The words “unity” and “diversity” have acquired an emotional significance beyond their simple definitions: In Canada, western liberal ideology and the discourse of multiculturalism have impressed upon many the need to embrace diversity while avoiding the imposition of unity-creating limits. However, to understand “diversity” solely as a good and “unity” solely as homogeneity, and diversity’s polar opposite, both oversimplifies the meanings and implications of these concepts, and prevents us from seeing the ways in which limits can be used to both promote and mitigate against a unity which can be either beneficial or harmful. The strategies used by the Israeli peace movement Women in Black to balance the opposing forces of unity and diversity clearly illustrate the extent to which limits present both challenges and opportunities. Specifically, an analysis of Women in Black’s tactics and ideology reveals that the challenge of limits lies not in avoiding their use, but rather in using them strategically. While Women in Black is forced to work both with and within certain limits, it has also capitalized on many of these constraints. In particular, by

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transcending the ‘limits’ of conventional political groups through its focus on effecting societal rather than policy change,\(^1\) Women in Black has created a unique form of ‘double diversity’ that is especially important in the development of a long-term solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.\(^2\)

In “defining” Women in Black one immediately becomes aware of the power of limits, for the group defies attempts to limit it through narrow definitions.\(^3\) On one hand, the 1988 Palestinian Intifada was the proximate cause of Women in Black’s formation as a peace movement by nine Israeli Jewish women from Jerusalem.\(^4\) Similarly, the message of “Stop the Occupation!” was shared by all participants in the movement’s vigils.\(^5\) At the same time, however, Women in Black consciously resisted defining itself any further than this.\(^6\) As Helman and Rapoport point out, diverse and even conflicting forces could lead women to join the vigils which formed the centerpiece of Women in Black’s activism.\(^7\) By focusing on delivery of the message “Stop the Occupation” more than any other statement, however, the group attracted broad support.\(^8\) Indeed, Helman and Rapoport go so far as to argue that “over time, the principle of no ideological deliberation was institutionalized and grew more rigid still.”\(^9\) This ‘principle’ arose from the fact that the women of Women in Black placed a primary importance on the act of demonstrating and the opportunity it provided for them to invest their participation with its own meaning.\(^10\)

Women in Black attempted to afford the vigils held throughout Israel under its name maximum independence, and to avoid further defining the movement or becoming institutionalized as a formal organization.\(^11\) At the international level, Women in Black continues to maintain a high level of inclusivity and flexibility,\(^12\) which is epitomized by the movement’s self-image: “We are not an organisation, but a means of communicating and a formula for action,” one Women in Black website notes.\(^13\) The same website invites viewers who are “‘against war and for justice’” to begin their own Women in Black vigil, asking for no further ideological commitment.\(^14\) Indeed, while vigils have been held under the Women in Black name throughout Israel and around the world, not all of the international events may be classified as “solidarity vigils” in cohesion with the Israeli Women In Black’s cause. From San Francisco to Germany, India, the Balkans and Italy, Women in Black vigils were held both in response to local concerns – the Mafia in Italy and nuclear weapons in Germany, for example – as well as in support of the Israeli Women in Black.\(^15\) Significantly, there is no consensus among either observers or members of Israeli Women in Black on the desirability of these solidarity vigils. In particular, some
Israeli Women in Black participants emphasize the idea that their Israeli identity allows them to criticize their state in a non-threatening way that foreigners cannot emulate.\textsuperscript{16}

