italics because the people who self-identify or are assigned to this color category distinguish themselves or are distinguished from negros, the more politically conscious term meaning “Black” in the way U.S. Blacks use the term. This is problematic because many morenos are descended from Black African people. So, morenos could be included in the term Afro-Brazilian, but in the Brazilian context they are a separate group, although here in the U.S. they might be considered part of the same group. See Kia Lilly (2007) for more detail about the category “morena.”

10 Tell Untold or Undertold Stories: According to Levins Morales (1998), “this meant seeking out and emphasizing the stories of women who were poor, African, indigenous, mestiza and mulatta, women enslaved and indentured, rural women, emigrant women in the United States” (p. 26).
are judged not Jewish enough. Brazilian Jewish communities need to reach out to Afro-Brazilian communities and individuals, valuing their contributions to Judaism.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition, this project contributes to Jewish Women of Color feminist discourses about intersectionality, multiple identities, and border-crossing (Blustain, 1996; Fleming, 2001; Levins Morales, 2001; McKinney, 2001; Shoshana, 2004; Walker, 2001). Yolanda Shoshana, the author of “Am I My Sister’s Keeper,” has discussed these concepts in her written work and public speaking. In \textit{Nashim} (2004) she wrote:

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It is shocking to people of color when they find out that I am, yes, Jewish. When I give my ‘Cliff-note’ speech on the diversity of the Jewish community, it is mind boggling to them… How can people outside the Jewish community know about Jews of color, when even Jews do not know about them? (pp. 157-8).
\end{quote}

Aurora Levins Morales (2001) writes of having to choose between two identities: Jewish woman and woman of color. While at feminist conferences in the 1980s, she would stand in the hallway trying to decide which workshop to enter – the one for women of color or the one for Jews. “I remember how every doorway I tried to enter required leaving some part of myself behind” (Levins Morales, 2001, p. 31). She began meeting other women who were also stuck in the hallways, and with them she began to create her own theories from “the stuff in our pockets, out

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\textsuperscript{11} Reveal Hidden Power Relationships: Many people outside of Jewish communities as well as inside Jewish communities may not know about the exclusion that is going on. It is important that this exclusion is made public so that it can begin to be addressed. Aurora Levins Morales (1998) writes, “In telling the history of an oppressed community, we need to expose those relationships of unequal power whether they come from outside our group or lie within it” (p. 31). I address anti-Semitism from the Brazilian government and community, as well as racism, homophobia and sexism within the Brazilian Jewish community. Thus incorporating another of Levins Morales’ methods: Show Complexity and Embrace Ambiguity and Contradiction (p. 31), because this project reveals the way that Brazilian Jewish communities have been oppressed as well as how they reproduce oppression within their sanctuaries. In addition, I show how Afro-Brazilian women can reproduce oppression.
\end{quote}
of the stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else” (p. 32).

My project is about women like Aurora Levins Morales; women who are stuck in the hallway. I hope these monologues and scenes will show Black Jewish women that they do not have to leave any part of themselves behind, that there are other women who are also stuck in the hallway and who can share their stories.

This project provides a space for Afro-Brazilian Jewish women to voice their experiences of racism, sexism and classism. I show how the women I interviewed affirm their identities as both Black and Jewish in the face of rejection from white Jewish communities as well as their Afro-Brazilian communities.¹²

Black Jewish women sometimes ally more with white Jewish communities than Black communities. Other Afro-Brazilian Jewish women live in self-defined worlds of Jewishness and Blackness, deciding for themselves what it means to be Black Jewish women, rather than allowing rabbis or white Jewish communities dictate what they should be and do.

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¹² What Constitutes Evidence: “The fact that something was written down does not make it true… As historians of the under-represented, we need to question the invalidation of non-literate mechanisms of memory” (Levins Morales, 1998, pp. 29-30). My project is based on audio-taped as well as informal interviews and conversations as well as participant observation, and thus highly values “non-literate mechanisms of memory” (p. 29-30).
References


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