



## *What White Supremacists Taught a Jewish Scholar About Identity*

*By Abby L. Ferber*

**A** FEW YEARS AGO, my work on white supremacy led me to the neo-Nazi tract *The New Order*, which proclaims: "The single serious enemy facing the white man is the Jew." I must have read that statement a dozen times. Until then, I hadn't thought of myself as the enemy.

When I began my research for a book on race, gender, and white supremacy, I could not understand why white supremacists so feared and hated Jews. But after being immersed in newsletters and periodicals for months, I learned that white supremacists imagine Jews as the masterminds behind a great plot to mix races and, thereby, to wipe the white race out of existence.

The identity of white supremacists, and the white racial purity they espouse, requires the maintenance of secure boundaries. For that reason, the literature I read described interracial sex as "the ultimate abomination." White supremacists see Jews as threats to racial purity, the villains responsible for desegregation, integration, the civil-rights movement, the women's movement, and affirmative action—each depicted as eventually leading white women into the beds of black men. Jews are believed to be in control everywhere, staging a multipronged attack against the white race. For *WAR*, the newsletter of White Aryan Resistance, the Jew "promotes a thousand social ills . . . [f]or which you'll have to foot the bills."

Reading white-supremacist literature is

a profoundly disturbing experience, and even more difficult if you are one of those targeted for elimination. Yet, as a Jewish woman, I found my research to be unsettling in unexpected ways. I had not imagined that it would involve so much self-reflection. I knew white supremacists were vehemently anti-Semitic, but I was ambivalent about my Jewish identity and did not see it as essential to who I was. Having grown up in a large Jewish community, and then having attended a college with a large Jewish enrollment, my Jewishness was invisible to me—something I mostly ignored. As I soon learned, to white supremacists, that is irrelevant.

Contemporary white supremacists define Jews as non-white: "not a religion, they are an Asiatic race, locked in a mortal conflict with Aryan man," according to *The New Order*. In fact, throughout white-supremacist tracts, Jews are described not merely as a separate race, but as an impure race, the product of mongrelization. Jews, who pose the ultimate threat to racial boundaries, are themselves imagined as the product of mixed-race unions.

Although self-examination was not my goal when I began, my research pushed me to explore the contradictions in my own racial identity. Intellectually, I knew that the meaning of race was not rooted in biology or genetics, but it was only through researching the white-supremacist movement that I gained a more-personal understanding of the social construction of race.

Reading white-supremacist literature, I moved between two worlds: one where I was white, another where I was the non-white seed of Satan; one where I was privileged, another where I was despised; one where I was safe and secure, the other where I was feared and thus marked for death.

According to white-supremacist ideology, I am so dangerous that I must be eliminated. Yet, when I put down the racist, anti-Semitic newsletters, leave my office, and walk outdoors, I am white.

GROWING UP WHITE has meant growing up privileged. Sure, I learned about the historical persecution of Jews, overheard the hushed references to distant relatives lost in the Holocaust. I knew of my grandmother's experiences with anti-Semitism as a child of the only Jewish family in a Catholic neighborhood. But those were just stories to me. Reading white supremacists finally made the history real.

While conducting my research, I was reminded of the first time I felt like an "other." Arriving in the late 1980s for the first day of graduate school in the Pacific Northwest, I was greeted by a senior graduate student with the welcome: "Oh, you're the Jewish one." It was a jarring remark, for it immediately set me apart. This must have been how my mother felt, I thought, when, a generation earlier, a college classmate had asked to see her horns. Having lived in predominantly Jewish communities, I had never experienced my Jewishness as "otherness." In fact, I did not even *feel* Jewish. Since moving out of my parents' home, I had not celebrated a Jewish holiday or set foot in a synagogue. So it felt particularly odd to be identified by this stranger as a Jew. At the time, I did not feel that the designation described who I was in any meaningful sense.

But whether or not I define myself as Jewish, I am constantly defined by others that way. Jewishness is not simply a religious designation that one may choose, as I once naively assumed. Whether or not I see myself as Jewish does not matter to white supremacists.

I've come to realize that my own experience with race reflects the larger historical picture for Jews. As whites, Jews today are certainly a privileged group in the United States. Yet the history of the Jewish experience demonstrates precisely what scholars mean when they say that race is a social construction.