The development of Women in Black, however, has been far from linear. Vigils spread beyond Jerusalem to other regions of Israel during the late 1980s and early 1990s,\textsuperscript{17} leading some observers to argue that “Women in Black has been the most consistently visible and well-known of all the protest groups started in Israel since the beginning of the Intifada.”\textsuperscript{18} At the same time, the Winter/Spring 1994 edition of \textit{Bridges} reports that the Jerusalem Women in Black vacillated between abandoning and resuming vigils in that city.\textsuperscript{19} Writing in the late 1990s, Helman and Rapoport identify June 1994 as the final date in the history of Israeli Women in Black.\textsuperscript{20} The Coalition of Women For Peace and Women in Black websites, however, report that Women in Black continues to hold weekly vigils in Jerusalem and other Israeli cities, in addition to the vigils held by Women in Black movements in other countries.\textsuperscript{21} According to the Women in Black Website, “[t]he renewal of the Palestinian intifada, in late September 2000... restimulated WIB in Israel.”\textsuperscript{22} The majority of the literature, however, focuses on Women in Black during the late 1980s and early 1990s. As scholars writing on the movement during this period analyze important topics of an enduring nature, this essay will draw on this literature and examine the movement during that period.

Having traced the broad contours of Women in Black, we may now focus exclusively on the Israeli Women in Black movement and the ways in which it worked both with and within certain limits. As will be seen, Israeli Women in Black’s strategic use of limits resulted in the creation of two distinct yet interrelated forms of diversity. First, as has been stated, the emphasis of the Jerusalem Women in Black on the message “End the Occupation” drew women from disparate political and demographic groups together in the vigils.\textsuperscript{23} Peace, however, was not the only source of unity for Israeli Women in Black: To varying degrees, the women of Israeli Women in Black were also united by their shared gender, if not also their espousal of feminist ideals.\textsuperscript{24} During the late 1980s and 1990s, Women in Black was an almost exclusively female movement, and it continues to be a movement primarily for women.\textsuperscript{25} Both the extent to which gender was a source of unity for Women in Black\textsuperscript{26} and the extent to which it was necessary and efficacious\textsuperscript{27} that the movement combine the two goals are the subject of debate.

There is an important sense in which Women in Black had no choice but to be a feminist movement.\textsuperscript{28} Emmett, Helman and Rapoport
note that women’s participation in female peace groups such as Women in Black was qualitatively different from women’s involvement in the other groups of the peace movement. Women-only vigils, Emmett posits, challenged the conventional Israeli female identity in so far as they re-conceptualized the public/domestic dichotomy: A space for women was created in the public political sphere by highlighting the ways in which women’s domestic roles made them “protectors,” and thus “full citizens” with valid roles in the public sphere. Participation in other peace movements is not nearly so radical, Helman and Rapoport contend, in so far as it does not challenge women’s conventional identity but rather maintains their subordinate status, by either placing them within the hierarchy of male-headed organizations or by playing on their identity as members of male-headed households. Emmett, like the Women in Black website, also points out that at heart, the reduction of violence was/is the aim of Women in Black. Emmett’s analysis thus posits a parity between feminism and peace: Both are concerned with forms of violence, and both involve a relationship between unequal partners, whether that be the inequality and violence between Israeli men and women or the inequality and violence characteristic of Palestinians’ relationship with Israelis.

The relationship between feminism and Israeli Women in Black is far from straightforward, however. Feminism, for example, was neither endorsed by all participants in the vigils, nor intended as the primary aim of the movement. This should come as no surprise, for in so far as Women in Black rejects the imposition of narrow limits and allows participants to define the particulars of their own involvement, it is inevitable that a variety of explanations will be given for women’s participation. Moreover, Emmett’s analysis supports a broad definition of feminism, as the mere act of participating in a vigil was inherently political in the context of Israeli gender relations, thus justifying the characterization of Women in Black as a feminist movement.

Whether or not Women in Black ought to have been a feminist movement is another question. On one hand, a level of unity was created within Women in Black through its emphasis on participants’ shared identity as women over their identities as members of various ethnicities, religions, or political ideologies. While this represents an attempt to create unity through the imposition of limits, the medium of the vigil ensured that it was a special type of unity, which allowed for the expression of a multiplicity of views. Thus Women in Black used limits creatively and strategically to create a novel type of unity. Scholars, however, also note that Women in Black was forced to work within the limits of the prevailing social order.
inequalities other than gender were present within the organizational structure of Women in Black, the movement may be said to have failed to evade the conventional limits of identities. This is a crucial point, for it goes to the heart of Women in Black’s existence as a movement or practice rather than organization, and contrasts sharply with the identity fashioned by the Israeli state.

