

clustering markers (re)configuring a self

by Sharon Rosenberg

Tenant compte de sa propre définition d'identité personnelle en tant que juive, l'auteure analyse comment les «autres» définissent les «Juifs» à partir de critères sociaux prédéterminés.



Shira Spector, "Shabbes Quilt," detail, screenprint on printed cotton, 22" x 29", 1992. Photo: Elaine Denis

In a recent gathering of Jewish intellectual folk, we were discussing the dominant markers of "Jewishness" that others use to identify "us." I was reminded of an experience from when I was first in Canada, in which I mentioned to a woman I had been working with for some months that I was Jewish. I remember still her shock—her exclamation that "I must be lying," that I couldn't possibly be Jewish, I was after all, British!

Having grown up in a highly assimilated family, I did not know then how to respond to her. Some 15 years later, I continue to grapple with what I do mean when I evoke the category "Jewish"—what markers might (I want to) matter.

Naming myself: an Ashkenazi Jew: deeply cognizant of how I am—and am not—figured within this identity: the child of a Jewish mother and a Jewish father; themselves children of Jewish parents with Jewish parents (at least I believe this to be so; there is not much of the telling of history in my family). This heritage accords to me an "authenticity" within dominant discourses of religious Judaism that I do not strive for; accords me an identity in which I do not find space for my(jewish)self. I live a secular largely non-ritualized life that is marked by my "being Jewish" in ways I have only recently begun to comprehend—marked by my own desires in, and representations of, self as well as the meanings others make on

and of me as an Ashkenazi Jew.

In naming my self Jewish, I search uneasily for markers that others might recognize (perhaps I might recognize): I do not live in a "Jewish neighbourhood" (but the Bloor Jewish Community Centre is a 15 minute walk away from my home); I am not part of a congregation or community (but I have some connection with other Jews); I do not have a traditional European-Jewish look (but it's the 1990s and I live in urban Canada); I do not speak with a particularly "North American Jewish" cadence to my voice (although more and more I find Yiddish words and syntax slipping from my tongue); I do not have "the Jewish-Nose" (but I have a Jewish nose)¹; I am not conversant with Jewish traditions, rituals, ways of making sense (but I am always seeking the work of Jewish lesbians, Jewish feminists. I am conversant with the writings of Adrienne Rich, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Irena Klepfisz, Sandra Butler, Lesléa Newman, Elly Bulkin ...). I did not grow up learning about my self as Jewish—assimilated nonidentity in middle class England—nor had I thought of myself as Jewish for most of my life (but I "came out" as a Jewish lesbian, hand-in-hand, and I came to this self-naming Jewish in learning about the Shoah²). And now I am beginning to face the limitations of an identity I know through horror—with little sense of the joy it might (still) carry.

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¹I have borrowed the form of this coupling from Ann Decter in an essay where she writes through some of the complexity of being Jewish (father's lineage) and not-Jewish (mother's lineage), articulating the doubleness of an identity in which she figures, differently, as "not Jewish" and "not-Jewish."

²The Hebrew name for the Holocaust.

References

Decter, Ann. "I'm Not-Jewish." *Fireweed* 35 (Spring 1992): 80–84.