

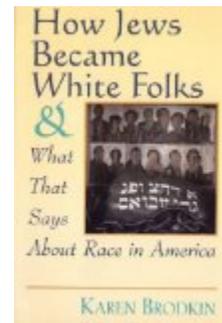
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Karen Brodtkin.** *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America.* New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998. xi + 243 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2590-7; \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2589-1.

**Karen Brodtkin.** *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says About Race in America.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998. xi + 243 pp.

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In *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says About Race in America* Karen Brodtkin uses tools from critical theory, anthropology, and personal experience to explore the impact of “whitening” on ethnic immigrant identity. Using her own family as a touchstone, Brodtkin interrogates the relationship between racial assignment and identity formation. She argues that the dominant culture’s impulse to categorize people into racial groups emerges out of capitalism’s demand for a segmented labor force. Though individuals and groups can counter this oppressive force by forming distinctive identities, those very identities are formed under the limiting shadow of racial assignment. Brodtkin is primarily interested in how racial assignment affected the political consciousness of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their descendants in the United States. Brodtkin outlines a rough history of the Jews in America.

As immigrants, Eastern European Jews found themselves defined as “non-white.” While their status as outsiders to the white American mainstream limited their social and political status, it also facilitated the development of a distinctive ethnic culture based on reciprocity. Jewish mutual benefit associations, labor unions and community organizations were built around the idea that benefiting one member of the community benefitted the entire community. This same ideal of reciprocity allowed Jewish women to construct standards of femininity in sharp contrast to the American domestic idea. Most Jewish women and men measured femininity in ways that enabled women to be wage earners, family managers, and political citizens as well as wives, mothers and

daughters.

According to Brodtkin, Jewish intellectuals were a primary force behind the “whitening” of American Jews, a process that took firm root during the 1950s and 1960s. In the post World War II period, Jewish intellectuals reinvented Jewish immigrant culture, emphasizing its quintessentially “American” characteristics. This transformation of Jewishness into whiteness came at a high political price. First, in order to become “whiteness,” Jewishness was cast in opposition to blackness, driving a wedge between Jews and African Americans. Second, since white privilege is intricately linked to male privilege, the Jewish quest for whiteness also re-defined the Jewish man in terms of mainstream masculine ideals. This required a second scapegoat: Jewish women. Stereotyped Jewish mothers and “Jewish American Princesses” emerged as public projections of the Jewish ambivalence toward this “whitening” and the morals and ideals that came with it.

Brodtkin usefully summarizes theories Antonio Gramsci and Zygmunt Bauman to explain the ways in which race, gender, and class assignment are all implicated in the construction of whiteness. These theories also allow Brodtkin to defend her placement of whiteness as the primary ideology underlying the construction of American national identity. She argues that whiteness emerged in the modern era. As such, it has inherited the primary problem of modern ideology: ambivalence emerging out of a binary logic. In order to perceive themselves as white, Jewish intellectuals bought into the

binary oppositions at its core, valuing individualism over community reciprocity, masculinity over femininity, and whiteness over blackness. This ambivalence led to the formation of complex political alliances and fissures in the contemporary American Jewish community. For Brodtkin, whitening transformed Jewish women politically, defining them as socialists in the 1930s, housewives in the 1950s and feminists in the 1970s.

Although Brodtkin's work might have benefited from

the inclusion of work by more recent critical race theorists, her easy language and engaging use of oral history combine to make *How Jews Became White Folks* accessible and well-suited for introducing undergraduate students to a variety of difficult theoretical concepts.

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