

**David S. Koffman. *The Jews' Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism, and Belonging in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 286 pp., ISBN: 978-1978800861.**

In his 1974 comedy *Blazing Saddles*, director Mel Brooks portrays a Yiddish-speaking Native American chief who allows safe passage out west to a wagon train of African Americans. As he lets them pass, he remarks, in English, “they darker than us!” This scene is inadvertently revealing of the malleability of Jewish racial identity. As Jews moved out to the American west in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they lightened and whitened, especially in contrast to the Native Americans living there.

This phenomenon, of Jewish immigrants to the United States establishing their own whiteness vis-à-vis Native Americans, animates the first half of David Koffman's important book, *The Jew's Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism, and Belonging in America*. The second half focuses on twentieth-century efforts by American Jews to study and assist Native Americans. But whether their intentions were aggressive, academic, or benevolent, Koffman understands Jews to be “perpetrators of colonialism in the new world” (19). That is to say, Jews' relationship to Native Americans was always one of white settler to colonized subject, even when those relations were good.

The thesis is innovative precisely because of its geographic setting. When discussions of Jews and colonialism emerge, they typically centre on the Middle East. Debates rage over whether Zionism constitutes colonialism, whether the modern state of Israel is a settler-colonial state, and whether Jews or Palestinians should be considered indigenous or aboriginal to the region. Koffman address these questions briefly in his introduction and conclusion, but his main point is to show how American Jews participated in the colonial project in the United States, in which European settlers, through disease, violence, enslavement, and exploitation, enacted the genocide and dislocation of millions of Native Americans, and continues to oppress the surviving population.

In addition to situating Jews in the history of the American colonialism, Koffman makes an important intervention into whiteness studies. Contra works such as Karen Brodtkin's *How Jews Became White Folks* (Rutgers, 1998), Koffman's study reinforces the argument of Thomas Guglielmo's book *White on Arrival* (Oxford, 2004) about Italian Americans. Legally, European Jewish immigrants to America were white on arrival. Socially, if Jewish immigrants to the American west were not entirely white on arrival, Koffman shows that they became white almost immediately in their encounters with Native Americans.

One could argue that American Jewish whiteness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was more firmly established in the west vis-à-vis Natives and Mexicans, and the South vis-à-vis Blacks, than it was in the North, where an abundance of white Catholic immigrants muddied the racial waters. Koffman's work can be placed in conversation with Linda Gordon's *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Harvard, 2001), which shows how Irish orphans in New York at the dawn of the twentieth century "whitened" as they moved southwest.

While American Jewish whiteness is usually examined vis-à-vis African Americans, Jewish-Indian relations remain vastly understudied. While some scholars have explored how American Jews imagined Native Americans, especially in literature, Koffman looks at "how Jews related to Native Americans, both in the realm of their cultural imagination and in face-to-face encounters" (3). The latter emphasis makes this work so original and important.

Jewish relations to Native Americans differed in three crucial ways from those of the Christian majority. First, Jews had no interest in proselytizing. Second, Jews did not sexualize Native American women, likely because of the Jewish emphasis on endogamy. Third, Jews, especially in Europe, had been primarily an urban people, without significant interest in cultivating large plots of land. Even Jews residing in rural areas worked mostly as merchants and peddlers, and rarely as farmers. As a result, most American Jews "never met a Native person in their entire lives" (13).

Nonetheless, Koffman makes a strong case that Jewish encounters with Native Americans on the western frontier operated in a colonial fashion while simultaneously helping those Jews integrate into the broader Christian culture. The first three chapters utilize historian Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "Frontier Thesis," as a crucible for Americanization. Opportunistically advancing settler colonialism, "immigrant Jews transformed themselves into pioneer Jews" (25) by dealing with Native Americans as soldiers and merchants. Serving in the US military, or occasionally acting as vigilantes to fight Indians gave Jews a renewed sense of masculinity to combat the stereotype of meek scholar that stuck with them across the Atlantic. In this way, the frontier ethos mimicked the Zionist image of the muscular Jew. American Jews not only whitened but also "shed gender biases" (36) as they moved west. The Jewish role in anti-Native violence was small but still vital to these immigrants' American self-fashioning.

