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## ARE JEWS WHITE?



JULIE INY. Courtesy Julia Caplan.

*People have suggested that if I have experienced racism, I am of color. But what if I have experienced racism in Israel and white privilege in the United States? I read essays that describe Arab Jews as Jews of color, but still I feel confused. If I am light-skinned, am I of color? What if I am light, but others in my family are dark?*

—JULIE INY (Iraqi-Indian/Russian-American Jew), “Ashkenazi Eyes”

*No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country. It is probable that it is the Jewish community—or more accurately, perhaps, its remnants—that in America has paid the highest and most extraordinary price for becoming white. For the Jews came here from countries where they were not white, and they came here in part because they were not white; and incontestably—in the eyes of the Black American (and not only in those eyes) American Jews have opted to become white. . . .*

—JAMES BALDWIN, “On Being ‘White’ . . .”

*If I were to snap my fingers and bring every Jewish person in this world into the room, we’d be more colorful than a rainbow, but when I walk into the average mainstream synagogue in the United States and talk about Jews of Color I often encounter the assumption that to be a Jew of Color one must be a convert or adopted.*

—YAVILAH MCCOY, interview

In the early 1980s, as an experienced antiracist activist, I began thinking and writing about being a Jew, and became engaged in progressive Jewish politics. As I wrestled with racism and anti-semitism, people asked

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me constantly, *Are Jews white? Are they? Are they white?* The urgency and anxiety behind the question were palpable and took me a while to understand. First assumption, there was one answer for all Jews. Second, the answer was either yes or no: Jews were white or they were of color. Third, whichever category one chose to file Jews into was a political decision: Jews were either down with the people of color, innocent and victimized, or lumped in with whites, guilty and victimizing.

The more I have learned about Jews, anti-semitism, and race and racialization, the more complex the situation gets. I still get asked, but now I want to give several simultaneous answers, and they are all questions: Have you heard of Arab, African, Indian, Asian, Latin Jews? Were European Jews white in Europe? What do you mean by white? Why are you asking? What does it matter?

And when I answer tersely and correctly, *Jews are a multiracial multiethnic people*, the asker most frequently succumbs to a tempting shorthand: *Yeah, but white Jews: Are white Jews white?*

### WHAT'S WHITE?

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1952: I am seven, and my ex-dancer mother enrolls me in dance class. The teacher, Ronnie All, is a tall graceful young man. His most important characteristic from my point of view is: he is not mean. I am a clumsy child and he does not mock me. On parents' day, my mother comes to observe. Afterwards she gushes to me, my father, all her friends, and the gush content is this: I have not noticed or mentioned that Ronnie All is Negro. For my ever self-reflexive mother, not saying/not noticing means that she has raised an unprejudiced child.

Let me credit her aspiration, more than most Jewish housewives in Flatbush aspired to in the early fifties, "niggerlovingcommiejew" stereotypes notwithstanding. The truth is I don't notice not because I am color blind—who by age seven is?—but because I come from a Jewish family and neighborhood with wide varieties of skin color in which someone like Ronnie All—a light-skinned black man—does not stand out as different (except maybe for being gay which I realize now he probably was). Had his skin been darker, would I have noticed? Probably. Would I have mentioned it? I'm not sure. Might I have already absorbed the polite hushed

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norm? I certainly knew that my mother's response was peculiar, that *not* noticing was a weird thing to get credit for.

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In 1964, at a Freedom School organized in a Harlem Church as part of a public school boycott, I lead a discussion with half a dozen seven-year-olds. The smallest girl, hair tightly braided, sits in my lap. Lenora. I am eighteen years old, not much more than a child myself.

"Why are you here instead of at your regular school?" I ask.

"Because our schools are bad. They don't teach us anything."

"We don't learn about black people."

"We don't learn about freedom, like here."

"The schools are segagated."

"Do you know what segagated means?" I ask these seven-year-olds.

Silence. How to explain this in a way that doesn't make the presence of white people sound like salvation?

"Segregation is separating people of different races, you know. Black and white people."

"If white people come to my school, I'm going to throw them out the window," Lenora says.

"Why?"

"My father says white people are bad and mean. They do terrible things. I'd throw them out the window." She sits snuggled into my lap. I debate whether to tell her. Then I say it.

"Lenora, I'm white."

She looks at me with affectionate scorn. "No you're not."

"I'm not?"

"No way." She shakes her head emphatically.

"What am I?"

"Sort of pink." I look at my hand. She has a point.

"What's white?"

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She scrambles off my lap, takes my (pink) hand and drags me around the room looking for something. The other seven-year-olds trail behind.

“This”—Lenora waves a piece of white paper triumphantly—“is white!”

Understanding dawns.

“Lenora, have you ever seen a white person?”

“No. My father told me about them from when he was in Mississippi.”

Point one: the minute I ask, “What’s white?” the stories that bubble up into memory are framed by blackness. Whiteness, in the words of Cornel West, exists only as “a politically constructed category parasitic on ‘Blackness’.”<sup>1</sup>

Point two: children need to be taught absolute distinctions of color. Left to their own eyes, who knows what they would see? A Jewish woman with a common Ashkenazi last name and skin tone like my sister’s turns out to have a Sri Lankan mother. A labor organizer I have known for years, and never wondered if she was Jewish or African American (in other words, I wordlessly assumed she was neither) turns out to be an African American Jew.

Point three: slippage. The white in both stories is me and/or my family, i.e., Jews. But the people in Mississippi who did horrible things to Lenora’s people were most probably *not* Jews. Probably did not see Jews as white. Probably would have wanted to do those things to my people too.

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1998: I am teaching a class at Brooklyn College called “Anti-semitism, Racism, and Class.” One of my students, Marina Stein, is a Jew from Ukraine. She tells us how *Jewish* was stamped on their papers, how children in Ukraine mocked and teased her and her sister, refused to play with them. One summer they went to camp and Marina lied about her name, “and I was the most popular there, and so was my sister.” In the course of a semester she will tell us this story at least three times.

Since coming to the United States, Marina tells us, she hates Russian Jews: they’re so insular, so conservative, stupid, and racist.

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During the last week of classes, Marina suddenly blurts out, "I'm sick of hearing about race. I'm sick of talking about it. I just want to be a person. Can't we just be people?"

In America, in Brooklyn, she has been told that this is possible, for her.

"That's what racism costs you," I explain. "That's your cost. You don't get to just be a person." I tell the class about a bumper sticker I've imagined: "When men stop raping women I'll pick up male hitchhikers." The women are nodding; the men aren't sure, the turf has suddenly shifted.

"Until there's no more rape," I continue, "mistrust poisons the air, and that's the cost to men. It's not the same as for women, whose cost is much much higher. But I guess every woman would like to say, I just want to be a person. And I guess every person of color might say, yeah, I just want to be a person. No one gets that as long as there's sexism. As long as there's racism."

Point one: In Ukraine Marina was a Jew. Here she has perhaps the opportunity to become white.

Point two: Marina wants this opportunity. She can be tired of race, can experience racism as an annoying bundle she'd like to put down, while her classmates with dark skin don't get to be tired of it, can't stop thinking about it. That's Marina's white privilege, courtesy of the United States.

What is white that shifts from continent to continent? Mostly the question hasn't been asked. Yet suddenly by 1998, according to an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, where political, cultural, and intellectual trends get translated into popular middlebrow knowledge, investigation of whiteness had become an academic minifad.<sup>2</sup> The *Times* article stressed the work of those who proudly identify "white culture" with "white trash," a home kick, nouveau-chic nosethumb at a hyperrefined institution, an impassioned choice of beer and chips over sherry and biscotti; macaroni and cheese instead of pasta and arugula with *chevres*.

We might speculate that these whiteness enthusiasts are at least partly animated by the ravenous need of young academics for new topics. But while White Studies provides fresh meat for the feeding frenzy of doctoral students, upper-class white culture remains significantly unnamed and unexamined, ignoring both whiteness as privilege and the existence of economically privileged whites. This emphasis is odd, given that "Racial inequities in unemployment, family income, imprisonment, average

wealth and infant mortality are actually worse than [in 1968] when Dr. King was killed.”<sup>3</sup>

To examine and honor white working-class culture is a fine idea, if class is the leading edge, and whiteness is probed. But with class submerged and whiteness foregrounded, what gets celebrated in part is racial dominance. Like the Harvard student who flew a Confederate flag out her window to honor her southern heritage, claiming—and perhaps believing—she was not (also) celebrating slavery.<sup>4</sup> Right-wing racist organizing—bizarre and marginal as these groups are—is on the rise: neo-Nazi militia, Christian identity, white identity, National Alliance all distribute literature and mobilize especially among young white disenfranchised men, and, more recently, among women as well.<sup>5</sup> For these groups, whiteness is palpable, sacred, and endangered; they are not investigating whiteness but organizing to strengthen its power.

