

Chapter 1

To Race, to Class, to Queer

Jewish Feminist Contributions to Intersectionality Studies*

Introduction

This chapter continues the introductory analysis with a more detailed discussion of doing intersectionality in a Jewish feminist context. It is intended to set the terms for the later chapters, which will increasingly apply the methodology explored here of racing queer studies and queering race studies, for example, from a Jewish feminist critical race perspective. This chapter is specifically historically situated in some of the most helpful literature from what is sometimes called the feminism's second wave (though treating developments as linear and progressive has been named as unhelpful in intersectionality studies) and critical responses, mainly to white feminists' work of that period. It is intended to (re-)introduce readers to some of the core texts of feminist intersectionality studies, with the Jewish frame made explicit. This will enable us in future chapters to examine various aspects where we can find generative Jewish work and experiences for those also interested in broadening the current trends in intersectionality studies.

The project of racing queer studies and queering race studies in a class-conscious Jewish context must be seen as a part of a larger, and changing, historical context of feminist activism and thought.¹ Feminist theorizing of identity has changed since the beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement. The origins of what we may call contemporary identity politics, since Karl Marx's focus on a liberatory politics based explicitly on class grounds, lay in identifying individual characteristics such as gender, culture,

*Revised and updated from the original publication in Bar On and Tessman (2001).

race/ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation that are singled out for analysis. This form of identity politics was also identitarian, assuming a sameness, or cohesion of a well-bounded identity community. The one identity aspect was often universalized and set at the center of visions for ending oppression. For Jewish feminists active in this period, universalizing one discrete and identitarian aspect of identity proved limiting.² Activists and scholars eventually were able to articulate that the choice of being either a woman or a Jew for communal and political purposes was indeed a false choice.³ Oppression works through multiple mechanisms, identities are porous and morphing and cannot be seen in isolation from one another.

Discourse about multiple identities and oppressions gave way to self-criticism, including the recognition that identities were not simply many, but interconnected in an indefinite variety of ways. We cannot just add critical race theory to feminist analysis, for example, because the way one's life is gendered does not stand on its own as clearly distinguishable and then get added to the way one's life is raced. Causes for celebration and resistance for Jewish women as feminists, for example, do not come in neat ahistorical packages for them as women, and then other times in other neat essentialist packages for them as Jews. Many feminists, then, began to talk about the connection between identities or even the ways that oppressions "intersect."⁴

While extremely popular still today, for others, however, intersectionality was not enough. Feminists theorized the ways in which identity signifiers are actually mutually constitutive (a premise that, when they are queried, most intersectionality scholars say they are working from). What they mean is that, for example, gender itself is a raced/classed/sexed/cultured category, as race is a gendered/classed/sexed/cultured category. Gender can be seen as mutually constitutive of the construction of sexual orientation so that being male or female only makes sense in the context of compulsory heterosexuality. The personal and social constructions of one's life as a Jewish lesbian feminist is a historically situated Jewishly and gendered sexing, a sexed and gendered Jewing, and simultaneously a sexed and Jewed gendering.

In large part, it has been the work of African-American, Latina, and other lesbians and feminists of color that most clearly articulated this point of analysis. In earlier works such as *Ain't I a Woman*, the anthologies *Home Girls*; *This Bridge Called My Back*; *Making Face, Making Soul*, and the most appropriately titled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*,⁵ many women of color worked at describing and investigating the ways that race, class, culture, and sexuality all nuance and shift gender construction. There were certainly formally trained philosophers writing in these books. In hindsight, however, we can now see that there

were both strengths and weaknesses involved in the appropriation of insights from these volumes into the works of formally trained feminist philosophers outside these marginalized communities. Further, despite the widespread activities of Jewish feminists, less attention has been paid to Jewish experiences and insights within these discussions of identities and multiple modes of power and oppression. From multiculturalism to intersectionality, Jewish people, experience, and analysis is largely missing in these literatures.

It is my intention in this chapter to constructively address these strengths and weaknesses and to situate Jewish feminist queer thinking within the philosophical discussion of intersectionality and mutual construction. To do so, the next section takes up an early important text in the development of intersectionality studies and mutual constitution theory, that by Elizabeth V. Spelman, as a helpful, yet limited, example of philosophical writing on the mutual constitution of identities. I then offer a critical reading of a specific Talmudic text as an alternative to Spelman's reliance on a hegemonic Western philosophical tradition. In the final section, through an analysis of early works by Rebecca Alpert and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, I discuss the ways that insights from both Western feminist and Talmudic traditions may be found at work in Jewish feminist queer discussions of what is termed today *intersectionality politics*.

Mutual Constitution Theory in Feminist Philosophy

It is probably all too obvious that those doing higher-level feminist philosophy have tended to be white women, or women not identifying in their written work with a nonwhite/Christian minority.⁶ The second point of import here, addressed more specifically to conceptual content, is that although some have managed to include numerous aspects of identities into their analyses, in fact, some of the most insightful academic philosophical demonstrations of this view of multiple identity signifiers as mutually constitutive have used a two-tiered model.⁷ Early pivotal work by Spelman, for example, demonstrated that gender and race mutually constitute each other.⁸ As helpful as this scholarship is, however, it also has significant limitations. Such work has tended to slip from focusing on two identity signifiers into privileging one or two at the cost of others. In Spelman's case, despite the significant contribution of her critique of such practices in the development of intersectionality studies, she tends to privilege race as an identity category and this seems to follow from her reliance on standard canons of hegemonic Western civilization.