The primary relationships between Jews and Indians on the American periphery were mercantile rather than martial. Jews interacted with Natives as peddlers and store owners in frontier towns. Numerous Jews engaged in "Indian trading" where Natives were "customers and suppliers," creating relationships that were often "amicable and harmonious" (84, 87). Though these relations were less antagonistic, they remained within a colonial framework.

Jews were part of the white majority, their presence part of the American effort to obtain Indian land and to assimilate Indians through capitalist exchange, in effect selling America to the Natives.

Frontier Jews also played a role in selling Native culture to white America. A small but significant percentage of Jewish “Indian Traders” dealt in “curios,” Native American “cultural commodities” in great demand by consumers across the United States. As merchants central to the curio business, Jews functioned “as cultural mediators, translators, and ‘middlemen’ in white consumption of ‘Indianness’” (94–95). In this capacity, Jews could position themselves as part of the white majority but also as having a closeness to Native Americans, thus preserving a kind of otherness within America’s pluralistic society.

The word “pluralism” appears in the book’s subtitle, and it refers to cultural pluralism. In the final three chapters, Koffman moves away from the frontier to examine ways in which 20<sup>th</sup> century American Jews understood the Native American predicament within a pluralistic framework. During the World War I era, as rising nativism led to immigration restrictions, “the figure of the Indian proved malleable and flexible in the hands of Jewish rhetoricians” (130). Jews dedicated to keeping America’s doors open simultaneously portrayed their immigrant brethren as white—thus, non-threatening—while also insisting that ALL Americans were immigrants, apart from Indians, and thus all had equal claim to the land.

By the 1930s, some American Jews had become major advocates for Native rights in the face of oppressive legislation. Chief among these was Felix S. Cohen, “the most influential American Jew in the history of Jewish–Native American relations” (137). Armed with a Harvard PhD in philosophy and a law degree from Columbia, Cohen employed his many talents in the service of Indians. Cohen attributed at least some of his engagement in Native rights activity to his Jewish heritage, and was involved in various Jewish organizations. His perspective was one of pluralism: he defended “the protection and preservation of minority rights and cultures” (146) as equally belonging in America.

This was similar to the perspective of the anthropologists Koffman describes in his final chapter. Disciples of Columbia University professor Franz Boas, an assimilated German–Jewish immigrant, this crop of young Jewish scholars studied Native peoples through the framework of cultural relativism. By the end of the Second World War, with Jews more integrated into the white Christian majority, a series of anthropologists, some of whom had rabbinical training, could position themselves as “objective” observers of Native culture, rendering themselves even more American, yet also distinct from Christian colonizers—at least in theory.

As Koffman notes in his conclusion, this well-intentioned Jewish commitment to American pluralism “ironically recapitulated some of the fundamental structures of colonialism” (220). While Jews sought to cast Indians as just another minority, equal to all others governed by the United States, Native Americans maintain a greater interest in sovereignty and political and cultural autonomy, standing in relationship with but also independent of the American state.

It is in this regard that Koffman’s book is most applicable to the Canadian setting. In the 1970s, Canada officially endorsed multiculturalism, a successor ideology of sorts to cultural pluralism. Canada encourages ethnic groups to preserve and develop their cultures and is less overtly invested in assimilation than its neighbour to the South is. Yet here too, First Nations and other indigenous Canadians generally seek sovereignty over pluralistic inclusion.

Demographic difference is also important. Out of nearly 330 million Americans, between 5.5 and 6 million are Jewish, while only 5 million are Native. Canada has proportionately a much higher indigenous population, with 1.5 million of its 37 million people being Native, compared to only 400,000 Jews. Koffman’s excellent book serves as invitation for Jews and Native peoples to dialogue in both Canada and the United States, to find common ground but also appreciate differences, not only in terms of culture but also in communal objectives, contrasting pluralism with sovereignty.

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