Unmentioned in the *Times* article is the less trendy but more significant work that follows in the tradition of social constructionists such as Theodore Allen, Michael Omi, Howard Winant, and David Roediger.<sup>6</sup> These scholars expose the process of racialization, the arbitrary construction of race and racial distinctions when the truth is that we are almost all mixed; and seek to develop new analyses to undergird antiracist activism. Antiracist examinations of whiteness stress two things: privilege and an apparent emptiness, an unmarked status. As the construct *a doctor/a woman doctor* reveals the unmarked status of male, the normalness—no one says *a man doctor*—so constructs such as *the writer/the black writer, my friend/my Chinese friend, the teacher/the Puerto Rican teacher* reveal the unmarked, the implied: white.

Thus Robert Terry notes succinctly, “To be white in America is not to have to think about it,”<sup>7</sup> and Peter McLaren states, “Being white is an entitlement . . . a raceless subjectivity.”<sup>8</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, in *White Women, Race Matters*, defines whiteness as a location of structural advantage.<sup>9</sup> Whiteness carries with it a sense of normality, safety, a constant assurance of superiority. Peggy McIntosh, whose article “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack [of white privilege]”<sup>10</sup> has become a standard text in Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies classes, offers a long list of advantages not available to people of color, from irksome (“flesh colored” Band-Aids and makeup) to life-threatening. However we problematize Jewish/whiteness, when I, with my—in Lenora’s words—“pink” skin, am stopped by police, they do not assume I am a criminal; they smile, wave me on, say, *We’re looking for a car like this. Sorry.*

*Sorry.* What about all the stories I’ve heard from people of color, in which a quick look is *not* followed by a friendly wave and an apology?

Stories of beatings, arrests, terror. Life and death. Anthony Baez, playing football in front of his Bronx apartment, strangled by a cop in broad daylight. Amadou Diallo trying to show his wallet to four plainclothes cops who fired at him forty-one times in the lobby of his apartment building. Most recently, in Queens near where I live, a police barrage of fifty bullets killed an unarmed man—Sean Bell—on his wedding day, and seriously wounded his friends Trent Benefield and Joseph Guzman, also unarmed.

Faddist White Studies fails to acknowledge the larger context of racism against which whiteness exists. “No one was white before he/she came to America,” James Baldwin observed in the mid-eighties. They were English, German, Irish, Italian, Russian, Polish. . . . In the United States, race begins to be produced by European land-theft and murder of the people who lived here, and with the enslavement of Africans and suppression of their cultures. By the time the founding fathers imagined a meritocracy, race was commonly invoked to naturalize slavery, as, later, it would simultaneously mask and naturalize class. A construct of whiteness begins to appear, conferring on indentured European labor the privilege of not being the lowest in the social order, and justifying theft, massacre, and enslavement on the ground of white supremacy and Christian morality. From there, as Toni Morrison remarks, “It is no accident and no mistake that immigrant populations (and much immigrant literature) understood their ‘Americanness’ as an opposition to the resident black population.”<sup>11</sup> As American identity is born, the indigenous people of the North American continent are confined to reservations, made invisible, their religion suppressed and frequently overlaid with enforced conversion so that American easily equals white/Christian. In the nineteenth century, expansionists would invoke manifest destiny. Born to rule.

Constructing white identity took time and law. In *Black, Jewish, and Interracial*, Katya Gibel Azoulay points out that the Supreme Court 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the case that legalized segregation, the doctrine of separate but equal, also set a “legal definition of what constitutes a black person”:

In this case Homer Plessy had argued that he was visibly white and therefore should be allowed to sit in the train’s white section.

Overriding his skin color as an indicator of *not* being a Negro, the Court instead took “judicial notice” of the fact that a Negro is *any* person known to have Black ancestry.<sup>12</sup>

In a later essay, Gibel Azoulay clarifies: “Homer Plessy was a white-skinned man who had to inform the railroad company that he was a Negro who intended to sit in the Whites Only car in an intrastate train. Without

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the advance notice, his white skin would never have drawn the attention of either the conductor or his fellow passengers.”<sup>13</sup> Black by notification. Similarly, in 1982–83 in Louisiana, Susie Phipps, “having lived her whole life thinking that she was white . . . suddenly discovers that by legal definition she is not. . . . The *state* claims she is black.”<sup>14</sup> Phipps challenged the state to change her racial classification from black to white, but her suit was denied, reaffirming a 1970 state law which designated anyone with 1/32nd “Negro blood” as legally black.

And then there’s white by notification; Gibel Azoulay talks about speaking in Indiana:

. . . and an Ethiopian American came up to me and said, did you know Ethiopians are considered white? So that kind of shocked me. She said she had a relative in litigation over a job position because he wanted to be counted as a minority. But because he came from Northeast Africa he was officially categorized as white.<sup>15</sup>

Official categories notwithstanding, in 1988 Ethiopian Mulugeta Seraw was beaten to death by white skinheads in Portland, Oregon, for being a black man on the street.<sup>16</sup>

Visuals, law, custom, history shift from moment to moment and site to site. What does not change is a fierce attachment to racial boundaries. Wherever they are drawn, the critical point is that they be closely monitored. Evidence of race-mixing still evokes near-psychosis in racists. In 1998, for example, a baby of mixed racial parentage who died and was buried in a Georgia churchyard near her (white) mother’s people, almost got dug up by the white church deacons when they realized that the baby’s father was African American. Only after media exposure and public uproar did the deacons relent and let the baby rest in peace.<sup>17</sup> Shall we count this as progress?

*The Turner Diaries*, a scarily popular novel written and published in 1978 by neo-Nazi William Pierce under the pseudonym “Andrew Macdonald,” depicts impending race war in service of imposing absolute segregation. The novel describes the gruesome hanging of thousands of “white women who were married to or living with Blacks, with Jews, or other non-White males.”<sup>18</sup> Significantly it includes Jews, along with mixed race people, as “mongrels” who need to be killed first because they confuse things. White supremacists want their racial differences clear.

Love, especially sex, across racial borders is enraging and terrifying to white supremacists; perhaps merely titillating or fetishistic to white liberal

racists. Racism of either sort inevitably conspires with contempt for the flesh and fear of its desires, projecting all sexual impulse onto the racial other. Such love also contradicts core racist ideology, namely that we are naturally different, naturally antagonistic, and most important, naturally unequal: no way might we be humanly connected enough to love.

Never mind that these unions and these children are increasing all the time. As people fall in love, marry, and reproduce across race lines, we note an increasingly fierce policing of racial borders. Whites, as we know, are already a minority in the world, a rapidly shrinking majority in the United States. A minority can retain privilege, perhaps not forever, as South Africa exemplifies, but for a long time. However, sooner or later racism requires a police state. Across the nation we are building more prisons than schools in which African American and Latino children disproportionately land with heavy sentences, marginalized and disenfranchised.

And Jews? Along the city streets and state highways, where black and brown people are routinely stopped, harassed, sometimes tortured and killed, it is fair to say that some Jews pass freely, however typically “Jewish” (European/Ashkenazi) they may look. In stores, no one immediately pegs them as shoplifters. Encountering these Jews in apartment building lobbies or elevators, no one assumes that they don’t belong. Hate violence against these Jews is manifested, almost always, in Jewish spaces or to Jews who visibly mark themselves, usually religiously observant men.

And what about the other Jews, the ones who don’t look white, those who by anyone’s definition are not white: Jewish African Americans, Jews from the Middle East, Latin America, Ethiopia, the Caribbean, India, China. Jews of any race who chose Judaism. Biracial and multi-racial Jews. Children of mixed marriages. Children of color adopted by Ashkenazim.

Invisible, marginalized, not even imagined.

