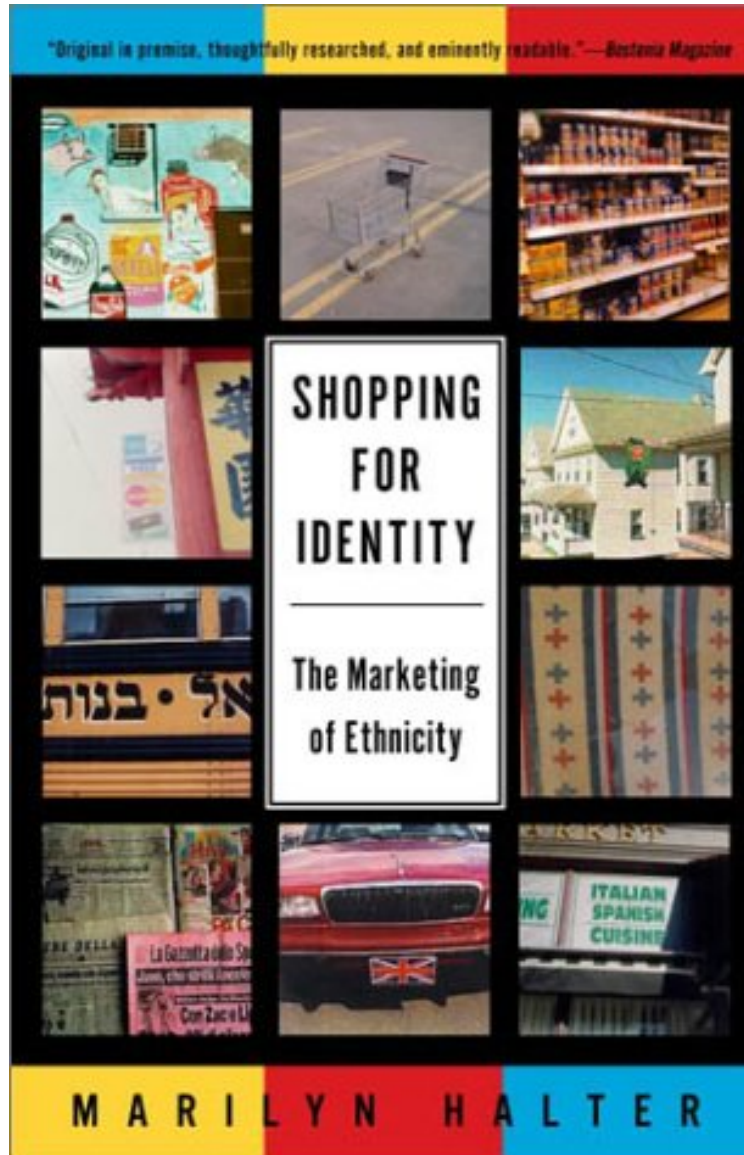


# Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity

Marilyn Halter

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**Marilyn Halter : Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity:

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Great idea, lousy execution By Ancient Fuzz There is little doubt that Marilyn Halter has hit upon an important concept: the part-time indulger in ethnicity, who buys products that resonate with her/his heritage. Halter shows how many companies ally themselves with new marketing schemes to appeal to an increasingly diverse American market. This is a solid sociological insight, and Halter's work mines this theme for all its worth. However -- many of the chapters are nothing but an endless list of examples; and because the

thesis of her work is all-pervasive, what you end up with is an entire book of near indistinguishable chapters. There seems to be virtually no progression to the writing here. I'm not sure if this is a new strain of pop market sociology, but this is not an example of good writing. Where the main thesis should be explored, there is instead a barrage of examples that shift rapidly (e.g., one moment it is the kosher foods market, the next it is new wedding services), and IMHO real analysis is sacrificed in favor of bowling the reader over with a collection of information that is supposed to be hard research. Yes, it is impossible not to ask important questions about one's own ethnicity while reading the book; but, this seems to come at the expense of Halter really digging in to some meaty cultural analysis and instead surrendering to more journalistic approach. While I am deeply interested in this topic, I have to express an overall disappointment with 'Shopping for Identity.' It's a book that reads like chaotic mush. 9 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Serious and enjoyable reading. By Isabel Feijo I read Marilyn Halter's Shopping for Identity and liked it so much I couldn't keep myself from sharing my enthusiasm with others. First of all because it is really enjoyable reading. I read the book as I would read a good novel, in spite of being the outcome of serious research. And this is rare. Then I liked it because it helped me understanding American society. As an European who admires American culture, reads a lot of American books and sees a lot of American films the book was an eye opener. I can now understand things that didn't make sense to me for lack of knowledge on a changing society. In this global world we tend to think it's enough to read some books and watch CNN and we'll know what is going on. Reading Marilyn Halter I realized that's not enough, but one book can make the difference. And Shopping for Identity made the difference for me. I hope it will be translated soon, so more people in this part of the world can enjoy it the way I did. Congratulations Marilyn, it's a great book! 10 of 1 people found the following review helpful. questions for mom??? By A Customer I read Mariyln Halter's book, Shopping for Identity and found it fascinating. Not only is the book about the marketplace but it touches the emotions of being an American and loving your own heritage. After reading about the Boston Irish firefighters I called my mother and asked very specific questions about my forebears and the struggles they had overcome. Shopping for Identity gave me permission to explore my own personal ethnic identity. I have shared the book with others because it is a great read and an important contribution to understanding the current trends in American culture.

