

# White People's Work, or What Jessica Krug Teaches Us about White Jewish Antiracism

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"There is no ignorance, no innocence, nothing to claim, nothing to defend." That's what Jessica A. Krug wrote on September 3, 2020, the day she cancelled herself, after being found out. A white Jewish professor at George Washington University, Krug had posed as a woman of color for years, shrouding herself in forms of Blackness and Latinidad from North Africa, the Caribbean, and the Bronx, even testifying before the New York City Council as "Jess La Bombalera." When I read the post, my stomach immediately clenched around a tangle of emotions. In that tangle I sensed fear, confusion, anger, frustration, and pity, but not, I must confess, surprise. In truth, my first thought was: *I know why she did this.*

I do not at all excuse Krug's deplorable actions. But I think I understand them. Perhaps in part this comes from what we have in common, both white Jewish women with difficult backgrounds, academics engaging with racial justice, sometime denizens of Kansas City and Washington, DC. And though I've never acted on it, I, too, have felt the impulse to hide from or deny my whiteness and all that it entails.

I also see Krug reflected in my research, which tracks the evolution of contemporary Jewish whiteness. As much as her masquerade may have been driven by her own pathologies, it also belongs to a cultural pattern of purposeful self-misrecognition. Krug is an (unusually obvious) avatar of a structural problem, which makes it all the more important to reckon with the issues her duplicity raises, as uncomfortable as that may be.

Not all Jews are white. But many of us are. And we have an ethical responsibility—perhaps to Jews of color above all—to acknowledge and think critically about the privileged position from which we speak. We should heed the call of Black Canadian writer and activist Dionne Brand, who asserts, "Racism is not our problem. ... It's a white problem. I think we can fight against it.... But in terms of

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doing things like changing white attitudes, white people have to do that work." Unfortunately, many white Jews seem content instead to inhabit our minority status and thus distance ourselves from racism and white supremacy. And sometimes even those white Jews who want to do the work don't want to do it *as white people*.

I started my PhD in August 2014, only days after Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson, MO. Witnessing the protests that followed, I began to recognize a conflicted entanglement both in myself and in Jewish antiracist activism more broadly. I needed—we needed—to have honest conversations about how we are implicated in the very problems we are trying to solve. I also quickly realized that for many American Jews, our whiteness and our sense of collective trauma—particularly in the context of Holocaust memory—are deeply interwoven. Recognizing and earnestly probing those links is a crucial element of the progress we need to make.

In "Collective Responsibility," Hannah Arendt maps this same constellation of issues into a discussion of responsibility, guilt, and conscience in ways that I find both productive and fundamentally flawed. She defines the titular term through two conditions: "I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group." This is important and relevant: our assimilation into whiteness, however recent, makes us collectively responsible for how white supremacy structures every facet of American life. Yet Arendt also reveals a crucial gap in her thinking when attempting to distinguish responsibility from guilt. Chiding those "good white liberals" with "guilt feelings" about racism, she writes, "There is such a thing as responsibility for things one has

not done.... But there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for [them].”<sup>ii</sup>

Of course, these “guilt feelings” do exist. What’s more: they *should* exist. For what Arendt fails to see is how deeply our ability to enact reparative justice is shaped by what we are and are not willing to feel. Later, Arendt describes conscience as one’s capacity to “live explicitly also with themselves,”<sup>iii</sup> but she frames it as the product of intellect rather than emotion. This is precisely where Krug re-enters the conversation. Though she was clearly unwilling to “live explicitly also with [herself],” I doubt the problem was a lack of *thought*. Krug knew she was white and repeatedly engaged intellectually with both white complicity and white denial. But she wasn’t willing to *feel* white. And in a desperate effort to avoid feeling that which we should, we often behave unconscionably.

Collective memories of persecution play an undeniable role in the construction of contemporary Jewish identity and condition nearly every aspect of Jews’ (mis)understanding of their whiteness. When, for example, I broach the subject of Jewish whiteness with those who wish to deny it, many cite the persistence of antisemitism in the United States and indeed all over the world. When the subject of Jews’ involvement in the slave trade or South African apartheid comes up, the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust are never far behind. And while I will not deny or disavow what we have endured, the fact remains: privilege and prejudice are not mutually exclusive. They do not cancel one another out.

These protestations exist on a spectrum that also includes Jessica Krug’s deception, each a deflection of our responsibility to engage with how whiteness complicates our cultural and historical position. Wielding histories of persecution as a shield against culpability is nothing new. Like many others, Jessica Krug was wrapping someone else’s oppression around herself like a cloak, hiding the naked implications of her whiteness.

As a white woman in antiracist spaces, it is often difficult to face the feelings that accompany each new revelation of how ethically compromised I am. And it can be difficult to find the line between productive accountability and performative atonement. None of this, however, is an iota as difficult as the actual experience of being a person of



**7 ART CONTRIBUTOR: MARSHA FINELT-BROOK**

Created to inspire the activist in us all. *The Way to Freedom*, 2013. Bronze on black marble base. 20 x 9 x 12 in. © 2013 Marsha Finelt-Brook. Courtesy of the artist.

color in America. And like prejudice and privilege, whiteness and Jewishness do not cancel each other out. We cannot shirk our white people’s work.

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i Jessica A. Krug, “The Truth, and the Anti-Black Violence of My Lies,” *Medium*, September 3, 2020, <https://medium.com/@jessakrug/the-truth-and-the-anti-black-violence-of-my-lies-9a9621401f85>

ii Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” in *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. J. W. Bernauer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 43.

iii Ibid, 49.