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*If people act surprised to see a Black Jewish woman representing Israel, I don’t understand it. I tell them to look at a map: the Middle East and Africa are closer to each other than Russia or Poland and Israel. So, I ask them, “Why are you surprised to see a Black Jew?”*

—BELAYNESH ZEVADIA,  
Israeli diplomat of Ethiopian origin

*Are you Jewish? You don’t look Jewish.*

—Countless people, to Ethiopian-born EPHRAIM ISAAC

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*Ethiopia is mentioned in the Bible over 50 times, but Poland not once.*

—EPHRAIM ISAAC, Director of the Institute of Semitic Studies at Princeton University,

*Being African American and Jewish isn't a dilemma. The dilemma occurs when I attempt to disconnect from one or the other and not live as my full self. The dilemma occurs when I am not seen as my complete self. Ashkenazi Jews often see me as an African American moving in a Jewish world or as an Ethiopian or Yemenite Jew. African Americans never see me as Jewish.*

—MIRI HUNTER HARUACH, "Born Again Yemenite"

Yet it's still more complicated. The Jew who looks white on New York City's Upper West or Lower East Side may be responded to in Maine or Idaho as a person of color.<sup>19</sup> Besides, what happens when you speak your (Jewish-sounding) name, or when your (less-white-looking) parent or child or lover meets you at work? What happens to your whiteness when you enter a Jewish space: a synagogue, Judaica bookstore, Jewish cultural event? In the United States, whiteness is a badge of normality, sameness, protection; and Jewish space is exactly the opposite: a place of separateness, vulnerability. African American Jewish scholar Katya Gibel Azoulay remarks that the Jews she feels most connected to are "the very people who didn't grow up identifying as white, they grew up identifying as Jewish. They knew they were Jewish, they left Europe because they were Jewish. Being Jewish is what defines them. *Not* being white."<sup>20</sup>

Yet filmmaker Ruth Behar (Sephardic/Ashkenazi/Cuban/American) tells how in the 1920s the United States was closing its doors to Jews fleeing European anti-semitism, while Cuba welcomed the fleeing Jews; thus her family survived. She says, "I am Jewish because I am Cuban." Behar's gratitude was later muted as she learned "our survival was an accident of racism." The white rulers of Cuba, afraid that Afro-Cubans might take over the island, were willing to accept the (whiter more European) Jews, to maintain white dominance over the "Black Peril."<sup>21</sup> Context is everything, or almost.

## THE PEOPLE OF CONTRADICTIONS

In Europe, class was naturalized, biologized by themes of noble blood, high born and low born, the depravity of the peasants and lower classes;

the natural intelligence and nobility of the aristocracy. Also in Europe, excluding centuries of multiethnicity in Iberia, and allowing for some overstatement, Jews *were* difference. In a bipolar racial landscape, non-Jews located Jews on a series of axes at either extreme.

Their logic is not negligible: Jews can be simultaneously communist and capitalist, for example, because they are seen as obsessed with, essentially made of, power-through-money. Similarly, whether under- or over-sexed, something is *wrong* with Jewish sexuality.

In the United States, with its submerged multiracial history, racial diversity stretched much wider than the uncertain terrain of Jews. Early in this century, immigrant Jews (along with Irish, Italians, and other so-called ethnic whites) were widely viewed as filthy, diseased, verminous, intellectually inferior, criminal, and morally deficient. Karen Brodtkin's *How Jews Became White Folks*, following Stephen Steinberg's analysis in *The Ethnic Myth*, studies the upward trajectory after World War II, when Euro-Jews in the United States participated along with other white ethnics in what she calls a massive affirmative action program for Euro-origin men. She describes the benefits offered unequally to white men under the GI bill, and through the Federal Housing Authority and Veterans Administration, smoothing the three great paths of upward mobility: education; jobs; and mortgages to purchase homes which can be passed on to the next generation.<sup>22</sup> In Brodtkin's argument, class whitens; white Jews move up and racialization drops away.

Observing Jewish history, notes Ethnic Studies scholar Nancy Ordovery, offers an opportunity to break down this process of racialization, because, by leaving Europe, Ashkenazi Jews "changed" their "race," even as our skin pigment remained the same.<sup>23</sup> Jewish Studies scholar Daniel Itzkovitz claims:

As opposed to Europe, where "the Jew" is constructed as an allegory for otherness, in twentieth-century America the Jews have often seemed a good metaphor for the notion of "American" itself—the "American," that is, was an identity whose imagined severed ties to the land and to tradition, and whose obsession with money, reminded many of the stereotypic Jew.<sup>24</sup>

Izkovitz's "Jew-qua-American" is persuasive if by *Jew* we mean *assimilated Ashkenazi*, yet the persistence of Jewishness as racial/ethnic/cultural marker suggests a limit to Jewish attempts to assimilate into mere ethnic whiteness. Instead values and qualities about which "America" is ambivalent get projected onto the marked Jew, as the Jewish marker shrinks or expands like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*; one minute nothing more

than a bagel or *mazel tov*, the next minute, Holocaust victim or Shylock's eternal pound of flesh.

Non-Jews frequently expect Jews to be absolutely identifiable by looks, or else—in true liberal fashion—they pride themselves on never thinking about it. The former never imagine they might know someone Jewish; the latter usually can't imagine what's the big deal. But in general, those Jews about whom you “can't tell” make non-Jews anxious. So Jewish and yet so invisible? The uncertainty of Jewish identification makes Jewish difference extremely flexible, darker, or lighter according to context.<sup>25</sup> In Crown Heights or Williamsburg, for example—Brooklyn neighborhoods with large Hasidic communities—even those least passing of all Jews, the Hasidim, are in the eyes of municipal government and police whiter than their neighbors of African descent. On Park Avenue or even on the Upper West Side, Hasidim play very differently, never mind in Boise or even San Francisco.

Cultural representations of Jews are nothing if not slippery. In *Friends*, for example—a TV sitcom with a half-life like uranium—carefully blond Rachel, despite being a Streisand look-alike-sans-nose, is only occasionally, casually Jewish, by dint of her materialism and rich father. Racial location is one of the unresolved polarities circling the Jewish people. Are Jews white, of color, or race mongrels?<sup>26</sup> European or “Asiatic”? Western or Middle Eastern? Where does “Semitic” fit in? Are Jews and Arabs bound together racially as well as linguistically?

But the list extends beyond the color line. Are Jews mainstream or marginal? Model Americans or Eternal Foreigners? Oversexed or impotent/frigid? Jack the Ripper or Woody Allen? Monica Lewinsky or Marjorie Morningstar? Holocaust victim or Israeli paratrooper? Capitalist or communist? Henry Kissinger or Noam Chomsky?<sup>27</sup>

*Slippery, uncertain*: the direction in which Jews deviate from the norm. Are Jews above or below, more or less, too much or too little?

*Stable, predictable*: the slipperiness itself and the fact of deviation, too much *and* too little. Also stable: the sites of contestation: the charged arenas of sex, money, power, intelligence, culture, and belief system.

Itzkovitz's research reveals that the most salient characteristic, historically, of the “are Jews white?” debate *is* this indeterminacy and the anxiety it provokes.<sup>28</sup> In Europe, when Jews were systematically murdered for pernicious racial inferiority, part of the perniciousness, Itzkovitz demonstrates, was, exactly, that you couldn't always tell. So dangerous and yet so passing.