Spelman's Argument

In *Inessential Woman*, Spelman presents the following analysis of race and gender categories. According to Spelman, we often find ourselves and our political commentators asking about, for example, the status of women and Blacks in the military.⁹ She reminds us that such a statement actually makes no sense, since some women in the military are Black and some of the Blacks are also women. Not only is this faulty use of language, but given the racist biases in gender analysis and the sexist biases in race-based analysis, the category “women” is taken then to mean non-Black women, and the category “Black” is taken to mean Blacks who are not women. This structure leaves out an important group of human beings: Black women.

Spelman seeks to introduce the Black woman into (traditionally white) scholarly discourse and ultimately (back) into the modes of political production. In order to make her point, she demonstrates that the additive method for understanding identity (adding one discrete identity signifier such as gender to another discrete identity signifier such as race, and so on) is insufficient for including Black women. The only way to end the exclusion of Black women is to understand identities such as race and gender, not just as connected or as one added to the other, but to understand that the very category of gender is raced and the category of race is gendered.

Spelman's Method

Spelman begins her argument with a critique of race and gender in Plato, and hones the discussion further in a second chapter on Aristotle. There were certain distinctions that Aristotle made between human beings that set them into particular categories with respect to power. Not all people were considered citizens. In fact, children, women, slaves, and foreigners were expressly considered to exist by nature outside the bounds of possible citizenship. It is, however, the specific designations of women and slaves that mostly concern Spelman. Again, motivated by who is left out of theoretical treatises on the subject of “women and slaves in ancient Greece,” including feminist ones,¹⁰ Spelman reminds us that some females were slaves, as much as some slaves were female. Among nonslave Athenians, Aristotle distinguished between the men and the women. When referring to slaves, the distinction of gender is not made.¹¹ Spelman skillfully demonstrates, therefore, that when Aristotle referred to women (presumably the gendered category of females),¹² he was referring specifically and exclusively to non-

slave females. Thus, for Aristotle, the very category of women exists only within a certain elite segment of the population.

It is at this point that Spelman's use of the hegemonic Greek text takes a problematic turn. She notes that the ancient Greek category of "slave" resembles a cross between our contemporary categories of race and class. She suggests that, for expository ease, this race/class category will have to be simplified. Driven by her own motivations within the context of contemporary political concerns, Spelman chooses to translate the ancient Greek notion of slave into the modern idiom of race.¹³ The potential for a class-based analysis effectively drops out at this point.¹⁴ We are left with a dual axis discussion of identity, based on gender and race.¹⁵ Due to this particular interpretation, although Spelman eloquently shows that gender is raced, her argument that race is gendered functions slightly differently and brings her use of the Greek text into further difficulties.

As mentioned earlier, Spelman points out that Aristotle does not address gender distinctions among slaves. Allowing Aristotle's work here to function as a hegemonic text, Spelman, therefore, also does not make such a distinction.¹⁶ Although for critical purposes she writes about this issue in Aristotle's writing, she also does not distinguish between the maleness and femaleness of slaves.¹⁷ Therefore, although she will ultimately argue that gender is raced and race is gendered, her explanations of the two understandably are not parallel. Gender, on this account, is raced because one needed to be of a certain race to have a gender at all. Race is gendered, in this story, because the distinction of races is marked by those who have genders and those who do not. In short: free Athenians have genders; slaves do not.

The issue of concern for intersectionality studies is the way that Spelman's construction of the race of gender and the gender of race does not sufficiently reflect the relations of power and identity in many of our lives, and therefore is limited in the ways it might be helpful in the work to overcome oppressions as they operate in our lived lives (not only in our philosophical heritage). By setting up race and gender in the way that she does with the help of Aristotle, Spelman assumes that Athenian women stand above all slaves, whether male or female, in the social hierarchy. Spelman writes: "Since there are no natural rulers among slaves, a man who is a slave is not the natural ruler of a woman who is a slave (and surely not of a free woman)," and "whatever biological superiority male slaves have to female slaves, they are inferior to the wives of male citizens."¹⁸ I could not say whether such a depiction is accurate. What is important is that Spelman then projects this set of relationships onto those she conceives of as among

similar groups of our day. Thus, Spelman presumes that white women, in the contemporary political context, always stand above all African Americans.¹⁹

Critique

From within Spelman's theory, one loses the ability to continue a critical gender analysis within a critical discussion about race. When Spelman relates Aristotle's view of slaves to the reality of African Americans, she also transfers what she understands as Aristotle's homogenizing characterization of slaves. As a result, in her argument, race trumps gender. If in Spelman's reading of Aristotle, slaves had no genders, then modern oppressed races have no genders. If modern oppressed races have no genders, then gender-based analysis cannot be applied. But, when critical gender analysis is not applied, maleness is the assumed norm and patriarchy goes uncontested. In effect, Spelman has thus erased the existence of African-American women and their concerns. Ironically, this is precisely the problem that inspired Spelman's inquiry to begin with.

