



How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America

By Karen Brodtkin

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The fashion identities in the context of a wider conversation about American nationhood, to whom it belongs and what belonging means. Race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality are all staple ingredients in this conversation. They are salient aspects of social being from which economic practices, political policies, and popular discourses create "Americans." Because all of these facets of social being have such significant meaning on a national scale, they also have major consequences for both individuals and groups in terms of their success and well-being, as well as how they perceive themselves socially and politically.

The history of Jews in the United States is one of racial change that provides useful insights on race in America. Prevailing classifications have sometimes assigned Jews to the white race and at other times have created an off-white racial designation for them. Those changes in racial assignment have shaped the ways American Jews of different eras have constructed their ethnoracial identities. Brodtkin illustrates these changes through an analysis of her own family's multi-generational experience. She shows how Jews experience a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness: on the one hand, marginality with regard to whiteness; on the other, whiteness and belonging with regard to blackness.

Class and gender are key elements of race-making in American history. Brodtkin suggests that this country's racial assignment of individuals and groups constitutes an institutionalized system of occupational and residential segregation, is a key element in misguided public policy, and serves as a pernicious foundational principle in the construction of nationhood. Alternatives available to non-white and alien "others" have been either to whiten or to be consigned to an inferior underclass unworthy of full citizenship. The American ethnoracial map—who is assigned to each of these poles—is continually changing, although the binary of black and white is not. As a result, the structure within which Americans form their ethnoracial, gender, and class identities is distressingly stable. Brodtkin questions the means by which Americans construct their political identities and what is required to weaken the hold of this governing myth.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Brodtkin (*Caring by the Hour*), a professor of anthropology at UCLA, synthesizes much recent scholarship to assess the shifting notions of race and changing objects of racism in the U.S. She points out that racial inferiority has been ascribed to waves of immigrants only when they were used as unskilled labor. She notes how "Jewish whiteness became American whiteness" after WWII, when Jews began to speak as whites and Jewish intellectuals "contrasted themselves with a mythic blackness." A self-described secular Jew situated in leftist academic circles, Brodtkin somewhat awkwardly weaves familial reflections into her otherwise academic book. While intriguing, Brodtkin's treatment is hardly exhaustive. She argues that her New York parents and grandparents "lived in a time when Jews were not white"; however, that focus on Jewish racial self-assignment obscures the somewhat murkier role of Jews in the South, as well as those who ran shops or provided social services in the inner cities of the North. She repeats her overall thesis—that racism and the construction of racial identity is the foundational principle of American identity and American capitalism—over and over, but her argument is no more convincing for all the repetition.

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From Kirkus Reviews

paper 0-8135-2590-X How Jews came, during the last three decades, to be viewed, by themselves and others, as white (having previously been considered not quite white) is the focus of this equally interesting and flawed study. By white anthropologist Brodtkin (Univ. of Calif., Los Angeles; *Caring by the Hour*, not reviewed) means not only skin color but also an ethnic-cultural identity (something connoted by such phrases as "WASP" and "mainstream American") as well as factors such as class and labor status. Through anecdotal, sociological, historical, literary, and other cultural material, she traces the decline of American Jews' working-class values, the loss of a distinctive language (Yiddish), the development of left-liberal politics, and general ethnic cohesiveness. Brodtkin has some fascinating insights into the interplay between Jewish ethnicity and gender. For example, she observes that the stereotypes of the smothering Jewish mother and of the Jewish-American Princess may well represent Jewish men's projections on to Jewish women of their own ambivalence about assimilating into the materially alluring but often culturally and spiritually shallow postwar mainstream American culture. Unfortunately, Brodtkin's perspective, which draws heavily on "African American, neo-Marxist and critical race theory," neglects entirely or scants a number of key factors in the growing acceptance of Jews as full-fledged whites, such as the post-Holocaust rejection of the concept of a "Jewish race." Brodtkin also errs in other ways, such as romanticizing the degree of "reciprocity" (ethnic cohesion and mutual aid) found among Lower East Side immigrant Jews. While containing a great deal of interesting material from several disciplines, including popular culture, Brodtkin's book ultimately is unsatisfying because it rests on too narrow a theoretical base and contains too many unwarranted generalizations. Thus, the author fails to sustain the view that the story of the Jews' successful assimilation into "white culture," during an era of persistent discrimination against those who are now known as "people of color," reflects something important about the role of race in American life. --
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Review

"An insightful interpretation of the complexities of Jewish ethn racial identity, in the context of a multicultural America stratified by gender, race and class that is both theoretically rich and deeply personal. By interrogating how Jews were integrated within the framework of whiteness. Brodtkin illustrates just how

difficult it may be to deracialize American society and culture."
(Manning Marable)

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