In Europe, the normative concept was not white but Christian. Christianity equated *Christian* and *decent* (as in, *Act like a Christian*), and

identified Jews and other non-Christians with Satan, the original infidel. Distinguishing Christian from infidel meant, in practice, distinguishing Christian from inhuman. As secularization proceeded, the categories shifted from Christian to ethnic or national identities, German, Polish, Russian, French, and so on, against which Jews, even as newly emancipated citizens, were measured and, often but not always, found foreign and dangerous. As German merged into Aryan, racial categories may have served to lure or pacify some of the other Europeans being conquered by Germany; Poles, for example, though defined as racially inferior (stupid and bestial, as opposed to the Jewish sly, diseased, and insidiously powerful) were still racially a slot above Jews, whose “darkness” was a given.<sup>29</sup> On the cover of *Degenerate Music, An Accounting*, published in 1938, a black man with bulging eyes and fat distorted lips plays the dread degenerate jazz on a saxophone. On his lapel he sports a huge Jewish star.<sup>30</sup>

According to George Mosse’s classic *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, in which this and other racialized images of Jews appear, religious and racial anti-semitism constitute two distinct ideological traditions. I am sure I am not alone in occasionally muttering, *who cares which, it’s all disgusting and deadly*. But Mosse is making a point. Defining Jews as a race—a pernicious diseased infecting race at that—meant: unsalvageable. Whereas a Christian/religious judgment insists on the possibility of conversion, and thus transformation. Let me not exaggerate this as a positive option. One would prefer to survive, untransformed, as oneself. The psychic cost of assimilation is reflected in the extraordinary suicide epidemic of Jews in the Weimar Republic, with German Jews committing suicide almost four times more than Catholics, and nearly twice as often as Protestants.<sup>31</sup> And the experience of the Sephardi *conversos*, whose difference came to be seen as more and more racial in their lack of *limpieze de sangre*<sup>32</sup> despite their actual or pretended acceptance of Christianity, suggests the increasingly frenetic intertwining of racial and religious bigotry as the modern age unfolds. In many parts of the Islamic world, too, though nothing matched the systematic reach of the Inquisition, crypto-Jews who converted by choice or by force continued to be set apart and persecuted.<sup>33</sup> The accusation of *Judaismo* (Judaizing) could be levied against someone “with no more than one-twentieth of Jewish blood in his or her veins,”<sup>34</sup> a percentage that actually outstrips the Third Reich.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless—and this is Mosse’s point—the idea that one’s religious practice is at fault is consistent with torture and forced conversion, as well as with death for the obstinate; but a racial definition of Jews is consistent with extermination. The racialized being simply is. Extermination is, then, the appropriate final solution.

But in Europe, even pre-Third Reich, the distinction blurs. Periodic forced conversion to Christianity, for example, suggests that Jews could shed their Jewishness, albeit unwillingly. Yet in tricultural Spain, where Jews, along with Muslims, were relatively integrated compared with the ghettos of much of Europe, when mass conversion was enforced, *conversos* remained as a group discrete and mistrusted. The pejorative for *converso* is *marrano*, meaning “pig,” whether as sheer insult or in reference to the Jewish taboo against eating pork. But even the flatly descriptive “New Christian” passed down through the generations demonstrates the threadbare nature of the Christian blanket; Jewishness peeps through, defiling, defective, justification for discrimination against anyone of Jewish ancestry. One could argue that the Spanish *conversos* were the first victims of racial persecution in Europe, but in a religion-permeated society, the racial and religious aspects never fully separated.<sup>36</sup> Still, *conversos* unsettled the Jewish Question—*who was a Jew?*—and one of the emerging answers was racial rather than religious.<sup>37</sup>

As Europeans developed racial schema to accompany the colonial enterprise, the placement of Jews was debated. Mosse claims, “Jews were either ignored by anthropologists during most of the eighteenth century or considered part of the Caucasian race, and still believed capable of assimilation into European life.” Though some insisted that Jews were “Asiatic,” and others acknowledged their confusion, “ideas of cosmopolitanism, equality, and toleration operated for the Jew as they could not for the Negro; after all, the Jew was white.” German phrenologist Carl Gustav Carus divided the world into “day people” (Europeans), “night people” (Africans), and “twilight people” (Asiatics and American Indians). Designating day people as superior, and marking the inevitable Jewish nose, he nevertheless included Jews with day people.<sup>38</sup> Similarly the French pseudo-Comte de Gobineau characterized three basic races: white, yellow, black.

The yellow race . . . was materialistic, pedantic, and taken up with “a steady but uncreative drive towards material property.” The blacks [had] . . . little intelligence, but overdeveloped senses which endowed them with a crude and terrifying power. The blacks were a mob on the loose, . . . eternal *sans culottes* who had collaborated with the middle classes to destroy . . . aristocratic France . . .<sup>39</sup>

Is there any doubt that aristocratic France is radiantly white?

According to Mosse, Gobineau's work had impact not in France but in Germany, where by racial default (black and yellow people were scarce), Gobineau's ideas were applied to Jews. Even so, Mosse concludes, "only after the mid-nineteenth century was racism applied to Jews with any consistency."<sup>40</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, according to Sander Gilman, debate about Jewish skin color had modulated into a general consensus in "the ethnological literature . . . that the Jews were 'black' or at least 'swarthy.'"<sup>41</sup> But the debate was hardly resolved. Itzkovitz, surveying a host of scholars, concludes that Jews were most frequently classified as "Asiatic."<sup>42</sup> Crammed into this or that racial category, all over post-Enlightenment Europe the Jew was increasingly seen as physically distinctive, practically a different species. The Jew's body was distinguished not only by circumcision (the Jew is, of course, normatively male), but also by large flat (unmanly, unsoldierly) feet, and by the telltale Jewish nose, evident in iconography from the mid-eighteenth century on,<sup>43</sup> and associated with syphilis, and diseased, darkened skin.<sup>44</sup>

In what I have come to think of as an ecology of hatred, racial anti-semitism kicks in as society secularizes. If a secular society at moments allowed Jews to participate as citizens, no longer totally dehumanized by dint of religious beliefs and practice, racism contravenes this permission by reinscribing Christian fear and disdain as racial. Racism against Jews represents the secularization of Christian anti-semitism, but let not categories obscure essence: difference translated into otherness equals indifference, hatred, and fear.

But if Jews are mongrels and antichrists, how is it that, often enough, no one can distinguish Jews from Christians? How "natural" are differences that can't be spotted or slotted into existing categories? Mosse, again, describes an 1870s German survey that found an estimated 11 percent of German Jews were "pure blonds" and 42 percent black-haired, while (Christian) Germans divided into 31.8 percent blondes and 14.05 percent black-haired. Most striking, however, was the finding that the largest number of both Christians and Jews fit into a "mixed type" category, neither pure blond nor pure black-haired—47 percent of Jews and 54.1 percent of Christians—a similarity that *The German Anthropological Review* found so disturbing that they suppressed the data and fudged, simply reporting that the Jewish population had fewer blonds than the German population. And the Austrians, "always more radical and interested in separating Jew from Gentile, concentrated their survey upon Galicia and

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Bukowina, where the Jewish race was said to have maintained its purity. They did find fewer Jewish blonds in that region"<sup>45</sup>—perhaps a relief to folks like the “Viennese prophet of Aryanism,” Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, who in 1905 founded *Ostara, Journal for Blond People*.<sup>46</sup>

Yet lest we focus too heavily on Europe, we should mark the role played by American eugenics and scientific racism in helping Germany develop its master race theory.<sup>47</sup> “The Nazis were avid students of United States eugenics doctrine,” notes Nancy Ordover.<sup>48</sup> “American eugenicists, armed with charts, photographs, and even human skulls, were there to provide the visual and mathematical support that rendered racism scientifically valid and politically viable.”<sup>49</sup> “Nazi doctors named American eugenicists their ideological mentors at the Nuremberg trials.”<sup>50</sup> Publications such as the *American Breeders Magazine* and *Eugenical News* spread the word, and “[w]hen . . . [*Eugenical News*] published the text of Germany’s 1933 Hereditary Health Law, an unsigned preface boasted of the influence U.S. eugenicists had had.”<sup>51</sup> Laws restricting reproduction and immigration were championed as eugenic victories on both sides of the Atlantic.

## APARTHEID/AMERICAN STYLE

Then and now. History and the present. How do we integrate Jews into an analysis of racism?

My grandparents immigrated from Russia and Poland to New York City in the early twentieth century, along with massive numbers of Europeans, including Eastern European Jews. But when I was growing up in New York City in the 1950s and early 1960s, legal immigration was basically at a standstill.<sup>52</sup> During this period, race continued to be seen as essentially a black–white thing.

In 1990, after twenty-five years of living all over the United States—California, Oregon, New Mexico, Maine, and Vermont—I returned to New York, to a neighborhood where I’d lived as a student at City College. Then a cheap slum, now it was mostly working-class Dominican, about to be hit by gentrification with its new identity as “Manhattan Valley.”<sup>53</sup> Because of my years away, and because of where I’d been, I saw the city and my old neighborhood with different eyes; but not only my eyes had changed. While I was wandering, people had come to New York from all over the world. Walking around my neighborhood, I saw new configurations, people of all colors and ages in many different roles. Taxi drivers, restaurant workers, small shopkeepers in the groceries, pharma-

cies, stationery shops that line Broadway were people of color from all over the world, especially Asia, as well as from Latin America, Africa, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean. Rarely African American.