There are, though, two additional problems. First, despite the obvious pervasiveness of racism in the contemporary context, all white women simply do not always have distinct power over all Black men. This was the case long before, and will be long after, Barak Obama beat Hilary Clinton for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. Second, Spelman tends to essentialize the groups of Black men and white women in her characterization; thus, the structure of her argument causes her at times to lose sight of diversity among white women, and also among Black men and women. Bringing these two points together, we can say that within classes, for example, Black men often enjoy male privilege over all women in their own or lower classes, often enough including white women and trans people and also queer, non-Christian, non-citizen, and disabled women and other genders of various races. Spelman's unfortunate refusal to work within the reality of such renders this aspect of her argument absurd. Moreover, real life has us often moving in and out of differing positions of power and this dynamic ought to be core to any intersectionality study, but Spelman does not adequately prepare us for the work.

Although Spelman's account of Aristotle focuses on his two-tiered model of free/slave-male/female, at the moment Spelman chooses to translate the ancient Greek slavery from what she herself notes as a more complicated convergence of contemporary class and race, she limits the power of her own insights as well. However, it is my argument that Spelman's thesis on the mutual constitution of multiple identities is not inherently limited. My

suggestion is that one reason she falls short of her own goals involves her particular methodological reliance on Aristotle, a preeminent Western canonical figure, in her critique of the dominant framework. Perhaps we will be better able to do the work Spelman sets out for us if we look for alternative ways of conceptualizing the issues from sources and traditions outside the Western canon. In light of this suggestion, I turn now to a discussion of countertexts.

There are certainly any number of texts that could be employed in order to help Spelman's analysis stay critical, multifaceted, and more flexible (which I imagine she intended) by applying a critique of a hegemonic text. What one ought to look for is a text capable of conceiving multiple categories as mutually constitutive that relies on an alternative epistemological framework to that relied on by hegemonic texts. We may look for answers to these questions in traditional, ancient Jewish texts.

Having said this, I realize that some people who are familiar with feminist and queer studies might find this statement implausible. Due to the sexism practiced and institutionalized in so many Jewish communities, feminists often presume there is nothing left of worth in traditional Jewish thinking and texts. Similarly, due to religious—and explicitly biblical—invocations used to justify extreme homophobia, queers of all kinds may assume that the Torah is inherently tainted with a heterosexist norm. What we also find, however, is that the epistemological framework manifest in certain ancient Jewish texts offers alternatives to current attempts at theorizing our multiple identities as mutually constitutive.

Jewish Texts as Countertexts

In this section, I develop a close reading of a Talmudic text.²⁰ Posing difficult dilemmas, the Babylonian rabbis puzzled through what Jewish tradition would prescribe in myriad specific circumstances. I engage a particular analysis of this text as an example of a countertext that can help perform the interrogatory function that Spelman's theory needs to stay critical. Before presenting the textual analysis, however, a few words are in order on the use of these texts as countertexts.

Political and Philosophical Potential of Countertexts for Intersectionality Studies

As feminist and queer scholars have argued, it is often helpful to turn to countertexts in order to see through myths of dominant cultural norms.²¹

If we look at a nonhegemonic text (or even a text that is hegemonic but in a subaltern context), we might be better able to explore the multiple layers of the ways identity categories are mutually constituted. Using Spelman's concern about lists of identities, and about how the additive approach blinds us to the reality of whole groups of people, we can look at a particular ancient Jewish text that resembles the Aristotelian model of listing "slaves and women," but with significant differences. I want to suggest that with the help of Spelman, an analysis of the countertext I will present holds more promise for those in intersectionality studies interested in theorizing the mutual constitution of multiple identities and the ways in which they are complicated, than that of Spelman's use of the canonical Greeks only. Further, we can find this methodology used in many Jewish feminist lesbian and queer theorizings, however unself-consciously.

Methodologically, it seems we would want to be able to say more about a text that qualifies in specific contexts as a countertext than that it is simply outside the canon.²² A comparative analysis of the differences between Talmudic texts in the context of their use in Jewish history and Western political theory would take volumes. What I find most interesting in this set of countertexts for the subject of this chapter, however, is how they help us circumscribe the problems of modernist standpoint theory that could (and at times do) plague Jewish feminist queer, critical race, and class work.

The main distinction that is important at this point, between the method of thinking in the Aristotelian-based tradition and that found in rabbinic texts, relates to how Aristotle's universalism relies on sameness to define identity concepts.²³ This is the foundational assumption in the problematic nature of essentialism. Jewish tradition has not worked this way, for the most part. It is not a universalist tradition, but rather it is usually particularist. As will be demonstrated, differences comprise the world of rabbinic and other Jewish understandings of identity.²⁴ This suggests that what I present as "additional" categories to the two-tiered approach of Spelman are not merely multiplying, or adding, categories as is often found in the additive move, and critiqued by those way of standpoint theory.²⁵ The Talmudic categories are not "added" to some essential and unchanging identity, as somehow external to one's "core" identity as a Jew.²⁶ The categories are internally constitutive of Jewishness itself; they explicitly make one the kind of Jew one is.