In America today, you can connect to your ethnic heritage in dozens of ways, or adopt an identity just for an evening. Our society is not a melting pot but a salad bar--a bazaar in which the purveyors of goods and services spend close to \$2 billion a year marketing the foods, clothing, objects, vacations, and events that help people express their (and others') ethnic identities. This is a huge business, whose target groups are the "hyphenated Americans"--in other words, all of us. As immigrant groups gain economic security, they tend to reinforce--not relinquish--their ethnic identification. Marilyn Halter demonstrates that, to a great extent, they do it by shopping. And their purchasing power is enormous. How has the marketplace responded to this hunger? Instantly and wholeheartedly: tweaking old products and inventing new ones; launching new brands in supermarkets, new music groups, vacation itineraries, language courses, toys, greeting cards, et cetera. This nexus of business and ethnicity is already seen as the hottest consumer development of this decade, and Halter is uniquely qualified to describe its origins, the exponential growth of products and advertising, and the phenomenal sales of items from salsa to Chieftains CDs. She addresses her subject with an abundance of anecdotal evidence, telling examples of ethnic marketing, and interviews with entrepreneurs (many of them immigrants) who are vigorously seizing the opportunities offered by the business of ethnicity. Shopping for Identity is provocative, intriguing, and farseeing, illuminating an important aspect of our contemporary way of life while validating the yearning we all feel for connection to our roots. From the Hardcover edition.

.com As one toy-company executive put it in the early '90s, "The color of money is green, and you get it from whatever skin tone has got it." Accordingly, with the annual buying power of minority customers exceeding \$1 trillion, U.S. companies now spend \$2 billion each year on advertising specifically designed to attract and engage these "New American" consumers. Who are they? More importantly, who do they think they are? And how are they expressing that self-identification through what they buy? In Shopping for Identity, Marilyn Halter explores these and other questions with an academic's critical eye and illustrates her research with an engaging variety of statistics, examples, and anecdotes. Until well into the second half of the 20th century, America was seen as a cultural melting pot. Immigrants were expected to assimilate into the mainstream culture, and cultural pluralism wasn't officially recognized, let alone encouraged. That changed significantly with the passing of the Ethnic Heritage Act of 1974, which contributed to the growth of "ethnic celebrations, a zeal for genealogy, increased travel to ancestral homelands, and great interest in ethnic artifacts, cuisine, music, literature, and, of course, language." At the same time, corporate America began moving away from mass marketing and toward segmented marketing techniques, and these newly demonstrative ethnic constituencies quickly became one of the most targeted and profitable marketing segments. Multicultural marketing experts have proliferated and act as their companies' in-house ethnographers, learning and responding to the cultural nuances of their audiences. At the same time, ethnicity in itself is becoming increasingly optional and malleable, as individuals choose to take on certain identifying aspects of their cultural group while

rejecting others. Halter's book poses some interesting questions: How does commercialism both enhance and make a commodity of ethnic identification? And what is authentic ethnic identification? Consider the non-Jewish, fourth-generation Irish leader of the organization for fostering Yiddish culture and education, who has immersed himself in living and promoting a Yiddish identity; or the way that certain ethnic peculiarities have become so ingrained in the culture that they've lost their obvious differences. Demonstrating the extent of cultural hybridism in the U.S., Halter quotes a Newsweek article as stating that "As the United States' Muslim community grows, so does the availability of halal products and pro-Islam tchotchkes." The Yiddish term for knickknacks hardly seems appropriate for pro-Islamic merchandise, and yet today's cultural hybridism often blinds us to such ironies. Halter's extensive research calls attention to these everyday marketing techniques, which no longer seem strange in our pick-and-choose cultural milieu. In its examination of how Americans express their ethnicity in and through a commodity-driven, consumer culture, *Shopping for Identity* is a revealing study of how far we have come from the days when Margaret Mead could pronounce that "Being American is a matter of abstention from foreign ways, foreign food, foreign ideas, foreign accents." As Halter shows us, money does indeed talk in many different languages; her examination of both sides of the ethnic dollar is informative, provocative, and surprisingly entertaining. --S. Ketchum

From Publishers Weekly: Black Barbies, a Northwest Orient advertisement urging Irish-Americans to fly to Dublin to "find their roots" and a Tetley Tea campaign suggesting that American Jews "think Yiddish" but "drink British" are only recent examples of advertisers' attempts over the last century to target consumers by appealing to their sense of ethnic and racial identity. In this highly engaging study, Halter (an associate professor of history at Boston University) traces the complicated history of ethnicity and consumption in the U.S. While the "melting pot" paradigm has been accepted with very little critique, Halter argues that such wholesale assimilation has never really occurred. She posits instead that individuals and groups have always tried to become Americans without losing the specificity of their ethnicity—a reality that is reflected in the marketing of consumer goods. While she focuses on how Alex Haley's *Roots* (1973) and the 1974 congressional Ethnic Heritage Act (which funded "initiatives that promote... distinctive cultures and histories") spurred the embrace of ethnic identity, Halter also documents that embrace in such fascinating occurrences as an 1895 article, "The Negro in Advertising," which ran in the advertising journal *Printer's Ink*, and a 1913 Proctor and Gamble campaign for kosher Crisco shortening that began: "The Hebrew Race Has Been Waiting 4,000 Years." Halter deftly conveys the sweep of her findings without ever glossing over her intriguing examples. Her refreshingly radical examination of U.S. history is an important addition to both cultural and ethnic studies. (Sept.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. "In this highly engaging study, Marilyn Halter traces the complicated history of ethnicity and consumption in the United States. She posits that individuals and groups have always tried to become Americans without losing the specificity of their ethnicity—a reality that is reflected in the marketing of consumer goods....Halter deftly conveys the sweep of her findings without ever glossing over her intriguing examples. Her refreshingly radical examination of American history is an important addition to both cultural and ethnic studies."—Publishers Weekly, July 24, 2000

From the Hardcover edition.