Many of them spoke English wrapped in the vowels and consonants of their mother tongue, while their kids who helped out after school and Saturdays (as I used to help out in my parents' store), were fluently bilingual, good English, as well as rapidfire Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Hindi, Arabic. . . . Many of these kids would go to college. Many would lose their language, their culture. This is the American dream.

Swirling around the dream, I heard contradictory epithets and assumptions about "Asians" collapsing a huge range of culture and history into a single narrative. Even so, distinctive stereotypes were seeping into the mainstream culture: Chinese pegged as the model minority, successful especially in the grind subjects, of math, accounting, computers, but lacking in creativity or indeed personality; (male "Oriental") sexuality

. . . conceptualized differently from and perhaps even in opposition to, African and African-Caribbean representations in the white imagination. Where the latter are constructed as aggressive, violent and hyper-masculinized, Asians are portrayed as passive, weak and hyper-feminized.<sup>54</sup> [Kobena] Mercer and [Isaac] Julien characterize this orientalist image thus: "The Oriental has no capacity for violence; he is mute, passive, charming, inscrutable."<sup>55</sup>

Indians and Pakistanis were assumed to be racking it up in Silicon Valley, while simultaneously gouging the neighborhood with their cabs and Mom & Pop delis; persistently mocked for their accents and their determination to earn a living.<sup>56</sup> Koreans were seen as Moonies with a greengrocer empire to which only Koreans were admitted; while Arabs and Muslims—assumed to be identical categories—were on the eve of Gulf War I holding down the place of most dread minority, terrorist but also unfairly wealthy, holding "us" hostage to their oil. Meanwhile, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Thai—folks from that part of the world the United States nearly destroyed (and still couldn't win the war)—are invisible, though they are perhaps some of the very poorest of immigrants.

The presence of large numbers of Asians was one change in New York City. The other was "the homeless." In the years I'd been away, between deinstitutionalization and an increasingly inhospitable economy, large numbers of mostly African American men, a few women, were stretched out asleep on the benches and sidewalks, shaking cups, asking, *can you*

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*spare some change, I'm very hungry, can you give me something, even a quarter.* It was winter. Some had no shoes. Some had no coat.

As I crossed the neighborhood boundary of 96th Street, the balance of color shifted from brown to white, Latino to yuppie, gentrified, white graduates of elite colleges living in buildings with swimming pools and elaborate doormen, views of the George Washington Bridge; men and women in their twenties whose parents or trust funds bought them apartments costing easily a million dollars. Two million dollars. Lots of old Jews, surviving still in their rent-controlled apartments that will probably turn co-op when they die. Lots of harried thirty-somethings and forty-somethings who had their kids late, split economically between upper middle and middle, and politically between liberals and radicals. Some are insistent about sending their kids to public schools, and some have given up on the public schools, refusing, in their words, to sacrifice their kids to a principle. While in "Manhattan Valley" women tended to be the same color as the children they tended, a few blocks west or south, it was a different story: when I saw a woman and child of the same color, I'd be almost surprised; the norm was women of color caring for white children of working mothers, often professionals, what I've come to think of as the underbelly of feminism. Most of the women were immigrants.

Now, fifteen years later, I see three massive changes: first, the woman-child-color thing cuts two ways: intermarriage and, especially, wide-scale adoption means these days, you might as readily see a white woman—who might be Jewish—with a child or children of color—contrary to the 1950s, when the Louise Wise Services Agency reported almost complete failure in finding white Jewish parents willing to adopt African American babies, even those who were matrilineally Jewish.<sup>57</sup> Second, homeless people are way less visible; they have not been housed but have simply been pushed off the streets by New York's own bundle of meanness, former mayor Rudy Giuliani, and kept off the streets by his mild-mannered but tight-hearted CEO successor Michael Bloomberg. Third, since September 11, 2001, formerly thriving Arab and South Asian communities have been devastated. Those who look like they might be Arab or Muslim are racially profiled, increasingly endangered by street and police violence, by economic hardship, by obstacles to enrollment in schools and colleges. Many from these communities are missing, indefinitely detained, deported.

Back to 1990. The long struggle against South African apartheid was finally bearing fruit. Nelson Mandela had just been released from prison and was about to visit New York. He had publicly embraced Yasir Arafat,

and there were those among New York's self-appointed Jewish leaders prepared to picket his visit. The idea that *this* would be the public response of New York's Jews to Nelson Mandela's visit encouraged a process already in place, and the organization Jews for Racial and Economic Justice was formed. JFREJ's first public act was to hold a *shabat* service in honor of Mandela and to raise \$30,000 for the African National Congress.

During that time, with the dismantling of South African apartheid fresh in my head, with a vision of economic possibilities open to some of the more recent immigrants, and closed to many who had been in the United States for centuries and in the North for at least decades, I saw an analogy between the structure of apartheid and racism in the United States. South Africa, the Ur-Racist Empire, had three racial categories, not two: white, black and colored, and this last, the buffer category of *colored*, seemed especially useful to contemplate.<sup>58</sup>

But first I need to issue a caveat: It's hard to talk about racial categorization without seeming to accept or even endorse it. What I am describing is air thick with polluting smog, making it difficult both to breathe and to see. At the same time, socially constructed racial categories that shift arbitrarily determine people's opportunities, and can mark the border between life and death. Moreover, even a casual survey reveals division in the monolithic category *people of color*, a division that corresponds suggestively to the three racial categories of apartheid.

One feature of a tripartite system is its nuanced hierarchy of privilege inflected by a shifting buffer class. *Whites* rule. But *colored*, though they will never be white, benefit concretely from not being *black*. They also benefit from the existence of those who are: "blacks" who stand in the racial hierarchy lower than they, the "coloreds." Scholar Roger Sanjek observes that on the West Coast there has been an increase in Asian-white and Mexican-white intermarriage, while

black-white intermarriage rates remained flat in comparison. It is also worthy of closer historical probing to note that Asian and Mexican intermarriage rates with whites appear to have increased only after blacks became part of the West Coast social order in substantial numbers. . . . It thus appears that Asians and Mexicans . . . became marriageable—and ethnic—to whites only after the U.S. black-white racial regime was numerically and institutionally established in the western states.<sup>59</sup>

I've already noted the post-9/11 explicit and intense targeting of South Asian, Arab, and Muslim communities. In this newly explosive context, a

South Asian friend talks of feeling protected when she is with her African American partner—American, not a foreign terrorist. Yet while these racial categories are unstable, they continue to confer or block privilege. In the United States, the racial benefits accruing to *coloreds* include better jobs, greater access to education, and small business opportunities. These are achieved not only through familial and ethnic networks, but also through some positive stereotyping of Asians as good at math and science, or as having strong family ties. The category “coloreds” comprises a variety of groups, mostly immigrants: Middle Eastern, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian, Arabs, Indians, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Iranians, and so on; people who arrived anywhere between yesterday and a century ago.

This group is lumped together as particularly unaggressive, with the increasing exception of Arabs or perceived Arabs. *Coloreds* are not seen as muggers or rapists, but increasingly, and since 9/11 indelibly, are pegged as irrational religious fanatics, inherently terrorist, given to violence, careless—unlike “Americans”—of human life. In addition, they are seen as sneaky, sexually perverse; at best, exotic,<sup>60</sup> formerly defined as “white slavers” (a phrase that cloaks the “normal” sexual subordination of enslaved African women, such that sexual enslavement of *other* women needs a white marker; while delicately excluding any mention of sex: the accurate term would be “female sexual slavery.” As “white slavers” they are thus associated with prostitution, pimping, and syphilis, and, in a more contemporary vein, with sex tourism. Their women: dominated in an unwesternly fashion. Their men, as noted: masculinity suspect, homosexual? sex with camels?

Placement in the hierarchy shifts according to context; for example, British Empire stereotypes of dark males under white/colonial rule, familiar from the postbellum U.S. South, turn the plot in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, where an English lady mistakenly charges an Indian man with attempted rape. Yet in the United States, despite actual experience of war with Japan, Korea, and Viet Nam, and the popularization of martial arts, *Asians* as a loose category continue to be seen as effeminate and nonaggressive, not to be feared on the street. They are considered good with money and are assumed to have lots of it derived from mysterious and corrupt practices. Arabs, as noted, form an increasingly distinct subcategory, as the war against Iraq proceeds.