What I find interesting in the Talmudic text (later replicated in much Jewish feminist work) is the alternative system of complex hierarchies.²⁷ In

the structure erected in this text, there is no single standpoint from which to gain perspective. These texts are therefore both extremely problematic for their content vis-à-vis the history of Jewish communities and also extremely promising for complex contemporary theorizing. Further, in using a countertext, I do not wish to suggest that we can get outside of oppressive discourses simply by looking outside *dominant* oppressive discourses. What I am offering is the idea that other noncanonical modes of thinking—even if oppressive in their own contexts—might highlight aspects of the dominant mode in need of critique. They can provide a set of instances that disrupt the first set of oppressive categorizations.²⁸

The following analysis of a countertext will also demonstrate the reciprocal benefit of using a more multicultural analysis. Relying on canonical texts can often reinforce problematic modes of thinking. Looking to marginalized works may provide us with more alternative conceptualizations. But this is not all. Bringing together analytic discussions of concern in the dominant framework with those in marginalized communities can provide transformative insight into the problems faced by those within the marginalized framework as well.²⁹ This layer of countertextual analysis is imperative, because not making the reciprocal move to hold the subaltern text to critical scrutiny runs the risk of cultural essentialism by not acknowledging the interpretive struggles and historical power dynamics in the minority community. Without the reciprocal move in countertextual analysis, the critique potentially sets up the historically dominant powers within the minority culture as an unproblematized and representative norm. For Jewish feminist queers, this will simply not do. Finally, failing to engage in the reciprocal countertextual critique implicitly prioritizes justice work for those in the dominant community over those in the marginalized minority community.³⁰ As such, the following pages will point to the potential of both using Jewish texts to revive Spelman's thesis, as well as using Spelman to challenge the power relationships in the Jewish text.

Talmudic Hierarchical Classifications for Saving a Life

Contemporary scholars and practitioners working in a Jewish framework often turn to historically significant Jewish texts to understand the ancient logic of the rabbis in order to help solve contemporary problems. For example, we might imagine a dilemma for contemporary medical ethicists where in urgent cases, such as those of modern emergency rooms, the question of how to prioritize patients for triage is life-threateningly pressing. In

examining the particular case of what a physician should do when faced with two patients of equal ill health at the same time, Jewish ethicists may turn to Talmudic sources for answers. In their search they are likely to come upon a text from the Babylonian Talmud Horayot 13b–14a, which addresses “matters concerning the saving of a life.”

In this case the rabbis reasoned through a maze of categories and came up with a specific answer. The rather shocking and very practical answer to this question of enormous gravity is that the male patient is treated before a female patient, for it says in the Mishnah, “A man takes precedence over a woman in matters concerning the saving of life.” Interestingly enough, the reasoning does not stop here in order to make sure that the writing can answer the problem completely. Gender categories are not the only significant categories in traditional Jewish culture, nor is this binary notation cohesive as the Talmud also discusses various additional gender categories (Lev 2004, 2007, 2010; Fonrobert 2007). The text thus goes on to rank numerous groups of people in the order in which they should receive attention.

The next ranking runs according to the ancient Jewish caste system: One must treat a Cohen before a Levite, and a Levite before an Israelite. The Gemara also includes ten ranked subcategories of Cohens and some challenges to its chosen order. This system of categorization, which I have called caste-based, actually works according to religious rights and responsibilities in ancient Israel. It is still in use today under certain circumstances and explains common Jewish surnames in the United States: Cohen, Cohn, Cahan, Kahane, Kane; Levi, Levy, Levitan, Levinson, Lewinsky; and Israel, Israeli, and so on. These names, or other familial identifications, tell where those individuals fall in the three-thousand-year-old Jewish caste system. As a concrete example, I am of the Israelite caste.

This is not all. The next set of categorizations are what might best be understood today as national (i.e., who belongs to the nation). The Mishnah states that Cohens, Levites, and Israelites are all to be treated before bastards, “a bastard over a nathin,³¹ a *nathin* over a proselyte, and a proselyte over an emancipated slave.” The text does not mention slaves as a group at all. What is also interesting about this category of national membership is that there are three subcategories of membership in the nation: biological, cultural, and geographic. Although these categories are presented in a simple hierarchy at this stage, the text in full through the Gemara interpretation keeps the relations between these three subcategories challenged within the text and thus may be seen as potentially fluid and shifting. Let us look at an example of this complex and hierarchy.

What is presented in terms of textual order, as the last category, scholars, actually turns out to override all the previous categories. This is the subversive category of the Talmud.³² The Mishnah states clearly: “This order of precedence applies only when all these were in other respects equal. If the bastard, however, was a scholar and the High Priest an ignoramus, the learned bastard takes precedence over the ignorant High Priest.” (The high priest refers to the Cohen caste, within which the Gemara makes sure to delineate many subcategories as well.) Mixing in political categories of hierarchical ordering, the Gemara also explains, “A scholar takes precedence over a king of Israel, for if a scholar dies there is none to replace him,” and “A king takes precedence over a High Priest.” There is a final category that crosses the political and religious—prophets—who are ranked below the political category of king. None of these classifications refer to those that affect women as a group as women, such as marital status.

