

Chapter 5 – A Whiteness of Our Own? Jewishness and Whiteness in the 1950s and 1960s

Main Point: In this chapter Brodtkin explores the “ways that American Jews understood their transformation” in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s (Brodtkin, p. 138). There are two main arguments: (1) “...a group of mainly Jewish public intellectuals spoke to the aspirations of of many Jews in the immediate postwar decades, and in doing so developed a new, hegemonic version of Jewishness as a model minority culture that explained the structural privileges of white maleness as earned entitlement” and (2) “...Jews related to this version of Jewishness ambivilyantly” (Brodtkin, p. 139).

Central Issues and Concepts:

- American Jews ↔ Whites
 - The social and political climate after World War II and the Holocaust caused Americans to be more accepting of Jews and Jewish culture. Jews became “prominent among public intellectuals” and used this as a tool to establish themselves among whites (Brodtkin, p. 141). In the 1960’s almost anyone could be Jewish. “...The non-Jewish majority joked that they were ‘assimilated Jews.’ In other words, non-Jewish whites joined Jews in adopting a commoditized cultural Jewishness as their own. Being Jewish was a way of being American” (Brodtkin, p. 142). Despite being accepted Americans, Jews wondered how long it would last.
- As a result of ethnic pluralism, American Jews were viewed as a model minority and other minorities were labeled as culturally deficient. In the book *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer contrasts the family structure of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Italians with Jews, asserting that Jews are the only group that has the ability to achieve Anglo-Saxon Protestant definitions of ambition and success.
 - **Key Quote #1:** “The Jewish ethnicity that intellectuals claimed for themselves as model minorities was an immigrant version or bourgeois patriarchal domesticity characterized by values of hard work, deferred gratification, education, and strong two-parent families with the mothers full-time at home. It was the invention of a deficient African American culture that illustrated its exemplariness.”
- Blackness is used to define whiteness; therefore, blacks can never be a model minority. Many Jewish intellectuals used social institutions such as high culture, politics, education, and family to paint a terrible picture of blacks and encourage distance from them.
 - **Key Quote #2:** “Analyses of minstrelsy and working-class immigrant whitening expand the argument that inventing blackness and speaking for African or Indian America has been a conventional way that immigrants and working-class whites have made themselves white and American, ‘on the backs of blacks,’ as Toni Morrison put it, and in doing so have added to or altered the hegemonic constructions of American whiteness.”

Questions:

1. Do you think that African Americans can ever be viewed as a model minority? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that gender roles played an important part in the construction of Jewish whiteness? If so, how?