In some respects, the existence of ethnic and class hierarchies within Women in Black may be seen as inevitable. While Shadmi recognizes this point, the fact that both Mizrahi Jews and less affluent women were secondary figures in the movement leads her to critique the movement. While the organization attempted to resist institutionalization and to remain inclusive, the factors that account for its development of an organizational and elitist structure are, in important respects, both inevitable and commonplace. Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, and Nadeau, for example, report that there is a positive correlation between the possession of cognitive (or educational) and financial resources and participation in protest activities in “advanced industrial democracies.” Thus it is not surprising that this trend should also be present in Israel’s Women in Black movement. Moreover, “institutionalization” is a problem confronted not only by Women in Black, but by “new social movements” more generally. If one accepts this “near inevitability” thesis, the question becomes one of how to work with the limits of the existing society’s categories of identity. The approach of Women in Black in this respect contrasts with that of the Israeli state and demonstrates the movement’s strategic and creative use of limits.

Even if Women in Black failed to realize its goal of expressing a plurality of views, its intention of doing so contrasts sharply with the identity created by the Israeli state. Indeed, Emmett draws a connection between the aims of the state’s identity policy and the activities of Women in Black: “Beyond the Left and Right divisions regarding the peace process,” she writes, “women’s public events... expose serious conflicts within the Israeli-Jewish community. ...Women’s public events bring to light these simmering disunities, which the center would like to deny, silence, or ignore.” Nor is Emmett alone in noting the Israeli state’s preference for unity over diversity when confronted with the cleavages of Israeli society. Fergusson expresses this phenomenon most creatively in writing that “there is no one Israel. ...One of the tasks of the Israeli state has been to mask this turbulence by defending its borders—geographic, cultural, linguistic—in ways that co-opt or delegitimize these subversions. The less common views,” she argues, “are hard to hear when the hegemonic voices are turned up to full volume.”
In sum, Women in Black and the Israeli state both attempt to create a level of unity out of diversity: A shared female gender and the goal of peace were used by Women in Black to create cohesion, while some have argued that militarism and masculinity form the basis of the Israeli state’s national identity and conception of citizenship.\(^{53}\) It is held that the identity constructed by the Israeli state, however, is intended to be exclusionary\(^{54}\) and beyond debate – it is, as Ferguson contends, “[a] hegemonic voic[e]… turned up to full volume.”\(^{55}\) In sharp contrast, the unity created by Women in Black through the format of the vigil is not only intended to convey a multiplicity of identities,\(^{56}\) it is also largely unspoken as “no person can speak for the vigil as a whole, and no vigil can speak for the movement as a whole.”\(^{57}\) Similarly, vigils, which are the mainstay of Women in Black,\(^{58}\) always hold at least the possibility of presenting any number of messages in so far as they give participants the opportunity to define the meaning of their presence beyond their acceptance of the slogan “Stop the Occupation.” Helman and Rapoport call this “the tension between the stubborn personal interpretation and collective action framework.”\(^{59}\) This comparison highlights Women in Black’s creative and strategic use of limits to forge a type of unity that still remains commensurable with diversity.

Limits, however, are also imposed on the vigils’ ability to convey a message. Specifically, vigils must be interpreted by observers before they can be understood. As Berkowitz points out, this process of interpretation is far from ‘error-free,’ and observers may well impose a false unity on the vigil’s diversity, or come away with the ‘wrong’ message for other reasons.\(^{60}\) Thus observers have the ability to impose “limits” on the meaning of the vigils. While problematic, this process of interpretation is crucial for the long-term prospects of a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, it was by working within conventional limits\(^{61}\) that Women in Black was able to most effectively draw observers into this process of “societal self-reflexivity.”\(^{62}\)