Co-Constructionist Intersectionality, Spelman, and the Confusion of the Talmudic Hierarchies

Given the multiplicity of categories and their nature, the Talmudic text can be quite interesting to contemporary political theorists working on intersectionality, and more promising than the twofold framework of Spelman’s translated Aristotle. Due to the complexity of the Talmudic rankings, I will first attempt to clarify the conceptual incoherences and the nuances of the hierarchical orderings that often turn in on themselves. To do so I will use Spelman’s methodology. First, a gender classification is in some ways distinct from the collection of castes among Cohens, Levites, and Israelites. These are, in turn, in certain aspects distinct from the national collection of bastards, *nathins*, converts, and emancipated slaves, which are to some degree distinct from the scholarly, political, and political/religious classifications. In this case, the fact that slaves are not even mentioned is a silence waiting to be theorized.

The use of the term *Israelite* in this listing is particularly confusing for those who yearn for discrete and separable identity groupings, because it sometimes refers only to the priestly order (as when it is used in the list of religious caste order), and at other times it means all the rest of the people of Israel (as in the reference to a king of Israel), which would include those named under the gender, national, scholarly, political, and political-religious listings as well as Cohens, Levites, and kings.³³ Also, historically there were instances when individuals moved in or out of the Levite cast, making that designation far more fluid than such placement in the list suggests. Further,

in common understandings of Jewish law, once a person has become a Jew, there is to be no distinction, let alone discrimination, made between one who converted to become a Jew and one who is Jewish by virtue of being born to a Jewish mother. Here, on the matter of literal life and death, we find a substantial distinction. Otherwise, Israelites may have been converts, bastards, or *nathins* and could be among the group designated as emancipated slaves. Finally, aside from Cohens, Levites, and kings, all the other categories mentioned might be composed of both men, women, and (and what we might consider today) queerly gendered.

Using Spelman to destabilize the Jewish text proves to be quite interesting. It forces a contemporary scholar to look at the multiplicity of categories and question their internal logic in ways not traditionally questioned. To explicate this for those less familiar with the mechanisms of this particular historical tradition, Jewish law is steeped in distinctions based on gender—though not necessarily only in a binary frame. In this case, the two top religious caste categories do not even include women. Laws for women apply to women only sometimes in the Israelite designation and usually in all the other categories designated; laws for men sometimes apply to all men and at other times apply to men according to their membership in these other classes. The scholarly and religious-political references would usually refer to men, but on occasion women scholars and prophetesses have been named. No woman was ever king. Although one might conclude that gender trumps all other distinctions, due to its appearance at the top of the original list, Spelman's analysis helps us to see that such a conclusion is nonsensical. In ancient Israelite society, women could be converts, *nathins*, bastards, and current or freed slaves. À la Spelman, saying “women and Israelites,” or “women and converts” makes no sense and excludes those who fall into both categories. It also does not help us understand women and the caste system or myriad decisions regarding (in contemporary terms) gender queers.

The Talmud and the Problem of a Two-Tiered Intersectionality Method

Due to the particularist tendency of Talmudic thinking, that there are many categories previously named does not mean that the categories of identity of interest to Spelman are simply multiplied. Instead, we find a complex system of overlapping, shifting, and internally challenged hierarchies. This makes the use of the additive method basically impossible. The following is intended to help clarify this point.

Regarding the Jewish text, one must do the following (not necessarily lexically):

1. Put all these sets of relationships together.
2. Figure out if including women and those beyond a gender binary into categories where they fit means that bastard males take precedence over bastard females.
3. Rerank categories that include men and women and all genders.
4. Open the possibility that women could stand above men in the case where a woman is a scholar.
5. Include the groups not mentioned in even this long list but crucial to its implementation, such as those beyond a modern gender binary, slaves and divorced women, wives of Cohens, Levites, Israelites, and kings.
6. Rerank according to how the unnamed groups change the hierarchy of the named.
7. Figure out what to do in frame 5 where a Cohen and a Levite are both above Israelites and are Israelites themselves.
8. Notice that it is impossible to perform steps 1 through 7.

The above set of steps demonstrates conceptually the classifications, group names, and power relationships in the two examples, Spelman's Aristotle and this particular Talmudic text. The difference between Spelman's Aristotle and the Talmudic text is not simply that more classifications and groups are named in the Talmud, but that the internal logic of the Talmudic text challenges its own named categories as discrete and separable entities and makes it impossible to develop a linear presentation of power relationships at all, let alone one that is stable or fixed.