And the bottom of the hierarchy? Native Americans and Latinos might be seen as joining African Americans in particularly onerous oppression. Assumed to be street-dangerous, intellectually inferior, violent and criminally inclined, sexually rapacious, bestial in contrast to the overcivilized effete “coloreds,” such stereotypes serve to justify the reality

of people's lives: *blacks* are disproportionately unemployed or underemployed, women disproportionately subjected to forced sterilization and sexual abuse, and men to police brutality. The children are more likely to suffer from lead poisoning, to grow up near toxic waste dumps, to be mislabeled mentally retarded, to die in the first year of their lives, to be incarcerated as teenagers, and to be sentenced to death.<sup>61</sup> As I write this, the breaking news—and who should be surprised—is that unemployment continues to afflict the African American community at rates more than double that of the white “community.”<sup>62</sup>

*Race* in this country comprises a range of themes, but six reverberate with particular force: through themes of sex, money, power, intelligence, nationality or culture, and belief system, race is embodied. Potent stereotypes recharge the primal categories that manifest in opposition among *blacks* and *coloreds*, thus dividing the human universe into those who are too much and those who are too little, while whites—white men, to be exact—lodge squarely between too much and too little; too little and too much; whites are exactly the right amount. Presumed, in every way, normal. Unmarked. Don't even require mentioning. The discussion of these themes that follows should be read entirely in quotes, describing not reality but “American” racial fantasy.

SEX *Black* men are assumed to be bestial and oversexed, studs, rapists or pimps; the women, welfare queens breeding like animals, will-less or way too strong (Sojourner Truth: “Ar'n't I a Woman?”). *Colored* men, on the other hand, are seen as unmanly, perverse and homosexed, associated with prostitution, and syphilis, historically stigmatized as “white slavers,” while the women are erotic, exotic, and agent-less (or, alternately, “Dragon Lady”). What remains constant: women and men inside a racialized lens don't perform their gender correctly. Either women and men trade roles, power shifting from men to women in a way that offends white male Christians (and sometimes also offends men of the home community, who want the right to control “their” women). Or else, however weak the men are perceived to be, the women are seen as weaker, outrageously passive: geishas, Miss Saigon, Mme. Butterfly, fantasy Asian women without will, without thought; practically botanical.

Racism and projected distorted sexuality seem to go hand in hand. The racist cosmology of black male=beast (soulless mindless flesh) and white helpless lady (fleshless mindless soul) justifies all sorts of racial apparatus, including the actual sexual abuse of

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women of color by white men, especially men of wealth and power, and the historical justification for lynching and other repression of black men in order to protect white men's property (which includes white women).

**MONEY** *Blacks* are seen as deservedly poor; squandering on fancy cars—it used to be Cadillacs—money earned by and taken from deserving whites; human capital in their formerly enslaved state but today lacking in value or productivity. *Coloreds*, on the other hand, are seen as suspiciously good with money; they have way too much; are sly and exploitative, heartless and godless capitalists, blamed as jobs get exported, and products imported, for stealing the jobs of hard-working white Christians. Arabs share this image of undeserved wealth, and are especially blamed for the rising price of oil.

**POWER** *Blacks* are seen as politically powerless but physically strong and violent like nature herself, ready to mug, steal, and riot, dangerously on the verge of rebellion. *Coloreds* are seen as also untrustworthy but sneaky, rather than physically explosive; corrupt, and corrupting, manipulative rather than violent. In the United Kingdom, emphasis on Asian gangs has somewhat erased the distinction commonly drawn in the white imagination between (violent) African Caribbean and (sneaky) South Asian young men.<sup>63</sup> In the United States, September 11 has shifted terrorism wholehog into the “colored” camp, and even this large scale violence is performed sneakily.

**INTELLECT** *Blacks* are seen as intellectually inferior, bell-curve flunkies, perhaps creative as performers, but not as thinkers; *coloreds* are seen as shrewd, academic stars, lacking in true creativity or culture, but their children get diabolically high grades. As with money, *coloreds* are seen as getting an unfair share of accolades.

**CULTURE** *Blacks* after centuries on this continent remain outsiders, savage, uncivilized, and cultureless or primitives (sometimes romanticized but always disrespected), while *coloreds* are seen as eternal foreigners, hailing from peculiar and distasteful unwestern “overcivilized” cultures.

**BELIEF SYSTEM** *Blacks* adhere to an overemotional Christianity (with undertones of sorcery, voodoo, and a propensity for Christian-hating Islam), while *coloreds* are the archetypal infidels—Muslims,

Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and followers of other religions considered by the Christian west to be foreign, irrational, and disconnected from morality.

What's significant is the division of each strand of undesirable qualities and values into two poles, and the projection of each of these poles onto "others." Note too the way—at least pre-9/11—"blacks" make "coloreds" look good; and "coloreds" make "blacks" look like losers. The "Model Minority," after all, implies an opposing "Minority from Hell," supposedly proving that racism is an outmoded fiction, and really it's that inferior "culture of poverty" or "bell-curve intellect" that's at fault. In addition, the "Model Minority" trope, by exaggerating the success of Asians, handily obscures continued discrimination against them.<sup>64</sup>

Simultaneously, as all negativity is projected onto racial "others," culture and style are cannibalized. Where would modern European art be without African art or American popular music without jazz and blues? Think of Oprah, Toni Morrison, Denzel. What of the obsession among privileged middle-class folks with eastern religions, cultures, food? Craft stores sell dream-catcher kits and white folks long to get down with the natives. White suburban teenagers wear huge baggy outlaw jeans and track hiphop. Halle Berry is probably the agreed-upon most beautiful woman in the United States. From this perspective, racism is a feel-good strategy to cope with the unpleasant experience of envy.

Of course this racialized tripartite scheme is crude, distorting, yoking race to class, unequipped to recognize nuances such as the large numbers of black professionals or impoverished East and Southeast Asians, the West Indian small business owners (who used to be called "the Black Jews" because of their role as shopkeepers and small landlords). I could cite many more examples of who doesn't fit. After all, it is racism that collapses the diversity of communities of color into homogeneity.

But this white/colored/black classification suggests how the middle category—like the middle class—functions: as a buffer zone to protect wealth, by absorbing blame for the truly powerful who are also usually out of sight and out of reach. *Coloreds* are blamed—and envied—for making money; for getting ahead; for their kids' curve-breaking grades, for stealing the jobs of hard-working white Christians. Along with Latinos, with whom, as immigrants, they are sometimes conflated, they are blamed for jobs exported from the United States to sites of cheaper labor, and for products imported from such sites. *Coloreds* are scapegoated for the ravages of global capitalism. Immigrant bashing—whether street violence or

political agendas such as English-only and anti-immigrant rights—becomes a “natural” response to an attack perpetually about to happen.

The category of *blacks* comprises those who, seen as not having money, threaten to rob and pillage hard-working, tax-paying white Christians. In this construct, welfare fits as women’s form of robbery; the men are busy mugging. *Blacks* are scapegoated for (perceived) urban violence, and for (perceived) economic need and dependency.

Thus despite the bipolar public face of race and racism in the United States, the submerged tripartite division functions as a safety valve for class rage.

As I’ve suggested, in the United States one side of the racial–other spectrum, one collection of extremes shifts to Asians.<sup>65</sup> The other side of the spectrum shifts to African Americans, and, insofar as Latinos and Native Americans are considered at all, they are usually subsumed into the category of *blacks*, a blurring eased by the existence of many Latinos who are of African descent. In the eyes of white America, race trumps ethnicity. Even the regional variation and complexity of tripartite division; for example, white–Cuban–African American power struggles in Miami, or Anglo–Hispanic–Native American hierarchy in New Mexico, does not seriously challenge the basic principle of racialized hierarchy.

Where are Jews?

By now it should be obvious. Mongrels to white supremacists; infidels who continue to refuse the true faith; associated historically with white slavery, prostitution, and syphilis; so good with money you could fairly say Jews ARE money; rootless cosmopolitans tenaciously associated with the impulse to control Christians with Jews’ ill-gotten gains and clannish plotting, through depraved sexual vices, and a sterile degenerate materialistic culture: Jews lodge somewhere between the categories *white* and *colored*, slipping back and forth according to context.

The middle (*colored* or Jew) serves as a place of blame: stretching beyond horizontal hostility for a vertical encounter with what is positioned directly above. In recent years, the top is often entirely missing, unseen. Black–Jewish conflict. Black–Korean conflict. Though race continues to be perceived as a Black–White binary, conflict is often ethnicized, obscuring and thus protecting white folks from racial or class anger.