In describing Women in Black’s vigils, scholars often highlight the symbolically charged nature of the events. Emmett reports that the vigils as public events become sites in which cultural conventions are employed by women to create political facts of contention. Women defied convention by choosing Friday afternoon (domestic time) to protest as citizens (in a public space); at the same time, they used conventional roles (of wives, mothers) as the ground for their defiance as political demonstrators.\(^{63}\)

Rather than denying that women played a crucial role in the domestic
sphere, for example, Women in Black developed and expanded women’s domestic role to the extent that it became undeniably political: “Domestic roles entailed political obligations and compelled women to act politically,” Emmett writes. “[T]he kitchen spilled over to the public square, to the vigil; the conventional domesticity, the women seemed to argue, now pointed toward public spaces.”

In a fundamental respect, then, Women in Black works within the prevailing order. Moreover, this strategy of working with rather than solely against the limits of conventional understandings allows Women in Black to not only embrace the challenge posed by limits, but to capitalize on an important opportunity to effect change. As scholars note, onlookers were powerfully drawn into the debates encapsulated within the vigils of Women in Black. Significantly, Helman and Rapoport suggest that this phenomenon is at least partially attributable to Women in Black’s decision to work within the prevailing discourse: “Since the demonstration symbolically takes place on the border, at once within the social order and without,” they argue, “it is difficult to situate it (and the women who comprise it) within existing categories. This difficulty elicits a sharp and at times violent response and generates a great deal of anger and indignation.” Similarly, it is important to note that while the vigils were criticized by onlookers for their statements on both feminism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, some insults did respond to more specific symbolic elements of the events, just as Helman and Rapoport claim. At one point, for example, the women were told to “‘Go make preparations for the Sabbath’.” On the whole, then, the invocation of symbols—which by definition belong to the prevailing discourse—helped Women in Black to capture the attention of observers.

While the negativity of the insults and counter-demonstrations that formed part of this interaction may appear to have few merits, they serve a crucial function. Not only does the participation of observers help Women in Black to realize its objective of changing societal attitudes, but it also makes an important contribution to the peace process. First, Shadmi’s analysis illustrates the ways in which Women in Black, as a new social movement, transcends the normal ‘limits’ of political organizations. Most significant in this respect is Women in Black’s focus on effecting social rather than solely policy change. Emmet, for example, argues that the vigils were as much about women’s place in Israeli society and their status as citizens as they were about the conflict with Palestine, and that the negative response of observers to the vigils can be seen as participation in both debates.

In this respect, Women in Black requires the participation of observers. While this participation may be misinformed by stereo-
types, this should not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle to the efficacy of the vigils. Rather, by compelling individuals to engage with its commentary on gender relations and peace, the medium of the vigil also requires that individuals articulate their reactions. This process of articulation may in time lead to critical (re)evaluation, and, eventually, to attitudinal change. Observers’ ability to interpret the vigils as they please thus creates the second half of Women in Black’s ‘double diversity,’ for the vigils not only allow their participants to ascribe a variety of meanings to their own presence, but elicit a range of potentially dynamic interpretations and responses from observers. Once again, it is only by embracing the limits that observers impose upon it that Women in Black can create this second level of diversity.

The nature of the ‘societal self-reflexivity’ promoted by Women in Black is extremely promising. As noted, Women in Black’s vigils caused individuals to consider not only the peace formula proposed by the group, but also the gender roles which it demonstrated. While Shadmi problematizes the movement’s espousal of both feminist and political ideals, arguing that the group would have been better positioned to promote the latter principle had it not also adopted the former, there is important evidence to support the movement’s strategy. In particular, Tessler and Warriner’s study finds that “regardless of the sex of the individual, persons [in Middle Eastern states including Israel] who express greater concern for the status and role of women, and particularly for equality between women and men, are more likely than other individuals to believe that the international disputes in which their country is involved should be resolved though diplomacy and compromise.” These findings suggest that it is not only the women of Women in Black who see the similarity between the Israeli women’s battle for security and equality and the difficulties faced by Palestinians. Moreover, the findings also validate Women in Black’s strategy of encouraging participation through vigils and of promoting both peace and feminism.