Using this countercontext to help destabilize Spelman's Aristotelian categorizations, we can see that if this had been the model that Spelman had relied on, she might not have translated the complicated racial/classed category of slave into the single contemporary signifier of race. It would not have helped her to do so. She would, therefore, also probably not have theorized race as a gendered category in the way that she does. Some particulars from this Jewish example are that certain castes have women and other genders, others do not; women and other genders in the families of the Cohen or Levite men led different lives in the social context than those in other castes; and divorced women and other genders, yet another

category, were generally exempted from the possibility of marrying males in the Cohen caste. Like life, the situation is more complicated than the easy slave/not-slave bifurcation, and importantly, the line of gender is not drawn on a dualistic model. In looking at the rabbinic text, we are forced to deal with multiple categories and myriad relationships that are often counterindicative and can change, given different contexts. We would have to examine the whole complex of gender, caste, class, politics, learnedness, marital status, foreign origin, and so on, as it works in its own unique way through each constellation, as well as what similarities might run throughout, even as the categories and their relations themselves are questioned and shift. This model is probably more productive for contemporary intersectionality thinkers seeking to theorize identities and power dynamics in the vast complex multiplicity of our lives.

The Talmudic Example and Jewish Lesbian Feminist Analyses

We must ask, therefore, how we can make use of this alternative mode, as found in traditional Jewish texts, for contemporary work in critical queer, class, and race studies. In some ways, many Jewish feminists and queer (or queer-conscious) activists and thinkers have long been working out the answer to this question. Although the majority of queer and feminist Jewish intellectuals and organizers are not likely to be familiar with Talmudic or other ancient texts,³⁴ we can find an interesting correlation between their epistemological assumptions. In addition, although many Jewish queers would not necessarily see themselves as consciously engaged in a contemporary application of ancient Jewish wisdoms, *we* might see them as such nevertheless.

There are two reasons for this that I think are important to highlight in the context of this chapter. First, there is a relationship between contemporary intersectionality perspectives that look for, embrace, and honor particularities and the epistemological framework found in some rabbinic reasoning mentioned earlier. Second, the basic life experiences of feminist Jewish queers demands attention to their multiple identities—and concomitant power relations—beyond a dual grid. Even white, European-heritage and Ashkenazi Jewish lesbians who have not yet begun to problematize their racial/cultural/class location in a US context do, at least, engage in the tripartite complex hierarchies of sexuality, gender, and Jewishness. In many Jewish feminist and queer activist organizations and writings, we find sensitivity to the complexity of power dynamics operating on multiple layers

that not only shade one another, but often change shape and turn in on each other as well, depending on the context. Since this may be difficult to understand abstractly, I would like to present an analysis of early exemplary works by two Jewish lesbian feminist activists and scholars. The first, Rebecca Alpert, is also a rabbi and therefore familiar with Talmudic texts (although I do not mean to imply that her book is a conscious application). The second, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, is a secular Jew with less exposure to such texts. In looking at a central early work by each woman, we can see more specifically how we may use Spelman's insights recast with a Talmudic legacy of multiple identities in theorizing Jewish issues in the complex nexus of race/nationality, gender, sexuality, and class.

The Lesbian Legacy of "Bread on the Seder Plate"

Alpert is a Jewish lesbian feminist activist rabbi, and also a scholar in the secular academy. The goal of her 1997 book, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, is to "determine strategies" for Jewish lesbians to "participate [more] fully, as lesbians, in Jewish life."³⁵ Alpert does not seek inclusion of lesbians into Jewish communal life in an assimilationist mode (as in the universalist reliance on sameness). Instead, she seeks an inclusion of this previously ignored—and other times marginalized—group through means no less radical than the fundamental transformation of Judaism itself. Similar to the way that the Talmud both establishes authority even as it challenges it, at the outset of Alpert's vision we find that Jewish tradition is itself open and changing rather than essentially static. In order to make possible this deep change in Jewish history, Alpert primarily takes on the traditional Jewish task of reinterpreting texts. There is, however, nothing essentially traditional in the aims of her methodology. Alpert offers lesbian-critical insights from readings of ancient religious texts, introduces new texts for consideration as part of a transformed canon, and develops suggestions for the creation of new sacred texts out of the lives of Jewish lesbians from the history of today and the future.

As the Talmudic example works with multiple, overlapping, and shifting categories to establish its newly authoritative perspective, Alpert deftly works a tripartite analysis of identities and their mutual constitution. She takes on gender, sexual orientation, and Jewish affiliation in a fluid weave. Within her tripartite analysis, Alpert is able to acknowledge and incorporate multiple aspects of difference though she privileges three categories. She is able to do so often enough without always treating the multiple aspects as discrete and separative. For example, Jewish diversity is not limited to factors

of sexual orientation and gender (her two other privileged categories). Jews are one group in the privileged triplet, even as Jews are diverse according to historical context, race, geography, religious expression, nationality, and so on. Similarly, analysis of the category of lesbian crosses Jewish and non-Jewish examinations as it is also related to gay male, bisexual, transgender, and queer categories. Her treatment of gender also draws on both Jewish and non-Jewish sources and complicates the very idea of gender through discussion of lesbian and other gender nonconformist interstices.

Alpert's project faces a number of challenges, however, when viewed through the lens of an attempt to race queer studies and queer race studies in a Jewish context. Most obviously, despite brief acknowledgment of other politically salient issues of identity such as race and class, Alpert's mode of exploration in this particular text is not sufficiently open to race- and class-critical analyses. Having said this, there is actually another consideration that I would like to focus on more specifically: the delicate difficulty of privileging the conceptual category of lesbian over queer without incorporating the baggage of second-wave feminism's history of essentialism.