The point of this tripartite division I offer is not to reinscribe bigotry but to make plain how this division exalts whiteness. As *blacks* and *colored* are either insufficient or excessive, too little or too much, *whites* are brilliantly perfect—and Jews are splendidly convenient. Jews of color are lumped in with non-Jews of color except to score a political point—Ethiopian

Jews, for example, invoked to demonstrate Israel's magnificent hospitality and lack of racism (ignoring how Israeli treatment of the Beta Israel humiliates and degrades); Iranian Jews cited to prove the monstrosity of the Iranian government. Meanwhile Ashkenazim shift between non-white (from a eugenicist racialized white supremacist perspective) and surrogate white; scapegoats and blametakers; superwhites, if you will.

Given that most of the world is completely ignorant of Jewish cultural markers such as *Ashkenazi* or *Sephardi*, stereotypes about Jews are by default usually about Ashkenazim. The diaspora Jew is an Ashkenazi man "represented by European Christian culture as feminized [and/or] queer."<sup>66</sup> From the perspective of Ashkenazim, gender inflects these images so that Mizrahi men are seen either as macho brutes or emasculated, practically women, while *actual Mizrahi women* are seen as primitive and irrational, sexually overactive, or completely repressed and oppressed dwellers in harems. As anthropologist Joëlle Bahloul notes, "Scholars continue to view the Sephardic world as 'archaic' and non-progressive, in large part because of its treatment of women and the extensive sexual discrimination found in it." This concern for women does not include attending to the reality of North African women's lives, their "yearning for modernity," or their significant role in bringing the modern world into their community.<sup>67</sup>

But lest we imagine that any of these categories are racially fixed, Indonesian feminist scholar Saraswati Sunindyo notes how narratives of the 1999 Indonesian crisis repeatedly cited ethnic Chinese as the wealthy elite, whereas the wealth of the [Indonesian] Suharto family went unmentioned. Violence against ethnic Chinese, pogroms, including mass rapes of Chinese women, was, according to Sunindyo,

not rapes by poor people who hated the Chinese so much—these were orchestrated operations by some faction of the military trying to gain political seats by creating complete chaos. Indonesian academics abroad characterized the rape of Chinese women as "racialized state violence."<sup>68</sup>

Sunindyo explains, too, how the diasporic Chinese had been given a superior position to the "dirty natives," slotted by the Dutch into the minority middle man petit bourgeois position of shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, and associated with money. Anti-Chinese riots have a long history in Indonesia, including during the three hundred years of Dutch power in the archipelago. No surprise that the Chinese are often called "the Jews of Asia."<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, the familiar position of marginality and middle-ness not only made—and continues to make—the Chinese in Indonesia

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vulnerable, but also points to some diasporic strengths shared with Jews. Diasporic Chinese, like diasporic Jews, have some common language and culture to draw on, familial connections good for trade and for sustaining a view that stretches beyond the nation-state. The Chinese in Indochina were widely understood as political radicals, perhaps only in part because of the strength of communist organizing and radical education in China itself. Without exaggerating the radicalism of diasporic Chinese, the marginal, middle position might be said to stimulate or at least sustain the production of radicals and create a familiar contradiction: are diasporic Chinese petit bourgeois or wild-eyed revolutionaries? Or both?

### JEWS: RACE OR RELIGION?



KATYA GIBEL AZOULAY  
(MEVORACH)

*When I teach [in Grinnell, Iowa], the first thing I do is to ask the students where their families come from. Given there's almost no diversity in my classrooms, and I mean color or ethnic. . . . So I ask what their genealogy is, it's a way for me to get them to realize, without my having to say it, that they're far more diverse than they thought. If they just say, for example, German, I'll ask "what religion?" Most of the time they don't know, but sometimes they do. Sometimes they come back in the middle of the semester, having gone home and asked, and they found out things they didn't know. The point is to show this unfolding whiteness without having to spell it out in those words on day one and make them feel defensive. Then we can talk about, why do you think Iowa is not only all white, but kind of generic white?*

*But [even] the Jewish kids will say Russia, Poland, Lithuania. They will not start out by saying "Polish Jews who were forced to immigrate because of pogroms."*

—KATYA GIBEL AZOULAY (a.k.a. Mevorach), interview

### Where do Jews fit?

*Jewish* is often trivialized as something you choose, a preference, like tea over coffee. In contrast with visible racial identity, presumptions of choice—as with gayness—are seen as minimizing one's claim to attention, sympathy, and remedy. As a counter to bigotry, *I was born like this*

strategically asserts a kind of victim status, modeled on race, gender, and disability: if you can't help yourself, maybe you're entitled to some help from others.

Some Jews will argue that all Jews are people of color, because the alternative seems to be erasure, a polarization of white and color that excludes us.<sup>70</sup> If we have lived in a part of the world for generations, we often look a lot like the others who live there. In 1854, Frederick Douglass understood the obvious. "The Jews, who are to be found in all countries, never intermarrying, are white in Europe, brown in Asia, and black in Africa."<sup>71</sup> But Jews do intermarry, quite widely, and even so sometimes we continue to look strikingly different.

African American/Jew Yavilah McCoy explains,

When I say "of color," it simply means having dark skin, because in a racialized society, the amount of color in one's skin can often make a difference in the way people see your identity and treat you accordingly. There are many regions of our world where people have dark skin, yet skin color is not the delineator of their identity. Jews come from many of these regions that include Yemen, Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt and many other countries where individuals of various shades of skin color have been Jewish for ages, and never questioned their Jewish identity in regard to the amount of melanin in their skin. Historically, Jewish identity, for many Jews around the world, of both light and dark skin, has been about religion, culture, practice and a relationship with God. As we encountered racism as a people, and entered societies where racial paradigms were in place, I believe that this began to change. When I walk into a room and say to people I meet "I'm Jewish" often I will get the response "but you're Black." I often want to say "no kidding," but the usual response I give is "Yes, my family has been practicing Judaism for at least three generations, now." The point that I aim to make is that it would make it easier to just "BE" as a Jewish person of color if "black" and "Jewish" identity were not so commonly assumed to be mutually exclusive. Historically, Jews have been multiple skin colors and it's unfortunate that the passive internalization of color consciousness that happens so easily in American society, helped us to forget the freedom from identifying around color that is a part of our Jewish history.<sup>72</sup>

Yet to say, simply, *Jews are not a race*, while accurate, overlooks the confusion, the waffling and uncertainty about Jewish racial identity, and

the anxiety created by this uncertainty. Since race emerged as a construct in nineteenth-century biological science, there's always been someone pitching the Jewish race, though not everyone agrees to catch. Still, Jews have been so racialized that subtext overwhelms text: we have been racially hated *as if* we were a race. Even as I assert, *of course, Jewish is not a race*, I come upon "a 1987 Supreme Court ruling that Jews and Arabs could use civil rights laws to gain redress for discrimination against them . . . on the grounds that they are not racial whites."<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, to reduce *Jewishness* to *Judaism* is to forget the complex indivisible swirl of religion–culture–language–history that *was* Jewishness until relatively recently. In eighteenth-century Western Europe, legal emancipation began to offer some Jews the possibility of escaping from a linguistically, culturally, and economically isolated ghetto. Even before Nazi racial definitions reinforced a defensive *only-a-religion* kneejerk from the Jewish community, the lure of partial assimilation led some Jews to define Judaism as narrowly as possible, as religion only: "a Jew at home, a man in the streets,"<sup>74</sup> a private matter, taken care of behind closed doors, like bathing. In Eastern Europe, a Jew was a Jew, marked visually and linguistically, by culture and religion, no Jew-at-home, man-in-street option. In a third variation found in the Islamic world, Jews did not live segregated from non-Jews, and cultural and linguistic interaction was considerable. Yet Jews were not pressed to assimilate or to separate secular and religious identity. Many Jews were encouraged briefly by "Ottomanization," which favored cultural diversity for ethnic minorities, including Jews and other non-Muslims.<sup>75</sup>

Though Judaism the religion does not tell the whole Jewish story, it does provide continuity and connection to Jews around the globe. There is something powerful even for an atheist like myself about entering a synagogue across a continent or an ocean and hearing the familiar service.<sup>76</sup> Even before the printing press made written documents widely available, during centuries of widest dispersion across five continents, most of the Jewish world followed basically the same teachings and worship.<sup>77</sup> A Jewish commonplace goes, "More than the Jews have kept *shabat* (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, the day of rest and prayer), *shabat* has kept the Jews."