At certain points in time, Jews have been defined as a non-white minority. Around the turn of the last century, they were considered a separate, inferior race, with a distinguishable biological identity justifying discrimination and even genocide. Today, Jews are generally considered white, and Jewishness is largely considered merely a religious or ethnic designation. Jews, along with other European

ethnic groups, were welcomed into the category of "white" as beneficiaries of one of the largest affirmative-action programs in history—the 1944 GI Bill of Rights. Yet, when I read white-supremacist discourse, I am reminded that my ancestors were excluded from the dominant race, persecuted, and even killed.

Since conducting my research, having read dozens of descriptions of the murders and mutilations of "race traitors" by white supremacists, I now carry with me the knowledge that there are many people out there who would still wish to see me dead. For a brief moment, I think that I can imagine what it must feel like to be a person of color in our society . . . but then I realize that, as a white person, I cannot begin to imagine that.

Jewishness has become both clearer and more ambiguous for me. And the questions I have encountered in thinking about Jewish identity highlight the central issues involved in studying race today. I teach a class on race and ethnicity, and usually, about midway through the course, students complain of confusion. They enter my course seeking answers to the most troubling and divisive questions of our time, and are disappointed when they discover only more questions. If race is not biological or genetic, what is it? Why, in some states, does it take just one black ancestor out of 32 to make a person legally black, yet those 31 white ancestors are not enough to make that person white? And, always, are Jews a race?

I have no simple answers. As Jewish history demonstrates, what is and is not a racial designation, and who is included within it, is unstable and changes over time—and that designation is always tied to power. We do not have to look far to find other examples: The Irish were also once considered non-white in the United States, and U.S. racial categories change with almost every census.

MY prolonged encounter with the white-supremacist movement forced me to question not only my own assumptions about Jewish identity, but also my assumptions about whiteness. Growing up "white," I felt raceless. As it is for most white people, my race was invisible to me. Reflecting the assumption of most research on race at the time, I saw race as something that shaped the lives of people of color—the victims of racism. We are not used to thinking about whiteness when we think about race. Consequently, white people like myself have failed to recognize the ways in which our own lives are shaped by race. It was not until others began identifying me as the Jew, the "other," that I began to explore race in my own life.

Ironically, that is the same phenomenon shaping the consciousness of white supremacists: They embrace their racial identity at the precise moment when they

feel their privilege and power under attack. Whiteness historically has equaled power, and when that equation is threatened, their own whiteness becomes visible to many white people for the first time. Hence, white supremacists seek to make racial identity, racial hierarchies, and white power part of the natural order again. The notion that race is a social construct threatens that order. While it has become an academic commonplace to assert that race is socially constructed, the revelation is profoundly unsettling to many, especially those who benefit most from the constructs.

My research on hate groups not only opened the way for me to explore my own racial identity, but also provided insight into the question with which I began this essay: Why do white supremacists express such hatred and fear of Jews? The ambiguity in Jewish racial identity is precisely what white supremacists find so threatening. Jewish history reveals race as a social designation, rather than a God-given or genetic endowment. Jews blur the boundaries between whites and people of color, failing to fall securely on either side of the divide. And it is ambiguity that white supremacists fear most of all.

I find it especially ironic that, today, some strict Orthodox Jewish leaders also find that ambiguity threatening. Speaking out against the high rates of intermarriage among Jews and non-Jews, they issue dire warnings. Like white supremacists, they fear assaults on the integrity of the community and fight to secure its racial boundaries, defining Jewishness as biological and restricting it only to those with Jewish mothers. For both white supremacists and such Orthodox Jews, intermarriage is tantamount to genocide.

For me, the task is no longer to resolve the ambiguity, but to embrace it. My exploration of white-supremacist ideology has revealed just how subversive doing so can be: Reading white-supremacist discourse through the lens of Jewish experience has helped me toward new interpretations. White supremacy is not a movement just about hatred, but even more about fear: fear of the vulnerability and instability of white identity and privilege. For white supremacists, the central goal is to naturalize racial identity and hierarchy, to establish boundaries.

Both my own experience and Jewish history reveal that to be an impossible task. Embracing Jewish identity and history, with all their contradictions, has given me an empowering alternative to white-supremacist conceptions of race. I have found that eliminating ambivalence does not require eliminating ambiguity.

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