Although the reclamation of "queer" became a hallmark of 1990s politics in the United States, it did not become—or remain—so without contestation. The concept of queer is in need of such contestation. I do not use the term *queer* here to suggest that it simply surpasses all essentialisms. It does not. As one example, many can collapse queer, often taken to suggest multiplicity and fluidity, into its own binary essentialism over and against heteronormativity. Many communities, often depending on age, race, class, and cultural diversity, do not use the term *queer* in self-identification. Significantly also for the purposes of this chapter, many lesbians in particular have resisted self- and movement-labeling as queer because of the legacy of sexism within gay men's activist movements and within society at large. Sexist tendencies to eclipse the experiences, concerns, and contributions of women in their diversity have found their place in coalitions among sexual minorities and in queer studies and activism. Lesbians, in particular, but not only those deeply situated in the second-wave feminist movement, have often continued to demand distinct lesbian spaces, organizations, and modes of analysis. This, of course, has become increasingly challenging as transfolk speak up and speak back in supposedly feminist women's spheres. Albert's project focused on lesbians, although it was clearly situated within a broader spectrum of sexual minorities, gender variance, and queer ideology in particular. In many ways the book itself demonstrates the need for such a prioritization.

However, as Spelman's work is designed to demonstrate, some aspects of second-wave feminism relied on various modes of essentialist thinking. Women were taken to be the subject of feminist political movement, and too often even the feminist employment of the category of women reflected hegemonic patriarchal characterizations of who these "women" are. As has been much discussed, despite long-term activism among women from an array of minority communities, the closer one was to a white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, and able norm, the more likely one's voice was to be heard within feminist movement and in the US media. Internalizing a narrow and/or static view of women, even as they often radicalized it, many second-wave feminists represented lesbians at an apex of the "feminist woman." While not specifically the trajectory of Alpert's work, the lesbian identity that often emerged out of radical second-wave feminism was, as a political act, defined more through a feminist lens of the person being "woman identified" than through a lens of sexuality and/or status as a sexual or gender outlaw.³⁶

The consequence of this trend among feminists was that lesbians of this milieu more frequently aligned themselves with "women" than with gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people. In fact, the nature of certain strains of feminist critique explicitly distanced lesbian identity and community from cultural forms developing in both gay men's communities (such as drag and male-to-female cross-dressing) and other forms of queer women's culture (such as role-playing, cross-dressing, female-to-male transitioning, or sadomasochism). This set of political alignments also often set lesbian feminists against lesbians whose identity was forged prior to the advent or outside the centers of second-wave feminism. This meant, for example, that lesbian identities in rural areas and small cities without a college campus (specifically an elite or radical college campus) were frequently marginalized as politically incorrect, not only as feminists, but also as women and as lesbians. The same may be said for racial and class dichotomies: The radical feminist assertion of "feminism as the theory, lesbianism as the practice" emerged largely outside of working-class and poor lesbian worlds, as well as outside most lesbian communities of color.

Feminist movements presuming the priority of women *as* women left no room for women *as* anything else. Put more specifically, the notion of women as women assumed an essential identity of womanness that could be abstracted from other identity constructions and stand universally on its own. In fact, this essentialized universal womanness was of course a raced, classed, sexed, and cultured conception. Without attending to this

fact, however, women from communities not assumed in the class/race/culture/gender/sexuality norm were seen as less purely *women*—including often Jewish women in their diversity. Identifications imbricated with a cross section of other communities were seen as tainted. This problem of essentialism is directly related to Spelman's excellent work on race and class in the text analyzed in this chapter. For all the critical work her contribution accomplishes, it also can make it difficult to do gender-based critique in the context of the vast array of power dynamics, even among the group she refers to as women.

We cannot overlook at this point that these imbricating identities are ones that women would share with men as well as with other women and those gender identified beyond the binary. Just as Jews invested in Jewish patriarchy found identifying as feminists an act of mutiny, as it was assumed impossible to identify with women *and* Jews, some feminists found continued identification with class struggle and racial and ethnic/religious communities an act of treason. In class, racial, and ethnic/religious communities, women could not be women *as* women exclusively; they shared these politics with groups of men, trans, and all gender queer people. This bind within feminism was at times replicated within lesbian politics. Moreover, to the degree that lesbians were seen as hyperwomen (in a radical feminist sense), the elite pressure to define identities and align politically with women made coalition and joint identity construction with males and gender/sexual outlaws culturally and politically criminal. This has led to the more recent reemergence of some self-identifying as "radical feminists" as virulently antitrans. This usurpation of the identifier radical is problematic. Jewishly it tends to make less sense. Jewish feminism has always needed feminism to be more open and variegated in its radicalness, or anti-Semitism remained intact in ways similarly found in hegemonic patriarchal and racist societal norms.

