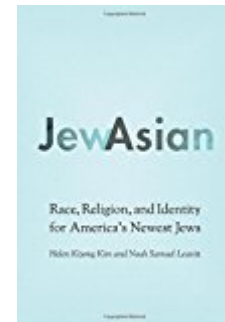


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Helen Kiyong Kim, Noah Samuel Leavitt. *JewAsian: Race, Religion, and Identity for America's Newest Jews*. Studies of Jews in Society Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 198 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-8565-1.



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In their published works, academic authors rarely acknowledge that the topics at hand emerged directly out of personal investments and experiences; it can be both refreshing and illuminating when they do. This is the case in *JewAsian: Race, Religion, and Identity for America's Newest Jews*, a book by Helen Kiyong Kim and Noah Samuel Leavitt, married sociologists who describe their background in a brief but useful preface to the volume. The couple met at a dinner party in the late 1990s, when they were both graduate students at the University of Chicago. Since then, they have married and had two children together. Their research project developed in large part out of a desire to help their now school-age children work through some of the questions of identity accompanying an experience of having a Korean American mother and a Jewish father. As the authors explain, “our children keep a lot of other people guessing who and what they are” (p. xv). The book is one of the first and only qualitative studies of the particular characteristics of such family structures, as described, in part, through the narratives of a small but carefully mined sampling of individuals. It is a precious and indispensable contribution.

In 2014, historian Keren McGinity published *Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Intermarriage, and Fatherhood*. Like

her earlier work, the book argues against commonly held beliefs that Jewishness is peripheral to the lives of those who have chosen to intermarry (in this book, her focus is on Jewish men in particular). As Kim and Leavitt acknowledge, McGinity’s work, and especially her chapter concentrated on a demographic falling within their own research interests, “Jewpanese,” is one of few interventions into the often problematic discussions about Jews and Asian Americans. These exchanges—frequently, as the authors point out, stemming from or connected to Jewish media sources—treat intermarriage primarily as a threat to the Jewish community. The assumption is that, by intermarrying, a person who identifies as Jewish, and presumably that person’s offspring as well, will lose her or his interest in, and connection to, the group. Kim and Leavitt point out how such reactions also often expose painful and damaging “racist and gendered stereotypes” (p. 3), such as notions of Asian American women as passive or American Jews as monolithically white. Discussions about these issues, the authors argue, have become increasingly urgent, as the rate of intermarriage, defined as a marital pairing of individuals from different racial, ethnic, and/or religious upbringings, has soared since the 1967 landmark Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia*. Too, racial and ethnic demographics in the

United States have dramatically shifted since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and it has become increasingly more obvious that talking about identity in America means moving beyond conversations that begin and end with an oversimplified, un-nuanced, and harmful black-and-white binary.

Following this compelling introductory framework, the authors move into detailing specific demographic movements in racial, ethnic, and religious categories, and their overlappings, according to US census data. Building on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of racial formation, which they delineate in their 1994 work, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, and which, as Kim and Leavitt state, "connects individual identity and social interaction with structural and institutional forces" (p. 13), the authors investigate both what can be gleaned from such information and the inadequacy of census categories in conveying the story of how various classifications play out in real life. They pinpoint telling, recent trends, such as a greater willingness, from 2000 to 2010, of individuals under eighteen to identify themselves as multiracial, and they also reveal how certain terms and categories (like the now-outdated "mulatto") often reflect broader political and ideological battlegrounds. They ask similar questions about the changing religious landscape, noting, for instance, the rise of people who do not affiliate or the effects of immigration on religious demographics. This background information leads the authors into a discussion of debates about intermarriage, beginning with sociologists, who have often "viewed intermarriage as a fundamental marker of incorporation into mainstream U.S. society" (p. 34). Kim and Leavitt point out how research on intermarriage of Jews in America in particular has not reached any clear consensus, and how some more recent conversations have sought to modernize what are often outdated notions of Jewish identification and assimilation. Turning to research on intermarriage among Asian Americans, the authors note "the important role

that racial and gender stereotypes and discourses play in partner choice" (p. 49). In all of these discussions, what becomes especially convincing is a recognition that the various narratives encountered—of studies of Jewish American or Asian American intermarriage, for example, which have generally remained separate—can be productively read in relation to one another. By the time the authors arrive at their examination of Jewish and ethnic identity in chapter 4, "Jews and Asians—Separate or the Same?," they are able to expertly demonstrate how attempting to define Jews as a group, like attempting to define Asian Americans, is a complicated endeavor that illuminates both the usefulness and limitations of a variety of intersectional classifications.

Only about halfway through the book, in two absorbing chapters, chapter 5, "Love and Marriage," and chapter 6, "What about the Kids?," do the authors finally arrive at the individual narratives that form the core of their arguments. In 2008 and 2009, the authors interviewed thirty-four married couples in metropolitan communities, and between 2011 and 2014, they interviewed thirty-nine adult children of such couples. Their primary research reveals the dynamic ways these individuals and families grapple with their unique backgrounds, ultimately countering previous studies that report on intermarriage as a catalyst for the "erosion of Jewish identity within a marriage and offspring" (p. 100). In reading the words of these parents and especially their grown children, it becomes apparent how the challenges they have faced, in regard to identity and belonging, often seem to have prompted these individuals to be especially thoughtful and aware of the knotty and complicated meanings behind concepts and impressions so often taken for granted, like identity or authenticity. In *JewAsian*, these notions, and the frameworks that have shaped our understandings of them, are carefully and thoughtfully investigated in a volume that will be useful not only to academics but also to individuals looking for deeper insights into how these subjects play out in everyday American life.

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