But a Jew is not a Jew only through belief. A Jew need not follow religious practice. A Jew need not even believe in god, not even to become a rabbi—an element of Judaism of which I am especially fond.<sup>78</sup> A non-Jew can become a Jew by embracing Jewish religious practice, but religion

offers only one strand, one way of being Jewish. Ironic that it is precisely the Holocaust's depletion of Jews and of Jewish identity, with profound linguistic and cultural losses, that makes imaginable a Jewishness that is *only a religion*—only now, when so much else has been lost. Speakers of Judeo-Arabic, Ladino (Judeo-Español), and Yiddish (Judeo-German) age and die;<sup>79</sup> the Jews who left India, Ethiopia, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Iran, Egypt . . . watch—mostly in Israel—their children learn to reject and be embarrassed by their rich, frequently matrilineal traditions.<sup>80</sup>

To equate Jewishness with Judaism, culture with religion, is to forget how even the contemporary, often attenuated version of this Jewish cultural swirl is passed down *in the family*; almost like genetic code, as Ashkenazim are genetically marked for Tay-Sachs Disease, Canavan disease, and even (though the genetic-environmental breakdown is not clear) breast cancer. One wonders, given the general amnesia about non-Ashkenazi Jews, whether there are other Jewish genetically linked diseases to investigate.

More provocative is the dazzling DNA discovery of Cohanim genetic makeup among the Lemba in Southern Africa and the Bene Israel of Marathi, India.<sup>81</sup> The Cohanim (Cohens) are the priestly caste, descended, it is said, from Moses' brother Aaron. At the same time, let me stress the obvious: the Cohanim "gene," like Jewishness itself, crosses all races.

But it's confusing, because to say someone *looks Jewish* is to say something both absurd (Jews look a million different ways) and shorthand communicative.

When I was growing up in Flatbush, every girl with a certain kind of nose—sometimes named explicitly as a Jewish nose, sometimes only as "too big"—wanted a nose job, and if her parents could pay for it, often she got one. I want to be graphic about the euphemism "nose job." A nose job breaks the nose, bruises the face and eye area like a grotesque beating. It hurts. It takes weeks to heal.

What was wrong with the original nose, the Jewish one? Noses were discussed ardently in Flatbush, with this or that friend looking forward to her day of transformation.<sup>82</sup> My aunts lavished on me the following exquisite praise: *look at her, a nose like a shiksa* (a non-Jewish woman). This hurt my feelings. Before I knew what a *shiksa* was, I knew I wasn't it, and, with that fabulous integrity of children, I wanted to look like who I was. But later I learned my nose's value, and would tell gentiles this story, so they'd notice my nose.

A Jewish nose, I conclude, identifies its owner as a Jew. Nose jobs are performed so that a Jewish woman does not look like a Jew. The Ashkenazi

girls of my generation bleached and shaved, to look less Jewish; the non-Ashkenazi girls bleached and shaved to look more Ashkenazi; more European; less Jewish.<sup>83</sup>

Tell me again Jewish is just a religion.

## CHRISTIAN CENTRICITY

Yet in a Christian-centric culture, it is the religious aspect of Jewishness that is articulated. Ethnicity and culture are confused, even for many Jews. We need a word for the system that normalizes and honors Christianity, just as *racism* names the system that normalizes and honors whiteness. Our very lack of a word illustrates the problem. How do we challenge what we have no language to discuss? Christian hegemony? Not very catchy, but the assumption of Christianity-as-norm does exercise a negative impact on Jews, and is erasive and diminishing. Jews usually designate this erasure as a form of anti-semitism, but it's not only a Jewish issue: erasure and marginalization of non-Christians denigrates all non-Christians. We sorely need a term such as *Christianism* to name the system of Christian domination. Such a term would help contextualize Jewish experience as marginality shared with other non-Christians.

Outside the Christian-dominant framework of the West, Christians are sometimes persecuted; in India, for example, or China. But in the United States, where Christianity is the established religion (the doctrine of separation of church and state notwithstanding), Christianity and whiteness are completely enmeshed. Christianity was used to service colonialism and agrarian capitalism/plantation slavery, and was seen as a pacifying tool.

Christians, religiously observant or not, usually operate from the common self-definition of Christianity: a religion any individual can embrace through belief, detached from race, peoplehood, and culture.<sup>84</sup> But while Christianity has also offered people of color a place to belong, to imagine and sometimes even experience equality, I suspect that most white Christians do not feel kinship with Latino evangelicals or Korean Baptists, or with indigenous people converted by colonialists all over the globe.

Doesn't Christianity really, for most white Christians, imply *white*? Think of the massive Christian evasion of a simple fact: Jesus Christ was not, was never a Christian. He was a Jew. What did he look like, Jesus of Nazareth, two thousand years ago? Blond, blue-eyed? I am not minimizing the authenticity or value of Christianity for any believer, nor am I forgetting the liberatory potential of the African American Church or of

Latin American Liberation Theology. But for the most part, *Christian*, like *American*, presents itself as a white man with female and child appendages. At its extreme, as in the Christian identity movement, Christianity merges with white supremacy.

Part of what gives this issue its distinct shape now—at home and around the globe—is the visibility of non-Christians other than Jews. As noted, Muslims are especially under scrutiny, and are widely confused with Arabs, even though surveys of ethnic origins of Muslims in the United States, as defined by regular participation in mosques, indicate that only 25 percent are Arab. The other 75 percent are made up of 33 percent South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Afghani), 30 percent African American, with the remaining 12 percent divided among sub-Saharan African, European, White American, Southeast Asian (Malaysian, Indonesian, Filipino), Caribbean, Turkish, Iranian, and Hispanic/Latino.<sup>85</sup> The racialized Muslim–Arab–infidel blur makes it easy for the United States to wage war on Iraq; to support the Israelis who seem, through the lens of American foreign policy and the eyes of a biased media, moderate para-Western, if not Christian, at least Judeo-, engaged in (normative military) state violence compared with “fanatic suicide bombers.” Palestinian religious and cultural diversity is invisible, even though some of the most celebrated Palestinian radicals are (at least were) Christian, such as the late Edward Said, or Arafat’s rival for years within the PLO, George Habash, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In this morass, Jewish Arabs are inconceivable.

What I want to note here is the way Muslim hypervisibility creates a tripartite structure of religions, in which Judaism is situated theologically between Christianity and other non-Christian faiths. Parallel to the transition from Europe/biracial to U.S./triracial, we can mark a transition in the United States from dominant Christianity with Jewish deviants, to the present, as immigration swells the ranks of those who are neither Christian nor Jews. While *Judeo-Christian civilization* is a nonsense phrase (since Christians have frequently tried to exterminate the Jews, it hardly represents a joint enterprise), nevertheless, when we factor in all those other faith communities, Jews lodge, again, in the middle: unchristian, yet with a unique prefiguring relationship to Christianity, absorbed into Judeo-Christian, disgorged again as anti-Christ.

You would think that monotheistic Islam, linked to both Judaism and Christianity and thus distinguished from polytheistic faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism, would occupy a special rung on the hierarchical ladder. Christianity is bound to honor Judaism in order to honor

## THE COLORS OF JEWS

its own origins, though its arrogant theology includes built-in dishonor, regarding Jews as stupidly, sinfully stopping short of the revelation that any decent human would have accepted. One might expect to find Islam a rung below Judaism but a rung above the polytheistic un-bible-based religions. Instead—and only racism/colonialism explains this—we find Islam confused in the Western mind with all the other “Oriental” faiths. The attacks of September 11th have shifted this somewhat, targeting Islam as particularly pernicious among the non-Western faiths, but emphasizing the anti-Christian essence of all those strange dark and dangerous people who hate god-fearing upright Americans.

Despite the extent and complexity of racial mixing in the United States, racial discourse there remains largely bipolar: there is Black and there is White. This binary is far stronger in the East than in the West, where Latinos, Asians and Native Americans are more numerous, more visible, and exercise more influence over the discourse of race and diversity. Still, to a great extent, race in the United States continues to be viewed reductively as two distinct opposites. We could speculate that one reason people clamor to know if Jews are or are not white is they want to understand where Jews fit in the Black–White scheme. Ironically, where Jews fit is often an act of displacement: Jewish replaces/protects White.