The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism


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Jewish identity is multifarious. Jews come in all races and colors, are from nations that span the globe’s continents, may be Orthodox or secular, and are hardly unified over issues surrounding Israel and Zionism. In The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism, Melanie Kay/Kantrowitz advances a multiracial and multicultural approach to Jewish identity. She argues that there is no one way of being Jewish.

Identity politics is only part of this work. Kay/Kantrowitz makes praxis, putting knowledge into action, a centerpiece of the book through her use of the term “Diasporism.” Kay/Kantrowitz rethinks identity vis-à-vis geographic location by moving beyond the assumption that nearly all Jews live in diaspora, and that those who do unreflectively make its experience synonymous with exile. She concentrates her definitions of Diasporism in the beginning and end of the book. Diasporism is necessary in order to “. . . strengthen the identity and practice of Jewish antiracism, including the often buried strand of economic justice. To heighten understanding among Jews of diverse backgrounds/cultures/ethnicities that we need each other in part because of our differences. To help Jews grasp that those Jews who are cultural minorities within a hegemonic Ashkenazi community are often best equipped to help the Jewish world reckon with our multiculturality, and to know that this multiculturality is an enormous asset when it comes to combating racism and anti-semitism and to building social justice coalitions. I name this identity and practice of Jewish anti-racism Diasporism” (xi). In her concluding chapter, “Toward a New Diasporism,” she states that “Diasporism is committed to an endless paradoxical dance between cultural integrity and multicultural complexities. Diasporism depends not on dominance but on balance, perpetual back and forth, home and away, community and outside, always slightly on the edge except perhaps at intensely personal moments in the family created by blood or by love, or at moments of transcendent solidarity” (199). Diasporism is a call to embrace diversity and put an end to the trope that the authentic Jew is exclusively white, Ashkenazi, European (or of European descent), and a supporter of Zionism.

The book chapters are structured around issues of multiculturalism: the deconstruction of whiteness, race relations between African Americans and Jews, diversity among Jews (paying particular attention to the history and historiography of Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews), Jewish organizing around racial and economic justice issues, and Jewish activism that encourages racial and cultural diversity. The book’s conclusion is a plea for radical Diasporism, a movement that is flexible enough to allow all Jews the power to name themselves and be themselves yet uncompromising in a commitment to end racial and economic injustice. Diasporism makes a place for Jews to stand together in solidarity to create a more just world within a framework of multiracial and multicultural diversity.
The power of this book lies in the vignettes of dozens of interviews Kay/Kantrowitz conducted with Jews around the world. These narratives bring Jewish multicultural experience to life. The stories document the complicated trajectory of Jews who do not “fit” the hegemonic model of Jewish identity: white, Ashkenazi, European, Zionist, and Jewish by birth. For example, Navonah, a Jewish American woman of color describes how she was “born into law” yet does not call herself Jewish (40). She articulates how even though she knows that she is Jewish that because she is not white, she does not feel as though she really is Jewish. “The term ‘Jew’ I associate with white people. I have some conflicting emotions about that. If I say I’m not Jewish because Jewish people are white, it’s as if I’m accepting that all Jewish people are white people. Yes, not all Jewish people are white people, I do know that, but at the same time the term ‘Black Jews’ doesn’t work for me either because it seems to assert that Jewish people are ‘normally’ white” (41). Navonah’s understanding of the precarious intersection between race and Jewish identity resonates with many other Jews in the book. What is interesting about how Jewish people of color grapple with identity is that while none question their own racial identity (none of those interviewed expressed uncertainty about whether they belonged to a certain racial or national group), nearly all question whether they are really Jewish, or at the very least detail the frustration with convincing others that they are indeed Jewish. Many of these stories are paired with a photograph of the narrator. These pictures work to undermine the assumption that Jewish identity is monolithic and force the audience to reorient visual markings that signify what it means to be a Jew.

Eschewing the role of the disengaged author, Kay/Kantrowitz situates herself in the text as yet another example of the multiplicity of Jewish identity. She interjects autobiographical struggles that detail her own understandings of Jewish identity and how these have changed over time. In the preface, she asks and answers: “Who, what is the Jewish people? The question dazed me when I first asked it. I thought I knew, had always known, the answer. The Jewish people lived in Brooklyn, and if your father made money, you moved to a coveted ‘private house’ on Long Island. (Mine didn’t). Jewish grandparents had foreign accents. Jewish grandmothers made chopped liver. Only old-fashioned Jews went to Shul” (ix). Throughout the book, Kay/Kantrowitz reveals her own experiences with being Jewish, including one of her earliest encounters with her own white identity when a young African American girl in Harlem calls her “pink” rather than white, and the regret she expresses when she stood silent at a party when Ofra, a Turkish Jew, meets Rose (a white American Jew? Kay/Kantrowitz identifies her only by her age) whose orientalist greeting questioned Ofra’s nationality and named her “exotic” (3; 84). One of the many pleasures of this book is how Kay/Kantrowitz provides a balance between her own anecdotes and the stories of others. She is an active subject in this work, yet her own narrative does not eclipse the voices of others.

The personal narratives are grounded in a survey and a critique of Jewish history that draw from feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race theories. Theoretically, the book advances the feminist concept of intersectionality without actually naming it. Kay/Kantrowitz shows how at the intersection of race, nationality, and religion (the three social locations she addresses the most) race and nationality most often determine
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whether someone really is Jewish. A causal relation she would like to see abolished. Kay/Kantrowitz takes a deconstructionist approach to categories. She explores the intersections of the categories and the meanings of any particular category (e.g. race, religion, nationality), yet avoids the poststructural/postmodern supposition that categories \textit{per se} do not exist or matter. Nowhere does she argue that Jewish identity is a fiction or is insignificant. Instead, she focuses on the diversity of meanings attached to being Jewish while maintaining the need for the category itself. While the book contributes to the academic literature on Jewish studies, women’s studies, postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and social movement activism, its accessible language and moving narratives that draw in the reader make \textit{The Colors of Jews} comprehensible to a general audience interested in issues of multiculturalism, diversity, and social change.

Kay/Kantrowitz has filled a void by interrogating the ways in which what it means to be Jewish occupies a particular place in the imagination. This place that is white, European, religious, and Zionist must be expanded, not to replace the former, but to include Jews who are black and brown, those who are from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, those who support coalition building with Palestinians, those who come to Judaism through marriage or conversion, and any others who have been systematically excluded from claiming their own identity. Accepting the tenets of multiculturalism is but a part of this process. In order to engage in radical Diasporism, Jews must work together in solidarity against racial and economic injustice to close the fissures that separate all who call themselves Jewish.

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