

Wesleyan University, Fall 2004

Religion 270 • American Studies 302 • African-American Studies 248

## **Race and the Making of American Jewish Identities**

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Class Meetings:  
Tues / Thurs, 10:30 - 11:50  
in Butterfield A413

Office Hours: Wed 10 - 12, or  
other times by appointment

### **Course Description:**

This course will explore the shifting racial identities of Jews in the United States, and the complex roles Jews have played in American racial politics. On the basis of this history, the course will draw broader insights into the process of racialization, and the very idea of “race.” The course will treat American Jewish identities as windows into the social forces that have shaped American understandings of difference and identity. As such, the course will speak to all students interested in race, ethnicity and religion in the United States, as well as students with a specific interest in American Jews and Judaism.

Major topics will include: contemporary theories of “race” and identity; perceptions of Jewish bodily difference before the birth of the concept of race; images of Jews as racialized others in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the development of American Jewish Whiteness in the mid-twentieth century; the histories and identities of Black Hebrew Israelites; the sometimes fraught political relationships between African-Americans and American Jews; and the complex contours of Black-Jewish difference in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights.

Students will contribute to class discussions, write discussion questions on the readings, write two papers on the readings, and write a longer paper based on original research.

### **Required Texts:**

Three texts will be available to purchase at Broad Street Books, and on reserve at Olin:

Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*

Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*

Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*

A packet of photocopied readings is also required, and will be available to purchase at Suburban Card and Gift (in Metro Square on Main Street) and on reserve at Olin.

## **Course Requirements:**

**Reading:** This is a reading intensive course. Some of the readings are straightforward factual texts, but others develop challenging theoretical analyses that will require intensive reading. You will need to keep up with the schedule of readings on the syllabus, read carefully, and come to every class with a solid grasp on the texts.

**Attendance and Participation:** Regular attendance and class participation are absolutely required. This is not the sort of course in which you can skip class then cram for the final. There is no final, and there is no way to grasp the themes of the course without active participation in class discussions. For this reason, I will take attendance in each class and structure the course to encourage (or perhaps require) your participation.

**Discussion Questions:** To facilitate your participation in class discussions, and ensure that you keep up with the scheduled readings, you will prepare ten brief discussion questions on the readings. One question will be due each week (with the exception of the first week of the semester, weeks without readings, and a couple of other weeks where the reading schedule is wacky). You can choose to submit your weekly question before the Tuesday or Thursday class -- it's entirely up to you -- but either way, questions are due by e-mail at 9 am on the mornings of class meetings. Questions will not be accepted after the relevant week of readings. We will discuss my expectations for these questions in detail in class, but let me be clear: If you keep up with the course readings, reading carefully and critically, preparing the discussion questions will not be a heavy burden.

**Other Written Assignments:** You will also write three longer, more formal, papers over the course of the semester: a 4 - 5 page paper on Units Two through Four of the course, due in class on October 21st; a 4 - 5 page paper on Units Five and Six, due in class on November 11th; and an 8 - 10 page research paper on any topic of your choice related to the themes of the course, due during finals week on December 20th. This paper will require additional reading in academic literatures, as well as topical research of some kind. In addition, you will submit a 1 to 2 page abstract and preliminary bibliography for your final paper on November 30th. This is absolutely required, but it will not be graded. We will discuss my expectations for all of these assignments in more detail in class.

**Final Grades:** Your grade in the course will be based on your discussion questions (roughly 20% of the final grade, or 2% each), your essays on the readings (roughly 30% of the final grade, or 15% each), your final research paper (roughly 30% of the final grade), and your attendance and class participation (roughly 20% of the final grade).

**Fair Warnings:** You will find that I am reasonably flexible about assignment deadlines when students face medical or personal issues, but I will penalize late papers if you fail to communicate with me about these issues in a timely manner. I will only give incompletes to students facing medical or personal issues at the end of the semester. And finally, you should know that I am an anti-plagiarism fanatic. I will have *zero tolerance* for plagiarism, and will refer all cases of intentional plagiarism to the dean for disciplinary action.

## Schedule of Readings and Assignments

### Unit 1: Introduction: Jews and Race?

- 9/7 Introduction to the Course. No reading.
- 9/9 Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Chapter 5  
Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, Chapter 7

### Unit 2: A Critical Introduction to "Race" and Identity

- 9/14 Audrey Smedley, "'Race' and the Construction of Human Identity"  
George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, Introduction
- 9/16 George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, Chapters 1 - 2 (selections)

### Unit 3: Jewish Bodily Difference Before the Birth of "Race"

- 9/21 Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, Chapter 3
- 9/23 Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and The Jews*, Chapters 3, 9 and 10

### Unit 4: Jews as Racial Others, in Europe and the United States

- 9/28 Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, Preface and Chapters 1 - 2
- 9/30 Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, Chapters 4, 9 and Conclusion
- 10/5 Leonard Rogoff, "Is the Jew White? The Racial Place of the Southern Jew"  
Arthur Abernethy, *The Jew a Negro* (selections)
- 10/7 Eric Goldstein, "'Different Blood Flows in Our Veins': Race and Jewish Self-Definition in Late Nineteenth Century America"  
Daniel Itzkovitz, "Passing Like Me"

### Unit 5: A Brief History of American Jewish Whiteness

- 10/12 Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Introduction, Chaps. 1 - 2
- 10/14 Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Chapters 3, 8 and Epilogue
- 10/19 No class. Fall Break.
- 10/21 In Class Film: "The Jazz Singer." No reading.

***Paper #1 Due in Class***

- 10/26 Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise"
- 10/28 Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, Introduction, Chapters 1 - 2
- 11/2 Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, Chapters 4 - 5

**Unit 6: A Counter-History of American Jewish Blackness**

- 11/4 Albert Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus and the American Israel"  
Roberta Gold, "The Black Jews of Harlem"
- 11/9 Werner Sollors, "Typology and Ethnogenesis"  
Henry Goldschmidt, "The Voices of Jacob on the Streets of Brooklyn"

**Unit 7: Scenes From the History of Black-Jewish Relations**

- 11/11 In Class Film: "Blacks and Jews." No reading.  
***Paper #2 Due in Class***
- 11/16 Hasia Diner, "Between Words and Deeds: Jews and Blacks in America, 1880-1935"  
David Levering Lewis, "Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites"
- 11/18 Clayborn Carson, "Black-Jewish Universalism in the Era of Identity Politics"  
Jonathan Kaufman, "Into The Cauldron: Rhody McCoy"
- 11/23 Nathaniel Deutsch, "The Proximate Other: The Nation of Islam and Judaism"
- 11/25 No Class. Thanksgiving Break.

**Unit 8: Race, Religion and Black-Jewish Difference in Crown Heights**

- 11/30 In Class Film: "Fires in the Mirror." No reading.  
***Final Paper Abstracts Due in Class***
- 12/2 Jonathan Rieder, "Reflections on Crown Heights"  
Henry Goldschmidt, "Race and Religion, a Riot and a Pogrom"
- 12/7 Henry Goldschmidt, "Food Fights: Contesting 'Cultural Diversity' in Crown Heights"
- 12/9 Last Class. Summing Up. No reading.

***12/20 Final Research Paper Due by Email, Monday 12/20 at 9 am***