While Women in Black may not, as Shadmi contends, have met with immediate success, their approach promises to be extremely valuable in the long-term, as the preceding discussion suggests that it is likely to create an indigenous support base for the development of a peace agreement. What remains to be seen is the extent to which Women in Black will be able to continue to participate in and improve upon this highly participatory process, as well as the extent to which its strategy of encouraging societal participation in deliberative engagements can be applied in different contexts and encouraged through media other than the vigil. The preceding analysis of Women in Black’s creative use of limits to create a ‘double diversity’ suggests that in answering these questions, we must avoid recourse to the unitary conceptions of “lim-
its,” “unity,” and “diversity,” which attach only positive or negative consequences to the terms. Instead, we must be aware of the ‘limits of limits,’ and the distinct challenges and opportunities they present for those willing to work both with and within them.

Notes


2 This position is informed by Shadmi (“Between” p. 26) and Tessler and Warriner’s (p. 281) analyses.


6 Helman and Rapoport, 687-689.

7 Helman and Rapoport, 687-689; Berkowitz, 96.

8 Helman and Rapoport, 687-689; Cohen, 101-102.

9 Helman and Rapoport, 689.

10 Helman and Rapoport, 683, 687-689; Cohen, 101.


16 Berkowitz, 96-97.

17 Svirsky, 546.

19 Cohen (and Bridges editors), 101-102.

20 Helman and Rapoport, 683.


23 Emmett, 20-21; Helman and Rapoport, 687-689.

24 Emmett, 27, 5-6, 14-16, 39-41.


26 Emmett, 14-15, 11, 5-6, 16-17.


31 Helman and Rapoport, 695-696.


33 Emmett, 39-41.

34 Emmett, 27, 5-6, 14-16, 39-41.

35 Shadmi, “Between,” 26; Helman and Rapoport, 683, 687; Berkowitz, 96.

36 Helman and Rapoport, 687, 687-689.


38 Emmett, 4-6, 11, 14-17, 27, 38, 41.


40 Emmett, 687.


45 Shadmi, 23-32


47 Ornulf Seippel, “From Mobilization to Institutionalization? The Case of

48 Shadmi, 29, 32.


50 Emmett, 16.


52 Ferguson, 436.

53 Ferguson, 442, 437; see also Emmett, 34-37, Shadmi, “Between,” 25, and Helman and Rapoport, 694-6 on militarism and gender inequality in Israeli society and culture.


55 Ferguson, 436, 438, 443.

56 Helman and Rapoport, 687.

57 Svirsky, 546.

58 Cohen, 101; Helman and Rapoport, 689, 683.

59 Helman and Rapoport, 687.

60 Berkowitz, 96.

61 Emmett, 25.

62 Helman and Rapoport, 694.

63 Emmett, 25. See also Emmett 17; Helman and Rapoport 685-86, 691-94.

64 Emmett, 26-27.


66 Helman and Rapoport, 694.

67 Emmett, 23, 30; Helman and Rapoport, 690.

68 Helman and Rapoport, 694.

69 Helman and Rapoport, 691.

70 Helman and Rapoport, 694.

71 Emmett, 22-25.

72 Shadmi, “Between,” 25, 26, 31; Emmett, 22, 34-41; Berkowitz, 94.

73 Shadmi, “Between,” 26, 28; Berkowitz, 94.

74 Emmett, 33-41, 22-23.

75 Berkowitz, 96.

76 Emmett, 22-23; Shadmi, “Between,” 25; Helman and Rapoport, 649.

77 Helman and Rapoport, 683, 687-689; Cohen, 101; Berkowitz, 96.

78 Emmett, 22-23, 39-41; Shadmi, 28, 27.


80 Tessler and Warriner, 280.

81 Emmett, 39-41.


83 Tessler and Warriner, 280-281.

84 Shadmi, “Between,” 25, 26; Berkowitz, 96.