I want to be clear here: I am not saying that these elements of exclusionary thinking are directly present in *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*. Alpert provides a helpful framework for those seeking to work in critical lesbian theory, which avoids the worst of these movement problematics. For example, Alpert explicitly concludes the book with her "visions for the future." In this chapter Alpert points out that many of her concerns for a lesbian feminist Jewish agenda are shared with numerous other Jews: heterosexual feminists, gay men, heterosexual intermarried couples, bisexuals, transgendered people, single heterosexuals, those not traditionally observant, liberal Jews in general, progressive educators, "scholars of women's history, mysticism, and Mizrahi Jewish communities." This single mention of nonwhite/

non-Ashkenazi Jews suggests, however, that they may be absent from the writer's and readers' conceptualizations about the other groups and may not even be interpreted to mean Mizrahi (Eastern) Jewish communities at all, but "scholars of." No mention was made at that historical juncture of Jews of color of whatever Jewish ethnic tradition, though Alpert's work has changed since the publication of this particular text. Further, Jewish lesbian feminists have made clear that tensions between lesbians and other sexual outlaws in the Jewish community, especially those involving "men" of various sorts, will not be adequately addressed until bisexual women take responsibility for certain aspects of relative privilege, and until men, including trans men, make antisexist work central to their agendas. However, this does not exempt lesbians from taking responsibility as well. The history of essentialist thought at work not only in feminism, Spelman's focus, but also in lesbian feminism has affected some aspects of Jewish lesbian feminism. Gathering together in specific communities is necessary as we do the work of social justice. However, attending to some of the problematic aspects that gathering has relied on historically is also a necessary part of justice work. In this, lesbian feminists must also take seriously the potentially essentialist bases informing some of our choices historically to identify as lesbians.

The Issue Is Power

At this juncture I would like to undertake a brief review of one other earlier work by a Jewish lesbian feminist that was also interestingly able to avoid the trap of essentialism. At the time Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz was writing the essays for her book, *The Issue Is Power: Essays on Women, Jews, Violence and Resistance*, she was not using the term *queer*; her radical feminist identification as lesbian and dyke does not, however, exactly recall the historical problems of essentialism in feminist thought in the same way that Alpert's work can and Spelman's work did. Clearly advancing a lesbian-critical agenda, Kaye/Kantrowitz shows us that we need constantly to see the relationship between anti-Semitism, racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia if we are to build an inclusive, multicultural, and effective left in this "toxic wasteland" of our lives.³⁷ However, we must build these bridges with "our frail/sturdy human hearts outraged by injustice and committed to generosity."³⁸

The Issue Is Power contains speeches from political events and essays of various lengths developed over a fifteen-year period. Kaye/Kantrowitz's message is delivered always in the cadence of a poet, with the urgency of an activist, and the sensitivity, kindness, and self-criticism of a Brooklyn-born

Jew re-created in the civil rights, women's, and lesbian liberation movements. From pieces on art and culture to politics, identity, and sexuality, Kaye/Kantrowitz shows over and over that the issue most certainly is power and that we had better wise up, allow ourselves to feel it, talk to each other about it, and take action.

The book opens with a long essay on violence.³⁹ She opens the introduction: "First I learned about rape. I mean, I always knew, cannot remember learning. First I learned about the Holocaust. I mean, I always knew, cannot remember learning."⁴⁰ Kaye/Kantrowitz, who is antimilitaristic, takes the issue of violence seriously and has decided that it is "a contradiction to be a Jew and a pacifist," that "pacifism is a luxury" because "victims resist every way they can . . . victims must fight back."⁴¹

But this is no diatribe through which Kaye/Kantrowitz might seduce you into any form of action and resistance if you are not careful. Her work on violence is far from a glorification, or a love affair such as Hollywood, the news media, or the nation-state have. Kaye/Kantrowitz, speaking with the insight of the oppressed, immediately asks: "What does it mean to be a *victim*? How does one/can one use violence to free oneself? And then how does one stop? When is one strong enough to stop?"⁴² In this essay, Kaye/Kantrowitz is able to focus on violence against women and articulate what she has learned from resistance to such violence. But like any of the mutually constitutive categories of the Talmudic text, women do not stand alone in this piece as a separative category. What she knows about violence against women is made possible by what she has mutually come to know about anti-Semitic, class-based, racial violence, and militarism as well.

Many of the other essays treat topics of Jewish identity and politics more directly. Similar to what we saw in Alpert and in contrast to an essentialist view, Kaye/Kantrowitz benefits from a traditional legacy that values historical continuity as it presumes major disruptions and new developments within that historical trajectory. In these pieces, she keeps in motion the movement to redevelop US Jewish identity. This emerging identity is Jewish and is placed in history; in her words, "to be a Jew is to tangle with history."⁴³ It is also well rooted in and relevant to our contemporary (US) American experience, in the spirit of those with an unflinching commitment to morality and pride, both personal and collective. Kaye/Kantrowitz takes for her base a quote from Muriel Rukeyser, "To be a Jew in the twentieth century is to be offered a gift,"⁴⁴ and adds that "To be a Radical Jew in the Late 20th Century" is . . . is . . . well, maybe we don't know yet exactly what it is." But in the face of the pain and loss particularly associated with assimilation, to be a radical Jew in the late twentieth century and still today